

POINTS OF VIEW—PUNTOS DE VISTA—PONTOS DE VISTA

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SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF DIFFUSION OF PUBLICATIONS AMONG ORNITHOLOGISTS STUDYING NEOTROPICAL BIRDS

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The goal of publishing the results of one's research in a medium such as a journal is to disseminate them and so to share them with as many other people as possible. Novel observations and brilliant ideas that remain hidden in one's notebooks do their author, or the community at large, no good: they will not increase knowledge. This fact is so obvious that many readers will wonder why I repeat it here. The reason is simple.

Publication of a given item in the "literature," however this term is defined, does not *ipso facto* guarantee its diffusion. An author who receives letters from readers or requests for reprints of his or her published work thinks, rightly, that this response is proof that the work has been read. However, this same response is not necessarily an accurate indication of the amount of diffusion that this work has enjoyed. I am concerned here with what I perceive as a significant problem of commu-

nication among ornithologists studying Neotropical birds. To be more specific, I view with a certain alarm the fact that many ornithologists publish items about Neotropical birds, thus believing that their efforts are being disseminated, yet that their work remains largely or entirely ignored by others. This apparent paradox can be explained relatively easily, but its solution requires much thought and even more action. This essay is devoted to this theme. As a *caveat*, I ask the reader to note that my reflections are not based on a statistical analysis of a large sample of cases, but on a rather limited number of anecdotal instances. Others may have a different way of analyzing this matter, but I believe that they will share my conclusion that there is an impasse, and, more importantly perhaps, will help us all in finding a way out of it.

As I see it, the numerous and varied individual instances that show that the level of

diffusion of publications among ornithologists studying Neotropical birds is indeed low, can be grouped under two categories: (1) even though they are printed in *bona fide* journals, many items so published remain “invisible,” hence are unavailable even though they are, theoretically at least, obtainable; and (2) even though they are “visible” because advertised through various media, many published items remain unavailable because they are unobtainable. In order not to incriminate unjustly any journal or any person, the examples below, even though based on real instances known to me, are fictitious, a situation unlike the disclaimers one reads in the credits at the end of many motion pictures.

An example of an invisible item might be as follows. Dr. A. B. C. publishes an article on the breeding biology and display behavior of *Ornitholagus cuniculus*, a species endemic to a particular portion of the Andes of ..., in the *Boletín de la Sociedad de Biología de ...*. This is a refereed but “local” journal, received by the members of the society and also by several libraries, in the home country and abroad. Hence, this paper is indeed published. In addition, the author sends reprints to a certain number of colleagues. Hence this published paper is also diffused privately. However, no one ever cites this work, not even a colleague, Dr. D. E. F., living in a neighboring country, and who works on this bird's congener, *Ornitholagus arboreus*. Author A. B. C. is indignant when the definitive paper on *Ornitholagus arboreus* is published by Dr. D. E. F. in *The Journal of Andean Ornithology*, an “international” refereed journal. Lack of citation in this case is not due to an instance of jealousy or other petty human trait. It is simply due to the fact that the *Boletín ...*, being a local journal, is not received by many individuals and libraries and so was not available to Dr. D. E. F., even though this publication could have been obtained, if only one had known about it. Being an “international”

magazine, *The Journal...* is available in Dr. A. B. C.'s institutional library. Dr. A. B. C. writes an angry letter to Dr. D. E. F., with an accusation of ignoring this previous work. Embarrassed, Dr. D. E. F. sends an apology, but the harm is done. The actual case is entirely fictitious, but the instance it represents is all too real. The question is how to avoid such a problem in the future.

An example of a visible item might take be as follows. Dr. G. H. I. publishes a book on the comparative morphology of the Neotropical endemic family *Neotropicidae*, especially speciose in the Andes. The publisher, a known company located in ..., in the Neotropical Region, advertises the work in various media, including leaflets that are inserted in *The Journal of Andean Ornithology*. Dr. J. K. L., living outside the Neotropical Region, sees the ads while perusing the *Journal* in an institutional library. All attempts to purchase the book, whether through normal home channels (such as bookstores), or after regular and e-mail letters are sent to the publisher of the monograph, fail. Dr. J. K. L. then requests that the institutional library buy the book, but that library's attempts also fail. The publication, even though visible, was unobtainable, hence is unavailable. Another purely fictitious case, yet it too is based on true stories. How can such a problem be palliated?

Solutions to these difficulties can be sought at the individual and at the group level. At the individual level, each of us can try to overcome some of the difficulties of the sort described above by actively, I would even say aggressively, searching library resources, tables of contents, and web sites, by perusing catalogs of books and monographs, and by regularly asking as many colleagues as possible to send references of publications that might be relevant to one's work. Needless to say that one should comply when these same colleagues ask for reciprocal help along the same lines. Thus, one must be networking,

and not be simply, and somewhat passively, reviewing the journals and books that one subscribes to personally or that are received by one's institutional library. One way of preventing the type two difficulty cited earlier is by establishing a sort of exchange with one or more colleagues in different countries or continents. Whenever one needs a publication that is not easily obtainable in one's country, one could ask one of these colleagues to buy it and mail it. The money thus spent will not be reimbursed as cash, but through exchange, as the reciprocal will be done. I have done this for years and it works reasonably well. All this activity is time consuming but it does reveal a vast amount of pertinent literature, and can significantly narrow the information gap.

At the group level, one must, I believe, rely on a formal ornithological organization to help in literature and information searches. The fundamental organization here should probably be the national ornithological society. Each such society, if it does not already have one, should create a Committee on Publications. Ideally, the individuals selected to be members of such committees should not only be interested in obtaining references but also be good at it, and so collectively have access to many literature sources. This could be because these people travel frequently and are thus exposed to a diverse array of publications, or because they themselves are excellent networkers, or else because their institutional

libraries are richer than those of others. The job of these committees should be to regularly publish in their respective national ornithological journal not only book reviews and reviews of selected papers or monographs, but also longer lists of publications on Neotropical birds, perhaps with some annotations. This sort of service has been successfully performed by several ornithological societies over the years. Outside the Neotropical Region, literature lists have thus been or are being published, for instance by the British Ornithologists' Union, the American Ornithologists' Union, and the French Ornithological Society, in, or as supplements to, their journals *The Ibis*, *The Auk*, and *Alauda*, respectively.

The Neotropical Ornithological Society recently started in a small way to contribute to the solution of the problem of diffusion of information on Neotropical birds by publishing a book review section, of which I am in charge. However, this sort of review is by its very nature selective, as it depends to a large extent on what publications are received. In order to open the discussion more fully, I urge readers of *Ornitología Neotropical* who have concrete suggestions concerning this important problem to get in touch with me (by letter, fax [212-769-5759], or e-mail [vuill@amnh.org]), in order to improve what I consider to be a difficult situation.

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NEWS—NOTICIAS—NOTÍCIAS

THE GOELET STUDENT FUND

At the VIth Neotropical Ornithological Congress in Monterrey, Mexico, October 1999, Mr. and Mrs. Robert G. Goelet of New York City donated \$5000 to the Society of Neotropical Ornithology, to be used as seed money for a fund, to be called the "Goelet Student Fund," which is earmarked specifically to make financial grants to students from the Neotropical Region in order for them to attend and present either a paper or a poster at the VIIth Neotropical Ornithological Congress, which will be held in 2003 in Chile.

This Society of Neotropical Ornithology would like to raise additional money in order to at least double the amount in this fund by early 2003, when grants will be made to deserving students. In order to reach this important goal, donations from members are urgently solicited. Even small gifts, when made by many people, can go a long way. Thus if 200 members each were to give \$20 in addition to their annual dues in 2000, then our

goal would be nearly reached only one year after the initial donation by Mr. and Mrs. Goelet.

The status of the Neotropical Ornithological Society as a tax-exempt organization under the United States Internal Revenue Service code insures that members' donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by US law.

Gifts should be made to the Neotropical Ornithological Society, earmarked as a contribution to the "Goelet Student Fund," and sent to Dr. J. Michael Meyers, Treasurer, The Neotropical Ornithological Society, Warnell School of Forest Resources, D. W. Brooks Drive, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-2152, USA.

All payments must be to the treasurer in US currency, either by credit card (VISA, MasterCard), or by cheque or international money order drawn on a US bank. *E-mail:* jmeyers@smokey.forestry.uga.edu.

VIIth NEOTROPICAL ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS

The VIIth Neotropical Ornithological Congress (VII NOC), will take place in 2003 in Chile. The VII NOC will be hosted by the Union de Ornitólogos de Chile (UNORCH) under the chairmanship of Dr. Yerko A. Vilina, of the Universidad Santo Tomas, Ejercito 146, Santiago, Region Metropolitana, Chile. The Congress will probably be held in October (austral spring) in either Valdivia or Puerto

Varas. This is an advance announcement designed to inform members of the Neotropical Ornithological Society about the VII NOC, so that they can put this date on their calendar at this early date. As more information concerning the exact place and date of the Congress and its organization becomes available it will be announced in *Ornitología Neotropical*.