

## BOOK REVIEW: A PARROT WITHOUT A NAME

by Dorothy R. Arvidson

*A Parrot without a Name: The Search for the Last Unknown Birds on Earth* by Don Stap, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990; x + 239 pages, bibliography and index; \$19.95. (Also available in paperback, University of Texas Press, 1991; \$14.95.)

"What is it, then?" Pete asks. . . .

"It's nothing," O'Neill says. "It's something new."

No one says anything. Angelo leans closer to the bird O'Neill is holding. Paul and Mara exchange glances. It's as if a bomb has exploded in the distance. We see the explosion, but we have not yet felt the shock waves. O'Neill seems very sure of the startling announcement he has just made. He has spent thousands of hours looking at specimens of every bird known from South America, and now images of them have passed through his mind at high speed. A picture of this small parrot did not show up anywhere. It must be an undescribed species. . . .

Personally, I cannot believe my luck. . . . Here, less than eighteen hours before I must leave camp, O'Neill has a new species in his hand. I could not be more surprised and delighted if a jaguar came out of the forest and sat at my feet. O'Neill keeps the bird's legs pinched between two fingers, holding it out in front of him and turning it slowly about in the light the way one would show off a diamond ring. (pp. 217-218)

Thus, in the final pages of this enthralling book, the author dramatizes for us the discovery of the unnamed parrot of the book's title.

I read this book at one sitting, swept along in the adventure narrative and captivated by Don Stap's crystalline and evocative prose. It was no surprise, then, to learn from the dust jacket that writer Stap is also a published poet and the recipient of a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Why was poet Stap, a self-described "occasional bird-watcher," invited to join this 1987 scientific foray? The reason is explained in a letter to Stap from the expeditions's leader, Louisiana State University (LSU) ornithologist Dr. John P. O'Neill who is currently Coordinator of Field Studies for LSU's Museum of Natural Science: "I am very worried that we are near the end of really pioneering, basic expeditions to discover what is actually in a wild part of this earth. There are few wild places left and the political situation around the world is such that we may not be able to do this sort of work too much longer. I

want to see such work well documented." John O'Neill should be very happy with Stap's book.

When O'Neill graduated from Oklahoma University in 1964, he had already published a description of a new species of Peruvian bird, the Orange-throated Tanager. Not surprisingly, he spent his first year out of college traveling about in Peru. On a flight southeast from Pucallpa, he saw from the plane window a "stunted mountain range known as the Cordillera Divisor sticking up out of the Amazon basin as if a piece had been torn from the Andes and set off by itself. What birds would be in mountains like that? he wondered." (p.18) Twenty-three years and twenty-one expeditions later, the 1987 endeavor, which he asked journalist Stap to chronicle, was to trek to that very mountain range to study its biota and to discover for O'Neill another new species—his twelfth.

O'Neill's group traveled from Pucallpa by dugout on the Rio Ucayali and Rio Abujao into the upper reaches of the Rio Shesha, a shallow stream, often impassable in the dry season, that meanders through the wilds of the Peruvian rainforest. The group of natural scientists set up a base camp where the Rio Shesha flows closest to the Cordillera Divisor, an isolated cluster of low mountains surrounded by unexplored lowland rainforest—300,000 square miles of it. In addition to scientific equipment, they had to carry enough food and supplies for fifteen people for ten weeks.

When they reached the site chosen for the base camp, a large satellite photo of the area and a map were examined to determine their exact location, the first basic datum that had to be established before work began. Stap writes on page 83:

I'm struck by how fantastic it is that we've just consulted a photograph taken from a satellite to tell us exactly where we are after three days in *peki-peki* on the Rio Shesha. I can scarcely imagine that the faint, squiggly, silver line in the photograph *is* the sunlit river forty feet to my right. The two perspectives do not jibe. It makes me feel far away, and small, as if I were a speck in this photograph that was taken from outer space. For me, this whole endeavor has the feel of something otherworldly about it, something incredible.

Twelve of the twenty-four chapters are devoted to a realistic, often humorous, and occasionally disturbing day-by-day journal of the uncertainties, obstacles, physical hazards, and discoveries of the 1987 expedition. This absorbing narrative is richly amplified by Stap's digressions in nearly every other chapter to relate lively anecdotes of Peruvian exploration or to provide perceptive sketches of John O'Neill, Ted Parker, and their natural scientist colleagues at work in the field. The author also succeeds in enlightening the general reader in an easy "by-the-way" style about a variety of technical natural

science topics, including, for example, a most lucid explanation of taxonomy, species, and speciation, important concerns for the expedition scientists.

John P. O'Neill has made twenty-one expeditions to Peru since 1961. He has discovered or described twelve new species there, more than any other living ornithologist: Orange-throated Tanager (1963), Selva Cacique (1965), Black-faced Cotinga (1966), Elusive Antpitta (1969), Pardusco (1976), Long-whiskered Owllet (1977), Cinnamon-breasted Tody-Tyrant (1979), Ochre-fronted Antpitta (1983), Inca Wren (1985), Cinnamon Screech-Owl (1986), Ash-throated Antwren (1986), and the parrot of Stap's book.

In addition to his firmly established ornithological reputation, O'Neill is also recognized worldwide as a fine natural-history painter. His work is found in many field guides, and his painting of a Pale-billed Antpitta is included in Roger Pasquier's recent *Masterpieces of Bird Art*, Abbeville Press, 1991. At LSU O'Neill manages to devote about half his time to his painting.

Stap devotes five chapters to Ted Parker, a younger colleague of O'Neill's, also associated with LSU. Stap had visited Parker in Baton Rouge and had spent some time with him in northeastern Peru, at Parker's camp on the Sucusari River. Parker had been expected to join the Cordillera Divisor expedition but never made it.

Theodore A. Parker III, which is how his name appears on over fifty scientific treatises, committed himself to an ornithological career at the age of sixteen, inspired by O'Neill's description of Peru and by his painting of the Elusive Antpitta that appeared in *The Auk* in 1969. Ted, who is a college graduate but not a university academic has, nonetheless, a reputation in ornithological circles that is equal to O'Neill's. He has published numerous papers in ornithological journals and, with first wife Susan Allen, *An Annotated Checklist of Peruvian Birds* (Buteo Books, 1982). As Stap says, Parker is regarded by many as "the leading authority on the birds of Peru, if not all of South America—John O'Neill and Bob Ridgely notwithstanding. . . . Roger Tory Peterson says simply, 'In the neotropics, Parker is supreme.'" (p. 113)

The basis for his reputation is his superb acoustic memory. Parker made six-to-seven thousand tape recordings between 1972 and 1985 in the rainforest and apparently never forgets a bird's song. Like O'Neill, he also recognizes on sight and knows the ranges of thousands of birds. Parker knew enough when in 1983 he first heard a *Tolmomyias* flycatcher making a sound he did not recognize that it was probably a new species. This makes Parker "the only ornithologist alive who has actually discovered a new bird in the wild rather than after the bird has been collected." (p. 122) Ted's flycatcher is a flatbill, which he has named the Orange-eyed Flycatcher, *Tolmomyias traylori*.

Ted has maintained himself primarily as a tour guide for VENT but is regularly sought out as the expert best able to identify South American bird species. The June 1991 issue of *Smithsonian* reports the work he is currently

doing in Bolivia and Ecuador as one of four biological experts for Conservation International's Rapid Assessment Program (RAP). RAP is described as an ecological SWAT team that moves rapidly through vast areas of the South American rainforest, one jump ahead of the bulldozers and loggers, to sample what species are out there. This is an effort to aid conservationists in wisely allocating their efforts and limited funds to areas with a rich biotic variety.

Working with Parker on RAP is Al Gentry, senior curator at the Missouri Botanical Garden and a world authority on tropical plants. The *Smithsonian* article reports that Gentry "will do anything to get to a plant. Bitten once by a venomous pit viper four hours by boat from the nearest village, his first reaction was annoyance that he would be losing field time. The snake died; Gentry didn't." This intrepid botanist was also a member of the Cordillera Divisor expedition, and his competence under adversity is well delineated by Don Stap in *Parrot Without a Name*.

All of the other courageous and dedicated people on O'Neill's trip deserve mention. In addition to botanists Al Gentry and Camilo Díaz and herpetologists Paul and Mara Freed, the other ornithologists were Angelo Capparella, Pete Marra, Tony Meyer (also an M.D.), Donna Schmitt (a skilled specimen preparer), and Peruvians Gabriel Ballón and Cecilia Fox (students of O'Neill). The Peruvian guide and staff were Manuel and Marta Sánchez and Magno Lazón.

Fifteen years ago, in June and July 1977, I had the good fortune to be on a month-long visit to Peru, guided by Peter Alden and Robert S. Kennedy (another LSU doctorate, to be known later for his work on the Harpy and Philippine eagles and his book, co-authored with Edward C. Dickman and Kenneth C. Parkes, *The Birds of the Philippines*, B.O.U. Check-list No. 12, British Ornithologists' Union, 1991). We spent some time at the newly opened Explorer's Inn in the Tambopata Wildlife Reserve, where Ted Parker and Susan Allen were resident naturalists. According to Stap, this reserve "may be, biologically speaking, the richest area on earth. Since 1976, 545 species of birds have been recorded in Tambopata, more than 1,100 species of butterflies, and 102 species of dragonflies, more than anywhere else in the world." (pp.145-146)

The 1977 sojourn at Explorer's Inn was memorable for me. In the wildest area I had ever visited, I listened to a young Ted Parker identifying for us every bird sound we heard—every note, call, song, rustle, or whisper. I shall never forget his mastery. A treasured memento of that visit is a tape I made of Ted naming the songs of twenty different species as the phrases were sung by an extraordinary mimicking thrush that was new to Ted but which he thought (and hoped) might be a new species. He called it the "uniform thrush" for its nondescript appearance. Ted was so familiar with South American bird song even then—he must have been about twenty-three—that he was able to comment with undeniable authority about one song in the mimicking thrush's

repertoire: "That's nothing; he's making that up." (The bird was later determined to be not a new species, but a Lawrence's Thrush.)

I found Stap's biographies of O'Neill and Parker and the contrast between the two men fascinating. I have never met John O'Neill. I first heard of him in 1968 as the graduate student artist at LSU who had agreed to do the colored plates for Peter Alden's first book, *Finding the Birds in Western Mexico*. During my 1977 sojourn at Explorer's Inn, John O'Neill's name popped up regularly in the conversation because Ted and Susan Parker and Bob Kennedy were LSU people. Later that same year a Texas birding friend sent me a news clipping about the discovery in Peru of a species believed extinct for a century, the White-winged Guan. Who had rediscovered it? John O'Neill, of course.

As you might expect, the parrot of this book is no longer nameless. It has been dubbed Amazonian Parrotlet. The April 1991 issue of *The Auk* formally announced its baptism in an article by John P. O'Neill, Charles A. Munn, and Irma Franke J.: "*Nannopsittaca dachilleae*, A New Species of Parrotlet from Eastern Peru" (108: 225-229). This is a copy of *The Auk* to treasure: accompanying the article is a colored print of John O'Neill's beautiful painting of two adult parrotlets pictured along the upper Rio Shesha. In the article, the authors announce that the species name *dachilleae* is a tribute to "our dear friend and colleague in conservation, Barbara D'Achille, who died tragically on 31 May 1989 while investigating reforestation projects in the mountainous Peruvian Department of Huancavelica [she and a companion were shot by Sendero guerillas]. . . . By the last three years of her life she had gained a worldwide reputation as Latin America's most committed, most effective, and most published environmental journalist. . . . Appropriately, Barbara wrote many of her finest articles while on expeditions to the rain forests of Pucallpa, Tambopata, and Manu, where she was among the first investigators to see the new species of parrotlet we name in her honor. We hope that naming this parrotlet after Barbara will keep her memory alive and inspire young journalists in Latin America and around the world to follow her example and fight for the survival of our planet's threatened biota."

*Parrot Without a Name* is a great book, informative and well written, about modern pioneering scientists of heroic proportions. It is also a worthy tribute to the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science, which has spawned so many fruitful ornithological studies in South America. This museum has the fourth largest university-related collection of bird specimens in the United States and, sadly, lacks both adequate space and funding—the Cordillera Divisor expedition was supported by the National Geographic Society. They deserve all the public recognition they can get. Don Stap has performed this service gracefully and honestly in the best and the most intelligent popular science book I have ever read. I look forward now to reading his book of poetry—*Letter at the End of Winter*. And I'll wager he's a d....d fine birder!

**DOROTHY R. ARVIDSON**, a former biology professor, is editor emeritus of *Bird Observer* and now works as a free-lance editor, writer, and consultant in biology. Birds have been a significant part of her life since the age of five when she became the chief rescuer of nestlings that fell from her grandmother's Purple Martin house. In college and in graduate school in the Middle West, she happily fell under the spell of biologist Carl Welty and ecologist Aldo Leopold and has been a student of birds and a conservation activist ever since.

## Natural History Adventures

### **Birds, Butterflies, and Wildflowers of Eastern Colorado - July 1-8, 1992**

Explore prairie grasslands, front range foothills and towering Rockies with Richard Walton, coauthor of Peterson's *Birding by Ear* tapes and one of the coordinators of Massachusetts Audubon Society's Butterfly Atlas Project.

### **Birding Southern New Jersey - September 11-13, 1992**

Visit the Edwin B. Forsythe (Brigantine) National Wildlife Refuge and sites on Cape May with Bill Gette and Strickland Wheelock. Both are experienced birders and trip leaders, having led many local and out of state trips for Drumlin Farm. Our last trip to this area netted 132 species

Please write for complete itineraries



Massachusetts Audubon Society  
Drumlin Farm, Susan MacCallum  
South Great Rd  
Lincoln, MA 01773