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Richard Archbold's expeditions, conclusions

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Richard Archbold (right) and his pilot, Russel Rogers board NC777 at Rose Bay, Sydney, Australia on June 3, 1939, to begin a survey flight from Australia to South Africa.

COURTESY/GEOFF GOODALL COLLECTION

Editor's note: Four earlier articles (7/8/20, 8/19/20, 3/10/21, 6/16/2021) were published in the

Highlands News-Sun. This is Part 5 of that series.

The legacy of the Archbold Expeditions is ongoing nearly 90 years after Richard Archbold, founder of Archbold Biological Station in Highlands County, first commenced his explorations in the South Pacific. Thousands of specimens were collected, many hundreds of photographs were taken, and hundreds more scientific publications were produced to summarize what has been discovered. These materials continue to be studied well into the 21st century and inform scientific inquiries right up until the present day.

Archbold Librarian Emeritus Fred Lohrer described the legacy of Richard Archbold's expeditions as follows: "The first three Archbold Expeditions to New Guinea were notable for their geographic scope, meticulous preparation, and support by airplanes on the second and third expeditions. The Archbold Expeditions after World War II were less ambitious in scope and did not use airplanes. Nonetheless, the combined results of the Archbold Expeditions to New Guinea, Australia, and Sulawesi were remarkable for the great number of specimens of plants, invertebrates, and vertebrates they collected, and for the detailed ecological and geographical information, and photographs that accompanied the specimens. These collections included many new species in almost all taxa collected. Collections and activities of the Archbold Expeditions to New Guinea, Australia, and Sulawesi contributed entirely, or substantially, to 127 scientific publications in botany, 60 about invertebrates, and 135 about vertebrates."

Dr. Bruce Beeler spent many years studying the birds of New Guinea. When he was asked by Archbold Librarian Joe Gentili about the legacy of Richard Archbold's expeditions, Beeler said, "I visited Lake Habbema in 1981, when it was still accessible only by foot traffic. Of course, now one can drive! I spent six days camped on the west margin lake. I found the (original) Archbold camp, on a small rise overlooking the north side of the lake on my hike back to Wamena via the Bele (Ibele) valley ... I felt a very special feeling being at that spot! The third Archbold Expedition was their greatest, no doubt. Besides all the novel species of plants and birds and other taxa, the transect they cut from the Idenburg River south across two mountain ranges and of course discovering the Grand Valley of the Balim, was stupendous ... Lake Habbema is one of the most beautiful spots in all of beautiful New Guinea, with the open gladelike environs at high elevation, and the vistas of the complex lake and the great massif of Puncak Trikora (Mt. Wilhelmina) to the south ... where they discovered the Snow Robins up on the rocky scree – the highest-living songbird in New Guinea."

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'The Archbold Collections at the American Museum of Natural History, 1928-1980 is the official designation given to the total materials from all the Archbold Expeditions, housed at the museum. Richard Archbold was a Fellow of the American Museum of Natural History, and his expeditions were sponsored in conjunction with the museum. According to the museum, the collection "is comprised of material that documents the expeditionary fieldwork of Richard Archbold and the Archbold Expeditions. It is housed within the AMNH Department of Mammalogy Archive, and encompasses a variety of formats, including photographs, slides, film, scrapbooks, correspondence, financial records, and field documentation such as catalogs, specimen lists, field notes and journals. These describe both the day-to-day activities of the expedition participants as well as the study of the scientific collections." In total, these materials comprise 56 linear feet of archive space.

Housed at the American Museum of Natural History, the specimens and expedition collections are actively used by museum scholars to the present day. In addition to work done by Dr. Lauren Oliver on the frogs of New Guinea (mentioned earlier in part 2 of this series), further work was conducted in 2014 in the mountains of New Guinea. According to an American Museum of Natural History article, "[Researchers] returned yesterday from their satellite camp at 8,200 feet (2,500 meters) elevation and reported species not found here at 5,900 feet (1,800 meters). This is typical for montane faunas, where species drop in and out according to their elevational requirements. Comparing the picture today with data collected in historic expeditions like the Museum's Archbold Expeditions (a series of seven expeditions to New Guinea conducted between 1933 and 1964) can give us insight into the possible effects of climate change in the tropics. For example, we know that the highest peaks of Papua New Guinea were once topped with glaciers that have disappeared in recent times."

Richard Archbold's legacy lives on in tangible ways here in Venus, Florida as well. There are several individuals like Fred Lohrer who knew Richard Archbold while he was still alive. These people continue his legacy through the stories they tell about his life. This living connection to Archbold is an invaluable resource when one wants to learn more about this fascinating individual, and the explorations he led and sponsored.

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