

THE MUSEUM COLLECTIONS AT THE PRESENT TIME, 1929

The purpose of this chapter is to call attention to collections or individual specimens which are of outstanding scientific importance or of special general interest. It is in no sense a guide to the museum. As the Hancock Museum has always been noted for its birds a few words about this collection first may not be inappropriate. The collection of British birds presented to the Society by John Hancock in 1881 is known to ornithologists throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles and even far beyond. The collection is exceptionally complete and is remarkable for the extent to which the various phases of plumage in the different species are represented. One or two artistic specimens, for instance the Lämmergeier and the groups illustrating falconry, were specially prepared for the Great Exhibition held in Hyde Park, London, in 1851, and brought John Hancock national fame as an artistic taxidermist. Perhaps the greatest treasures in the bird department are the two specimens of the extinct Great Auk and the Great Auk's egg. One of the birds is in the adult plumage, the other is immature. The latter is the only existing specimen in this phase of plumage and its value is incalculable. The

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egg under the foot of the mature bird is only a plaster cast; the real egg is safely stored away under lock and key and is only exhibited on rare occasions. Several other birds are of particular interest to specialists. Foremost amongst these is a male Capercaillie which was in the Tunstall Museum; this is the only known example of the original British stock which became extinct some time during the eighteenth century. George Allan who bought the Tunstall Museum in 1791 describes this bird in his catalogue as having been "shot in Scotland." Other noteworthy specimens are the only Red-necked Nightjar obtained in Britain, the first British recorded specimens of the Black Kite, Great Reed Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler and the Lesser White-fronted Goose, and the Great Spotted Cuckoo which is one of only four so far recorded for the British Isles. Another interesting specimen is the only Spotted Eagle recorded for Northumberland. Last but not least are two historic specimens of Bewick's Swan. One is a male which was shot at Prestwick Carr, Northumberland, in January, 1829, and which John Hancock decided was specifically distinct from the Whooper Swan. The other, a female, which was shot at Haydon Bridge, Northumberland, on February 7th, 1829, is the specimen examined by Yarrell and named by him Bewick's Swan *Cygnus bewickii* in 1830. This specimen therefore is the type of the species.