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Department of Reptiles: Annual Report 1888 - 1889

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Report on the Department of Reptiles in
the U. S. National Museum, 1889.

By Leonhard Stejneger, Acting Curator.

Up to the time when the present
curator was appointed and assumed
control of the department the work per-
formed during the year consisted chiefly
in the ordinary routine. Upon assuming
his new duties he found that before any
other work could be properly undertaken
a thorough overhauling of the entire
collection would be necessary, in order
to ascertain just what specimens the
collection contains, and to arrange them
so far as the space allotted to the department
would allow — in such a manner that
it would be possible at any time to
lay hand on any specimen desired.
A beginning was made with the reserve
series of North American species, and then

work was still progressing at the end of the year covered by this report. At the same time a large number of specimens which previously had not been catalogued were entered upon the museum register.

The most important accession received during the year is the collection made by the naturalists of the U.S. Fish Commission Steamer "Albatross" during the ~~during~~ the circumnavigation of South America, and particularly during the stay at the Galapagos Islands. The collection contains no less than 319 specimens which have been ^{sent} to Prof. E. D. Cope in Philadelphia for special report.

From Mr. J. F. Le Baron, in charge

of the survey of the proposed canal through the isthmus of Nicaragua, an interesting collection of 44 specimens, brought together by Dr. L. F. H. Birt, the surgeon of the surveying party, was received in good condition. The curator, by force of routine work was prevented from working it up immediately, but he hopes to be able to report more fully upon it later on.

The Royal Zoological Museum of Florence, Italy, sent in exchange a small but very interesting collection from that country, especially from the islands surrounding it.

Mr. H. W. Henshaw, of the Bureau of Ethnology, presented quite a number

of specimens, chiefly batrachians, from the eastern United States, among which numerous Chorophilus trisriatus corporalis.

Through the kind offices of Mr. Gustave Kolur, New Orleans, La., the department secured by purchase a number of rare Chelonians from that state, thus filling serious gaps in the North American reserve series.

A great deal of the routine work has consisted in entering on the record book material accumulated during previous years. The present curator has instituted the change in cataloguing accessions, that now each specimen receives a separate number, while formerly all the specimens of the same

species in each accession were entered collectively under the same number.

Under the old system it was very difficult to properly designate each individual specimen when it became necessary to mention it separately, either in treating of it scientifically, or in the ordinary museum routine, for instance, when any single individual of a collective number had to be picked out as a duplicate and exchanged.

Special care has been exercised in identifying and properly labelling type specimens. When assuming control the present curator found quite a number of specimens collected by the famous "Exploring Expedition" with labels which

from exposure and neglect had become nearly illegible. They had not been entered upon the record books, and on cataloguing them great care was taken in deciphering the labels to prevent possible mistakes. This work was of necessity very slow as it involved considerable research besides the mere deciphering of the faded labels, but the
(X) curator was rewarded by rescuing in this way the types of no less than eight species.

It often happens that specimens destined for this department are received alive. Whenever practicable such specimens have been deposited in the "Live Animal Department" to be returned

when they die. It has been found impracticable to do so with rare or specially valuable specimens, because in the vivarium they easily lose their identity, while, on the other hand, it often happens that their death is only discovered after putrefaction has set in rendering them unfit for preservation in alcohol.

During the present year Professor E. D. Cope has finished his work on the collections of the North American Batrachians based upon the collections of this department, and has commenced a similar study of the North American snakes in the museum.

Dr. J. Saur, of Yale college, New

Haven, Conn., has had for study a number of chelonians belonging to the museum, especially the soft-shelled turtles. Some of the results of these studies will be found indicated in the bibliography of the year at the end of this report.

The curator has been unable to devote much time to scientific study of the collection during the few months he has been in charge. What little he has been able to do has been to investigate the status of the boiform snakes of North America with special reference to individual variation. One paper has been handed in to the editor of the museum "Proceedings", while

another more extensive article was in preparation at the end of the year covered by this report.

As stated above, a complete overhauling of the whole collection has been commenced and is still in progress, in order to ascertain the state of the collection, including the number of specimens contained in the various 'series'. On account of the cramped condition of the collection and lack of assistance this work will still consume months before completed. The following table is therefore simply based upon the one furnished by my predecessor for the year 1887-1888 by adding the number of entries catalogued

during the present year and deducting the number of specimens which are known to have been destroyed or disposed of in exchange. By a calculation of this nature the status of the collection on June 30, 1889, would be as follows:

Reserve series 13469 specimens

Duplicate series 8802 "

Unassorted and exotics 6134 "

Grand total 28405 specimens

The state of preservation of the collection may be said, on the whole, to be tolerably good, but errors in numbering and labelling are constantly discovered. In most cases it has been possible to correct them by a diligent

search through the records and the literature, a work involving considerable labor and consuming much time, though the results have well paid for the trouble. The greatest need of the collection, however, is additional room, as the great majority of the specimens with the present facilities are wholly inaccessible, while the handling of those more or less accessible is attended with difficulty and exposes them to great danger of being destroyed or lost. The office of the department is now so crowded, that a great many of the largest and most valuable specimens have to be placed on the floor leaving but little room for the occupants to move

about, and exposing the jars to the danger of being broken. The room is, moreover, infested with mice which destroy the dried preparations, such as turtle shells. But worst of all, the room is so dark and damp, that it is impossible for the curator and his assistant to work there during part of the day. During the recent floods water from the sewers covered the floor of the office several inches high. The light from the small and low cellar windows which open into a light well has recently been obstructed by a stable having been built less than 20 feet from the windows, while the alley thus formed between the two buildings

is filled with old boxes and rubbish with the result that there is barely light in the room on sunny days during the middle of the day to do the work required of the occupants, while in dark weather work is nearly impossible. To prosecute scientific research, or even to undertake the required identifications of the specimens, which often necessitates the use of the magnifying glass is mostly out of question, while even under the most favorable circumstances in the present quarters it is ruinous to the eyes. Under these unhealthy and unfavorable conditions the work of the department cannot be what it

ought to be, and it is urgently recommended both in the interest of the better preservation and display of the collection and in that of the health of those employed in this department, that roomier, lighter and healthier quarters be found.

The number of the last catalogue entry in June 1888 was 14739; that of June 1889, 15523.

L. Stejneger.

List of papers
published by collaborators not
officers of the museum, upon museum
material.

G. Baur. Ostrologische Notizen über
Reptilien. (Fortsetzung III.).

Zoologischer Anzeiger, XI, No. 285, Aug.

6, 1888, pp. 417-424.

Treats of Proganochelys quenstedtii
Baur; Attempt at a classification of
the typical Pleurodora; osteological
peculiarities of the living Pleurodora;
and Colpochelys Garman.

G. Baur. Osteologische Notizen über
Reptilien. (Fortsetzung IV.).

Zoologischer Anzeiger, XI, No. 291, Oct.
22, 1888, pp. 592-597.

Besides additional notes on the
osteological peculiarities of the
living Pleurodora, and a short
one on the occipital condyle of
Pelonodusa subrufa La Cep., the
present "Fortsetzung" is devoted
to a discussion of the "Systematic

position of Dermatemys Gray,⁴
 with the result that the genus
 is placed in a special family
Dermatemydidæ, and a similar
 article on Manouria which is
 made a subfamily Manourinae
 under the Testudinidae.

G. Baur. Ostrologische Notizen über
 Reptilien. (Fortsetzung V.).

Zoologischer Anzeiger, XI, No. 296, Dec.
 31, 1888, pp. 736-740.

The various sub-headings of this
 article indicate the nature of the
 notes as follows: - Troionychoidea;
 The quadratojugal of Terrapene
carolina L.; Peculiarities in the
 skulls of Staurotypidae, Cimosternidae,

and Dermatemydidae; Pleurodira;
 The saddle-shaped articulations of
 the cervical vertebrae of Podoc-
nemis.

G. Baur. Osteologische Notizen über
 Reptilien. (Fortsetzung VI.).

Zoologischer Anzeiger, XII, No. 298, Jan.
 21, 1889, pp. 40-47.

The present series contains notes
 relating to Testudinata, on the
 epipterygoid of the "Pinnata";
 on the number of pleuralia
 (costalia) in the Chelonians; on
 the peripheralia (marginalia)
 of the "Pinnata"; on the connection
 of carapace with plastron in
 the "Pinnata"; on the absence

of foramen palatinum in the
Chelonidae and the Dermochely-
idae; on the nuchale of the
"Pinnata"; and on the cervical
vertebrae of the "Pinnata".

G. Baur. Notes on the American
Trionychidae.

American Naturalist, XXII, 1888, pp.
1121 - 1122.

Recognizes two genera, Platypeltis
with one species P. agassizii Baur
(= P. ferox Agass. nec Schn.), and
Aspidonectes, with 6 species.

G. Baur. The Systematic Position of
Meiolania, Owen.

Annals and Magazine of Natural
History, (6) III, Jan. 1889, pp. 54-62

The result of the author's researches is summed up as follows: —

"I am inclined to consider Meiolania as a highly specialized branch of the true land-tortoises."

J. Baur. On "Aulacochelys", Lydekker, and the Systematic Position of Anosteira, Leidy, and Pseudotrionyx, Dollo.

Annals and Magazine of Natural History, (6) III, March, 1889, pp. 273-276.

The author considers the genus Aulacochelys as not entitled to recognition, being based upon trivial characters. He also gives his reasons for referring Anosteira either to the Staurotypidae or the Cinosternidae, but concludes by provisionally

following Boulenger in placing
this genus with Pseudotrionyx
in a separate family.

J. Baur. Die Systematische Stellung von
Dermochelys Blainv.

Biologisches Centralblatt, IX, No. 5,
May 1, 1889, pp. 149-153, and concluded
in No. 6, May 15, 1889, pp. 180-191.

Author maintains his former
standpoint that Dermochelys
should not be removed from the
"Pinnata", and that the group
"Athecae" is not well founded.

E. D. Cope. On a New Species of Charina
from California.

Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., XI, 1888, p. 88

Described as a new species Charina brachyops.