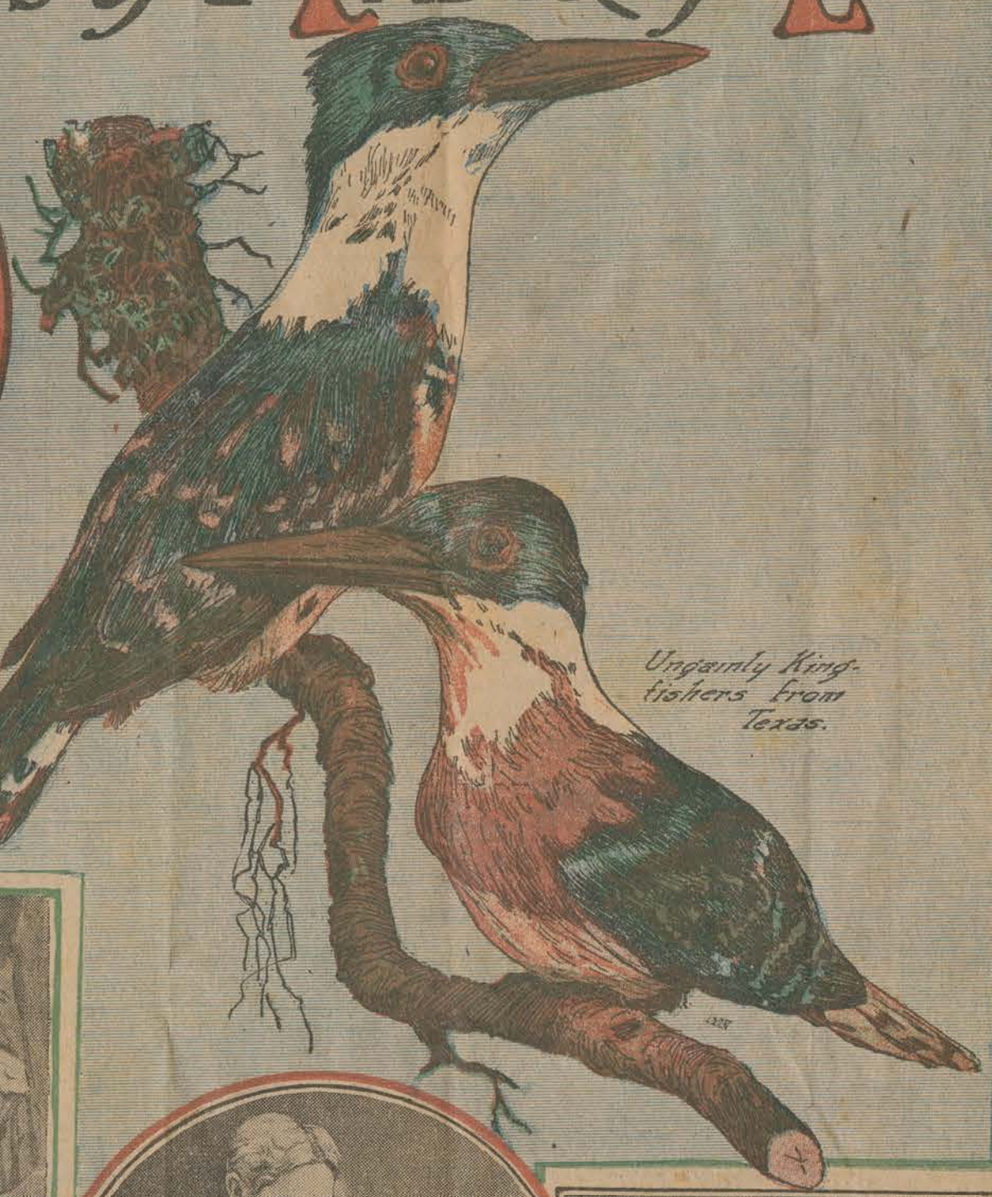
The Feathered Treasures of a Labor of Love

How W. H. Werner Has Followed Nature in Preserving Birds

A Zone Tailed Hawk and its nest.



Ungainly Kingfishers from Texas.

A Species of Fly Catcher.

Mother and Baby Vulture Always interest Children.

W. H. Werner teaching a grand child bird wisdom.

Great White Herons as natural as life.

A Section of the Werner bird museum.

A GREAT bald-headed eagle, its feathers unruffled, perched upon a ledge of rock overlooking its mountain eerie; below, gazing proudly on a wee, yellow bunch of fuzz, mamma eagle, happy and contented, hangs over the nest.

Not far away, perched on a thin twig, a tiny bird, with a golden head, iridescent wings—a feathered jewel, slightly larger than the humming bird; nearby the little mate, also hovering over her nest—golden-crested kinglets from Maine.

A few feet distant, some contentedly perched, others ready for flight, an aggregation of all the members of the pigeon family in the United States—small pigeons, big pigeons, various colored pigeons—as cheerful a family as one could imagine.

Also families of owls, grim and sapient looking; of woodpeckers, clinging to trunks of trees; of humming birds, of kites, of scores of birds, little and big, all as natural-looking, as animated as if they were alive.

This is the sight which greets a visitor who steps from the boardwalk at Atlantic City into a wonderful little bird museum. From the glare of the boardwalk and the tumult of its passing crowds one enters a bird world where, in glass cases, in lifelike attitudes, can be seen nearly every kind of feathered creature in the United States.

For more than forty-five years W. H. Werner, the little old man with gray hair who conducts visitors from case to case, has been gathering birds. The fact that he has more than 200 species is not so remarkable as his method of preserving them as they were found in their natural surroundings—eagles in artificial mountain eeries, woodpeckers pecking at trees, sea birds wandering amid sea weeds. In a fac-simile of their natural habitat the old collector can show parent birds, their eggs, and the young just emerging from the shells.

THESE birds, that through years to come will brood in lifelike manner over their nests, or continue, apparently with never-ceasing delight, to revel in their haunts, were gathered from nearly every part of the United States—to be exact, from twenty-four states and territories.

In the gathering and mounting of these winged treasures Mr. Werner has devoted his lifetime. The result is a collection of its kind that is thought to be unequaled in this country, probably in the world. From a scientific standpoint the collection is above value—because, for the first time, it is said, a collection of a nation's birds has been made and the birds preserved in reproductions of their natural habitats. Upon a cold cash estimation, the collection is valued by Mr. Werner at from $30,000 to $40,000.

To gather these birds, during the forty-six years he has spent in the work, Mr. Werner has traveled into distant and remote sections of country, often risking his life to secure some feathered treasure. Among the birds he has secured are specimens of a few which have become extinct, and these, to the ornithologist, are of priceless value.

Most visitors to the museum wander leisurely among the cases, mark the different varieties of birds and wonder at the indefatigable labor of getting such a collection. They will hardly associate the genial old man with the museum; an idea of what he endured, what efforts he made, may never enter the minds of these good folk. But as every notable achievement is the result of some notable effort, so, as an extraordinary romance, does the life of Mr. Werner fit with his wonderful collection.

When at the age of 20 he began mounting various specimens of night herons, crows, scarlet tanagers, caught in the part of Pennsylvania where he lived, he was a young man, lithe of limb, quick and vigorous of movement. He would climb a tree as readily as he would run or walk. Today his 66 years set well upon him, although his hair is gray. The birds he caught in those early days are, to him, just as lively, as animated as they were forty-six years ago. Mr. Werner's songsters may never sing, but they will not perish—at least, barring accidents, for many years.

Of course, any work that is remarkable is the result of exceptional interest on the part of the worker. Mr. Werner's has been a labor of love. When he was a little fellow of 6 he would wander about the farm of his parents near Nazareth, Pa., and watch the birds.

He became familiar with their ways, learned to know the meaning of their language, so that when he was about 15 he could tell any bird by its chirrup. Probably few children attain such unique understanding of linguistry; in time he learned to know the language and habits of 500 different kinds of birds.

To a visitor entering the place where he has exhibited his birds for eighteen years, Mr. Werner will point out a passenger pigeon caught in Northampton county, Pennsylvania, on May 11, 1870—a brown and black species which is now extinct. If one has time he will tell the story of any one of the 200 kinds of birds, of its life and habits, where his specimens were caught, and just what adventures he had in securing them. Weeks, sometimes months, were spent getting a particular bird. Swamps were invaded, mountains were scaled, all sorts of dangers braved.

Entering the quaint place one will see on his left a case of sea birds, caught along the coast from New Jersey to Texas; on the right, kites, one specimen of which is extremely rare and which was caught with great difficulty in the Everglades of Florida. There is, too, among the woodpeckers, a variety of the ivory bill, caught twenty years ago, which is now extinct. One sees, in a great glass case, a couple of bald eagles and the young "peep" eagle just emerged from the shell. Mr. Werner will tell one the story of the ferocious eagle—how it once attempted to carry off a child, how the child's mother beat it with a broom and how, as it rose in the air, the child dropped from its claws and was saved.

The love Mr. Werner felt for the birds as a boy bred in him a desire to preserve specimens of mated birds, preserve them as they lived in their haunts, with nests as they built them, with eggs and, where possible, the young.

There are hundreds of birds, each installed in fitting surroundings. In most cases the nests are those built by the birds themselves; in most cases the eggs were those laid by the female bird in the case, and in many cases the trees, the boughs, the strange retreats in which the birds appear are those in which they were found.

WORKS LIKE A SCULPTOR

Mr. Werner learned the art of taxidermy when he was 20. He had formed a friendship with a teacher in the parochial school at Nazareth, a naturalist in his way. Among the first birds caught and mounted were scarlet tanagers, night herons and crows. He still mounts birds by what is known as the old-fashioned method, first constructing a skeleton of copper wire, stuffing the bird and preserving it with arsenic.

Mr. Werner's knowledge of bird anatomy enables him to mould it just as it appeared when living. He bears in mind the shape, the natural position of the bird, and recreates it just as a sculptor fashions of clay features and muscles in similitude to life.

Not only has Mr. Werner made the remarkable collection for himself, but he has gathered birds for various institutions, among them Lehigh University and the state museum of New Jersey. For five years he has been taxidermist for his state. During this time he has collected about 300 birds indigenous to New Jersey for the state museum.

Each spring he starts away on a tour. He has taken long trips to the West, Southwest and South eight times. He uses a 12-caliber breech-loader, with which he has shot all kinds of birds, ranging from eagles to humming birds.

One of the biggest in his collection is a great white "whistling swan"—a majestic bird from Alaska. From tip to tip of the wings it measures nearly ten feet. By some chance the bird migrated to the southeast and was shot by Mr. Werner one winter six years ago along the Chesapeake bay.

In another case, with a young lamb in its bloody talons, one can see a great golden eagle. It is an imperial bird, fully developed, and measures eight feet four inches from tip to tip of the wings. This was shot in the Northwest nineteen years ago.

To a visitor who shows an interest in his inanimate pets Mr. Werner will point out a case in which there is a group of myrtle warblers from northern Pennsylvania, which were caught forty-five years ago. These little black-throated and emerald-green creatures are as lively looking as they were in the early days of Mr. Werner's career.

What infinite pains he took, what patience was required, one may judge when he considers the cases containing complete collections of various families of birds in this country. In one glass case is a collection of doves—the Inca dove from Mexico, the mourning dove from Florida, the well-known turtle dove and others.

Near these mild-eyed creatures are woodpeckers of various kinds—among them the extinct ivory-billed bird, which was caught in the Everglades of Florida twenty years ago, which sits on a tree, its eggs in a nest; there are two Mexican pileated woodpeckers from Central America, which were caught in 1903; there are specimens of the golden-winged woodpeckers from Texas, caught in 1880.

Of course, everybody is interested in owls; they appear to know so much, they are such wise, grouchy, disdainful looking things. Well, here one can see all the various owls in this country. There is the pygmy owl, the smallest known, which was caught in Tampico, Mexico, in 1903; there is also a specimen of the great gray owl, the largest, from Alaska.

An interesting one is the snow owl, which makes its home in the arctic regions. Six years ago a couple of snow owls took a trip over the continent until they reached Egg Harbor, N. J., where they built a nest. Mr. Werner, his vigilant eye open for rare birds, espied the couple. Today one can see both, with their nest and eggs, in the glass case.

BIG COLLECTION OF NESTS

Besides the birds, Mr. Werner boasts of possibly the most complete collection of nests in the country. There is a nest of kingfishers in sand; there are the nests of flycatchers in trees, designed so as to snare flies; there are nests of the black-capped titmouse in hollow trees; a nest of the bush tits, resembling a hanging pouch, made of lichens and cotton, and a nest of brown creepers contrived behind loose bark.

By a peculiar process Mr. Werner is able to preserve grass and the boughs with the natural foliage. He has preserved nearly all nests as they were found, amid their natural surroundings.

Mr. Werner is justly proud of his collection. His first trip after birds was to Ohio in the early seventies. Another trip was made to Utah, Wyoming and Colorado shortly afterward, when he secured from 200 to 300 birds. His first collection was made for the Keystone Normal School, at Kutztown, Pa., which aggregated over 100 birds. Later he made a collection for Lafayette College of Pennsylvania birds, and another for Lehigh University.

Three years ago Mr. Werner visited Mexico and the Bahama islands. He still seeks rare birds—the quest is always alluring; he follows it with zest and enjoyment. His work is done with care, with fondness. He has never during his career wantonly killed birds, rarely, he is proud of declaring, getting any duplicates.