



Where I work Leah Tsang

Photographed by Doug Gimesy/
Nature Picture Library.

On the table in this photograph are the remains of more than 130 wedge-tailed eagles (*Aquila audax*) – Australia’s largest bird of prey. The birds had been poisoned, and I needed to confirm the species for a criminal case.

As collection manager of ornithology at the Australian Museum in Sydney, I not only identify birds, but also give input on exhibits and educational programmes and provide other scientific services. The museum’s bird collection is the oldest and largest in Australia, containing about 100,000 specimens of species from all over both the country and the world. The oldest registered specimen is a northern pintail duck (*Anas acuta*), collected in 1828.

I liken the collection to a bird library. Researchers can come in to study a species or range of species. We’ve got stuffed specimens; skeletons; animals mounted in lifelike poses; intact birds in ethanol; eggs and nests; and a range of frozen tissues. Every item notes the time and location of collection, as well as the name of the

species. Each is a snapshot in time and holds information that can’t be replicated.

My passion for birds began when I was young. I liked watching them to work out what they were doing. Why would different birds walk differently, eat different things, be different colours? For me, the collection is brilliant. I can hold the birds in my hand and look at them closely to scrutinize and appreciate their differences.

Specimens usually come in from the public or from staff at the National Parks and Wildlife Service. But in the eagle poisoning case, I had to fly down to a chilly government-department shed in Knoxfield to carry out my analyses.

The whole situation was very sad. The perpetrator was prosecuted for poisoning hundreds of birds on a property in Victoria between 2016 and 2018. He was fined and jailed. It was a great outcome to have him caught and penalized.

Leah Tsang is collection manager of ornithology at the Australian Museum in Sydney. **Interview by James Mitchell Crow.**