



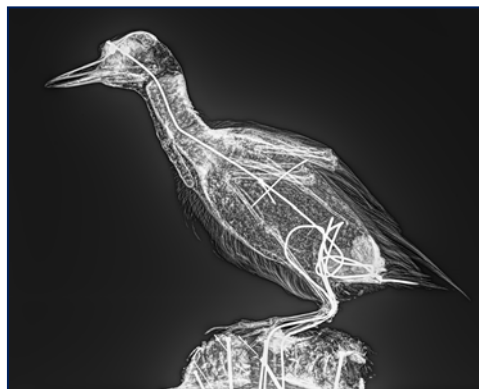
Art Conservation *and natural history collections*

With a slight lean and broken skin near the rusting armature at the ankles, the brown feathered taxidermy mount, a bird called the pigeon guillemot, is largely intact with an ovular body, short neck and tail, and white patches on the wings. It nearly came back to life when WUDPAC Fellow Nicole Chausse, an objects major who is treating the bird this year, carefully cleaned the dusty haze from its small black glass eyes, shining them to a lifelike finish.

This small, handsome bird was in fair condition when Nicole started her treatment. In addition to the broken skin at the ankle, its feathers had faded from black to brown, and its feet, scarlet-colored in life, had become dull, faded, and dry. The species of this shorebird is naturally found living along rocky shorelines of the Pacific Rim. This particular taxidermy specimen is thought to predate the 1970s and was likely part of ornithologist John DuPont’s collection, which constituted the original holdings of the Delaware Museum of Nature and Science, which now owns the bird.

Nicole’s goal was to safely clean and improve the bird’s aesthetic appearance. The presence of arsenic, a toxic substance widely used as a preservative and pesticide in taxidermy before the 1980s, was confirmed through scientific testing. Nicole knew to take precautions, such as wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and safely disposing of chemicals and materials as she worked. When cleaning the feathers, she first used an air puffer and soft brush to dislodge as much dirt and dust as possible, with a vacuum nozzle nearby to catch the debris. She then used a very soft toothbrush, a dental pick, and a small spatula to preen and straighten the feathers, realigning the tiny hooks on each feather barbule to put them into place.

Nicole used conservation paints to restore color to the bird’s feet, referencing images from living birds and their scarlet red feet, but crafting a more aged appearance to be sympathetic to the rest of the bird’s condition. Finally, she mended the damaged ankle skin using Japanese tissue paper, toned to match the new color of the feet. After Nicole has



completed her treatment, she will return the pigeon guillemot to the Delaware Museum of Nature and Sciences, where it will rest in the natural history collection among its feathered and furry peers.

ARTC Spotlight—April 2024

The University of Delaware’s Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators who are well versed in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifact and archive collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: Winterthur/University of Delaware Fellow Nicole Chausse using a soft brush and vacuum to surface clean the delicate feathers. Above: Nicole uses toned paper to match the color of the painted feet. Right, upper: The pigeon guillemot after treatment. Right, lower: X-radiograph of the taxidermy specimen showing the internal armature and structure. (Images: E. Krape, N. Chausse, and L. Fair.)