



Museum of Biodiversity, Georg August University, Göttingen

The Emerald Jewel of Central America

You find yourself high on a mountain in a dense rainforest in Central America. The melody of insects, birds, and amphibians fills the air around you. Evergreen dense foliage envelops you, making you feel one with nature. You come to a clearing in the path and notice how quickly the winds are carrying the clouds across the valley. Within a break in the clouds, what appears

to be a brilliant-green phoenix flies across the sky with agile grace. Shimmering iridescent green feathers cover most of the bird. It has an aquamarine tail doubling the length of its body, a ruby red breast contrasting with its green feathers, and a spiky green helmet in the shape of a mohawk that conceals parts of its bright yellow beak.¹ Curiosity sparks within you as you wonder what you just saw. As you

¹ LaBastille, A., Allen, D.G., Durrell, L.W., (1972). *Behaviour and Feather Structure*

of the Quetzal. *The Auk* (89) 339-348.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4084210>

travel back down the mountain path, the image remains fresh in your memory. Later in the evening, while you're enjoying a drink with some locals, you ask them, "¿Vi un pájaro verde magnífico. ¿Qué especie podría ser?". The locals laugh, as this isn't the first time that this bird has grabbed the attention of a tourist. They tell you, "What you saw was a resplendent quetzal, one of the most beautiful birds in the world."

You find out that this bird has meant a lot to the ancient civilizations of this area. The Aztecs worshipped a God named Quetzalcoatl, meaning "precious feather" and "serpent" in Nahuatl.² Quetzalcoatl was depicted as a snake-human with green feathers from the quetzal. The people who worshipped him believed that he created all humans, being the God, which represented the fertility of the earth.³ Since he represented fertility, he was opposed to sacrifices (human and animal) which were common practices to other Gods during this time. Other cultures, such as the Mayans, would use quetzal feathers to celebrate events and were worn by high standing members of society. Even to this day, the currency of Guatemala is called the quetzal, showing a strong connection to this animal.

After days of traveling, you've returned home to Göttingen. Inspired by the amount of biodiversity in Central America, you choose to visit the Museum of



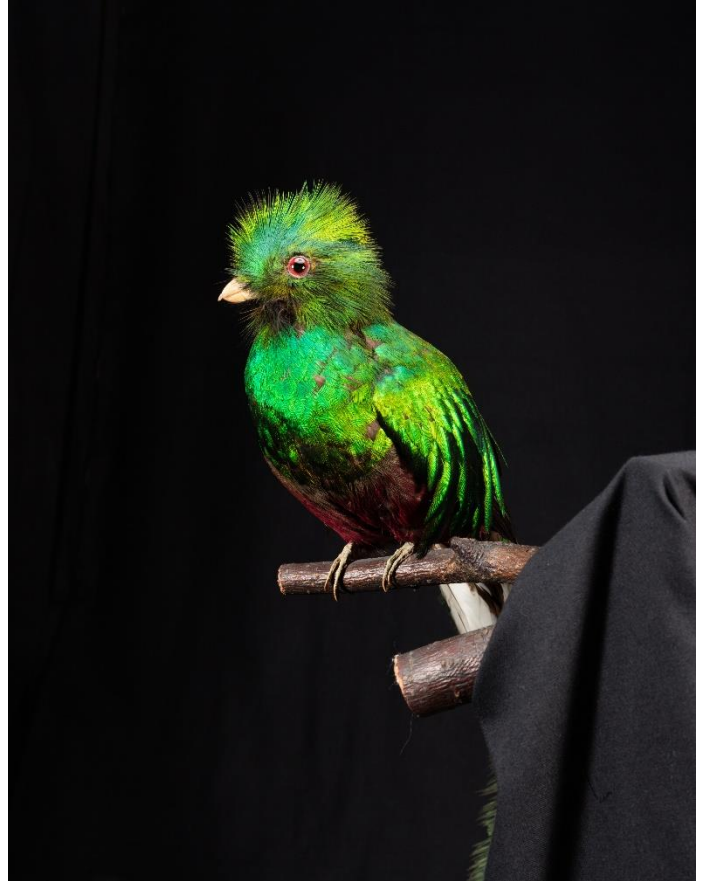
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² Tremain, C. G., (2016). *Birds of a Feather: Exploring the Acquisition of Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno) Tail Coverts in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica*. *Human Ecology*; (44) 399-408. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-016-9827-8>

³ Austin, A.L., (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Rulership, and History in the Nahua World*. University Press of Colorado. p 28-32

Biodiversity to understand more about the world we live in. As you make your way around the museum, you find a specimen fitting the description you had seen on your trip. The excitement of your wonderful journey feels complete, knowing that the story of this bird is being told around the world.

Andrew Gall



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