

Lice spark National Museum investigation

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Two very old insects attached by rusty pins to faded, age-spotted labels, have excited great interest and sparked some careful detective work recently at the National Museum.

The insects — feather lice — belong to one of six species which inhabit the plumage of the wandering albatross.

What makes these insects particularly interesting is their history.

As part of the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney, they were sent to the National Museum by the newly appointed curator of invertebrates, Dr Donald S Horning.

Dr Horning had noticed that two lice in the collection appeared to be very old and one was mysteriously labelled: "Cape Forster 1775." Cape Forster was initially interpreted as a locality, but could not be found anywhere in the world.

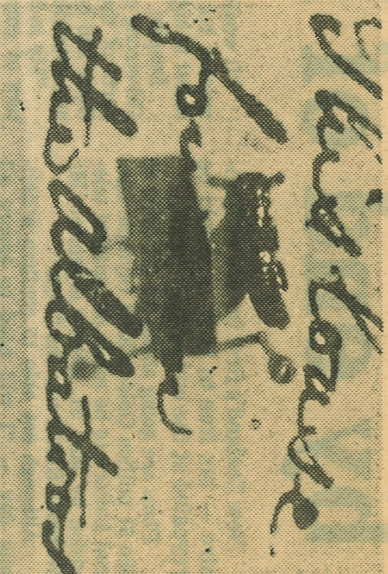
Founder

In England, Alexander Macleay — founder of the Macleay Museum — bought a large collection of insects from Sir Ashton Lever in 1806. Sir Ashton's collection contained some specimens presented to him by Rev Johann R Forster.

Macleay was appointed Colonial Secretary of the colonies in 1826, and took the insect collection with him when he left for Australia. At that time it was the largest private collection in the world.

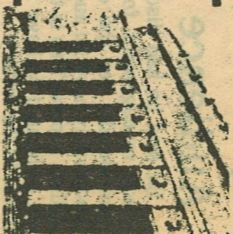
Macleay bequeathed the collection to his family. In 1874 a descendant, Sir William Macleay, appointed George Masters as curator to the collection.

In 1888 the collection was transferred to the University of Sydney where,



The male louse collected by the Forsters in 1772, pinned through as received by the National Museum.

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after the death of Masters in 1912, it was neglected until the appointment of Dr Horning in 1982.

Specialist

Dr Horning suspected that these two lice were among the insects given by Forster to Sir Ashton Lever. He sent them to a specialist in the National Museum, who was able to confirm that the lice had been collected by either Johann or George Forster, the two naturalists in Captain James Cook's second voyage on HMS Resolution.

Johann Forster was a talented German naturalist who, with his son George, replaced Sir Joseph Banks who had accompanied Cook on his first voyage, but who forfeited his place on the Resolution following a dispute over the size and weight of the artistic and scientific equipment he wished to take with him.

On July 13, 1772, Johann and George Forster set sail with Cook on a voyage that was to take them through the Southern Indian Ocean, around the Antarctic continent, and on further extensive exploration of the Pacific and South Atlantic Oceans.

Diaries

Johann Forster's diaries for 1775 (the date on the label) and 1772 (when the Resolution was off the Cape of Good Hope) were not until 1982. Some of these

diaries the National Museum was able to track down the origin of the two feather lice. On October 24, 1772, Johann Forster gives an account of the capture and examination of a wandering albatross. He wrote: "The albatross had two kinds of lice, one oval, short with a round broad head and black, and another kind, brown, half an inch long with four long and two short feet and two horn-like antennae in one sex, in the other setiform."

Labels

While the two specimens did fit the description of the latter kind, the writing on the labels was not in the same hand as that in Johann Forster's journal.

Dr Michael Hoare of the Turnbull Library, an authority on the work of the Forsters, declared that the labels were the work of George Forster, who in a quieter moment in 1775 must have labelled the lice taken from the albatross captured off the Cape of Good Hope in 1772.

Hence the label "Cape Forster 1775."

The first published work to mention the feather lice was the "Dissertation on the Albatrosses" published by Johann Forster in 1785. As for George Forster, all he recorded of the incident in his journal published in 1777, was that, after it was skinned, the albatross made a good meal.