

## **Alwyn Hasso von Wedel (1873–1957): bird and plant collector on the Caribbean coast of Panama**

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**ABSTRACT:** Hasso von Wedel, usually “H. Wedel” on specimen labels, settled on the northwestern Caribbean coast of Panama in the province of Bocas del Toro in 1898 and sustained himself mainly through the production of picture postcards and as a photographer for the United Fruit Company. He learned to prepare bird specimens in 1926 and collected widely in Bocas del Toro for various museums, mainly Harvard University’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, at least up until 1939. Wedel made the first collections of birds from the easternmost Caribbean coast of Panama in the Comarca de San Blas at intervals from 1929 until 1934. He learned the fundamentals of botanical collecting in 1938 and made extensive collections of plants for the Missouri Botanical Garden from then until 1941, his specimens forming the basis for dozens of presumed new species, at least ten of which were named for him. His biological explorations appear to have ceased about the time the United States entered the Second World War, although he lived in Changuinola, Bocas del Toro, until his death at Almirante in 1957.

**KEYWORDS:** Bocas del Toro province – botany – ornithology – postcard photography – Comarca de San Blas.

### **INTRODUCTION**

For many collectors of biological specimens in the tropics, there is little known of their lives and activities beyond what can be surmised from data on specimen labels. We have been fortunate to document important biographical information concerning Hasso von Wedel, who was a pioneer among collectors of birds and plants along the Caribbean coast of Panama in the regions of Bocas del Toro and San Blas (Figure 1) from the 1920s until the early 1940s.

Among numerous files that Smithsonian ornithologist Alexander Wetmore (1886–1978) accumulated for a proposed history of ornithology in Panama was a dossier of correspondence and notes about Wedel,<sup>1</sup> which has been augmented by additional correspondence in the Smithsonian Institution Archives and Wetmore’s field journal of 1958. Most of this information probably does not exist elsewhere and merits putting on record, as it documents aspects of the life of a person who made important natural history collections in what was then a biologically little known part of the tropics.

We also received information about Wedel from Elsie Howard,<sup>2</sup> who was once a neighbour of Wedel’s and was one of the beneficiaries of his will. Howard was born on Isla Bastimentos, but her family moved to Bocas town in the late 1930s to an area known as German Point, from the number of Germans living there. This is where Howard encountered, and became a favourite of, Wedel (Figure 2), who was a neighbour, when she was about 13 years old in 1939.

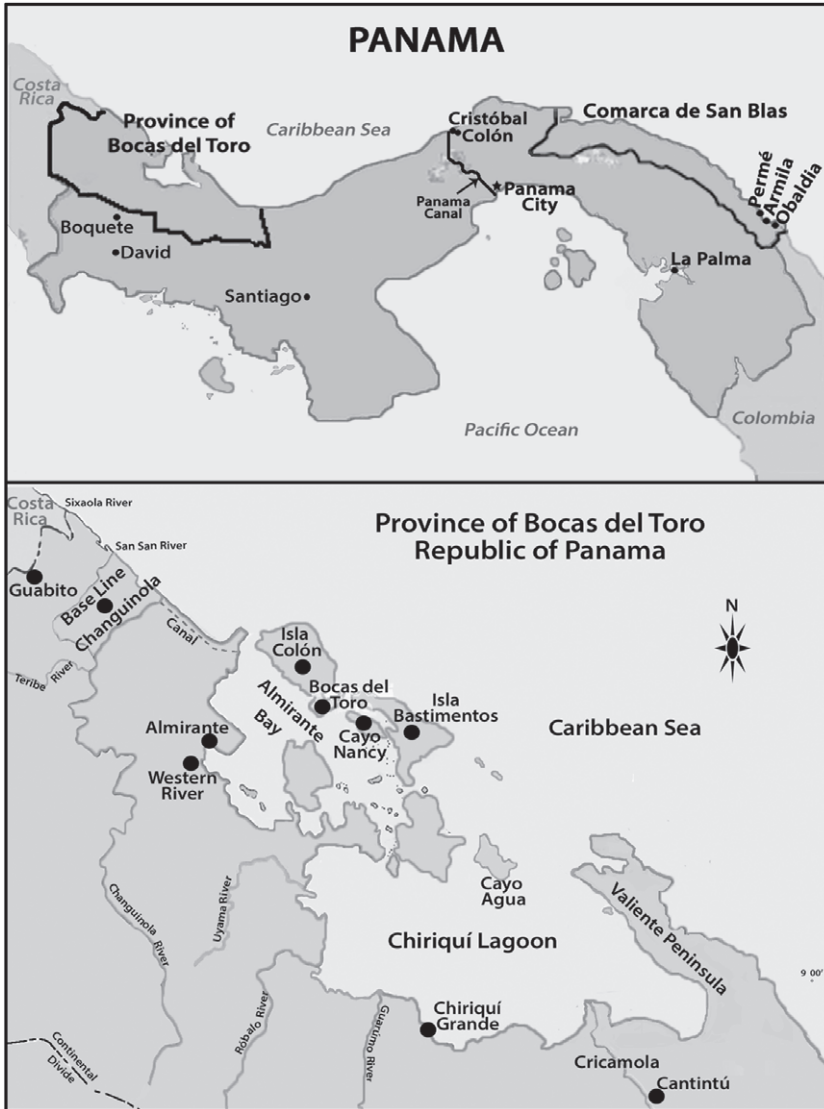


Figure 1. The Republic of Panama: (upper) showing the two regions (Bocas del Toro and San Blas) at the western and eastern ends of the Caribbean coast where Wedel's collecting activities took place; (lower) detail of Bocas del Toro, including localities mentioned in the text.

Howard eventually worked for years for the United Fruit Company (UFC) in Almirante and Changuinola.

A further incentive for the present biography comes from the recent attention drawn to Wedel as an example of the difficulties that museum curators may have with collectors (Lewis 2012: 125–126). Lewis's account consists of a quote from a long, one-sided rant against Wedel by one of his employers, followed by a series of comments by Lewis that are entirely erroneous, so the historical record deserves to be set right.



Figure 2. Hasso von Wedel, in Parque Bolívar, Bocas del Toro, probably in the 1930s (photographer unknown; by courtesy of Elsie Howard).

## EARLY HISTORY

Alwyn Hasso von Wedel was born at Dordrecht, Cape Colony,<sup>3</sup> in what is now Eastern Cape province, Republic of South Africa, on 27 July, although there appears to be some doubt as to the year. Webster H. W. Chase<sup>1</sup> first gave 1872, but then 1873. An undated note from Alice Louise Dunn (Mrs Thomas Dunn)<sup>1</sup> gives 1872, but a note in a wispy hand (neither Wetmore's nor Wedel's) across a copy of Wedel's will says "born July 27 1873". Wetmore accepted 1873 in his summary biography,<sup>1</sup> which noted that Hasso's father was a Prussian officer who had been stationed in southern Africa, and his mother was a South African of English descent, and that the boy "received an excellent education in England and later in a military school in Germany in the junker tradition".

Although we traced at least three German military officers also named Hasso von Wedel, we were unable to find any connection between them or any other relative of the Panamanian collector apart from a sister-in-law, Sophie von Wedel, who was 84 years of age in 1958 and lived then in Swanage, Dorset, England.<sup>1</sup>

## WEDEL IN BOCAS DEL TORO

Alwyn Hasso von Wedel came to the United States about 1888 aged 16, and was employed for a time as a shipping clerk in New York, later becoming a purser on a boat in the banana trade on

the east coast of Central America. He wandered from place to place in Panama, finally settling in the town of Bocas del Toro in 1898, where there was a prosperous German colony that was benefiting from the emerging banana business. Bocas town is situated on an island, Isla Colón, and is the administrative seat of the province of Bocas del Toro, the westernmost province on the Caribbean coast of Panama. Chase wrote to A. L. Dunn that Wedel eventually “worked as a clerk for the Fruit Company” and

took up photography as a hobby and invested all his savings in some great old view cameras ... [A]fter several years with the Company he started to free lance it as a professional photographer and was at one time appointed official Company photographer and did very well financially during the construction days with hundreds of progress pictures.<sup>1</sup>

Wedel (1905) advertised to sell a Pony Premo No. 5 camera with a Voigtländer lens for US \$50 that had cost him \$127 in 1903. As he seems never to have given up his interest in photography, perhaps he was selling to upgrade to even better equipment.

Wedel parlayed his photographic experience into publishing picture postcards. Used cards from a series of 25 issued by “Dockrell & v. Wedel” have cancellation dates ranging from 17 August 1911 to 28 November 1916 (Anonymous 2002). Another series, numbering up to at least 31, was published by Wedel alone (Anonymous 2002) and was marked “H. Wedel Panama-Studio Almirante R. P.”<sup>4</sup> Some of these have dates of 1936, 1937 and 1940, with the last being a photograph taken in Bocas town about 1906 (Figure 3).

In Wedel’s will<sup>1</sup> (dated 18 April 1955) and its codicil (22 April 1955), he mentioned a daughter, but not by name, who lived in Bocas town, and from whom evidently he was estranged. He pointedly left her only a wristwatch and was emphatic that she receive no money or belongings other than her boat and railway fares from Bocas to Changuinola, and return, to collect the watch. This was Emma Felicita von Wedel Lopez (18 May 1907–18 October 1998).<sup>5</sup> According to Elsie Howard,<sup>2</sup> Emma’s mother was never married to Wedel, and the daughter never cared to hear anything about her father. Stephens (2002: 134) mentioned as a resident of Bocas town a “Miss Wedel Lopez” whose “father was the legendary photographer von Wedel. His name is on many of the old Bocas del Toro postcards printed during the early 1900s. Miss Lopez said her father was in South Africa during the Boer War before coming to Panama.” If so, that must have been the First Boer War (1880–1881), when Wedel would have been a boy of seven or eight years of age.

The remainder of Wedel’s will, which he evidently typed himself, using such spellings as “whitnesses” and “codycil”, mainly distributed his few household possessions, such as a radio, electric stove and oven, lanterns, cooking utensils and a desk and chair among local friends. Webster Chase was to receive “everything else I possess”, and he was asked to “dispose of any money I leave to the best of his ideas”.

In Heckadon-Moreno’s (2004: 207) selection of essays on naturalists in Panama, Wedel barely gets passing mention as one of ornithologist Ludlow Griscom’s collectors, where he is misidentified as “Henry Wedel”. Later, Heckadon-Moreno (2011) gives his name once as “Henry Von Wedel”, but usually as “Harry Von Wedel”. From Webster Chase’s correspondence<sup>1</sup> we know that among his intimates in Bocas del Toro, Wedel was indeed called “Harry”. At least some digital records in the Missouri Botanical Garden formerly listed him as “Hans Wedel”, although these entries have since been corrected.<sup>6</sup> As he almost always gave his name on specimen labels simply as “H. Wedel”, ornithologist Alexander Wetmore, for example, did not learn that he was “von Wedel” until 1957.<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted that among the locals his last name was pronounced to rhyme with “needle”.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3. Wedel's postcard No. 4 was a scene at the south end of Third Street in Bocas del Toro town in an area that had been land-filled by 1910. Some of these early photographs continued to appear on his black-and-white postcards that were mailed between 1937 and 1940 with the name H. Wedel, Panama-Studio, Almirante, R. P. (Original 90 × 140 mm; from the personal collection of Clyde Stephens.)

Although Wedel originally lived in the town of Bocas del Toro, he had a house and photographic laboratory in the port of Almirante, where he apparently settled about 1919 (Anonymous 2002) and where he produced postcards and Christmas cards. About 1941, he was hired by the UFC as a photographer, and moved to a company house in Changuinola. Wedel was hired by the UFC to photograph the nascent and ongoing developments of the abacá period in Changuinola.<sup>1</sup> Managers had to request funds, and such requests were always accompanied by photographs to convince the corporate office in Boston of the needs in the tropics. Wedel was an official photographer, a position that existed in all tropical divisions of the UFC in all countries. Wedel would therefore have been entitled to live in a company house in order to do his job.

Wedel always lived alone and never had a family.<sup>2</sup> We have not been able to determine just when Wedel moved to Changuinola, but it may have coincided with the entrance of the United States into the Second World War, as he may have wished to distance himself from members of the German community in Bocas town, some of whom were interned in detention camps in the Canal Zone during the last two years of the war.

Stephens (2002: 135) was partly mistaken in writing that “although von Wedel sometimes worked for the UFC, he was impounded in detention camps in the Panama Canal Zone during World War I and II.” Elsie Howard<sup>2</sup> was certain that Wedel was never detained during the Second World War, and his friend Webster Chase never mentioned such a circumstance. The First World War (April 1917 to November 1918 for the United States) was long before Wedel started collecting natural history specimens. We have no evidence as to Wedel's activity during that time, but the cancellation dates of some of his postcards suggest that he was still active in

Bocas at least up until 1916. We know for certain, however, that Wedel was interned during the First World War, as he is listed in a manifest of “Enemy Interns” on the USS *Kilpatrick*, which sailed from Cristóbal, Panama, on 27 July 1918, arriving at New Orleans on 8 August 1918.<sup>8</sup> He was evidently back in Panama by 1922, when he sailed from Colón on the SS *Bayano*, arriving at Avonmouth (Bristol), on 9 July 1922, with his stated destination being Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Wedel was actively botanizing in Bocas del Toro up until 22 November 1941, well after the Second World War broke out in Europe, so detention of Germans in Panama probably would not have begun until after the United States entered the war in December 1941, when Wedel would have been 67 years old. Wedel evidently never collected or sold a biological specimen after 1941.

Wedel was evidently well acquainted with the prosperous German merchant Carl Friese, who escaped from Bocas del Toro in his boat and stayed in exile in Costa Rica during the First World War (Stephens 2002: 140). When war resumed a second time between Germany and the United States in 1941, the Panamanian police were dispatched to bring in German residents in Panama. Friese was so depressed at the prospect that he killed himself by poisoning (Stephens 2002, Heckadon-Moreno 2011). This must have been a shocking personal tragedy for Wedel, who moved to Changuinola about the time Friese died in December 1941. Wedel died on 7 October 1957 at the UFC hospital in Almirante aged 84 or 85.

“After [Wedel] died and was buried in the Changuinola cemetery, his huge collection of distinguished photographs and books disappeared, thus depriving future generations of a look at the arts and skills of this talented immigrant” (Stephens 2002: 135). The cemetery in which Wedel was originally interred was behind (east of) the Catholic church in Changuinola, but burials were not restricted to Catholics. Wetmore photographed Wedel’s tomb the year after he died (Figure 4). The new Changuinola hospital was built over that cemetery about 1970, after the old bones had been exhumed and placed in columbaria in a new cemetery to the west of the railway tracks in front of the town’s two churches. That cemetery filled up and was abandoned years ago, and the site was in complete disarray, overgrown with brush and filled with mud and water, when Stephens and his assistant searched in vain for any trace of Wedel’s remains on 1 September 2015, at which time most of the niches of the columbaria were open and unmarked.

## ORNITHOLOGICAL COLLECTING IN BOCAS DEL TORO

Frederic Hedge Kennard (1865–1937) took up ornithology as a serious avocation following his retirement as a landscape architect in 1915, and made numerous expeditions in pursuit of specimens (Bent 1937). He was first exposed to tropical birds in Panama, Colombia and Jamaica in 1918, which stimulated him to mount a collecting trip to Bocas del Toro, Panama, in 1926, when he spent nearly two months in the Almirante Bay region with J. D. Smith as taxidermist. The results were published in Kennard and Peters (1928: 444), where we are informed that the expedition “took with us, from Almirante, H. Wedel as photographer, interpreter, and general utility man”. Wedel’s experience with Kennard was expanded upon by Peters (1931: 294), who wrote: “Before leaving Almirante, Mr. Kennard trained H. Wedel in the art of preparing bird skins – good ones – and from June, 1926 until the beginning of 1929, when Mr. Wedel left for other fields [the San Blas coast], he had sent in over 1,000 skins representing 272 species.” They formed the basis for Peters’s (1931) report. Wedel had been financed by Kennard, because the “bulk of these birds were generously





Figure 4. “Cementario Changuinola” (Changuinola cemetery) entrance arch and Hasso von Wedel’s tomb (small, low building with a cross). (Photograph taken by Alexander Wetmore on 17 January 1958 and labelled “Tomb of Hasso von Wedel, at left of gate. Changuinola, Prov. Bocas del Toro, Panama”. (Smithsonian Institution Archives RU 7006, Box 184, Album 3, image number 6583 or 6584.)

presented” to the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), Harvard University, by Kennard (Peters 1931: 294),

and form one of the very best collections ever made in a given region in the American tropics. It is particularly interesting since it is the result of practically two and one-half years’ steady work at all seasons, and shows the changes in plumage due to wear and moult not usually found in neotropical collections; it also furnishes some interesting data on the arrival and departure of North American migrants.

Peters included a gazetteer of Wedel’s collecting localities, as these included a number not covered in the previous report by Kennard and Peters (1928).

Following up on a conversation in the preceding April, Kennard wrote to George Finlay Simmons of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History on 8 September 1928, explaining that he had been subsidizing Wedel for the benefit of the MCZ “for a couple of years, but [he] is sending us a good deal of the same stuff over and over again”, and wanted to know if Simmons was interested in making an arrangement with Wedel. Simmons replied on 29 September wanting more information on costs, but by that time Kennard had already made arrangements with Witmer Stone of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia to purchase specimens from Wedel. In responding to Simmons, Kennard wrote on 13 October that he had been paying Wedel “a dollar a skin up to about the size of a robin, and a dollar and a quarter a skin for birds larger than a robin, and sometimes more according to the size and rarity of the bird”. He noted that Wedel “does not make skins very rapidly”, his shipments were sporadic and “vary in number from 40 or 50, to 150 birds at a time”.<sup>10</sup>

When collecting on 14 January 1958, Wetmore noted:<sup>11</sup>

The lower end of the valley [of the Western River or Río Oeste] is held by a Jamaican, Stewart who had been here since 1918. He told me that H. von Wedel (the ‘H. Wedel’ of specimen labels) came out here regularly to stay with him and collect. He was especially interested in ‘de spur-wing bird’ which flew very fast and high so that his memory had confused von Wedel’s collecting of swifts and jacanas.

But we have found no specimen or catalogue evidence of Wedel having collected either jacanas (Jacanidae) or swifts (Apodidae) in the vicinity of the Río Oeste.

At least by 1938, towards the end of his ornithological collecting, Wedel had as his assistant Martin Sparks, who would have been 18 years old at that time (Heckadon-Moreno 2011). A photograph supplied by Sparks captioned “Cankintú, 1938” shows the interior of a “house in the jungle built by the taxidermist Harry Von Wedel” (Heckadon-Moreno 2011: 213). According to the caption, “On the bed lies a stuffed Swainson’s toucan and on the table at right, a king vulture.” The toucan is clearly visible and identifiable as *Ramphastos swainsonii*, but there does not appear to be any sort of specimen on the table in question. We have traced Wedel specimens of the toucan taken at Cricamola on 18 January and on 18 February 1938, so the year of attribution appears to be correct. There are Wedel specimens of the vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*) from Cricamola in the Cincinnati Museum taken in 1936 and 1937, but what bearing they may have on the photograph of Heckadon-Moreno (2011), showing no vulture, is uncertain. Furthermore, that and other images of the Río Cricamola, said by Heckadon-Moreno (2011) to have been taken near Cankintú, were from a lower elevation, as Cankintú is much farther up the river along rapids above the head of navigation.

Martin Sparks told Heckadon-Moreno<sup>12</sup>

that he was born in Nancy’s Kay [Cayo Nancy or Isla Solarte] in 1920, his mother, Rebecca Schwartz, was from Old Bank or Bastimentos [Island]. Her father, of German Jewish origin, came to Bocas from Corn Island, Nicaragua. Martin’s father was a Jamaican carpenter of Scottish descent. He arrived in Bocas town, 1902, to build the local United Fruit Company headquarters, now the Hotel Bahia. Martin gave me two photos taken by Von Wedel in his finca at rio Cricamola farm.

Elsie Howard<sup>2</sup> had never heard that Wedel had a farm on the Cricamola, and more likely he stayed at the farm of the German merchant Carl Friese, whose house on the Cricamola appeared ample and commodious in 1940 (Heckadon-Moreno 2000). Heckadon-Moreno related<sup>12</sup> that when he went up the Cricamola in 1970, “the old wooden building was still standing. People used to call it ‘La Finca del Aleman’ [the property, or farm, of the German]”. The German was surely Friese and not Wedel.

During the period when Wedel was collecting birds for the MCZ, he wrote to the Smithsonian Institution on 5 September 1928 that he was “turning my interest also to mam[m]-als”, desired to obtain a copy of Goldman’s (1920) monograph on mammals of Panama, and offered to be of service collecting. His letter was circulated among relevant Smithsonian curators. Herpetologist Leonhard Stejneger (1851–1943) had little interest, mammalogist Gerrit S. Miller (1869–1956) expressed interest only in bats, and Charles W. Richmond (1868–1932) doubted that there were any birds needed that Wedel could supply, despite the fact that it would be another 30 years before the Smithsonian obtained any series of birds from Bocas del Toro. The rather discouraging response to Wedel by Assistant Secretary Wetmore on 25 September 1928 noted that the Goldman volume would be “forwarded upon receipt of a remittance drawn in favor of the Smithsonian Institution”, that the museum was not interested in specimens of birds or mammals except bats, but that the museum “cannot place an order in advance”, and that no specimens should be forwarded “without first receiving a definite order for them”. Wedel responded to Wetmore on 8 October 1928 to the effect that “the only mam[m]als I could send you would be one or two kinds of Squirrels, the Aguti (Natives call it here Neke [= *ñeque*, the agouti *Dasyprocta*]), the Conejo pintado (wild rabbit [= *paca Cuniculus*]), and perhaps a bat.” He added that “I am making a long extended trip to the Divide of the Cordillera, (5600 ft.) to collect [for the MCZ] and probably may come across some birds or mam[m]als, which may interest you. I am also collecting butterflies and bugs, lizzards [*sic*]



and frogs.”<sup>13</sup> We have found no further response by the Smithsonian. Apart from three specimens of squirrels at the MCZ from Changuinola and Almirante, taken in 1928, we have encountered no evidence that Wedel actually diversified his zoological collecting to include anything other than birds.

#### ORNITHOLOGICAL COLLECTING IN SAN BLAS

Meanwhile back at the MCZ, Griscom (1932: 303) considered that “it would no longer pay the Museum to purchase additional specimens” from the Almirante region, so he persuaded Wedel to proceed to the ornithologically unknown eastern Caribbean coast of Panama in what is now the Comarca de San Blas. Wedel went first to Perm , a small plantation with rail lines of the UFC that had been established about 1928, where he arrived on 14 March 1929. His travel between Crist bal, in the Canal Zone, and San Blas was doubtless facilitated by the Company’s “former sub-chaser which made a weekly voyage to the Company’s plantations” at Perm  (Freeman 1932: 252). Here Wedel was hampered by “much denser and more impenetrable” vegetation than at Almirante and “by the humid climate, as heavy rains began the middle of April and lasted until the following January”. This was exacerbated by uncooperative residents who would not serve as porters or guides, and the funds sent to Wedel “had a way of remaining indefinitely at Col n or Crist bal, and he was severely handicapped all during the summer, and suffered considerable hardship” (Griscom 1932: 304).

Heavy rains did not cease until the first week of January, 1930, at which time Wedel had only one gun in working order. A further chapter of accidents prevented an expedition into the mountains during the dry season, and Wedel decided to leave Perm  and move to [Puerto] Obald , where there is a United States naval radio station. In the meantime his boy accidentally shot a native woman in the foot, and the Panama government confiscated his remaining gun, so for a period of seven weeks Wedel was unable to collect at all. (Griscom 1932: 304–305)

Wedel’s collecting in San Blas was “discontinued in March, 1931, and Wedel returned to the Canal Zone”, but not before sending back “1,396 skins, referable to 284 species”, which Griscom (1932: 305) regarded as “outstanding results”. The collections contained “a surprisingly large number of new forms”, plus numerous species and subspecies new to Panama, to which may be added the fact that “Wedel collected North American migrants very intelligently”. It is difficult to read anything into this effort as described by Griscom except the expenditure by Wedel of two full years of deprivation and dedication to achieve “outstanding results”.

According to Wetmore,<sup>14</sup>

The M. C. Z. sent Wedel to Perm , San Blas with a guarantee of \$1500–2000 per year. [Wealthy amateur collector Henry O.] Havemeyer agreed with Griscom to purchase duplicate skins from Wedel collections not exceed \$1000 in any one year. It transpired that the M. C. Z. arranged the entire finances, but that later Havemeyer purchased some of the duplicates. The entire Perm -Obald  collection was identified by Griscom and is included in his report.

Wetmore extended his Panama collecting to eastern San Blas in 1963, where he was based in Puerto Obald . On 17 February he wrote:<sup>15</sup>

This afternoon two men came by who told that they had been Wedel’s collectors and helpers. And on talking to them I am satisfied that they are telling the true story and that my landlord’s tale of yesterday [among other things that Wedel had collected mainly on the Colombian side of the border] was pure bunk. Wedel lived in a house directly across the street from my present domicile, which belongs to the uncle of one of my informants. Wedel made various camps for limited periods but this was his headquarters. The young men ranged along or with him all

of them collecting. They told me that the water birds were taken along the shore where many came at times apparently in migration. Ranchón was located near the [I]ndian village of Armila. Permé has been replaced by Pito when the army had an airfield and camp but all were now abandoned and the village has disappeared. I have these points located on my map. Wedel's market for specimens ran out toward the end of the 5 years or so that he lived here, and finally he came to a low point on food. The Fruit Company was represented here at the time with a small cement building still standing but in bad repair as quarters. The men of the company there moved Wedel in with them and he remained with them until he returned to Bocas del Toro.

Details of Wedel's collecting localities in San Blas, based in part on Wetmore's notes, may be found in Siegel and Olson (2008).

Doubtless motivated by lack of funds, Wedel again wrote to the Smithsonian towards the end of 1930, when he was still collecting in San Blas for the MCZ. His letter, which has not been traced, was sent to C. W. Richmond and passed on to Herbert Friedmann (Smithsonian ornithologist from 1929 to 1961), who wrote to Griscom on 6 December 1930 wanting to know if the MCZ was "through with" Wedel, and what he was being paid for his specimens. Griscom's vituperative response, dated 12 December 1930, was as follows:<sup>16</sup>

We greatly appreciate your letter of December 6<sup>th</sup> with regard to H. Wedel in Panama. He has been collecting for us for some time on a definite basis of employment throughout the year, and it was entirely improper of him to suggest selling specimens to you. Nevertheless we are more than glad for you to take him over if you wish. Wedel is more or less of a beach-comber, well over fifty years old, and inspires every white man with whom he comes in contact with strong contempt in about two months time. He makes very good skins, is not really able to remember one bird from another, but succeeds in the course of time in getting quite a variety of interesting material, largely on a hit or miss basis. He is very slow and does not average a thousand specimens a year. He is also lazy and entirely lacking in initiative, and cannot be persuaded to go more than a mile or two back into the woods from a settlement. About a year and a half ago he went for us to Permé on the Caribbean side of Eastern Panama near the Colombian boundary, and after looking the ground over asked for advances of money to outfit his proposed expeditions into the mountains of the interior. Needless to say, he never got into the interior or into the mountains, and he never will get there. One alibi after another came through until he owed the museum \$1,000, and Dr. Barbour wrote him that we would advance him no more money under any circumstances whatsoever. As he always blow in [*sic*] all the money he receives the moment he gets it, he is always strapped and down and out at the end of a month, and consequently when we would advance him no more money he must have lived a pretty miserable existence while he was collecting a thousand specimens of birds for us to clear up his debts. He really did some work all last summer and this fall for the first time in many years, and we are now quits. As a matter of fact he feels incensed at his treatment and would undoubtedly be glad to switch from us to you, if you care to do so. The basis on which we have been paying him is \$1 per skin up to ten from each locality with a bonus of 50¢ for all good or desirable ones. It has been my custom to write and tell him which these are. I might add that as far as our collections are concerned we have ample exchange material of all the more specially desirable birds with only one or two exceptions. We have about all the birds from the tropical lowlands that we want, and if you wish to take him over we will fire Wedel with pleasure.

Despite the fact that there must have been considerable correspondence between Griscom and Wedel, and Griscom specifically mentioned a letter to Wedel from the MCZ Director Thomas Barbour, none of this correspondence could be traced in the archives at the MCZ or the Harvard University Archives.<sup>17</sup>

Most of Griscom's screed was quoted by Lewis (2012: 125) as an example of the difficulties that museum curators may have with collectors, whereas from Wedel's perspective, if he was not receiving the funds needed to sustain his activity in the field, it was the museum that was the problem, not the collector. Griscom would seem to have had no first-hand experience from which to formulate the gossipy aspersions he cast upon Wedel. It may be noted that the years that Wedel was first in San Blas (1929–1931) saw the New York stock market crash, which the UFC weathered, but the following collapse of the global economy reduced the company's profits by 85 per cent by 1932 (Cohen 2012: 138), which may well have had an effect on Wedel's ability to secure transport and accommodations.

In any case, Friedmann soon responded (15 December 1930):<sup>16</sup>

We have a good Panamanian collection, and shall probably be able to get special desiderata by exchange with you, so we are not much interested in Wedel's offer, especially in view of your comments about him. I am writing Wedel informing him of our inability to avail ourselves of his services.

It is therefore almost inconceivable how Lewis (2012: 125) could then write that “Wedel did end up leaving [MCZ's] employ and was hired by the Smithsonian, for which he did substantial work, including discovering several new species that ended up bearing his name, despite his apparently uncaring ways.” This is utterly fictitious. Wedel was never employed by the Smithsonian. There are no specimens of mammals attributed to Wedel in the Smithsonian collections<sup>18</sup> and only 13 specimens of birds, which arrived as gifts or exchanges in five different transactions from four different institutions or individuals, none directly from Wedel.<sup>19</sup> The only bird to be named after Wedel was a subspecies of the Crested Owl (*Lophotrix cristata wedeli*), described by Griscom (1932: 326) and “named for Hasso von Wedel who collected the type specimen”, hardly a year after Griscom's rant to Friedmann about Wedel's supposed worthlessness.

Griscom (1932) has Wedel returning from San Blas to the Canal Zone in March 1931, whence it is quite possible that he returned to Bocas del Toro for a period. He returned to San Blas and was based at Puerto Obaldia from 1932 to 1935, based on museum catalogue records and Wetmore's statement that Wedel was in residence there for some five years.<sup>15</sup> Wedel specimens from Cricamola, Bocas del Toro (Figure 5), dated 1932 and 1934, provide evidence that he must have returned to his true home base at least briefly during his second sojourn in San Blas. This was probably one of the more difficult and hardscrabble periods of his life, trying to make a living by trying to find buyers for bird specimens, which can only have been exacerbated by the slowness of the mails in and out of remote Puerto Obaldia. Wedel's close friend Webster Chase<sup>1</sup> gives some idea of the tribulations Wedel went through (see also Appendix, pp 332–334):

von Wedel gave taxidermy and bird collecting a real work out for several years and his diary of experiences was worth reading, however, the story was continuously reminding the reader of the rugged outdoor experiences combined always with the element of hunger, low process for his product, poor market and difficult collections – von Wedel never seemed to have a sponsor and his continuous letters and telegrams to possible buyers ate up all his very dubious profit and he finally had to fall back on photography (self taught) to keep bread in the larder.

We can only regret that Wedel's diaries, which would have been a mine of information about his activities, were lost or discarded after his death and the deaths of Mr and Mrs Chase.

## WEDEL'S BIRDS IN THE BRANDT COLLECTION

Herbert W. Brandt (1884–1955) was a wealthy businessman of Cleveland, Ohio, with an avid interest in ornithology. He conducted collecting expeditions widely in the Americas and wrote several popular books on his adventures (Schorger 1955). He amassed a collection of birds “in excess of 70,000 specimens” that was “purchased by a group of naturalists ... in Cincinnati ... from the Brandt family in Cleveland soon after the death of Mr. Brandt”.<sup>20</sup> The Herbert W. Brandt Memorial Collection, as it was known, was incorporated into the bird skin collection of the University of Cincinnati under the curatorship of Emerson Kemsies, and the entire collection was later transferred to the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History (Drury 1971), where it currently resides.

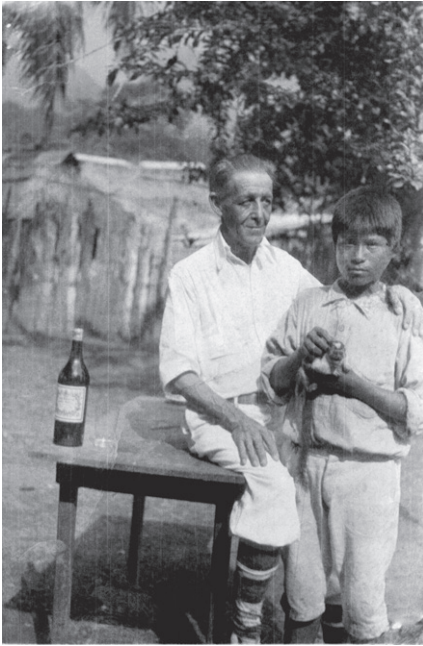


Figure 5. Hasso von Wedel with a Ngöbe (Guaymí) Indian boy probably taken at Cricamola in the 1930s. (Photographer unknown, supplied by Elsie Howard.)



Figure 6. Hasso von Wedel looking “like he did just before he died. He was a slight wiry person, and although he had more white hair when I first knew him in 1938, he looked very much like the picture” (Alice Louise Dunn, Almirante, undated note<sup>1</sup>). (Photograph originally supplied by Mrs Webster Chase, probably dating from 1957.)

Wetmore examined the records at the Cincinnati Museum, as did Olson subsequently in August 1995, and found that the Brandt collection contained at least 399 specimens obtained from Wedel, many of which were raptors, which seems to have been a particular interest of Brandt’s. Of these, most were from Puerto Obaldia, San Blas, taken in 1933 and 1934, and the rest were from Bocas del Toro, collected from 1933 to 1939. We have traced no correspondence between Brandt and Wedel, and none now exists at the Cincinnati Museum.<sup>21</sup>

#### WEDEL’S BOTANICAL COLLECTING

Wedel’s introduction to botanical collecting came in 1938 with the arrival of Robert E. Woodson (1904–1963) of the Missouri Botanical Garden (MBG) in St Louis. Woodson left the rest of his expedition to spend two weeks in the vicinity of Almirante, Bocas del Toro. After visiting and collecting around villages and plantations of the UFC, Woodson embarked on

perhaps the most interesting of the trips taken out from Almirante ... to the Río Cricamola at the east end of the Chiriquí Lagoon ... [W]e stopped at the town of Bocas del Toro to pick up Mr. H. Wedel, a local ornithologist and accomplished photographer, who was to act as guide and interpreter.

The party was conveyed to the bar of the Cricamola with all the conveniences that the UFC could provide, including “six cases of carrier pigeons for communication with Almirante”. After several days of collecting, the party returned “to the comparative luxury of Bocas del Toro” (Woodson and Seibert 1939: 271–272) and

accepted the hospitality of Mr. Wedel for a collecting trip to Isla de Colón, where ... thanks to the kindly experience of Mr. Wedel, in only a few days numerous additions were made to the known flora of Panama ... There is probably no one in the vicinity of the Chiriquí Lagoon who is quite so familiar with the country and its inhabitants as Mr. Wedel. Since last spring, he has started independently collecting, sending his specimens to the Missouri Botanical Garden for identification and distribution.

Wedel's efforts were acknowledged in the titles of two subsequent papers from the MBG (Woodson and Schery 1942, 1943).

Wedel's botanical collections were made exclusively in the province of Bocas del Toro and, so far as known, went only to the MBG,<sup>22</sup> whence many duplicates were distributed to other institutions. He is credited with nearly three thousand numbers, which would have been divided into many more individual specimens dispersed as duplicates. The collection dates of these numbers range from 25 August 1938 to 22 November 1941 (when he would have been 68 years of age). Wedel's specimens were the basis for about 64 new taxa of plants, mainly new species but including several infraspecific taxa as well. Botanists were considerably more generous towards Wedel than were ornithologists, and at least ten taxa of plants have been dedicated to him, with the descriptions spanning nearly 40 years from 1939 to 1976 (Table 1). We note that Wedel may be regarded as an appropriate name for a botanical collector as one of the meanings of *Wedel* in German is frond or twig. No correspondence or invoices have been found at the MBG to indicate how much or when Wedel may have been paid for his plant collecting activities, the only archives pertaining to Wedel being some of his field notebooks with specimen numbers and data and a file of taxonomic determinations by various specialists. Some annotations in these field books, however, appear to indicate how much he was reimbursed for his plants. The number of duplicates was totalled at 869, for which Wedel received \$86.90 plus \$17.38, presumably for shipping costs. Ten cents per specimen would certainly have been a bargain for Woodson and the MBG, but not much for Wedel's subsistence.

## CONCLUSION

Hasso von Wedel lived in Panama for at least 60 of his 85 years of life. During that time he collected birds and plants along the Caribbean coast for some 15 years, at least from 1926 to 1941. His remuneration for this activity was often sporadic, yet he was a kind and generous person with numerous friends. His contributions to biodiversity have usually been underappreciated, especially among ornithologists.

Although Wedel was far from the first ornithological collector in Bocas del Toro, his long residence there and his wide-ranging activity in the province insured that he obtained many unique distributional records, especially among larger species such as raptors and waterbirds that are seldom obtained in the mist nets that are the staple of modern specimen-oriented field ornithology. Wedel's ornithological pursuits in San Blas were definitely pioneering, however, and his collections formed the basis for all further knowledge of birds from the eastern Caribbean coast of Panama.

Table 1. List of plants named after Hasso von Wedel in chronological order. The names are those used in the original descriptions and do not necessarily reflect current nomenclature or validity (information supplied by Gerrit Davidse, Missouri Botanical Garden).

taxon	author/date
<i>Costus lima</i> var. <i>wedelianus</i> (Costaceae)	Woodson 1939
<i>Prestonia wedelii</i> (Apocynaceae)	Woodson 1942
<i>Chamaedorea wedeliana</i> (Arecaceae)	L. H. Bailey 1943
<i>Ardesia wedelii</i> (Primulaceae)	Lundell 1943
<i>Ocotea wedeliana</i> (Lauraceae)	C. K. Allen 1945
<i>Peperomia wedelii</i> (Piperaceae)	Yuncker 1950
<i>Piper wedelii</i> (Piperaceae)	Yuncker 1950
<i>Dicranopygium wedelii</i> (Cyclanthaceae)	Harling 1958
<i>Anthurium wedelianum</i> (Araceae)	Croat 1966
<i>Mikania wedelii</i> (Asteraceae)	W. C. Holmes and McDaniel 1976

Wedel's botanical achievements were considerably greater as Bocas del Toro in the 1930s was essentially *terra incognita*, which meant that many of his specimens became the basis for new species and subspecies of plants, at least ten of which were named for him. For most of his life he lived a quiet existence, and perhaps a rather furtive one at times because of his German heritage. Despite living on the fringes of poverty, he was known to his acquaintances as a kind and generous person whose original contributions to biological knowledge of Panama deserve acknowledgment and recognition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For information and assistance for many aspects of this biography we are indebted to Smithsonian Institution staff and associates in the Smithsonian Archives, Libraries, the National Postal Museum, the Tropical Research Institute, and vertebrate and botanical collections and databases: Annette Aiello, Ellen Alers, George Angehr, Vielka Chang-Yau, Stanley Heckadon-Moreno, Leslie Overstreet, Ira Rubinoff, Baasil Wilder and Neal Woodman. To Laurence Dorr, Department of Botany, National Museum of Natural History, we are particularly indebted for several critical references concerning Wedel's wartime internship and his postcard business. Jeremiah Trimble's careful searching turned up the correspondence between Kennard and Simmons concerning Wedel. For information on specimens from the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, we thank then-curator Robert S. Kennedy. For information from the Missouri Botanical Garden we are especially grateful to Gerrit Davidse and Andrew Colligan. We are deeply indebted to Ken Huff for drawing up the maps, editing, and for his interested assistance in ferreting out information on Wedel's whereabouts in the decade of the First World War.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This material is found in Wetmore's Wedel file (now Smithsonian Institution Archives Accession 17–296) and in Smithsonian Institution Archives RU 7006, series 1, box 11, folder 1 of Wetmore Papers. A single typed sheet with Wetmore's handwritten annotations in his Wedel file is a short biographical account of Wedel, some details of which are not to be found with attribution elsewhere, nor in the Chase correspondence, and were presumably from the information on Wedel that Wetmore received orally (cited as "Wetmore biography"). Wetmore collected birds in the province of Bocas del Toro in 1958, being based in Almirante, where his field journal indicates that he received information about Wedel from Thomas Dunn (in charge of materials and supplies for the UFC) and Alice Louise Dunn (head matron of the UFC hospital), as well as Gustav Andrew Engler and Ludwig Jaffé and their wives. Engler and Jaffé were Austrian medical staff in the employ of the UFC. Much information comes through correspondence received from Mrs Dunn's acquaintance Webster W. Chase, who was then in Costa Rica and who had become a very close friend of Wedel's in the last decade of Wedel's life. Chase, a Canadian by birth, was brought to Bocas del Toro by the UFC to supervise fibre



extraction at the Manila Hemp factory in Changuinola. These strategic fibres come from *Musa textilis*, the supply of which was cut off during the Second World War after the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Chase was then transferred to Costa Rica at Puerto Limón, and then back to Changuinola, where he died and was buried about 1964. Correspondence from Chase is dated 23 February 1958 (to Mrs Dunn), 6 February 1961, 5 March 1964, 17 May 1964, and 23 May 1964 (those to Wetmore mostly from Villa Neily, a satellite town of Coto, Puntarenas, Costa Rica).

<sup>2</sup> Oral interview with Stephens at Changuinola, 1 September 2015, when Howard was 89 years of age.

<sup>3</sup> Wedel's birthplace was determined from the National Archives, Washington; Passenger lists of vessels arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1903–1945; NAI number 4492741; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; Record Group 85.

<sup>4</sup> URL <http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/bocas-del-toro-panoramic-view-472373136> (accessed 25 July 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Oficina de Cedulación y Registro Civil, Bocas del Toro, File IAV-127–764.

<sup>6</sup> URL [www.tropicos.org](http://www.tropicos.org) (accessed 28 November 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Wetmore to Webster Chase 8 April 1958, SI Archives RU 7006, ser. 1, box 11, folder 1 Wetmore Papers.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives at College Park, Maryland, Lists of incoming passengers, compiled 1917–1938, NAI Number 6234465, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774–1985, Record Group Number 92; Roll or Box Number 135. It is likely that Wedel was interned at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, as German residents of Panama were still being held there under duress more than six months after the armistice. URL: <https://www.fold3.com/image/56849277> (Aliens deported from Panama, to Legation of Panama, c/o Legation of Switzerland, 16 May 1919), accessed 1 September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives, Kew, London; Boards of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors: Inwards Passenger Lists; Class BT26; Piece 708; Item 61. SS *Bayano* was a banana ship of Elders & Fyffes Ltd, a British firm controlled by the United Fruit Company.

<sup>10</sup> Correspondence in Ernst Mayr Library, Special Collections, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University: ARC 145.

<sup>11</sup> Wetmore field journal, Panama 1958, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>12</sup> S. Heckadon-Moreno to S. L. Olson (hereafter SLO), pers. comm., 28 July 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Smithsonian Institution Archives (hereafter SIA) RU 192, box 355, folder 103437. Wedel wrote from Almirante, c/o United Fruit Company.

<sup>14</sup> Undated note in Wetmore's hand with "information from correspondence between Griscom and Henry O. Havemeyer, in files Bird dept., Peabody Museum [of Natural History], Yale [University]."

<sup>15</sup> Wetmore field journal 1961–1963, vol. 69, pp 236–237, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>16</sup> SIA RU 105, box 18, folder 7.

<sup>17</sup> Dana Fisher (Special Collections Assistant, Ernst Mayr Library, MCZ) to SLO, pers. comm., 7 December 2012. Robin Carlaw (Researcher, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library) to SLO, pers. comm., 13 July 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Craig Ludwig, computer database, Division of Mammals, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>19</sup> Collector/Donor File, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>20</sup> John Ruthven to SLO, pers. comm., 10 September 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Glenn W. Storrs to SLO, pers. comm., 24 August 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Records from Missouri Botanical Garden were received from Gerrit Davidse (partly through Andrew Colligan, MBG archivist) to SLO, pers. comm., 8, 11 and 28 July 2015.

<sup>23</sup> While this may have been literally true, Wedel must have had some manner of official identification during his internship and subsequent trip to Europe in 1922. In addition, we found that he was manifested on a banana ship from Bristol, England, to Limon, Costa Rica, 29 August 1912 (URL <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk>, accessed 18 July 2017).

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Received 3 July 2017. Accepted 24 August 2017.

APPENDIX: Personal recollections of Hasso von Wedel by Webster W. Chase in a letter<sup>1</sup> dated 6 February 1961, from Limón, Costa Rica, sent to Alexander Wetmore at the Smithsonian Institution.

I have a letter from Mrs. Alice L. Dunn of Almirante, Panama, and she has given me your address and added much laudatory [*sic*] praise in your favor [Wetmore had been in Almirante in 1958].

Mrs. Dunn advises that you might be interested in the biography of one Hasso (Harry) von Wedel who was born in South Africa on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1873 and died in Panama on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1957, he was of German parentage, educated in England and never had a passport in his life.<sup>23</sup>

von Wedel was above all thing a gentleman and never forgot it, he was never comfortable financially and yet he was always making charitable contributions and giving rather wonderful Christmas presents to all his friends. A part of his being a gentleman was to always have a boy or house servant, which I believe he secretly considered a valet, yet his servants always ate well and were always paid.

I do not have Harry's entire history during his 60 years in Panama, but I do know he worked for the United Fruit Company as a clerk for many years, he then learned by correspondence some of the rudiments of taxidermy and spent many years of privation in the rain forests and jungles from the Columbian [*sic*] border to Nicaragua; later he fell back on his self taught photography and virtually supported himself by this profession until his very last days. I worked in his dark room and laboratory with him when he was 83 and still had excellent eyesight.

von Wedel was always a man's man and never married, he would choose a friend and stood by him loyally like a brother and never look for an assortment of friends, before myself his loyal friend was British vice-Consul William Ponton of Bocas del Toro, a huge 250 lb. 6' 2" [113 kg; 1.88 m] personage who took life very seriously and adored his 100 lb. 5' 8" [45 kg; 1.73 m] friend von Wedel, and when Billy Ponton died in, or about 1950 it left von Wedel with little else to live for and he wished to join Billy as soon as possible, however, I stepped in in time and showed my interest in his photography, went duck shooting with him (he was an excellent shot), played chess with him, visited him each morning and evening before and after my office hours, I always sent him an electrician to care for his ever changing array of photo and flood lamps or a carpenter to re-arrange his working quarters; he finally had a 2" [0.6 m] high diaz [*sic* = dais] built near his front door and placed his desk, office chair and filing cabinets upon that and importantly received clients or lesser friends from this courtly position.

When I was transferred from Panama in 1956 I entered von Wedel in the excellent hospital of my Company at no expense to him, and I visited him as frequently as my work would permit, I sent him personal checks to care for his minor expenses such as stationery, postage stamps, toilet perquisites for occasional special food and to enable him to continually pay tips to those who served him, he highly objected to have anyone who he considered to be of the laboring class to serve him as a gesture of charity and he paid his tips up to his last day, I also gave him enough to satisfy his one vice—buying weekly lottery tickets.

I believe that von Wedel may have well lived to attain 100 years if I had remained in Panama and gave him the constant friendship which he lived for and someone to listen to his theories, experiences and assure him he need not fear the future, but when my visits got longer and longer apart I could see that Hasso was pining away and dying for nothing else but companionship.

von [Wedel] always warned me to never bury him in the wet jungle soil, so I had a nice high and dry tomb built in the form of a little church and his bones rest dry and comfortably there today. When I visit Panama [from Costa Rica] I enter the cemetery alone and stand uncovered in front of that little church with my hand over my heart and inevitably the tears come and I am forced to stalk away because von would never tolerate a "softie".

Apart from Harry's accomplishments as a fair taxidermist, a knowledgeable man about tropical birds and animal life, an excellent photographer, a master marksman with a gun, a better than average chess player he also belonged to the Bocas "Bottle a Night Club", where each member brought his own bottle of whiskey and it was drank [*sic*] during the evening without sharing, and the member who could not finish his bottle or could not soberly walk

home on his own power was voted out of the club, also a member who missed attendance too many nights was frowned upon and considered very much a weakling.

I do not know whether I have in the past sent Mrs. Dunn any photos of von Wedel or if I sent one of his diaries, but I can furnish if you might be interested [Figure 6]. The diaries are especially interesting and are continuously complaining about not receiving checks from customers who bought 20 parakeet skins or six quetzals [*sic*], the slowness of the boat and surface mails, that lack of food in the bird camp, the fish he caught or the monkey he shot to help out with rations until his check arrived, the grand day when someone visited with a bottle and some real good food and the fiesta they had, the jungle animal who robbed his camp of fresh supplies just after he had received his check and returned from a long packing trip from the nearest village, the poisonous snakes he chased out of his camp or the boas he permitted to live with him to keep out the rat and mouse invasion of his supplies.

I could probably write much about my late friend von Wedel, and I still correspond with his sister-in-law Sophie von Wedel who is now 85 and living in England. I would like to know if you personally knew don Hasso or if it was only his work as a bird collector in the tropics which you might be interested in.

I am still in possession of some of his 8" × 10" [20 × 25 cm] glass negatives which he coated himself and exposed with a huge view camera in Bocas circa 1910 or earlier.

Would like to hear from you and to know if there is any information which I might be able to furnish that would interest you from these parts, as a result of Wedel training I also consider myself a photographer but in a strictly amateur [*sic*] category.

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