

The Lang-Chapin Zoological Collections

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The first scientific exploration of the Congo dates back to 1816, when Captain James Kingdon Tuckey launched an expedition to the river's mouth. The project was a dismal failure; most members of the Tuckey expedition died of disease shortly after they arrived in Africa. Explorers persisted, but real scientific progress documenting and cataloging the plants and animals of the Congo proceeded very slowly. "Before the takeover of the Congo by Belgium's King Leopold in 1885, the area was practically a terra incognita from a scientific point of view," wrote Henry Fairfield Osborn, former President of the American Museum. In the final decade of the century, scientists from Belgium, England, France, Austria, Italy, and Sweden picked up the pace. And in 1910, the first notable American expedition to the area was led by Theodore Roosevelt.

But while previous expeditions had emphasized big mammals, the AMNH expedition focused on the entire fauna. Lang and Chapin collected insects, fish, rodents and everything else on up to elephants, rhinos, and giraffes.

The total number of specimens brought back to New York gives a sense of the expedition's scientific import.

Mammalogy	5,800
Ornithology	6,200
Herpetology	4,800
Ichthyology	6,000
Invertebrates	More than 100,000

Lang also took 10,000 photographs and Chapin produced approximately 300 watercolor and ink drawings during their six years in Africa. These works, along with detailed diaries and field notes, and the great specificity with which they documented their work, enhance both the expedition's scientific value and its historical accessibility.

Scores of scientific publications resulted from the expedition, but perhaps the most renown were in the field of ornithology. Chapin published his four-volume *Birds of the Belgian Congo* based on the expedition's collections. The expedition brought many new species to science, perhaps most notably among the smaller mammals. Of the 177 specimens of shrews brought back, for instance, seven were new species. Of the 800 bats collected, 15 proved new to science.

These collections contribute a great deal to our knowledge about what lives in the Congo and how those organisms fit into the bigger picture of evolution and life on Earth. But they also provide an important tool for those trying to preserve the many wild ecosystems now under threat in the Congo Basin. Before conservationists can make effective decisions about how to protect habitats and organisms, they must have baseline data showing what was where before the incursion of threats.