



August Joseph Corda's Texas expedition of 1848-1849 and its ornithological results

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Abstract. August Joseph Corda collected from November 1848 – August 1849 in Texas an unknown number of birds for the National Museum in Prague (NMP), but his collection perished in sea during his return way in September 1849. At least ten specimens, all from Texas, reached NMP as samples sent by Corda before his departure. Six of them are still deposited in the NMP. Below I present their list and discuss relevant issues of this first exploratory expedition of an NMP's curator.

Key words. National Museum, Praha, bird collection, historical ornithology, August Joseph Corda.

INTRODUCTION

August Joseph Corda (1809-1849) was a Czech naturalist, primarily botanist, paleobotanist and pioneer of microscopy (Weitenweber 1852, 1854). He was curator of the Bohemian Museum in Prague (now National Museum, Prague; NMP) from 1823-1848. On behalf of Prince Franz von Colloredo-Mansfeld (1802-1852) Corda went to Texas in 1848 to explore its natural history and to collect natural history specimens, including birds, for the NMP (Weitenweber 1852: 33).

Corda left Prague on 6 October 1848 for Bremen, Germany, from where he continued after 14 October onboard sailing-vessel *Louisiana* to New Orleans, Louisiana. His letters indicate that he spent most of his American time in Galveston, New Braunfels and Houston, southeastern Texas (Weitenweber 1852). In New Braunfels, he was in close contact with the German-Texan botanist Ferdinand Jacob Lindheimer (1801-1879) (Weitenweber 1852). One of Corda's letters shows that he planned to return to Europe onboard of German barkentine *Victoria* which was to depart from New Orleans on 28 August 1849 (Weitenweber 1852). The ship disappeared during its way to Europe. It remains unknown where and when exactly the ship sunk with Corda and his collections. Suggestions that it became victim of pirates or that it was destroyed during heavy storms that raged in the Caribbean in mid September 1849 are pure speculations (Weitenweber 1852).



August Joseph Corda (1809-1849). From author's archive.

Corda seems to have amassed considerable collection of natural history specimens, which perished in September 1849 during Corda's return way to Europe. Fortunately enough, Corda has sent from America small samples, which included birds. Exact number is unknown, because Anonymous (1850a: 331, 1850b: 494) said that the shipment included nine species of birds (number of specimens was not given), while early NMP catalogues (Frič 1854a,b, 1866) listed ten specimens (eight skins and two skeletons) in eight species, including eight skins and two skeletons. The material was deposited in the NMP.

All of these specimens were listed in early catalogues as having originated from "Tejas" (Texas). However, the collection includes a South American duck (see below), which indicates that some specimens were not collected by Corda in the wild. Similarly, Corda's collection of reptiles includes South American species (J. Moravec, pers. comm.).

Taxonomy and nomenclature of birds follows Dickinson (2003) throughout the present paper. "P6V" prefixes current inventory numbers of the vertebratological collection of the NMP, "P6p" prefixes accession numbers (Frič 1866), and "B" prefixes numbers from the Exhibition Catalogue (Anonymous 1897).

SYSTEMATIC LIST

***Pelecanus erythrorhynchus* Gmelin, 1789 (Pelecanidae)**

NMP P6V-uncatalogued (P6p-1540/1866, B-uncatalogued): This specimen (skeleton) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 41 sub *Pelecanus trachirhynchus* [sic]) and was still present in the NMP in 1866 (Frič 1866), but it was no more recorded in the Exhibition Catalogue from the 1890s (Anonymous 1897). It was discarded as damaged on 16 June 1910 (V. Vávra in Anonymous 1897).

***Platalea ajaja* Linnaeus, 1758 (Threskiornithidae)**

NMP P6V-030153 (P6p-1427/1866, B-1166): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 39) and is still preserved in the NMP.

NMP P6V-uncatalogued (P6p-1426/1866, B-uncatalogued): This specimen (skin or mount) was recorded in 1866 (Frič 1866), but was not exhibited in 1854 (Frič 1854: 39) and I found no trace of it in post-1866 catalogues. It is lost.

***Ardea herodias* Linnaeus, 1758 (Ardeidae)**

NMP P6V-uncatalogued (P6p-1390/1866, B-uncatalogued): This specimen (skeleton) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 38) and it was still present in the NMP in 1866 (Frič 1866), but I found no trace of it in subsequent catalogues.

***Anas sibilatrix* Poeppig, 1829 (Anatidae)**

NMP P6V-042940 (P6p-1464/1866, B-1294b): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 40 sub *Chaulelasmus chilensis*) and it is still preserved in the NMP. Note that this species inhabits southern part of South America (Brewer 2005) and is unknown from Texas (Lockwood & Freeman 2004).

***Anas discors* Linnaeus, 1766 (Anatidae)**

NMP P6V-042934 (P6p-1485/1866, B-1310): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 40 sub *Pterocyanea discors*) and it is still preserved in the NMP.

***Recurvirostra americana* Gmelin, 1789 (Recurvirostridae)**

NMP P6V-042457 (P6p-1314/1866, B-1233): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 36 sub *Recurvirostra occidentalis*) and it is still preserved in the NMP.

***Rynchops niger* Linnaeus, 1758 (Rynchopidae)**

NMP P6V-003900 (P6p-1580/1866, B-1371): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 42 sub *Rynchops nigra*) and it is still preserved in the NMP.

NMP P6V-uncatalogued (P6p-1581/1866): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 42 sub *Rynchops nigra*) and it was still recorded in 1866 (Frič 1866), but no more in the 1890s (Anonymous 1897). It is lost.

***Tyto alba* (Scopoli, 1769) (Strigidae)**

NMP P6V-042363 (P6p-160/1866, B-127): This specimen (mount) was on the NMP exhibition in 1854 (Frič 1854a,b: 9 sub *Strix perlata*) and it is still preserved in the NMP.

DISCUSSION

August Corda and most of his Texas collections did not survive their oversea travel from America to Europe. The few bird specimens shipped by Corda from Texas to Europe before his departure were a welcome addition to the small collection of North American birds then housed in the NMP (Frič 1854a,b, Mlíkovský 2010b), but currently they are only of historical value. It is noteworthy, however, that most birds in Corda's collection are large water birds, while land birds are represented by a single owl.

Most specimens shipped by Corda are presumably of local, i.e. Texas origin, but the presence of an extralimital species (*Anas sibilatrix*) indicates that some of the specimens were obtained by Corda from natural history dealers. Due to this observation, the geographic origin of all Corda's specimens must be considered uncertain (Corda's original labels have not been preserved).

Corda was primarily a botanist and paleobotanist, but his Texas collection of birds was not his only contribution to ornithology. Most importantly, shortly before his departure to America he found among uncatalogued specimens in the NMP a unique upper jaw of a bird, which he correctly recognized as that of the Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Strickland 1850, Reuss 1855). This jaw originated from the Dodo of Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612) and is still deposited in the NMP (Mlíkovský 2010a, Mlíkovský et al. 2011).

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