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# The 13th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting - Conference Report

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## Abstract

The 13th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting was held at World Museum, National Museums Liverpool, Liverpool, UK, from October 29th to 31st, 2024. In this conference report we summarise the diverse and packed programme of talks, posters and discussion. The aim of the EBC meetings, to promote cooperation, dissemination of best practices and new techniques in the curation, management, and research of bird collections, was again comprehensively achieved. An expression of interest was put forward to hold the 14th meeting in Livingstone, Zambia.

**Keywords:** Birds, Ornithology, Curating, Liverpool, Conference, Collections, Specimen preparation

## Introduction

25 years ago (in November 1999), with the aim of increasing cooperation among museums holding bird collections, Robert Prŷs-Jones of the Natural History Museum, UK, opened a meeting of bird curators (and other interested parties) near Tring, UK (Steinheimer and Adams, 2000). The meeting was attended by around 130 participants from 25 countries. The conference “Why Museums Matter: Avian Archives in an Age of Extinction” and its associated workshop “Increased Co-operation between Museum Bird Collections, especially in Europe” led directly to the setting up of eBEAC (the electronic Bulletin for European Avian Curators; Scharlemann, 2003; Russell, 2019) and there was general agreement that the meeting should become the first of a biennial series (Prŷs-Jones, 2003). The second meeting was held in Bonn in 2001 and the third in Leiden in 2003 as the “Third European Conference on Bird

Collections” (Dekker *et al.*, 2005). Now generally known as the European Bird Curators (EBC) meetings, the series most recently convened in Tel Aviv in 2019 (the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting; Wilson, 2020) and Gothenburg in 2022 (the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting) after a one-year delay due to the covid pandemic. The meetings are not managed by a formal scientific society or commercial organisation but continue to be informally organised and arranged by bird curators themselves.

We held the 13th EBC meeting at World Museum, National Museums Liverpool (NML) in Liverpool, UK, from October 29th to 31st, 2024. There were 44 registered attendees representing museums in Europe (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, UK), Australia, Israel and USA (Figure 1). There was strong attendance from local museums in the north of England (Bolton Museum, Manchester Museum, Whitby Museum).





*Fig 1. Attendees of the 13th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting held at World Museum, Liverpool, UK, 29th -31st October 2024. (Photograph by Neve McLaughlin)*

As always, the aim of the meeting was to promote cooperation, dissemination of best practices and new techniques in the curation, management, and research of bird collections. Presenters included curators, collection managers, ornithological researchers and artists.

The 3-day meeting had a diverse and packed programme of talks, posters and discussion (Vertebrate Zoology, National Museums Liverpool,

2024). Day one of the meeting included a keynote talk, poster session during lunch (Figure 2) and two sessions of contributed talks in the afternoon. A conference dinner was held at World Museum in the evening. On day two the poster session continued, there were two further sessions of contributed talks, a preparation demonstration, and an informal gathering for discussion. Participants could also sign up for tours of NML's natural history stores. Day three was a birding excursion to RSPB



Fig 2. Poster session at the 13th Biennial European Bird Curators Meeting held at World Museum, Liverpool, UK, 29th - 31st October 2024. (Photograph by John-James Wilson)

Dee Estuary Nature Reserve, Burton Mere Wetlands, Cheshire. Seventy species of birds were recorded by the attendees, including 'lifers' for some colleagues from overseas (Belmaker *et al.*, 2024).

### Talks and posters

The national bird collection held at NML, which comprises around 70,000 specimens across the study skin, mounts, osteology, egg and spirit collections, was introduced in a keynote talk by Clem Fisher. It is the third largest bird collection in the UK based on number of specimens (Roselaar, 2003). The history of the collection including the link to the Stanley family of Knowsley Hall (Fisher, 2002) was elaborated and several unique or rare specimens and extinct species were highlighted (Fisher, 1981). Bird specimens from NML's collection, including those collected by Stamford Raffles, were further introduced during a presentation by Lydia Gan from the SIGNIFY project of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, Singapore (SIGNIFY, 2024).

Research into historic collections and noteworthy specimens was also the subject of the talks by Pepijn Kamminga (Naturalis Biodiversity Center), Sylke Frahnert (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin), and Jakob Pöhacker and Robert Lindner (Haus der Natur Salzburg), and a poster by Till Töpfer and Devon Putman (Museum Koenig Bonn). Mark Adams (Natural History Museum UK) talked us through the process of generating an updated list of extinct and endangered species for use by collections (first presented at the first EBC meeting; Adams *et al.*, 2003). Javier Quesada (Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona)

presented preliminary results on a method to date historical osteology specimens whilst the challenges of curating historic bird collections in spirit and as mounts were detailed in posters by Judith White (Natural History Museum UK) and Sylke Frahnert and Pascal Eckhoff (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin) respectively. A talk by Douglas Russell (Natural History Museum UK) and a poster by Renate van der Elzen (NHM Wien) presented case studies documenting the integration of relatively modern large private collections into national museums, in Zambia and Austria respectively.

We heard about some more unusual kinds of bird collections – soundscape recordings (Karen Rowe, Museums Victoria), sperm (Jan Terje Lifjeld, Natural History Museum University of Oslo) and cell cultures (Till Töpfer and Devon Putman, Museum Koenig Bonn). There was a demonstration of making spread-wing specimens (Augie Kramer, American Museum of Natural History), a poster about preparing skeletons more environmentally (Jessica Martinez-Vargas, Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona) and a talk about incidences of contamination with arsenic and other harmful elements across specimen preparations (Lars Erik Johannessen, Natural History Museum at the University of Oslo).

The crossover between science and art were explored in the talks of Lauren Field (Bolton Museum), who showcased the art and collections of former Bolton Natural History curator Eric Gorton featured in the (concurrent with the meeting) "Birds of Bolton" exhibition (Tooth, 2024), and Sonal Mistry (independent researcher) who shared her work as a student in scientific

illustration (Mistry and Beavers, 2024).

The importance of type specimens in collections, and research challenges they present has been a recurring theme through EBC meetings and a number of talks focussed on this topic. Robert Douglas (Oxford University Museum of Natural History) unpicked the type collection at Oxford, Al Vrezec (Slovenian Museum of Natural History & National Institute of Biology) delved into the types of Joannes Antonius Scopoli, and Hein Van Grouw (Natural History Museum UK) cautioned us on the problems of describing species on the basis of unique ‘fantastic’ specimens. Alice Cibois (Natural History Museum of Geneva) enlightened us on the knowledge residing in vernacular names from Eastern Polynesia. Till Töpfer (Museum Koenig Bonn) and Guy Kirwan (Natural History Museum UK) explored avenues available for creating a comprehensive avian type catalogue, which continued during an informal gathering for discussion after the formal closing of the meeting.

‘Avian Archives in the Age of Extinction’ was the theme of the first EBC meeting 25 years ago. The continued relevance of this theme was echoed neatly in a ‘sneak-peek’ talk by Alex Bond (Natural History Museum UK) on the latest scientifically confirmed bird extinction – the extinction of Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* (Davis, 2024). Unfortunately, things are not getting better for birds and specimens under the care of bird curators are becoming increasingly exceptional.

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