

BRITISH MUSEUM (NATURAL HISTORY) EXPEDITION

The Harold Hall Australian Expedition organised by the British Museum (Natural History) arrived in Fremantle on November 13. The leader of the expedition, Mr J.D. Macdonald, and Mrs Macdonald, who is medical officer to the expedition, arrived a few days earlier. The other two members of the expedition, Messrs Graham Cowles and Peter Colston, were met at Fremantle by our Fauna Wardens, who paid a number of courtesy calls on the expedition while it was camped at Gooseberry Hill. On November 22, the members of the expedition were entertained at dinner at the King's Park tearooms by a group of local ornithologists, including Dr D.L. Serventy, of the Division of Wildlife Research, C.S.I.R.O.; Mr Julian Ford, honorary secretary of the W.A. Branch of the R.A.O.U.; Mr Angus Robinson, ornithologist and farmer, Coolup, a deputy member of the Fauna Protection Advisory Committee; Mr C.F.H. Jenkins, Government Entomologist and well-known naturalist; Dr G.F. Mees, Curator of Vertebrates in the Western Australian Museum; and Mr H.B. Shugg, Fauna Protection Officer of this Department.

Later that evening, the party attended a meeting of the W.A. Bird Group, held at the headquarters, of the Western Australian Naturalists Club. It was presided over by Dr D.L. Serventy, who, on behalf of the Club and local naturalists, extended a welcome to the members of the expedition. Mr Macdonald, after acknowledging the welcome, gave a talk on the aims and purposes of the British Museum and of the expedition. A resume of his address, which was illustrated by transparencies, appears below. It summarises succinctly why such expeditions are carried out and the benefits to be obtained from them -

"The British Museum was founded in 1753. Its basis was a collection of miscellaneous items amassed by Sir Hans Sloane. The collection contained numerous zoological specimens, including some birds, mainly bones. It was housed in a mansion in Bloomsbury and in the Act of Parliament which brought the Museum into existence it was stated that the collection was to be "maintained for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and curious, and for the general use of the public, to all posterity".

I think that statement adequately covers the main purposes of any museum, except perhaps for the more hilarious aspects of entertainment. Entertainment in its educational sense, or instruction of the curious, is to be found in the galleries open to the public.

"The preservation of specimens for the inspection of the learned only gradually became a distinct purpose in the organisation of the museum for the original idea was that everything should be exhibited. I need not elaborate on that point or say that the distinction is recognized to varying degrees in different museums. In the British Museum the separation is still not complete, but considerable strides to that end have been made in the last 20 years, especially by the formation of a department which deals entirely with exhibition, instructional tours, public lectures and so on.

Specimens preserved for the inspection of the learned, as distinct from those exhibited for the general use of the public, serve two main functions. One is that they are used for reference purposes; that is to say they illustrate named kinds and are used for identifying material which is not named. Their other function is for research purposes; that is to say they form the raw materials for extending knowledge.

It is the latter function which I wish to speak about in particular. Research may be carried out either by members of the staff or by visiting students, mainly the latter. Students from at least a dozen countries worked with us during the past year. The way I look at it is that it is our first duty to help such students by providing them with the material they require. One way to do that is for us to go out and get it, though such opportunities occur all too infrequently. That is why we are here at the moment, but of course although we want to help others we would like to do some research ourselves.

It can be a tricky matter nowadays collecting birds for research purposes. It is well known and understandable that the objections of the specialist are not readily appreciated by those not well versed in his subject, whether he wants to reach the moon, drive a car at suicidal speeds or collect birds. At the same time, of course, the specialist might go off with the bit between his teeth and it is a good thing that he should be pulled up. It is a good thing that there are two sides to any question. Government is strengthened by opposition in Parliament. What value would there be in a penny if it had no obverse and reverse sides.

I can illustrate the research side of our work by the example of a problem raised by Mr C.M.N. White, of Northern Rhodesia. White has been studying larks



belonging to the genus Mirafra, mainly the African species. The genus is represented by one species in Australia which, incidentally, has been the subject of valuable studies, both by Dr Mees of Perth and Mr Alan McEvey of Melbourne. White is interested in the broad view of the genus, a view which started to expand when the original Bush-lark of Australia, M. horsfieldi, was considered to be conspecific with M. javanica. Expansion continued when the African marginata was joined up with the Indian cantillans through the Arabian simplex. Next, cantillans was linked with javanica, and recently White took the matter even further by tacking on M. passerina of South West Africa. This is where I take some personal interest in the matter for I have studied passerina in the field in South-West Africa. It has a very striking and distinct behaviour. I am looking forward to seeing if I can recognise any similarities in the behaviour of the Australian Bush-lark, for behaviour as well as morphology can provide important clues in the understanding of relationships."

At the conclusion of the address, in a lively discussion, members of the Group suggested a number of problems relating to the taxonomy of Australian birds which the expedition might follow up if it had the opportunity.

Later, two Australians joined the expedition in Perth. They were Mr Alan R. McEvey, Curator of Birds at the National Museum of Victoria, and Mr W.G.D. Middleton, Senior Forester of the Forests Commission, Victoria, who is an ecological botanist with a knowledge of ornithology. They will guide the expedition and advise it on ornithological matters during its journey eastwards. The expedition left Perth for Adelaide by road on November 30 and expects to be about fourteen days en route. It will not return to Western Australia for some months, but licenses were issued to the three collectors and also to Mr A.R. McEvey to collect materials subject to the conditions set out in the May 1962 issue of this bulletin. The expedition was escorted as far as Tammin by Fauna Warden S.W. Bowler, who was able to advise on local matters.

#### WESTERN FISHERIES RESEARCH COMMITTEE

As foreshadowed in the previous issue of this Bulletin, a meeting of the committee was held in the S.G.I.O. building on November 20 and 21. The following research situation reports and background papers were submitted:-