



Ornithology in Central and South America: Cause for Optimism?

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## COMMENTARIES

### Ornithology in Central and South America: Cause for Optimism?

DAVID CAMERON DUFFY<sup>1</sup>

Attention has been focused on the need for greatly increased training and research efforts in Central and South America (Short 1984, Mares 1986, James 1987). The general argument is that too few researchers are producing too little research on the incredibly diverse neotropical avifauna. While more and better-trained biologists are needed in Latin America, I suggest that North Americans and Europeans are simply unaware of much of the work that goes on there. At the same time, many Latin Americans lack access to journals and are unaware of research by outsiders. There are several possible methods to improve the situation.

James (1987) analyzed neotropical citations for birds in the *Zoological Record* for 1972–1983 and found publication rates of 0.25/yr (Nicaragua) to 25.1/yr (Mexico). The *Zoological Record* is an excellent reference for Northern Hemisphere scientific literature. I believe, however, that much or even most Latin American ornithological results are produced in "house" journals or even more inaccessible forms of an unpublished "gray" literature.

Many institutions prefer that their staff publish in their own journal and language. Such journals are frequently irregular and used primarily for exchange with other scientific publications. Many such journals cover a wide variety of topics, of which ornithology constitutes only a small percentage, so a subscription does not make economical sense for individuals and organizations with narrower interests.

Many Latin American institutions lack house journals, so reports are photocopied or mimeographed, distributed to those who need to know, filed, and eventually forgotten. Obtaining such reports may be impossible from outside the country, or even outside the institution. The author often cannot afford to photocopy lengthy documents, so reprint requests go unanswered.

To give an extreme example, based on James' analysis, Nicaragua appears to be an ornithological disaster: only 3 papers were published in 12 years. However, I quickly found 8 Nicaraguan reports on psittacids alone for this period. I suspect a more thorough effort would uncover more. These reports are a bibliographic nightmare and almost impossible to acquire, but they represent much of the published data in Nicaragua and many other neotropical countries.

Neotropical ornithologists face a variety of challenges to publishing in international journals. Pub-

lication is often a luxury, given the pressing need for research by a limited pool of biologists. Most international journals are not written in Spanish or Portuguese, so translation is necessary. Romance languages and styles are often more verbose than scientific English, and papers occasionally fall into the hands of insensitive referees whose comments very effectively discourage future contact with such journals.

At the same time, many neotropical biologists do not have access to major scientific journals. Despite relatively modest membership or subscription fees for journals, funds are often unavailable. Access to journals through libraries is also limited. Most have restricted access and hours, and few institutions can afford a wide range of journals, especially when institutional subscriptions are more expensive than for individuals.

Lack of access to journals also reduces the incentive and ability to publish, as authors may not see the eventual published paper, especially if they cannot afford reprints or if they publish in a journal that does not provide free reprints. Secondary sources such as textbooks are of necessity the main sources of references when preparing manuscripts, making it difficult to evaluate citations critically and thus more difficult to publish a rigorously argued paper.

A variety of solutions are at hand. Some international journals allow or insist on Spanish abstracts; others make special efforts to edit foreign contributions. The American Ornithologists' Union has donated back runs of *The Auk* to "key" libraries in the Neotropics. Many individual ornithologists have developed working relationships with neotropical scientists, providing literature and encouraging international publication.

I would like to suggest additional actions that would increase the availability of ornithological research from the Neotropics. The first is to distribute *Recent Ornithological Literature* free as a separate journal to ornithologists who cannot afford to subscribe to *The Auk*, *Ibis*, or *The Emu*. ROL could be subsidized by outside funding, thus avoiding the problems of weak currencies and exchange controls. Ornithologists in the Neotropics thus would be better able to keep up with the literature by soliciting reprints.

Second, while many organizations such as the A.O.U. have student memberships, few have reduced fees for members from developing countries where currencies are weak and salaries low. American graduate students are not usually overpaid, but consider the plight of more than one Latin American biologist making the equivalent of \$50 per month. Enlightened

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self-interest would suggest that the A.O.U. and other organizations do all they can to help such biologists and make them aware of international work. A.O.U. members might also consider sponsoring subscriptions.

A third direction is the establishment of Biological Documentation Centers in Latin America to collect and circulate scientific literature, with special emphasis on the gray literature. The first of these, supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has been established by our university. When fully operational it will conduct computerized literature searches and copy publications for the personal use of neotropical biologists. Our unpublished holdings will be available to biologists outside the region who wish to know what work has been done but not published by local workers.

We hope that eventually a network of such centers

will operate, providing regional access and coverage. In the meantime, we hope that ornithologists both within and outside the Neotropics will make available reprints and unpublished reports so that our coverage can be as complete as possible.

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### Learning to Live with Nature: A Commendable Philosophy with Practical Limitations

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The recent review (Southern 1987) of our report "The Ring-billed Gull in Ontario: a review of a new problem species" (Blokpoel and Tessier 1986) is so unbalanced that it warrants some comments. As employees of the Ontario Region of the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), the agency that administers the Migratory Birds Convention (MBC) Act in Canada, we have had to deal with complaints about nuisance and damage by the burgeoning numbers of Ring-billed Gulls in Ontario. At one point the Association of Ontario Municipalities adopted a resolution that called for the removal of the Ring-billed Gull from the list of species protected under the MBC Act. Despite substantial political support for the resolution, CWS was able to fend off this attack on the Ring-billed Gull. Nevertheless, the resolution showed that many people in Ontario had very serious concerns about the growing numbers of Ring-billed Gulls. CWS therefore published two information pamphlets (Blokpoel 1983, 1984) and the report (Blokpoel and Tessier 1986) to provide more detailed background about the population explosion, the problems caused by it, and the various methods that could be used to reduce those problems.

The strong bias in Southern's review apparently stems from his philosophy as stated at the end of his review: "It is time that we stop thinking in terms of conquest of nature instead of considering ourselves

part of nature. Our fight against nature is, in many ways, a war against ourselves." This is a commendable approach, but it cannot be pushed to the extreme. Humans have irreparably changed the face of North America, and in many areas there is little original nature left. Occasionally a species adapts exceedingly well to a disturbed environment, becomes superabundant, and may cause problems. This is the case with the Ring-billed Gull in southern Ontario. In such situations it makes little sense to insist that we "stop conquering nature," especially when humans are largely responsible for the present superabundance. When a property owner complains about the smell, noise, and defecations of thousands of gulls nesting on his land, or when a desperate farmer is on the phone reporting gulls feeding on his tomatoes, it is counterproductive to suggest to them "to learn to live with nature." The affected people will lose confidence in government and may try to control the gulls illegally.

In Ontario, CWS uses the following rule with respect to complaints about problem birds: The problem is that of the affected landowner, and it is up to the landowner to carry out a control program. The landowner needs a permit from CWS if the control operations take place at a nesting colony. If the landowner wants to scare problem birds from areas outside a nesting colony, a permit is required only if firearms or aircraft are used. The roles of CWS are to evaluate requests for permits and to issue such permits where warranted, to advise affected land owners, to coordinate control operations where needed, to evaluate

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