

II.—*On the Best Method of Relaxing the Dried Skins of Birds and other Animals.* By WILLIAM SWAINSON, Esq., F.R.S., L.S., &c. [Read 8th February, 1854.]

OBSERVING in the Museum of the Royal Society of Tasmania a valuable and not an inconsiderable collection of bird skins from different countries, which will require, eventually, to be mounted or set up in their natural attitudes, I think it very desirable to lay before the Society the method of relaxing such skins, as pursued by the best animal preservers in Europe, and the efficiency of which I have repeatedly proved.

Let a common box be made of any seasoned wood, about three-quarters of an inch thick, with the cover or lid made to lift off and on, but without hinges. The size is not material, but that which is most generally convenient may be about two and a half feet long by one and a half feet broad in the clear. This will be sufficiently large to contain the skins of nearly all the birds under the size of a goose or eagle; and for those which are larger other methods, which I will subsequently allude to, should be used. Let the sides and bottom have an internal lining of plaster of Paris, at least two inches in thickness; the lid also should have a similar coating, leaving only a margin all round for receiving the edges of the box itself. When this internal coating of plaster becomes dry, it is hard, but perfectly porous.

When it is required to relax the skins of any birds, (three, four, or five at once), let a sufficient quantity of hot water be poured into the box to saturate the whole of the plaster, not only on the bottom, but that which lines the sides and

the lid : this must be done effectually, and more water added so long as it is absorbed by the plaster, after which, if any water remains at the bottom, it should be poured out, that none of the feathers of the birds to be relaxed may become wet. The specimens are then to be laid in the bottom, and the lid immediately put over, so that the steam arising from the plaster does not escape, or the external air enter, to counteract its effects.

The time necessary for the proper softening of a bird's skin depends very much on circumstances, arising either from its size or the mode in which the skin has been originally prepared ; generally speaking, however, twenty-four hours will be sufficient for birds not larger than a thrush, if the skin has only been washed with common arsenical soap. But it sometimes happens that the natives of India, not being acquainted with any other composition, use one of their own, which, being chiefly composed of spices, not only injuriously contracts the skin, but hardens it considerably.

In such cases the operator should cut the original sewing where the orifice for extracting the body and soft parts has been made, take out the original stuffing and insert a fresh one, composed of any soft substance, saturated (but not dripping) with warm water : this additional process will be found necessary with many species of the *anatidæ* or duck family, whose skins are much thicker than those of the generality of birds ; but if, after being again replaced in the box, and left for another twenty-four hours, the skin is not found to be sufficiently pliable, it may be rendered much more so by applying the thumb-nail, moistened with saliva, and working it sufficiently long to produce the necessary degree of softness.

Great care, however, should be observed in not distending

the skin beyond its apparent natural size, particularly that of the neck, for however much the skin can be enlarged by this process, it can never be contracted, and an undue length of neck is the general fault of all preserved specimens, whether mounted or otherwise.

Birds of a size too large for being relaxed in a box of the dimensions above specified may be enveloped in two or three folds of damp cloths, from which the warm water has been well wrung out, the inside being also stuffed, as already directed. Wetted cotton or tow should likewise be inserted in the orbits or hollow of the eyes, and should the bill not be closed, an additional piece of wet tow, inserted in the mouth, would much facilitate the object to be attained.

Skins of quadrupeds are much more difficult to be relaxed than those of birds.

In these the whole of the original stuffing should be taken out, well saturated with warm water, and the animal enveloped in wet cloths, over which another, quite dry, will prevent, in a great degree, the evaporation of the steam.

When it is considered how much more attractive an Ornithological collection, well mounted, becomes to ordinary observers, I cannot deem these few remarks to be unworthy the attention of our Society, as they may ultimately be found very useful, when a fit and proper building is erected for the display of our many specimens now remaining in skins, and which number is continually augmenting by the liberality of our members, and other well-wishers to Zoological Science.