

# Max Auerbach and the natural history collections of the Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie Colmar during the German annexation of the Alsace 1940-1945

Albrecht Manegold, Mathilde Haentzler & Claire Prêtre

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## Kurzfassung

### **Max Auerbach und die naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie Colmar während der deutschen Annexion des Elsass, 1940-1945**

In der vorliegenden Fallstudie wird die gemeinsame Recherche zur Klärung der Provenienz eines Konvoluts von 68 Bälgen von 60 Vogelarten sowie einem Set Karteikarten zu Belegen europäischer Vogelarten beschrieben. Die genannten Objekte werden gegenwärtig am Staatlichen Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe (SMNK) aufbewahrt, befanden sich aber ursprünglich im Besitz der Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar (SHNEC). Dokumente, die sich im Stadtarchiv Colmar sowie im Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA KA) befinden, belegen, dass es sich bei den Objekten um kriegsbedingt verlagertes Kulturgut handelt. Sie zeigen auch, dass Max Auerbach (1879-1968), seinerzeit Direktor des als Badische Landessammlungen für Naturkunde bekannten Naturkundemuseums Karlsruhe, während der deutschen Annexion des Elsass auch die Verantwortung über die naturkundlichen Sammlungen in Colmar und Mulhouse innehatte. Offenbar war es Auerbach, der die Vogelbälge und Karteikarten von Colmar nach Karlsruhe brachte, und wir diskutieren, was ihn dazu motiviert haben könnte.

## Abstract

We present a case study of joined provenance research regarding a bundle of 68 bird skins representing 60 species as well as a set of index cards referring to specimens of European bird species. These objects are currently housed at the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe (SMNK) but were originally in the possession of the Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar (SHNEC). Documents in the Archives municipales de Colmar as well as the Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA KA) indicate that these objects are cultural property displaced as a result of war. They further reveal that Max Auerbach (1879-

1968), then director of the natural history museum in Karlsruhe (by that time known as Badische Landessammlungen für Naturkunde), was also in charge of the natural history collections in Colmar and Mulhouse during the time of the German annexation of the Alsace. It seems obvious that Auerbach transferred the specimens as well as the set of index cards from Colmar to Karlsruhe, and we discuss his possible motivation for doing so.

## Résumé

### **Max Auerbach et les collections d'histoire naturelle de la Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie Colmar pendant l'annexion allemande de l'Alsace, 1940-1945**

Nous présentons une étude de cas de recherche de provenance conjointe concernant 68 peaux d'oiseaux représentant 60 espèces ainsi qu'un ensemble de fiches se rapportant à des spécimens d'oiseaux européens actuellement conservés au Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe (SMNK), qui se trouvaient cependant à l'origine dans les collections de la Société d'histoire naturelle et d'ethnographie de Colmar (SHNEC). Des documents issus des archives municipales de Colmar et du Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA KA) prouvent que les objets constituent un patrimoine culturel déplacé à cause de la guerre. Ils révèlent que Max Auerbach (1879-1968), alors directeur du musée d'histoire naturelle de Karlsruhe (à l'époque Badische Landessammlungen für Naturkunde), était également responsable des collections d'histoire naturelle de Colmar et de Mulhouse à l'époque de l'annexion de l'Alsace par l'Allemagne (1940-1945). Il semble donc manifeste que Auerbach ait apporté les spécimens ainsi que le jeu de fiches de Colmar à Karlsruhe, et nous étudions ses motivations possibles pour ce faire.

## Authors

Dr. Albrecht Manegold, Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe, Erbprinzenstraße 13, 76133 Karlsruhe; E-Mail: albrecht.manegold@smnk.de  
Mathilde Haentzler, CRESAT, Université de Haute-Alsace, 16 rue de la fonderie, 68100 Mulhouse; E-Mail: mathilde.haentzler@uha.fr  
Claire Prêtre, Musée d'Histoire naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar, 11 rue Turenne, 68000 Colmar; E-Mail: claire.pretre@colmar.fr

## 1 Introduction

The vertebrate collections at the State Museum of Natural History Karlsruhe (SMNK) house 68 study skins of 60 bird species, which apparently form a bundle, date from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which provenance remained obscure until recently (Table 1). Virtually all of them are formerly mounted specimens turned into study skins. They were kept in a drawer labelled “alte Vogelbälge” (i.e., old study skins of birds) (Fig. 1) for an unknown period of time, but at least since the 1970s. Information regarding the date and circumstances of the acquisition of these bird skins was missing, and they were not inventoried until 2021. The original labels are marked with a now outdated stamp of the SMNK reading “Landessammlungen für Naturkunde, Karlsruhe” (i.e. the official name of the SMNK from 1945 to 1989), but the design of the labels (Fig. 2, 3) clearly indicates that they originated from a different museum's collection.

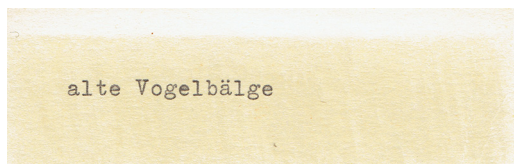


Figure 1. Label reading “Alte Vogelbälge”, i.e. “old study skins of birds”, which was attached to the drawer containing the bird specimens from the SHNEC collections. – All photos: SMNK (Mathias Vielsäcker).

Furthermore, a set of 148 record cards was discovered within the card index of the SMNK bird collection, which does not match to the latter. These cards were originally designed for keeping current accounts with imprinted separate columns for debit and credit (Fig. 4). The type-written information on the cards is given in German. In general, a single card refers to only one species of bird, frequently supplemented with a curly bracket in pencil and the word “Gruppe”, in-



Figure 2. Former mounted specimens turned into study skins of two Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) from former French colony Cochinchina and Hungary, respectively, and a Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) from the Alsace. These three specimens are representative of the bundle of study skins that were originally part of the SHNEC collections, but which are currently housed at the SMNK.

Table 1. List of 68 bird skins displaced during the German annexation of the Alsace from the natural history collections of the Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie Colmar to the State Museum of Natural History Karlsruhe. Catalogue numbers refer to those provided by Schneider Sr. (1895). Catalogue numbers of misidentified or otherwise problematic specimens are set in pointed brackets. Species not mentioned in the original catalogue lack a catalogue number, which is indicated by an em dash in round brackets (—) (see also Appendix).

| Inventory No. SMNK | Catalogue No. | Common name               | Scientific name                    |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| SMNK-AV 11091      | <606>         | Pied Crow                 | <i>Corvus albus</i>                |
| SMNK-AV 11092      | <606>         | Pied Crow                 | <i>Corvus albus</i>                |
| SMNK-AV 11093      | (—)           | Rook                      | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11094      | 1400          | Red-billed Tropicbird     | <i>Phaethon aethereus</i>          |
| SMNK-AV 11095      | 1362          | Parasitic Jaeger          | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>    |
| SMNK-AV 11096      | 1359          | Pintado Petrel            | <i>Daption capense</i>             |
| SMNK-AV 11097      | 899           | Lesser Vasa Parrot        | <i>Coracopsis nigra</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11098      | 899           | Lesser Vasa Parrot        | <i>Coracopsis nigra</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11099      | 901           | Grey Parrot               | <i>Psittacus erithacus</i>         |
| SMNK-AV 11100      | 902           | Timneh Parrot             | <i>Psittacus timneh</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11101      | 908           | Yellow-headed Amazon      | <i>Amazona oratrix</i>             |
| SMNK-AV 11102      | <911>         | Puerto Rican Amazon       | <i>Amazona vittata</i>             |
| SMNK-AV 11103      | 920           | Sulphur-crested Cockatoo  | <i>Cacatua galerita</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11104      | 918           | Cockatiel                 | <i>Nymphicus hollandicus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11105      | 858           | Keel-billed Toucan        | <i>Ramphastos sulfuratus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11106      | 859           | Channel-billed Toucan     | <i>Ramphastos vitellinus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11107      | 859           | Channel-billed Toucan     | <i>Ramphastos vitellinus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11108      | <860a>        | Collared Aracari          | <i>Pteroglossus torquatus</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11109      | 934           | Black-spotted Barbet      | <i>Capito niger</i>                |
| SMNK-AV 11110      | (—)           | Black-collared Barbet     | <i>Lybius torquatus</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11111      | (—)           | Western Cattle Egret      | <i>Ardea ibis</i>                  |
| SMNK-AV 11112      | 1185          | Striated Heron            | <i>Butorides striata</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11113      | 1267          | Purple Gallinule          | <i>Porphyrio martinica</i>         |
| SMNK-AV 11114      | (—)           | Lizard Buzzard            | <i>Kaupifalco monogrammicus</i>    |
| SMNK-AV 11115      | 67            | Black-winged Kite         | <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11116      | 55            | Malagasy Kestrel          | <i>Falco newtoni</i>               |
| SMNK-AV 11117      | 98            | Burrowing Owl             | <i>Athene cunicularia</i>          |
| SMNK-AV 11118      | 89            | Northern Hawk-Owl         | <i>Surnia ulula</i>                |
| SMNK-AV 11119      | 848           | Western Plantain-eater    | <i>Crinifer piscator</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11120      | 848           | Western Plantain-eater    | <i>Crinifer piscator</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11121      | <849>         | Eastern Plantain-eater    | <i>Crinifer zonurus</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11122      | 846           | Guinea Turaco             | <i>Tauraco persa</i>               |
| SMNK-AV 11123      | 845           | Violet Turaco             | <i>Tauraco violaceus</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11124      | 976           | Blue Coua                 | <i>Coua caerulea</i>               |
| SMNK-AV 11125      | 987           | Senegal Coucal            | <i>Centropus senegalensis</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11126      | 972           | Chestnut-breasted Malkoha | <i>Phaenicophaeus curvirostris</i> |
| SMNK-AV 11127      | 973           | Green-billed Malkoha      | <i>Phaenicophaeus tristis</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11128      | (—)           | Greater Coucal            | <i>Centropus sinensis</i>          |
| SMNK-AV 11129      | (—)           | Philippine Coucal         | <i>Centropus viridis</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11130      | 984           | Common Squirrel Cuckoo    | <i>Piaya cayana</i>                |
| SMNK-AV 11131      | 999           | Great Spotted Cuckoo      | <i>Clamator glandarius</i>         |

| Inventory No. SMNK | Catalogue No. | Common name                 | Scientific name                 |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| SMNK-AV 11132      | 1071          | Plain Chachalaca            | <i>Ortalis vetula</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11133      | 1108          | Northern Bobwhite           | <i>Colinus virginianus</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11134      | 1110          | California Quail            | <i>Callipepla californica</i>   |
| SMNK-AV 11135      | 1100          | Grey Partridge              | <i>Perdix perdix</i>            |
| SMNK-AV 11136      | <853>         | Western Red-billed Hornbill | <i>Tockus kemp</i>              |
| SMNK-AV 11137      | 854           | African Grey Hornbill       | <i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11138      | 854           | African Grey Hornbill       | <i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11139      | 855           | West African Pied Hornbill  | <i>Lophoceros semifasciatus</i> |
| SMNK-AV 11140      | 855           | West African Pied Hornbill  | <i>Lophoceros semifasciatus</i> |
| SMNK-AV 11141      | 1303          | White-faced Whistling Duck  | <i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11142      | 1306          | Wood Duck                   | <i>Aix sponsa</i>               |
| SMNK-AV 11143      | 1349          | Smew                        | <i>Mergellus albellus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11144      | 1312          | Garganey                    | <i>Spatula querquedula</i>      |
| SMNK-AV 11145      | 1234          | Pied Avocet                 | <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>   |
| SMNK-AV 11146      | 1227          | Common Greenshank           | <i>Tringa nebularia</i>         |
| SMNK-AV 11147      | 1226          | Spotted Redshank            | <i>Tringa erythropus</i>        |
| SMNK-AV 11148      | (—)           | Jameson's Snipe             | <i>Gallinago jamesoni</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11149      | 1147          | Red-wattled Lapwing         | <i>Vanellus indicus</i>         |
| SMNK-AV 11150      | 1235          | Black-winged Stilt          | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>    |
| SMNK-AV 11151      | 1236          | Black-winged Stilt          | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>    |
| SMNK-AV 11152      | 1283          | Bronze-winged Jacana        | <i>Metopidius indicus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11153      | 1283          | Bronze-winged Jacana        | <i>Metopidius indicus</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11154      | (—)           | Small Minivet               | <i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i> |
| SMNK-AV 11155      | 673           | Common Grackle              | <i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>       |
| SMNK-AV 11156      | 482a          | Giant Antshrike             | <i>Batara cinerea</i>           |
| SMNK-AV 11162      | (—)           | Curve-billed Tinamou        | <i>Nothoprocta curvirostris</i> |
| SMNK-AV 11499      | (—)           | Common Kestrel              | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>        |

dicating the listed specimens were combined as a group of birds for display.

In a first attempt to clarify the provenance of both the study skins as well as the index cards, all the available records related to the SMNK vertebrate collections were searched for referable evidence. From the 1890s until 1942, each zoological specimen had been documented at least twice: first, by entries in separate handwritten catalogues sorted by major taxonomic groups (i.e. birds, mammals, reptiles, etc.), and second, in an alphabetical handwritten card index, again sorted by major taxonomic groups, but also separated into mounted specimens for exhibition purposes and study skins for the scientific collection. In general, each specimen was registered with a unique inventory number. Furthermore, new acquisitions were additionally documented by entries in a common register that followed a

separate numbering system. Usually, entries in the common register were supplemented by cross-references to the inventory numbers applied in catalogues and card indices.

This system of documentation was first established by Constantin Hilger (1857-1915) in the early 1890s, who served as curator of the zoological collections and later as head of the museum from 1892 to 1899 (Mayer 1983). It was further improved by Max Auerbach (1879-1968), who started his career at the Karlsruhe natural history museum in 1902 as assistant in the zoology department, and who became the museum's director in 1932 (Frentzen 1951, Höfer et al. 2018). Apparently, Max Ritzi (1907-1979), teacher for natural sciences and since 1936 delegated to an assistant's position at the natural history museum (Müller 1980), was responsible for inventorying specimens following the well-es-





Figure 3. Colour-coded labels diagnostic for the labels of the bird collection of SHNEC. Blue edging indicates specimens collected in the Alsace (a), green edging indicates specimens collected in Europe (b, f), and red edging indicates specimens collected outside Europe (c-e). Labels (a-c) apparently are in the handwriting of Gustav Schneider Sr. (1834-1900), labels (d-f) in that of Gustav Schneider Jr. (1867-1948). Note the printed catalogue number glued onto the label of a *Tringa erythropus* (a) and the handwritten catalogue number supplemented by an 'a' (i.e. 860a) on the label of a *Pteroglossus torquatus* (e). Vernacular names in German and French are only provided for selected species (a, b, f). All labels show marks of pins or staplers where they were fixed on pedestals or boxes. Metal eyelets might have been added after the bird skins had been transferred to the museum in Karlsruhe.

established scheme from 1937 onwards (Manegold pers. obs.). However, after major parts of the museum's building were destroyed during an air raid of Karlsruhe in the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1942 (Ritzi 1951, see Syré 2005), any kind of documentation related to the vertebrate collections came to a preliminary end.

After the Second World War, the museum's taxidermist Kurt Silber (1906-1979) continued the common register from 1948 to 1958, which proved to be a reliable documentation of new acquisitions during this period (Angst 1980; Manegold pers. obs.). Max Ritzi, however, finally pro-

moted to the position of head of the zoological department, started to register what remained from the vertebrate collections. Unfortunately, he allocated new numbers to already inventoried specimens. The card index was no longer continued (Manegold pers. obs.).

Helmut Knipper (1914-1974) succeeded Ritzi as head of the zoological department in 1959 (Jörg 1976). He did not use the common register or any of the catalogues but kept meticulous records of any acquisition by filing bills and compiling detailed information on labels attached to the specimens.

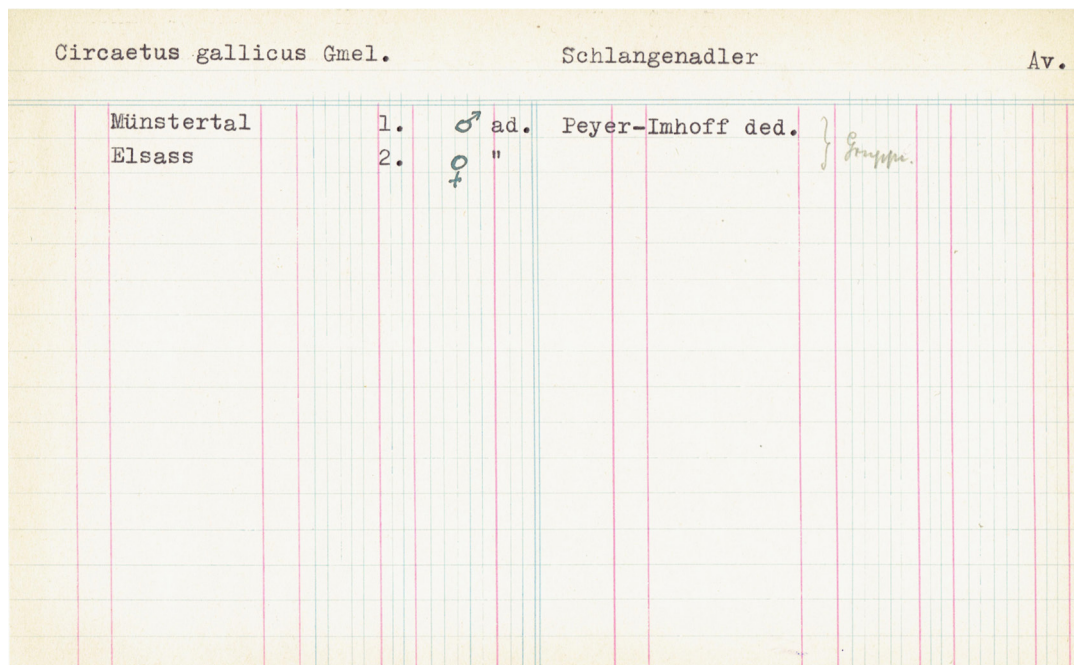


Figure 4. Index card referring to specimens of Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) on display at the Musée d'histoire naturelle de Colmar. The note in handwriting reads "Gruppe" and indicates that the individual specimens had been arranged in a group. The handwriting might be that of Max Auerbach.

In 1972, Ralf Angst (\*1938) – the first scientist solely responsible for the museum's vertebrate collection since its foundation – revived the former tradition established by Hilger and Auerbach of keeping catalogues and of numbering specimens consecutively. Furthermore, he created a new card index, and continued the documentation of receipts, though abstaining from keeping a common register.

Both Knipper and Angst added typewritten labels to drawers containing specimens, and both could be author of the already mentioned label reading "alte Vogelbälge", but so far it is impossible to say, who actually did it. Nevertheless, this would imply that the specimens in question were already present at the SMNK in 1959 or 1972, respectively. After Angst's retirement in 1989 (Trunkó et al. 2000), the documentation of acquisitions became patchy again, but the new card index created by him became the basis for the digital database of the vertebrate collections that is still in use.

In summary, none of the mentioned catalogues or comparable documents contain any obvious

reference to either the bird specimens compiled as "Alte Vogelbälge" or the index cards.

In the following, we describe how the distinct design of the original labels helped to identify the collection the objects originally belonged to, and how provenance research helped to identify them as cultural property displaced as a result of war.

## 2 Labels' design as important clues for specimens' provenance

The labels attached to the study skins are conspicuously marked with blue, green, or red edges. Most of them measure 8.5 x 5 cm and bear handwritten information on the specimens (Fig. 3a-f). Because several labels show vernacular names in German as well as in French, and because several specimens had been collected in the Alsace region, a relation to a natural history collection in the Alsace region seemed obvious (Fig. 3a, b, f).

By pure chance, the catalogue of the bird collection of the Société d'Histoire naturelle de Colmar (since 1998 Société d'Histoire naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar, SHNEC, Gradoz 2011)



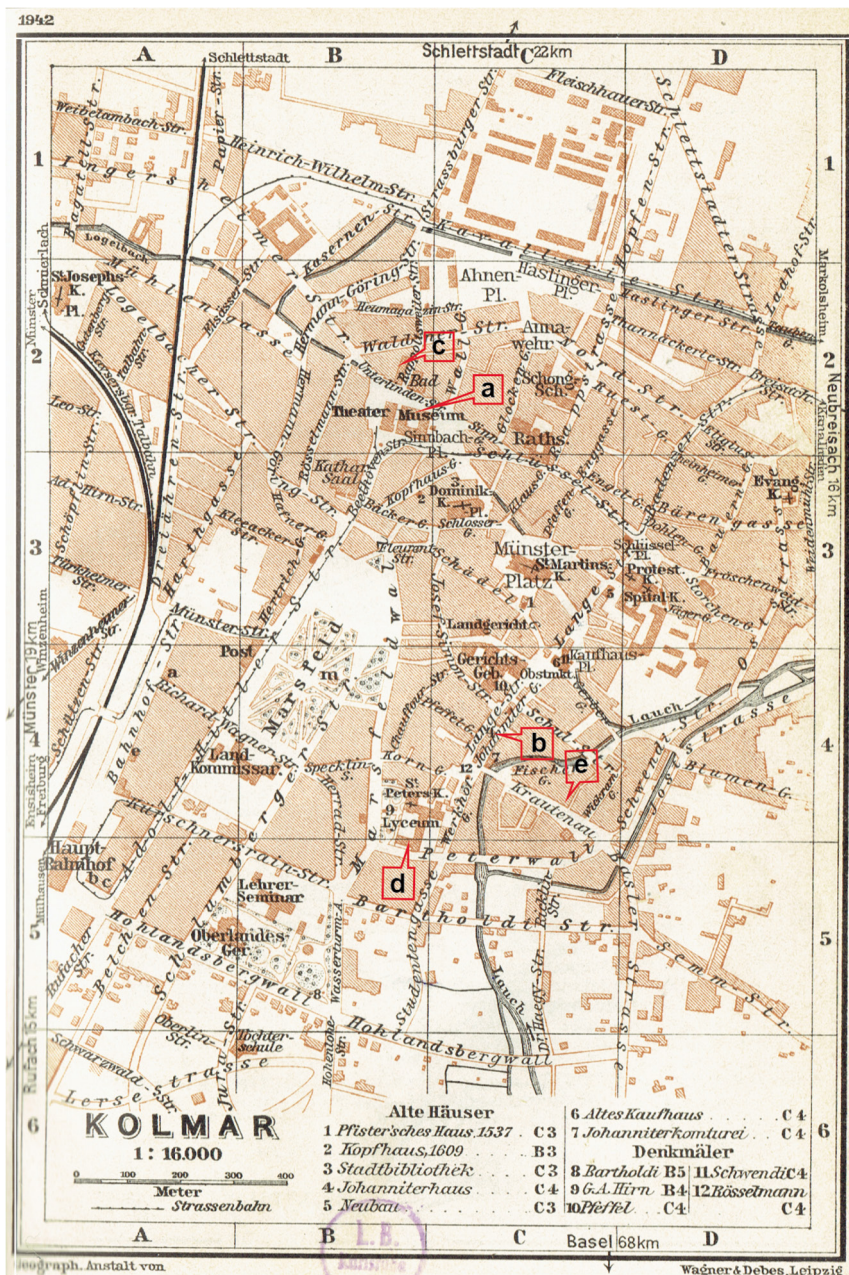


Figure 5. City map of Colmar dating from 1942 with several places related to the SHNEC collections indicated. (a) Musée Unterlinden, (b) Commanderie Saint-Jean, 3 Rue Saint-Jean, location of the natural history museum Colmar 1941-1945, (c) École des Unterlinden, 27 Rue Golbéry, where the SHNEC collections were stored after 1945, (d) Lycée Bartholdi, where specimens from the SHNEC collections were recognized in 2016, (e) actual location of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar, 11 Rue Turenne. (Map from Baedeker 1942, modified).

published by Gustav Schneider Sr. in 1895 provided evidence that the bird skins had been part of this collection: The colour code of the labels is explained in the catalogue's preface, i.e. blue edging indicates specimens collected in Alsace, green edging indicates specimens from Europe, and red edging indicates specimens collected in areas outside of Europe (Schneider Sr. 1895). This colour code is not an invention by Schneider Sr. but was already defined by the SHNEC as early as 1861 to indicate the provenance of any specimen at glance (Faudel 1862: 31).

Furthermore, several labels bear a small piece of paper imprinted with a number that had been glued onto them (Fig. 3a). These numbers match perfectly with the catalogue numbers used by Schneider Sr. (1895), with the numbers referring to a particular species, but not to an individual specimen. For example, all six specimens of Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) mentioned in the catalogue (Schneider Sr. 1895: 69) are listed under the catalogue number 1226 (Fig. 3a). Occasionally, labels bear handwritten numbers like "860a" (Fig. 3e). Again, these numbers match with those of the printed catalogue, though the addition of a letter in small caps might indicate an attempt to distinguish certain specimens of the same species. Interestingly, labels with such a combination of numbers and small caps are in a different handwriting, probably in that of Gustav Schneider Jr. (see below).

65 of the 68 study skins bear the diagnostic labels and are therefore readily referable to the SHNEC collections (Table 1). Several specimens obtained by the SHNEC after the catalogue was published by Schneider Sr. could be traced in the Society's annual reports. Three additional specimens that were kept in the same drawer as the aforementioned 65 study skins can at least tentatively be referred to the SHNEC collections, although they lack an original label: The specimen of a male Garganey (*Spatula querquedula*; SMNK-AV 11144) was only imperfectly turned into a study skin, and – in contrast to the remaining specimens – its feet show no traces of white paint from the original pedestals. The specimen of a West African Pied Hornbill (*Lophoceros semifasciatus*; SMNK-AV 11140) is virtually indistinguishable in style from a second specimen (SMNK-AV 11139) of the same species with the original label still attached. The skin of a juvenile female Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*; SMNK-AV 11499) bears a tag made of cardboard indicating the handwritten

note "Hellau 1931", which apparently does not refer to the place of collection, but probably to the name of the collector as well as the year of collecting. The reverse side of the tag bears an illegible and crossed out note that might indicate a price in French franc. Because of the currency and the circumstance that the specimen was found together with all the other specimens from the SHNEC, the same provenance is assumed. After the successful identification of the aforementioned 68 specimens, the vertebrate collection of the SMNK as well as the corresponding database and catalogues were searched for additional specimens that might relate to the SHNEC collections, which led to a single hit: Ralf Angst inventoried the study skin of a male Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*; SMNK-AV 5959) collected in Marseille, as it is evident from the corresponding entry in the bird catalogue in his distinct handwriting. Angst did not provide any further information regarding dates of collection or acquisition of this peculiar specimen, but sex and place of collection are identical to the single specimen of *Numenius tenuirostris* listed by Schneider Sr. (1895, No. 1217). It seems very unlikely that the specimen inventoried by Angst is not identical with the specimen catalogued by Schneider Sr. (1895) given the concordance in sex and place of collection. Unfortunately, specimen SMNK-AV 5959 went missing before 2014, which makes further studies impossible. The Musée d'Histoire naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar (MHNEC) still keeps two specimens of this extremely rare species (Gradoz 2010), which was recently declared globally extinct after it was last documented in 1995 (Buchanan et al. 2025).

The index cards refer to bird specimens collected almost exclusively in the Alsace and neighbouring areas of France, and most of these specimens had been collected between 1927 and 1937. Although no catalogue numbers are given, several specimens listed on the cards are clearly identical to specimens mentioned in the catalogue (Schneider Sr. 1895), i.e. they have been collected before 1895. Prominent examples are specimens of a Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circus gallicus*), from Münstertal (i.e. Vallée de Munster) (Fig. 4), a male Common Crane (*Grus grus*) from Lützelburg (i.e. Château de Lützelbourg), collected in December 1851, and a male Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) from Colmar, collected in winter 1879/80. Other records clearly relate to specimens described and illustrated by



Gradoz (2011, 2014). Thus, the relation between the set of index cards and the SHNEC is evident. By spot-checking the information for apparently identical specimens provided by both the catalogue and by the card index, discrepancies became obvious. For example, Schneider Sr. (1895) listed one specimen of Northern Hawk-Owl (*Surnia ulula*) from the Alsace, donated by Mr. von Peyerimhoff, and another specimen collected in Brumath without any further data. According to the index card, however, both a male and a female specimen were collected in Brumath and donated by Peyer-Imhoff (sic). Frequently, scientific names are misspelled leading to the assumption that the person who wrote the card index was probably not a trained ornithologist.

### 3 A short history of the SHNEC

The SHNEC was founded in 1859 as Société d'histoire naturelle de Colmar by dedicated laymen and scientists. Its collections were housed in the Musée Unterlinden alongside the collections of the Société Schongauer, the city library, the city archive, and other municipal collections (Ziegler 2003: 133, Gueth 2011). According to the society's annual reports, the natural history collections – and especially the bird collection – grew rapidly until the onset of the First World War (e.g. Koenig 1904, 1906, Gueth 2011). Gustav Schneider Sr. (1834-1900), a taxidermist of German origin and dealer of natural history objects in Basel was appointed by the SHNEC to take care of the Society's collections from 1893 until his death in 1900 (Macker 1900, Schneider Jr. 1900). Between 1894 and 1898, he published a series of catalogues of the major groups of vertebrates represented at the Colmar collections (Schneider Sr. 1894, 1895, 1898a, b). His son Gustav Schneider Jr. (1867-1948) took over his business in Basel and continued his curatorial work at the museum in Colmar apparently until 1939 (F. Schneider 1958).

Lack of space for the growing collections was already evident by 1910 (e.g. Koenig 1912). Apparently, the original policy of increasing the collections continuously changed between 1918 and 1939, when rearranging the present collections and replacing spoiled specimens with new ones became more important. Interestingly, donating expandable objects to local schools became common practice by that time (Herzog 1933, 1935, 1937a). Plans of moving at least certain parts of the natural history collections from the Musée Unterlinden to rooms of the adjacent

l'École des Unterlinden were discussed in 1935, but finally not approved by members of SHNEC (Herzog 1937a: IX f.). This school building already housed the Society's library and provided room for meetings of SHNEC members (Herzog 1937b: XXXVI). – The school was also known as l'École du Musée (Gueth 2011; Archives municipales de Colmar [AMC] OA 182), its building is situated at 27 Rue Golbéry and currently houses the Institut Médico-Éducatif Les Catherinettes (Fig. 5).

### 4 The jeopardized integrity of the natural history collections of the SHNEC during the German annexation 1940 to 1945

During the Second World War, German troops invaded the Alsace on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1940 and occupied Colmar, Mulhouse, and Strasbourg during the following days. Armistice between Germany and France was announced on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1940, leading to the de facto annexation of the Alsace (i.e., the armistice agreement did not contain a clause on Alsace and Moselle; the de facto annexation was proclaimed by decree). Robert Wagner (1895-1944), Gauleiter of Baden, also became chief of the civil administration of the Alsace, and finally Reichsstatthalter of the newly established Gau Baden-Elsass with Strasbourg as its capital (Rosebrock 2012).

As a consequence of the annexation, the SHNEC had to cease its activities and was dissolved like other Alsatian societies and associations (Gueth 2011). The property of the SHNEC including its natural history collections and its library passed into the ownership of the municipality of Colmar, installed by the German Nazi administration. Thus, Luzian Manny (1892-1968), Robert Wagner's former lawyer from Freiburg im Breisgau and appointed Oberstadtkommissar of Colmar, became responsible for these collections (Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire et d'Archéologie d'Alsace; GLA FR F166/3 No. 479, No. 486).

Wagner's personal aim was the "re-Germanisation" and the creation of a model Reich province in the spirit of Nazi Germany (Rosebrock 2012). The centralization of the administration of all museums in Baden as well as the Alsace by means of the Generalverwaltung der Oberrheinischen Museen (GVOM, i.e. General administration of museums of the Upper Rhine Valley) was an essential element for the accomplishment of this plan. Therefore, Wagner appointed Kurt Martin (1899-1975), art historian and director of the

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe (National Art Gallery Karlsruhe), as Generalbevollmächtigter (i.e. chief representative) of the GVOM already in July 1940 (Rosebrock 2012).

The German administration was highly interested in the removal of the natural history collections from the Unterlinden Museum in order to enable reconstructions of the convent building and its future use as a museum dedicated solely to German art of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Gueth 2011, Rosebrock 2012: 94). As it is evident from a letter by Auerbach to Manny, Martin informed Auerbach about the natural history collections in Colmar, and the Baden ministry of education asked Auerbach to inspect and evaluate them (Auerbach in litt., 27<sup>th</sup> January 1941; AMC OA 159). In fact, Auerbach was made responsible for moving and rearranging these collections to the Commanderie Saint-Jean de Colmar, between April and November 1941. This impressive building located at 3 Rue Saint-Jean dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century but was remodelled in large parts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century after it was acquired by the order of the Sœurs de la divine providence de Ribeauvillé, which used it as a private school. The building became only available for the collections, because the order had been dispossessed in April 1941 by the German administration (Gueth 2011; AMC 2R1-19, 2R1-20A; Fig. 5). A copy of Auerbach's detailed report on the state of the SHNEC collections, their accommodation at the new location, and their future supervision dating from 28<sup>th</sup> June 1941 exists in the Archives municipales de Colmar (AMC OA 159). According to this report, Auerbach selected only a comparatively small number of specimens for the new exhibition and regarded the remaining specimens as the basis for a scientific collection to be stored separately. Considering specimens of especially rare species to be out of place at the rather small Colmar Museum, Auerbach recommended the exchange of specimens with Karlsruhe. Furthermore, he made suggestions regarding the future collection concept and the organization of the museum's operation including the employment of a biologist and founding of a new natural history society. Obviously, Auerbach suggested the Landessammlungen in Karlsruhe, which he shaped and modernized over a period of almost 40 years (Frentzen 1951, Elster 1969, Höfer et al. 2018), as a template for a new natural history museum in Colmar. In doing so, Auerbach followed the common pattern that the re-organisation of the museums' landscape should

be shaped after German model institutions (see Rosebrock 2012: 91 ff.).

Interestingly, Manny suggested to Martin that the building of the former district court might be more suitable for a natural history museum (Manny in litt., 4<sup>th</sup> September 1941; AMC 2R1-20A), while Auerbach was still busy rearranging the collections at the Commanderie. Auerbach did not approve such plans and did not share Manny's opinion. Instead, he favoured the construction of a new museum building (Auerbach in litt., 9<sup>th</sup> December 1941; AMC 2R1-20A). Apparently, these plans were not followed up, the SHNEC collections remained at 3 Rue Saint-Jean until the end of the Second World War (Gueth 2011).

Auerbach also made efforts to find a local taxidermist for restoring specimens for the exhibition and for turning mounted specimens into study skins for the scientific collection. In a letter to Manny, dating from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1941, Auerbach informed the Oberstadtkommissar that he was in contact with a L. Boehm, taxidermist from Colmar, whom he would have liked to have given corresponding jobs on a trial basis (AMC OA 159). This person is apparently identical with Lucian (or Lucien) Alphons Boehm (1893-?), a Colmar born furrier, who resided in 12 rue Roeselmann since October 1941 (AMC, in litt.).

According to the aforementioned documents (AMC OA 159), Auerbach acted as a service provider for the municipality of Colmar on behalf of the Baden ministry of education. He stressed the significance of the Badische Landessammlungen in Karlsruhe for the Upper Rhine region and offered support for developing a modern natural history museum in Colmar by providing expertise, but he made no attempts to take over the local museum or its collections. This attitude fits Auerbach's concept of the Landessammlungen as the central museum of natural history in the Upper Rhine region submitted as a draft paper to the Baden ministry of Education in late November 1940 (GLA KA 235 No. 30946). In that paper, Auerbach did not mention any of the local natural history collections in the area, e.g. those in Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Colmar, Freiburg im Breisgau or Offenburg. Apparently, he did not question the integrity of these collections until the Landessammlungen were badly affected by the air raid on Karlsruhe in the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1942. When Robert Wagner commanded the rebuilding of the Baden State Library at Strasbourg on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1942, he also considered the rebuilding of the damaged natural history collections at the

designated new capital of Elsass-Baden (GLA KA 235 No. 6655). Probably in reaction to this consideration, Auerbach submitted another draft paper dealing with plans for a new subterranean museum's building to be erected near Colmar on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1942 (GLA KA 235 No. 30946). For this scenario, he planned to unite the natural history collections of Karlsruhe, Strasbourg, and Colmar ignoring the factual ownership of the mentioned collections. (Such a union would have been in line with Robert Wagner's plans for a single representative art museum for the Gau Baden-Elsass (Rosebrock, in litt.).) However, these plans were not followed up. Instead, during a meeting at Strasbourg on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1943, Ministerialdirektor Gärtner and Oberstadtkommissar Manny, in the presence of Auerbach, agreed on re-establishing the Landessammlungen in a large villa in Colmar. Furthermore, they planned that the park of this villa was to be transformed into a botanical garden as well as a small menagerie with fish tanks and several terrariums. They further agreed that the dispossessed library of the SHNEC should remain property of the municipality, though the Landessammlungen should be responsible for its management (GLA KA 235 No. 6655). The document contains no information regarding the ownership structures of the natural history collections, i.e. it remains unclear if the dispossessed SHNEC collections were supposed to be merged with the collections of the Landessammlungen or if Manny insisted that the municipality would have remained their factual owner as he did in the case of the library. It is doubtful that these plans were pursued any further after May 1943, because the progression of the Second World War would not have allowed it. There is no evidence of the removal of any property of the Badische Landessammlungen für Naturkunde from Karlsruhe to Colmar, though Auerbach was desperate to find safe places for the most vulnerable parts of the collection (GLA KA 235 No. 6655). The SHNEC library remained intact and unspoiled in its storage at the basement of the École des Unterlinden (Gueth 2011).

### 5 The fate of the natural history collections of the SHNEC after 1945

The SHNEC was re-established in 1953 (Gueth 2011), though its collections were returned to the Unterlinden convent as early as 1945 and stored in a dim room at the museum's ground floor (AMC 2R1-19; Gueth 2011). In 1955, the collections were moved again, this time to the nearby

École des Unterlinden, although there was not enough space to store them sufficiently. As early as 1959, a provisional exhibition place was established at the former janitor's house within the park of the Château d'Eau. In 1978, the MHNEC was re-established at the former École Turenne, where it finally re-opened for the public in 1984 (Gueth 2011).

Major parts of the SHNEC collections went missing or were spoiled during and after Second World War. According to an unpublished report on the ornithological collections, less than 50 % of the specimens inventoried by both Schneider Sr. and Schneider Jr. were still present in 1995 (P. Gradoz unpubl., SHNEC Archives). However, as mentioned previously, donating specimens to local schools was common practice during the 1930s (Herzog 1933, 1935, 1937a). Occasionally, specimens were rediscovered in schools in Colmar, such as the Lycée Bartholdi, thanks to their distinctive labels (Prêtre, pers. obs.). A pair of mounted lions (*Panthera leo*) dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and missing since the 1940s, were rediscovered in a local private collection bought by the city of Colmar in 1987, and finally returned to the museum in 1999 (Bichain & Cicekli 2017: 53).

### 6 Discussion

Auerbach's involvement in curating and managing natural history collections in Colmar and Mulhouse during the German annexation of the Alsace almost fell into entire oblivion. So far, Gueth (2011) seems to be the only published source that mentions Auerbach's activities at Colmar at least parenthetically. As far as we are aware of, his involvement was never mentioned in any publication dealing with the history of the SMNK in general or Auerbach's biography in particular (i.e. Frentzen 1951, Elster 1969, Höfer et al. 2018), though a reappraisal of the museum's history during the Third Reich and during the post-war period is still lacking. The evaluation of not widely known documents at both the Archives municipales de Colmar and the GLA KA proved to be crucial to clarify the provenance of the specimens in question.

It now seems obvious that Auerbach took the bird skins as well as the index cards to Karlsruhe with him, while he was busy rearranging the collections in Colmar. Why Auerbach took the set of index cards with him seems to be rather easy to explain: The careful study of the index cards would have allowed Auerbach to become familiar with both the SHNEC collections of birds of the



Alsace and the local avifauna. (It is still unknown, though, when and by whom these index cards had been compiled.)

However, his motive for taking the bird skins is not evident. Perhaps, he selected specimens for supplementing the scientific bird collection of the Badische Landessammlungen für Naturkunde, following his own suggestion to exchange specimens between Colmar and Karlsruhe (AMC OA 159). After all, 70 % of the species represented by the selection of 68 specimens from the SHNEC collections would have been new for the Landes-sammlungen and thus a significant addition to its collections. However, such an exchange would have been documented and should be traceable in the various catalogues. Furthermore, such specimens would have been sorted within the skin collection, which was completely destroyed during another air raid in September 1944. Regardless of such speculations, even if Auerbach and Manny would have agreed on an exchange of specimens, it would have been illegitimate, because the SHNEC had been dispossessed from their collections.

It is also possible that Auerbach took the specimens with him for further study and identification, because some specimens had been misidentified by Schneider Sr. and Schneider Jr., respectively, such as specimens of *Crinifer zonurus*, *Pteroglossus torquatus*, *Corvus albus*, and even *Corvus frugilegus*. As stated above, Auerbach announced to Manny that he would forward a sample of bird specimens to a taxidermist of the name L. Boehm from Colmar, who should have turned them into study skins. Perhaps, these bird skins were the result of this particular or a subsequent job.

Large numbers of specimens listed in the old catalogues of Schneider Sr. for the SHNEC collections are still missing. It is evident that the SHNEC voluntarily forwarded older and spoiled specimens to schools in Colmar, at least during the 1930s. After 1945, the natural history collections were moved several times before a new inventory could be made. Decades later, specimens of the SHNEC collections were discovered in schools and in private collections in Colmar. We hope that the present paper with its description of the very characteristic labels might help identifying additional, so far overlooked SHNEC specimens in school or even museum collections in the Alsace and neighbouring regions.

The directorial boards of the MHNEC and the SMNK are informed about the results of the

present study as well as the board of the SHNEC and the Direction de la Culture of the City of Colmar. They are in contact with the responsible authorities in France and Baden-Württemberg, respectively, and details concerning a probable restitution are discussed on the basis of an inter-governmental agreement.

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#### Online Resources

- [www.alsace-histoire.org/netdba/manny-luzian/](http://www.alsace-histoire.org/netdba/manny-luzian/) – Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire et d'Archéologie d'Alsace (biographical data on Luzian Manny), Status 14.2.2026.
- [www.worldbirdnames.org/new/](http://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/) – Gill, F., Donsker, D., Rasmussen, P. (eds.) (2026): IOC World Bird List (v15.2), Status 25.7.2026.

#### Archives municipales Colmar (AMC)

- AMC OA 159 – Musée Unterlinden; transfert de la collection des histoires naturelles du musée Unterlinden à l'école Saint-Jean
- AMC OA 182 – L'École du Musée [or L'École des Unterlinden]
- AMC 2R1-2 – Fonds Schongauer
- AMC 2R1-19 – Fonds Schongauer
- AMC 2R1-20A – Fonds Schongauer
- AMC AN 20144792/299 [Kurt Martin]

#### Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA KA)

- GLA KA 235 No. 6655 – Luftschutzmaßnahmen und die Fliegerschäden an den Landessammlungen für Naturkunde in Karlsruhe.
- GLA KA 235 No. 30946 – Landessammlungen für Naturkunde in Karlsruhe (Allgemeines).

#### Generallandesarchiv Freiburg (GLA FR)

- GLA FR F166/3 No. 479 – Landgericht Freiburg/1829-1972, Personalakten
- GLA FR F166/3 No. 486 – Landgericht Freiburg/1829-1972, Personalakten

#### Appendix

- Annotated list of the bird specimens from the Société d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie de Colmar (SHNEC) at the collections of the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe (SMNK) –  
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