WHY MUSEUMS MATTER: AVIAN ARCHIVES IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTION. Edited by Nigel J. Collar, Clemency T. Fisher, and Christopher J. Feare. Bulletin of the British Ornithologists’ Club, vol. 123A—Supplement. 2003: 360 pp., 21 contributed papers (selected contributions at http://www.boc-online.org/bulletin.htm#bul). ISSN: 00071595, £22.00–24.00 (paper).—This volume stems from a meeting of the same name held in November 1999 in Tring. The meeting was the first of its type, and now is the first in a series, meant to bring members of the European avian collections community together in an effort to enhance international cooperation among museum biologists. In the New World, we have the annual meetings of the American Ornithologists’ Union and the listserv AVECOL (established by J. Van Remsen, Jr.) that seem to promote a degree of interaction that had not yet been achieved among European institutions. The breadth of participants (130 people from 25 countries) and authors (36 people from 13 countries, many outside of Europe) demonstrates a success that reaches well beyond Europe.

This is a dynamic time to be a museum biologist—although the title of this volume reflects some of the community’s angst—as we continue an inexorable transition from the description of avian diversity and distribution to a more diverse array of scientific pursuits. The collection of papers in this volume is rather eclectic, which is to be expected given the great diversity of materials that museums preserve and the variety of ways in which these materials are used in avian research.

The bulk of the volume treats traditional collections of skins, skeletons, fluid specimens, eggs, and associated paper (labels, catalogues, journals, etc.). DNA, proteins, tissue collections, databases (Christidis and Norman, Rajkowski), and sound collections (Alström and Ranft) are also included, as are two chapters on the electronic amalgamation of museum data (Peterson et al. and Navarro et al.).

The highlight of the volume is C. S. Roselaar’s An Inventory of Major European Bird Collections, which, at 85 pages, is the longest contribution. He summarizes 109 larger collections (the A-list) in some detail, and another 151 are listed in much less detail (the B-list: collections of <4,000 skins, or <5,000 bird items, or institutions that did not return the questionnaire that served as the basis for his paper). A long reference section and three appendices provide additional details that make this heterogeneous assemblage of collections accessible to researchers everywhere. I consider the data presented in Roselaar’s chapter to be the hallmark of the meeting; the paper coalesces the collaborative, broad interest of museum biologists and is a summary of lasting value to collections-based ornithology.

Those eager to see data from museum labels made available electronically and to use these data in analyses will do well to read Rasmussen and Prŷs-Jones’ paper History vs Mystery: The Reliability of Museum Specimen Data. Museum collections generally contain rich and accurate data, but there are many ways in which data quality is compromised, and museum personnel are accustomed to uncovering errors using clues such as specimens and handwriting that are unavailable electronically.

Collar and Rudyanto, in The Archive and the Ark: Bird Specimen Data in Conservation Status Assessment, demonstrate how important museum specimens can be in conservation (Peterson et al. and Navarro et al. extend this notion for Mexico). They also point to the decline in the number of specimen-based taxonomists and systematists (important in their case at the “twig” level) as being detrimental to conservation. Collar and Rudyanto’s paper is important both for conservation biologists and museum administrators. The authors see molecular studies growing at the expense of more traditional studies in taxonomy and systematics, and suggest that this emphasis has begun to “marginalize specimen collections in the eyes both of space-stressed administrators pondering their budgets and of result-oriented...