

Perspective

SCOTT CLINE, editor

An Archival Bestiary

TRUDY HUSKAMP PETERSON

Abstract: Well, yes, this is a bit abstract. But this whimsical presentation analyzes the origins, relationships, and evolution of archival terms and expressions.

About the author: Trudy Huskamp Peterson is assistant archivist of the United States at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. She introduced the archival bestiary at a meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archival Conference and again at the fifty-second annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Atlanta in August 1988. She does not believe that it is necessary to say that the opinions expressed are her own.

“The capacity for correct classification is the essence of human wisdom.”

—Aristotle

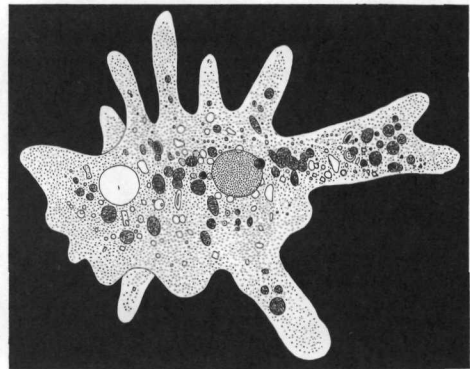
DEFINING WORDS, LIKE INSISTING on standard punctuation, is a very conservative enterprise. Language evolves, and the unacceptable becomes the unimpeachable usage. Yet it is important that at any one time (notice that we have eschewed “at any one point in time”) persons hoping to communicate clearly with each other use words in reasonably the same manner. Archivists have had a standard glossary in hand since 1974, when Frank Evans, Donald Harrison, E. Alan Thompson, and William Rofes published the glossary developed by the Committee on Terminology of the Society of American Archivists.¹ Predictably, the glossary was an attempt to reconcile widely divergent usages and, as a result, the definitions sometimes represent the least objectionable common denominator. Furthermore, as the world of computers spreads, its own particular vocabulary begins to influence common speech patterns, most especially those of archivists. In an effort to clarify the current meanings of important archival terms, an expedition was launched to capture and examine each specimen. Each animal was studied, and its genus and species, habitat, distinguishing characteristics, European relatives, and mutants were described. The following standard descriptions are the result of those investigations.

I. Document

A. Genus and species: *Archivus Ubiquitous* (*Holmesia quintivium*).

B. Habitat: Worldwide. Migrates through records and manuscripts, resident in archives and manuscript collections.

C. Distinguishing characteristics: Each document has three elements, as can be seen in the example photographed. First, the physical base, represented in the drawing by the white blotch. Second, the impression on the physical base, either manual or mechanical; in this example, note the stippled background. Third, the message, or the information conveyed by the impression upon the base; note the various circles, either black or white, in the example. The third is the element that makes the document valuable and is the reason for its preservation; currently it is often necessary to preserve the first and second in order to preserve the third. Because the members of this species are extremely varied, the common practice has been to describe them by the physical form of the base (clay tablet, papyrus, parchment, paper, photograph, magnetic tape, and so forth). Evans-Harrison-Thompson-Rofes (hereafter EHTR) says that the species is frequently interchangeable with the species “record”: this is clearly incorrect. All records are documents but not all documents are records. EHTR also suggests



I. Document²

¹Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, and Edwin A. Thompson, compilers; William L. Rofes, editor, “A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers,” *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 415-31.

²All illustrations for this article are reprinted, by permission, from Jim Harter, *Animals: 1419 Copyright-Free Illustrations of Mammals, Birds, Fish, Insects, etc.: A Pictorial Archive from Nineteenth-Century Sources* (New York: Dover Publications, 1979).

that a document is the same as an item; however, an item need not convey information (such as an item of clothing) while the very fibers of the document contain information.

D. European relatives: Latin variety known as *dochere*.

E. Mutants: In libraries, the species may mutate into a single printed (published) item, such as a "government document." In the past curators occasionally noted a subspecies as a will, deed, or testament; now largely extinct as a usage.

II. Record

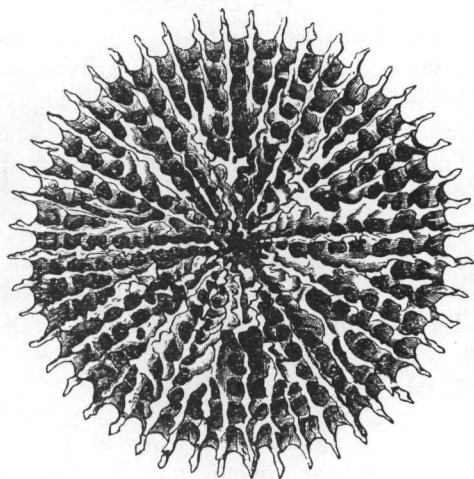
A. Genus and species: *Archivus stolidus*.

B. Habitat: Found associated with institutions and organizations; breeds in typewriters, cameras, computers, and, most importantly, data processing equipment and Xerox machines. Certain subspecies come to maturity in photochemical baths, principally those species associated with camera breeding.

C. Distinguishing characteristics: Records are easiest to recognize by their associations. Always found where institutions and organizations exist, they have a definite life cycle: current, semi-current, and noncurrent. They are best recognized when found in a covey, for their organic nature is such that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Although all records are documents, not all documents are records. On the whole a rather plain species, at times noted as dingy-looking (see the photograph), it is nonetheless an unparalleled worker. EHTR neglects to mention this species' association with institutions and organizations, and is clearly wrong on this point. There are several known subspecies, including *archivus stolidus publicus*, *archivus stolidus religiosii*, and *archivus stolidus collegium*.

D. European relatives: Latin variety known as *recordari*.

E. Mutants: Several observed in association with computers; appear to be mutating rapidly. Apparently in these mutants the document (*archivus ubiquitous*) has been broken into two parts, one containing the physical record and the other containing the logical record. No specimen of either has been captured, perhaps because they are always found in bytes and bits.



II. Record

III. Personal Papers

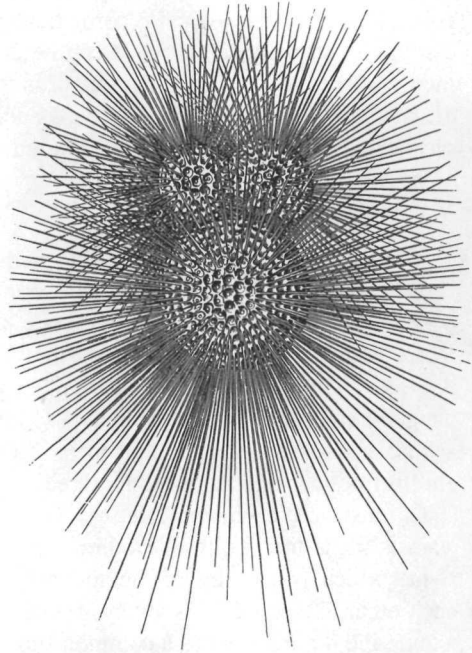
A. Genus and species: *Archivus delecta*.

B. Habitat: Found associated with persons; breeds in typewriters, pens, pencils, cameras, word processors; occasionally now in data processing equipment and Xerox machines.

C. Distinguishing characteristics: As will be noted, this species has much in common with the record. Both are organic in nature and usually found in groups (in fact, we were unable to secure a single specimen for examination, instead securing triplets). Highly prized by curators and collectors, *archivus delecta* has showy plumage, color, and great variety.

D. European relatives: Numerous.

E. Mutant: None noted, although one subspecies, the handwritten personal letter, has recently been named *archivus delecta neglecta* and is in danger of extinction (particularly at Christmas).



III. Personal Papers

IV. File

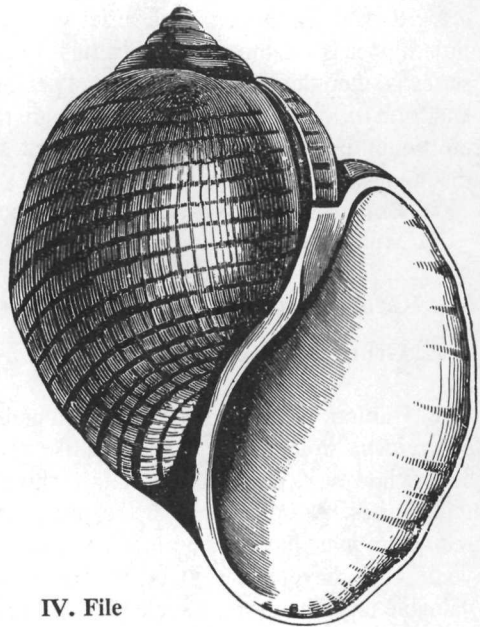
A. Genus and species: *Holmesia quadrivium*.

B. Habitat: Breeds throughout *archivus stolidus* and *archivus delecta*. Nests vary from leather to cardstock; some commonly winter on shelves while others hang or rest in office equipment. Older species may reside in Woodruff boxes.

C. Distinguishing characteristics: While documents reside inside the covers, the most distinctive characteristic of the file is the external shell. The documents within the shell maintain an intellectual unity (with a few exceptions, such as the subspecies *Holmesia quadrivium miscellanea*) and often have a common physical form. It is normally handled as a whole within its shell, and its hierarchical level (these are a well-organized and disciplined species and, as such, are naturally hierarchical) is reflected in its name: *quadrivium*.

D. European relatives: Unknown, but assumed to exist.

E. Mutants: A very vigorous mutant is apparent, growing within computer cultures.



IV. File

In that mutant the external shell has been totally discarded and the file is reduced to a collection of related logical records treated as a unit. This makes the file very difficult to distinguish visually, although it can be discerned through intellectual exercise. It is commonly termed a data file. The mutant is found more often with *archivus stolidus* than with *archivus delecta*, although in rare instances it has been discovered in the latter. Again, a physical specimen has not been captured.

V. Series

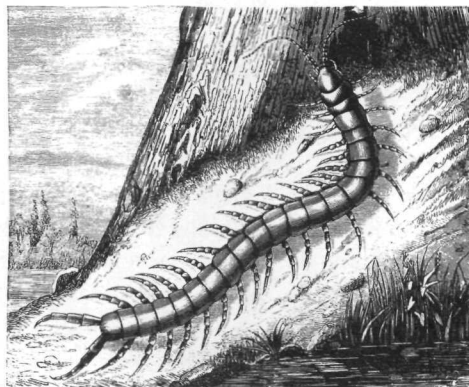
A. Genus and species: *Holmesia trivium*.

B. Habitat: Native to breeding grounds of both *archivus stolidus* and *archivus delecta*. Found in the same range as the file. Appears to breed rapidly in the dark like coat hangers; archivists have been known to take a look at a series long thought to be stable and to find that one has become three.

C. Distinctive characteristics: The *trivium* is made up wholly of *Holmesia quad-rivia*, which bear a logical relationship to each other. The *trivium* is always treated as a unit, and it normally has a common subject and often a common form. This particular specimen exhibits all three of these major characteristics of a typical series. Although the file units within the series are obviously hierarchical, the series themselves have a little less apparent pecking order. In records, *archivus stolidus*, the patriarch series is usually the one that is most general, while the last little nipper is the most specific series. In personal papers, *archivus delecta*, the patriarch series is often the one that is the least personal. Occasionally a series will undergo mitosis and form one or more subseries. These are rarely seen, however, and many of the sightings are doubtful. It is more likely that most subseries are in fact series that are not easily distinguishable in the wild.

D. European relatives: None known but assumed to exist.

E. Mutants: None known.



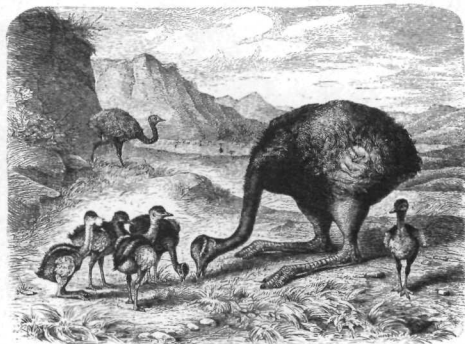
V. Series

VI. Record Group

A. Genus and species: *Holmesia secundum*.

B. Habitat: Native to the breeding grounds of *archivus stolidus*, the record. Unlike the series, however, it is found only in archival repositories. At some time in the past, the *secundum* must have nested in a fountain of youth, for they appear to be permanently valuable and, therefore, have enduring life.

C. Distinctive characteristics: Although the record group is said to be an artificial construct, we have managed to view numerous specimens. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic is that any record group has a



VI. Record Group

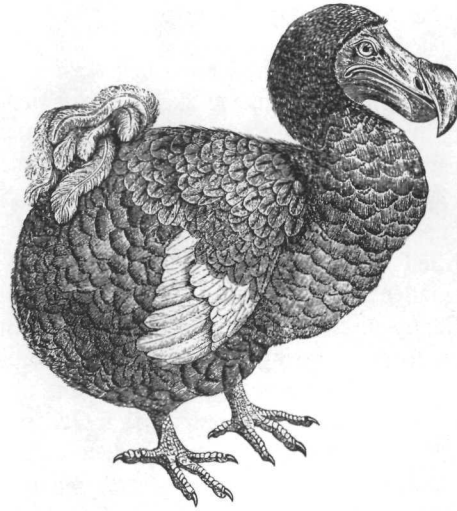
single identifiable progenitor, which is an institution or organization. Beyond that, record groups vary widely. Some consist of all the records of the progenitor, while in other instances the records of a single progenitor form several different groups. Record groups also normally spawn subgroups, which consist of the records of part of the progeny. In our specimen, a record group with no affiliated subgroups appears in the background, while in the foreground is a record group with two subgroups, one of which also has four sub-subgroups. It is quite possible that as this foreground family matures, the resources of the habitat may make it advisable that the family split up. In that case, the matriarch might become a general record group, while the youngsters would form record groups of their own. The record groups establish no hierarchy among themselves, being an extremely egalitarian species. Pecking order seems determined by chance. Record groups may also molt, losing some parts that apparently are not permanently valuable.

D. European relatives: The English variety of record group is a less independent form. A record group such as the one photographed would never subdivide in England but would continue along on whatever resources the habitat can provide. The banding nature of the single progenitor in England is inviolate.

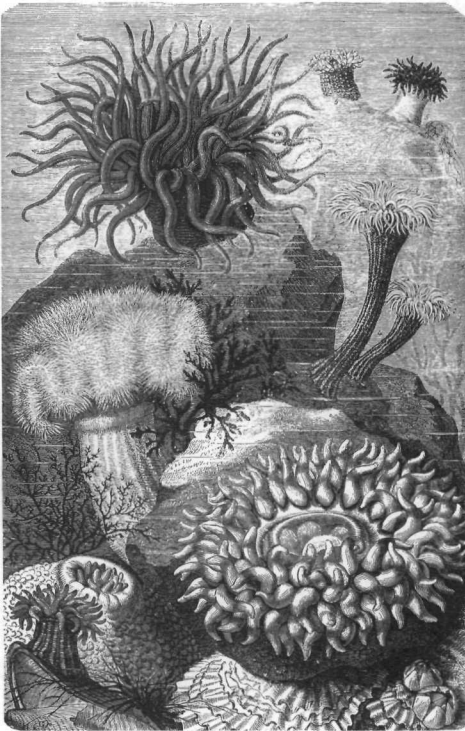
E. Mutants: Two are known.

1. Closed record group. In this variety no more progeny will be produced (it is an interesting aspect of the record group that it does not die but is susceptible to becoming infertile). Oddly, the record group has very little control over its obsolescence, and the onset of infertility can be traumatic. Keepers must be alert for extra-repository signs of impending climacteric.

2. Collective record group. This record group does not have a common physical progenitor but instead has a common function or subject-matter progenitor. Each subgroup is too small to sustain life as a record group, so they band together for convenience. The subgroups are often closed.



VI (1). Record Group Mutant #1: Closed Record Group



VI (2). Record Group Mutant #2: Collective Record Group

VII. Manuscript Group

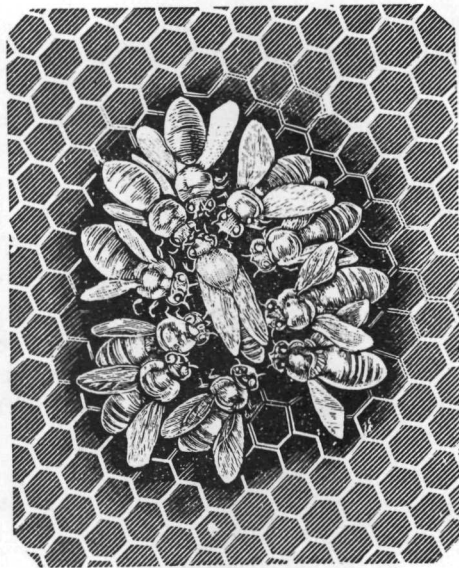
A. Genus and species: *Ducketta delecta*.

B. Habitat: Native to the breeding grounds of *archivus delecta*. It is found only in manuscript repositories.

C. Distinctive characteristics: Again, this apparently artificial construct has been identified in the wild. As can be seen, it is a smaller group than the record group and very tightly interconnected. It is normally affiliated with the single progenitor, but unlike the record group, this progenitor is a person, not an institution or organization. Occasionally keepers include donated records in a manuscript group; this is clearly incorrect, for records form a record group. The student of the species should be careful not to confuse the provenance of the document (which is the correct basis for all classifications) with the legal status of the document, whether donated or inherent in the institution (which is not the correct basis for classification). Most manuscript groups are closed rather quickly, in contrast to the record group, for they usually expire at the death of the person. A few manuscript groups are the documents of a family, and so continue over some time, but these are rather rare in the wild.

D. European relatives: Unknown.

E. Mutants: Some years ago a species known as the archival group was sighted, which embodied characteristics of both the record group and the manuscript group. It did not survive.



VII. Manuscript Group

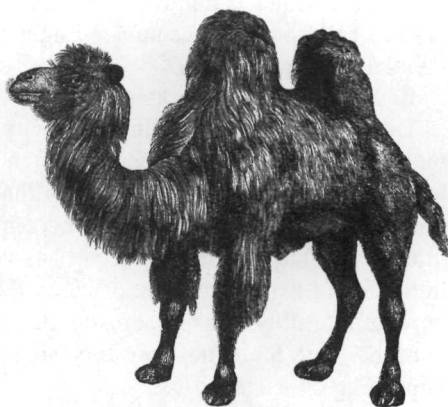
VIII. Artificial Collection

A. Genus and species: *Forcea inexpectata*.

B. Habitat: Occurs throughout the land, but most prevalent in manuscript repositories. Is not native in the wild, but is a domesticated form of *archivus ubiquitous*.

C. Distinctive characteristics: This species is an artificial assemblage of documents (*archivus ubiquitous*) formed around a single theme, person, event, or (less commonly) physical type. These come from many different sources; consequently, they are not organic as are records and personal papers.

As can be seen in this specimen, the lower part appears to be four related documents, there appear to be two upper documents (each slightly different), a rear document which is again different, and a face only a mother could love. Whether this specimen is related



VIII. Artificial Collection

by theme, person, or event is unclear; it is clearly not by physical form. If a guess may be made, it might be that these are all documents relating to committees.

D. European relatives: Unknown.

E. Mutants: Impossible to determine, as they are indistinguishable from the real thing.

IX. Repository

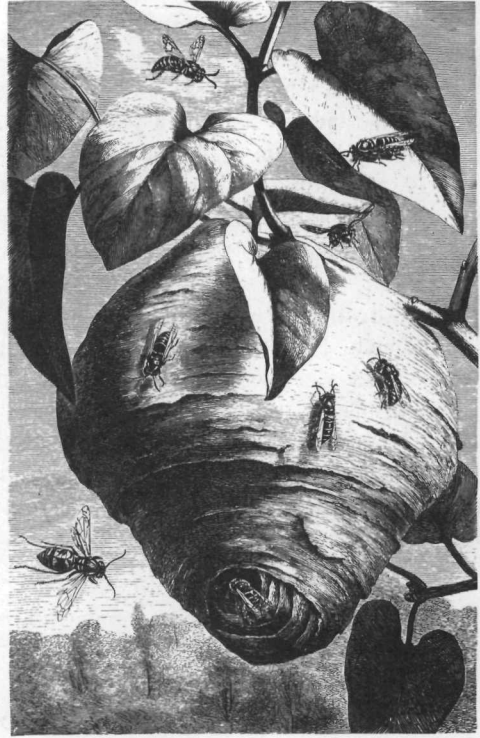
A. Genus and species: *Holmesia primus*.

B. Habitat: Throughout the breeding area of *archivus ubiquitous*; however, the soil must be well mulched with dollars in various denominations, preferably large, before the species will thrive.

C. Distinctive characteristics: Holds record groups, manuscript groups, and artificial collections. Ostensibly there are two forms, archives that hold record groups, and manuscript repositories that hold manuscript collections and artificial collections; but neither of these pure types has been sighted in a number of years. In all known cases, the repository holds both types of documents, although it leans toward one or the other and is identified in its title by its major thrust. In each case the repository has a protective wall, limited entrances, interior storage areas, and a throng of workers (some claim to have sighted drones and a queen, but these sightings have not been confirmed). One more characteristic: a plural noun, archives comes with an s, just as do *scissors* and *trousers*. The word is plural because one record does not an archives make: an archives implies a multiplicity of documents; a fundamental condition of plurality.

D. European relatives: Numerous. In England the s is omitted after “archives,” but this is clearly a substandard usage in North America.

E. Mutants: Breeding in synergism with computers, a mutant known as *Holmesia spuriosa* is developing called data archives. This is a particularly virulent strain, as it is indiscriminate in its feeding habits, devouring information without respect to progenitors. It is, however, thriving, and the only hope appears to be to domesticate the mutant and bring it within the fold. Note: A word should be said about the word *repository*. Some persons have persisted in calling it a *depository*. It is important to note that repository comes from the word *repose*, which suggests the ultimate rest of *archivus ubiquitous*. The word *depository*, on the other hand, suggests that *archivus ubiquitous* has been torn from its roots and deposited there. While this may be true for *archivus delecta*, which are usually—nay, invariably—moved to a *Holmesia primus*, it is not true of many types of *archivus stolidi*, which often stay within the same progenitorial institution. Repository is preferable. The word *suppository* should be avoided at all costs.



IX. Repository

X. Provenance

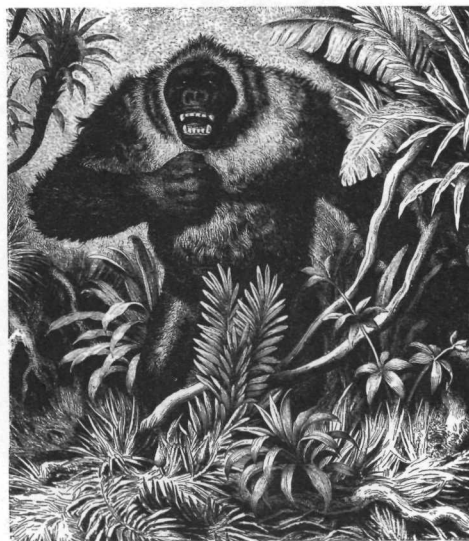
A. Genus and species: *Antiqua majusculus*.

B. Habitat: Throughout the range of *archivus stolidus*. Appears to be spreading slowly into the range of *archivus delecta*, at least the larger varieties of the latter.

C. Distinctive characteristics: This species insists on remaining within the confines of its range and associating with only its kind. Miscegenation is known but the hybrid progeny is spurned by all purebred provenances and left to wither and die. This species can be traced to the early part of the nineteenth century.

D. European relatives: German, English, Dutch, French (where it is known as *respect des fonds* and is the oldest known strain of the species).

E. Mutants: *Forcea inexpectata* (see artificial collections). The species is also on very shaky ground when it enters the turf of computers, where miscegenation (known as cross-linkage) and inhospitable environments (known as relational databases) are very popular.



X. Provenance

XI. Original Order

A. Genus and species: *Antiqua minusculus*.

B. Habitat: See *antiqua majusculus*.

C. Distinctive characteristics: Originally believed to be a subspecies of the *antiqua majusculus*, it is now known to be a separate species, although it is entirely dependent upon the *majusculus*. It is a parasite, and although you can have a *majusculus* without *minusculus*, you cannot have the *minusculus* without the *majusculus*. It is usually easier to spot the *minusculus* in concert with *archivus stolidus*, but it is also possible to find it consorting with *archivus delecta*. As you can see, it has a strictly hierarchical nature, and is sometimes considered sacred (some keepers—and EHTR—refer to it as the Principle of Sanctity of the Original Order).

D. European relatives: In England, the Registry Principle; in Germany, *Registratur Prinzip*; in France, *respect pour l'ordre primitif*; elsewhere on the Continent.

E. Mutants: Said to be extinct where it



XI. Original Order

has come into contact with computers and other forms of data processing equipment. No mutants known.

XII. Continuous Custody

A. Genus and species: *Antiqua perpetua*.

B. Habitat: Range is very narrow, for it never leaves its nesting grounds. It is found only with record groups, and then only with those that remain in a repository that is part of the institution that created *archivus stolidus*. It does, however, remain associated with *archivus stolidus* throughout its entire life cycle.

C. Characteristics: Once the keeper has encountered *antiqua perpetua*, it is impossible to get it off one's hands. While the species is highly desirable, it has only been domesticated on a national level since 1935. It is a species that is not well established in the United States, although its popularity is growing. EHTR omits it entirely; clearly an oversight.

D. European relatives: English, where the species originated and remains particularly well-established.

E. Mutants: A variety seems to be developing where the progenitor, usually a records creator but possibly also a personal papers creator, makes one transfer to a repository which thereafter is responsible for continuous custody. This limits the species to the period of *Holmesia primus*, whereas the original ranges throughout the life of the *archivus stolidus*.



XII. Continuous Custody

XIII. The Values Family

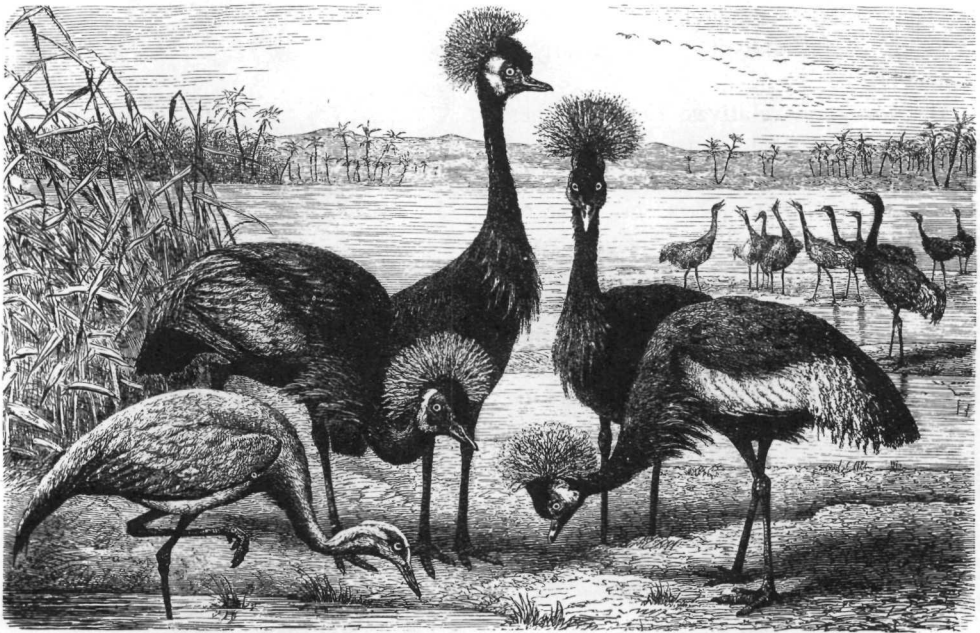
A. Genus and species: *Schellenbergus Americanus*.

B. Habitat: Various. See below.

C. Distinctive characteristics: Although some skeptics believed that these species could not be captured, it has been done. In the background one can see the primary values—administrative, fiscal, and legal—which will depart in a V rather soon (note the sky). In the foreground is the enduring (or secondary) values family: evidential, informational, and intrinsic. The largest of these birds is evidential value, primary in all nest-making activities. It nests throughout the range of *archivus stolidus*, with occasional forays into the territory of *archivus delecta*. It is clearly the dominant member of the family. The smaller specimen is informational, a softer and more subjective specimen than evidential. This value will be found throughout the territory of *archivus ubiquitous*. Third, in the foreground, and without the tufted headdress of the full adult, is intrinsic. Few archivists believed that a specimen could be captured, much less described. Like informational, intrinsic is native to the entire range of *archivus ubiquitous*, but it never changes its native form. Once an intrinsic always an intrinsic, they say.

D. European relatives: None known. Appears to be a purely American species.

E. Mutants: None, as yet.



XIII. The Values Family

XIV. Accession and Accretion

A. Genus and species: *Acquisitor tyrannus*.

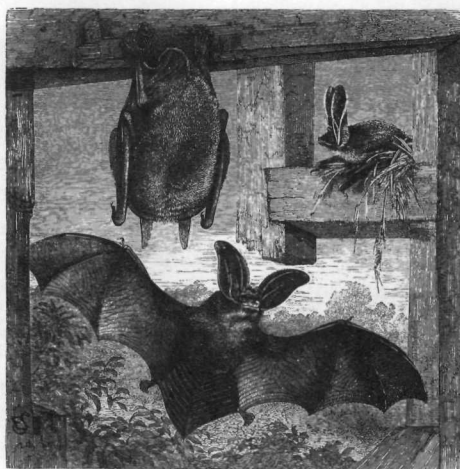
B. Habitat: Throughout *Holmesia primus*.

C. Distinctive characteristics: These subspecies are often confused. Both are extremely fertile and both frequent similar places; however, accession is dominant and accretion is subordinate. Either may cohabit with *archivus delecta* or *archivus stolidus*, although the latter is more sympathetic. With the accession, an equivalent body is added to preexisting ones. In the illustration, one accession is arriving, another is in process, and a third is hung up to dry as will, ultimately, the other two. These are all equivalent specimen, and there is no discernible pecking order.

The accretion is another matter. Here the newest arrival clings to a preexisting body and is nurtured and protected by it. In some repositories an accretion is an addition to a preexisting series, in others an addition to a preexisting collection of personal papers, in still others an addition to a preexisting subgroup or even record group. Each repository establishes its own standards, but in each case the accession stands one step higher in the pecking order than the accretion (for example, if the accretion is an addition to a preexisting series, the accession is an entirely new series).

D. European relatives: Unknown but certain to exist.

E. Mutants: In association with computers neither the accession or the accretion appears to survive. Instead a whole new species is created, embodying all the parts of the original plus whatever parts may have been added since the first was born. This is very confusing.



XIV (1). Accession



XIV (2). Accretion

XV. Access

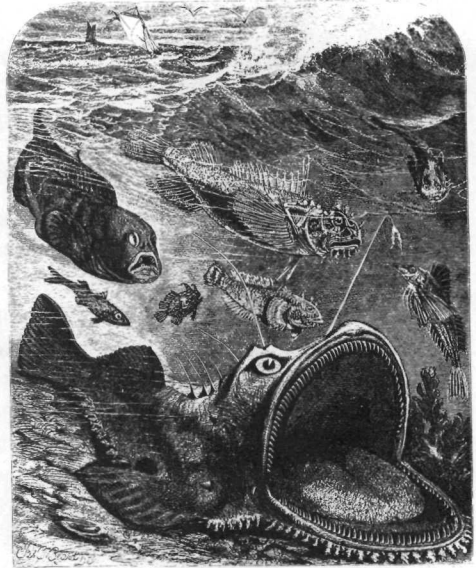
A. Genus and species: *Hesitata regurgitus*.

B. Habitat: Throughout. Has a symbiotic relationship with journalists and revisionist historians.

C. Distinctive characteristics: This species usually grovels along the bottom, slowly eating its way through whatever it happens to encounter. It soars only when it discovers old and languid documents for dinner. It is surprisingly strong, and when attacked can close its mouth completely. The more virile types can even overtake fleeter swimmers and force them to disgorge their catch. The principal enemy to the species is time, which may make keepers try to gather it in nets rather than individually with lines. Netting may be done carefully if sufficient information is known in advance about the schools with which the species has lived, but it can be a very dangerous practice, one that can capsize the unwary keeper.

D. European relatives: The European species are even older and wilier, often attaining ages of fifty or even one hundred years before regurgitating.

E. Mutants: Another strong strain is appearing in the computer culture. Here specimen are limited solely to calling up and rising to the top; they have no digestive functions whatsoever. The species has also mutated from nouns to verbs, and keepers can now "access the data." Most of the data accessed by this mutant are disclosure-free. All of these complications can make one a bit EBCDIC; if you have to ASCII about it you are surely not properly identifying the species.



XV. Access

XVI. Unnamed

This species was difficult to catch in the wild, but this photograph shows it in two different stages. It may be the archivist before and after certification; then again it has also been tentatively identified as a MARC format and a series description. With such variation in the opinions of experts, the proper genus and species cannot be assigned at present.

* * * * *

All of these species are evolving; there is no anti-Darwinian claue here. Most of them are healthy; most are mutating. We cannot stop the growth, only insist that when we speak of one of these species that we are clear about the characteristics we mutually ascribe to it. Otherwise your accession may turn into an access.³

³Editor's note: A new glossary, reflecting the evolution of usage, has been prepared and is available as Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo, *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992). Future expeditions may discover mutations and new species residing there.



XVI. Unnamed