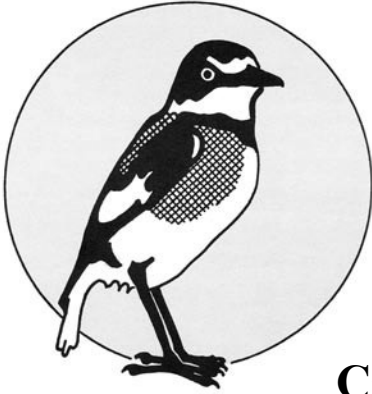


# LANIOTURDUS



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## A visit to the Vänersborg Museum

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I read the recently published book “The Trader King of Damaraland” written by Peter Johansson about Axel Eriksson, a Swedish pioneer in Southern Africa, with great interest. Axel Eriksson’s contribution to ornithology in Namibia is revealed for the first time in greater detail in this book.

On his first journey into the interior of South West Africa Eriksson accompanied Charles John Andersson, on what would turn out to be Andersson’s last journey as he died in 1867 five kilometres north of what is today the Namibian border with Angola on that expedition.

Charles John Andersson, who also hailed from Vänersborg, is known for his great contribution to ornithology in Namibia through his book “Notes on the birds of Damara Land and the adjacent countries of South West Africa”, which was published five years after his death as well as through the paintings of the birds of South West Africa by Thomas Baines commissioned by Charles John Andersson.

Axel Eriksson did not publish any of his work and was thus much less well known but his collection of birds later exceeded that of Andersson. Eriksson donated most of his collection, with the exception of the Bat Hawk, to his hometown, Vänersborg. He wrote: “My much discussed South African bird collection should be handed over as a gift from me to the Vänersborg Museum. However, the collection should exclude the extremely rare *Machaerhampus alcinus anderssonii* as being too great a rarity to be kept in a small country museum”.

Through the businessman and collector Adolf Andersohn the Vänersborg Museum was financed to house the bird collection and Andersohn’s collection of art, coins and archaeological artefacts from his journeys to the Middle East and North Africa, amongst others.



*The Vänerns Museum*

*Photo: Eckart Demasius*

Gustav Kolthoff from Uppsala got the demanding task of stuffing and preparing the bird specimens. Kolthoff wrote "... the birds are of immense interest and value. There are probably few museums in Europe and none in our country which own such a beautiful collection of South African birds, which contains many of Africa's most valuable bird species and even such birds as are almost new to science." The local paper also reported on Eriksson's collection and on him stating "it is now almost impossible to find in South Africa a single bird that is not already represented in the museum's collection".

In 1888 the African Bird Room was opened to the public. 998 birds of 399 species are displayed in ten tall showcases and the collection has remained on display untouched ever since.

Having read this a visit to the museum became a dream of mine. Little did I know that I would very soon have the opportunity to make such a visit a reality. The town of Swakopmund was invited to twin with the City of Malmö in

the south of Sweden during May 2008. At the beginning of October a delegation travelled to Malmö to make arrangements for the twinning. I was fortunate to be part of the delegation and hence I could travel to Vänersborg after the official visit was concluded.

Thus I found myself sitting on the train to Vänersborg on Saturday 4 October 2008. After a five-hour journey I arrived there in pouring rain. Fortunately Anne Charlotte Oberg from the museum picked me up. Arriving at the museum she insisted on first introducing me to Mr Eriksson. I did not know what to expect but on entering the building there Mr Axel Eriksson was standing! – (in the form of a lifelike silicone figure). What a surprise! After greeting Mr Eriksson I was shown the display room where I spent the rest of the day. The museum is open daily only from 12h00 until 16h00.



*Eckart Demasius with Mr Axel Eriksson  
Photo: Eckart Demasius*

Overwhelmed by this impressive collection I spent most of the available time photographing the birds on display. I am still amazed at the variety of birds and the excellent work done stuffing and preparing the specimens.

Every bird on display still has the original length of string attached to it with a small paper label describing the bird, the date and place of collection in the neatest possible handwriting of Mr Axel Eriksson himself. Most of the birds were collected around Omaruru where he lived for many years. Others are from wherever he travelled during his time in southern Africa.

Of special interest to me was the display of vultures. Here one finds an Egyptian Vulture collected in Omaruru on 6 September 1877. Charles John Anderson in his book, “Notes on the Birds of Damara Land and the adjacent countries of South West Africa”, comments on this species as follows: - “This Vulture is not uncommon in Damara Land and the parts adjacent, more especially in the



*The lit display cabinets*

*Photo: Eckart Demasius*

neighbourhood of the coast. It is usually found in pairs and is a regular scavenger, being generally seen in search of the filthiest food.” Quite clearly its abundance and distribution has changed radically over the last 150 years.

Another stunning display is a Palm-nut Vulture found at “Canecontus” (Goanikontes?) on 24 July 1879. Interestingly, no other natural scientist interested in ornithology collected this bird nor does any comment on it in a Namibia context. This must truly have been a significant find.

Raptors are very well represented in the collection. The Bat Hawk is indeed not on display. As instructed by Axel Eriksson the Bat Hawk was donated to the museum in Stockholm. His collection of Gabar Goshawks includes three melanistic specimens. Jackal Buzzard is represented but strangely not Augur Buzzard which one would expect in the Omaruru area.

Another display cabinet contains the colourful rollers, woodhoopoes and parrots. The Broad-billed Roller was also collected at Omaruru and both Green and Violet Woodhoopoe are displayed.

The parrot collection includes what is described as a Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus angolensis* (in Swedish Kappapegoja). Both specimens are recorded as coming from Omaramba Onggama in Ovamboland and dated 10 June 1877. Andersson refers to this parrot as Levaillant's Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus* and describes it thus: - "The iris is brown; the bill livid, but brown at the extremity; the tarsi are lead-coloured". However the specimens are of what we know today as Grey-headed Parrot, which is a recent split from the Cape Parrot.

Strangely bird species which one would expect to see are either not part of the collection or were collected from places far away from where they are so common in Namibia. The two Kalahari Scrub-robin specimens originate from the Limpopo.

One of the White-browed Scrub-robins is also from the same area, another specimen is from Ombanja in Ovamboland, dated 8 July 1880. Typically the western race has a much less streaked breast and could possibly be what is now known as the ovamboensis sub-species.



The "Cape" Parrot  
Photo: Eckart Demasius



All the Bennett's Woodpecker specimens have a mainly plain yellow breast. All specimens were collected in either Ovamboland, Ombanja, or in southern Angola thus being of the buysi sub-species. Another interesting north-western race in the collection is the Red-necked Spurfowl, *Pternistis afer afer*.

Red-necked Spurfowl specimen  
Photo: Eckart Demasius

The bird that brought Axel Eriksson so much wealth from the sale of its feathers, the Common Ostrich, is not part of the collection. Perhaps the bird was too big to preserve or simply not regarded as a “bird”. Other tall birds, such as storks, flamingos and the three crane species are indeed part of the collection. Another that is not represented is the White Pelican.

With the exception of the Swamp Nightjar all species of nightjar have more than one specimen on display. In contrast some more common birds such as the Yellow-billed Hornbill and the Red-eyed Bulbul are represented by only a single specimen. A true delight is the specimen of the yellow form of the Crimson-breasted Shrike.



*Yellow form of Crimson-breasted Shrike*

*Photo: Eckart Demasius*

Lundevall and Ängermark published the book “Fåglar från Namibia” (Birds of Namibia) in which the complete collection is catalogued. Only when I started translating all the bird names into English did I realize how wonderful this collection is. Time and again I refer back to my photographs to see whether I photographed birds I only now realize are on display. Amongst the starlings is a Sharp-tailed Starling. Yellow-throated Sandgrouse completes the Sandgrouse collection and a leucistic Black Crake had me wondering in the museum. The Lesser Jacana adjacent to the African Jacana shows the relative difference in size which one would not readily see in nature.

My time in the museum went by in a flash and sooner than I would have liked I had to leave. Four hours for such a lovely museum is simply not enough. But I am grateful that a dream of mine came true and I know that the next time I have the opportunity to visit this marvellous museum I will set aside a couple of days for this visit alone.

Peter Johansson invited Anne and me for coffee and cake later in the afternoon. We had a wonderful conversation about our country, the birds and our travels, as if we had known each other for years and much later than is customary

for a normal coffee and cake visit, I left for a good night's sleep well content with the birds I had seen and the lovely people I had met in Vänersborg.

The next day I left Vänersborg by train and while we were rumbling along I thought to myself how fitting the little poem that the then rector's wife, Anna Wästberg, wrote describing in one of the verses how she sees Axel Eriksson standing at his bird collection in the museum:-

*"Lo, the birds loudly warble their song  
And, deeply moved, you listen along  
While the museum's great flocks of birds  
Silently whisper what only you have heard."*

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