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The birds go digital

Archbold bird collection enters the digital age

The Archbold Biological Station Biological Collection houses hundreds of thousands of preserved specimens of animals and plants. In an ongoing effort, Archbold scientists, interns, and volunteers have been working together to digitize and post the Archbold Collection online. The last day of July marked the end of the second year of this digitization project. “During the first year, we focused on digitizing our insect and plant collections,” says assistant curator Stephanie Leon. “This second year, along with continuing the insects and plants, we also digitized the Archbold bird collection.”

The bird collection at Archbold represents over 75% of all birds known from Florida, with about 1,500 bird skins (~500 species), more than 500 skeletons (~420 species) and hundreds of egg specimens. Like all collections at Archbold, the bird collection can be traced back to the foundation of the Station, and Richard Archbold’s passion for natural history collections. The earliest bird specimen was collected in 1930. The breadth of specimens in the collection, and its extensive curation is primarily due to the efforts by the late Glen E. Woolfenden, former University of South Florida professor and Co-Director of the Avian Ecology Program at Archbold. Dr. Woolfenden worked very hard to develop the Archbold bird collection. His goal was to have a collection representative of all the bird fauna of Florida. In 1995, he oversaw the donation of hundreds of bird skin specimens from the former University of Miami Collection, which was being disbanded at that time. This greatly increased the extent of the Archbold bird collection.

Bird specimens in the collection are organized by bird family (like songbird, raptors, etc.) in specialized drawers. Each specimen typically has one or more labels carefully tied to its feet. These labels contain a vast amount of information, ranging from date and location collected, body length, wingspan, weight, stomach contents, and reproductive organ structure. The digitization process for the birds includes the addition of uniquely numbered labels, transcription of data on the labels, and taking photos (from three different views) for at least one specimen of each species. “Digitizing the birds was a completely different experience than digitizing the insects” says Stephanie Leon “There is so much more data associated with bird specimens. It really puts specimen preparation into perspective if you think about all the measurements and other notes included on the bird specimen labels.”

In a span of two months the bird specimen catalog was updated with 1,474 bird skin specimen records and more than 1,600 images of these bird skins uploaded online. This was completed with the help of two remarkable graduate students from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology who rapidly updated the existing catalog of Archbold’s bird collection, originally compiled by Dr. Glen E. Woolfenden, Dr. Reed Bowman, Archbold’s current bird curator, Dr. Jon Greenlaw, a collaborating volunteer, and recently maintained by volunteer Ed Cunningham. “We want these data to be available for all those who are interested, whether it be on what a particular bird might eat, morphological features of different birds, or the geographic range of a species,” says Stephanie Leon. “The collection data will allow scientists to track patterns such as the changing geographical distributions of a particular species, which is really important for conservation.”

The Archbold bird collection contains many exciting, colorful, and beautiful specimens, including dozens of skins of the beloved Florida Scrub Jays and Blue Jays, species which are extensively studied at Archbold. “A large proportion of Archbold’s bird collection was acquired from other museums, notably University of South Florida and University of Miami”, says Dr. Reed Bowman. “It’s important to note that bird specimens collected from Archbold were mostly obtained as opportunistic ‘salvage’ specimens that resulted from roadkill, birds that fly into windows, or natural death and repurposed for the use of science.”

iDigBio (<https://www.idigbio.org>) helped Archbold with the digitization process and Archbold received funding from the National Science Foundation to support this work. To view current records and images of Archbold’s Bird Collection visit:

<http://csvcoll.org/portal/collections/index.php> and select the Archbold Collection.

Photo 1: A male Florida Scrub Jay Specimen.



Photo 2: Graduate Student Young Ha Suh from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology preparing to image parrot specimens.

