

THE DAY THE BIRDS CRIED: REMEMBERING TED PARKER

by Peter Alden

Near Clear Lake, Iowa, a few decades back, a plane went down with Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper. Fans of early rock music were shocked with the loss of budding and proven talent, and the tragedy became known as the "The Day the Music Died."

Far to the south, in the Sierra Chongon-Colonche of western Ecuador, on August 3, 1993, another small plane went down. Ted Parker, an ornithologist specializing in Latin America, Al Gentry, a botanist and acknowledged expert in Latin American flora, and Eduardo Aspiazu of Ecuador's Fundacion Natura came to rest in a forest they were trying to save. Parker's fiancée, Jaqueline Goerck, survived the accident.

Ted Parker, 40, knew the songs and calls of close to 4000 bird species, specializing in Latin America. He was the major contributor of recordings to the Library of Natural Sounds at Cornell. Ted carried a twenty-five-pound tape recorder with him to most moist forests a human could reach in the Andes, the



*Ted Parker recording bird songs.
Photo courtesy of Conservation International.*

Amazon, and the Pacific slope. Back in the 1970s on foot trips into the remotest high Andes he had little choice but to chew coca leaves like all the Amerindians in order to keep going and carry less weight in food.

Ted was founder and team leader of RAP (Rapid Assessment Program), an ecological SWAT team organized by Conservation International of Washington, D.C. In the species-rich areas of the wet tropics, no one person could recognize all fauna and flora. This team of crack naturalists, experts in many disciplines, were able to do quick surveys of the last habitats of endangered ecosystems. No time to look things up in heavy books, or to check out months later in museum trays. They needed to produce environmental impact statements in a few days or weeks—before bulldozers or chainsaws destroyed unique areas. Each expert had to know thousands of species and their range and status. Ted could inventory birdlife blindfolded.

It was my good fortune to know Ted for several decades. As a teenage birder in the 1960s drawn by the distinct birdlife of Arizona and its proximity to Mexico, I chose to go to the University of Arizona in Tucson. I was the only undergraduate birder there. My 1969 book, *Finding the Birds in Western Mexico*, may have inspired other young birders to come to the border, for by the 1970s numerous birders were at the University of Arizona. On swings through Tucson, I met with such out-of-state students as Steve Hilty (*Birds of Colombia*), Mark Robbins, Doug Stotz, Vernon Laux, and from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, one Ted Parker. Ted happened to be in the Northeast when the Ross's Gull graced Newburyport harbor. He gathered a gang in Pennsylvania, camped out in my Cambridge apartment, and loved seeing the gull—even if it did not sing!

Ted caught the listing bug early, did the rounds of the United States, and soon turned to Mexico and South America. Unlike those who needed a Peterson to enjoy birding, Ted was one who enjoyed going after species that had never been illustrated and whose songs were unknown. In a May 1974 letter, Ted was excited about collecting Peru's first Tamarugo Conebill above Arequipa, at 13,000 feet elevation. He stated that he wanted to stay in Peru indefinitely, which he proceeded to do for long periods yearly. He took great pleasure in finding additions to my first crude Peru bird checklist, and went on to add many species and publish a formal annotated Peru list. Ted, with various Louisiana State University colleagues, went everywhere, seeing Marvellous Spatuletail, White-winged Guan (which he called a giant magpie), and eventually species and subspecies new to ornithology. He was also a valued contributor to my book, *Finding Birds Around the World*.

John O'Neill, Bob Kennedy, and I ran, for the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), the first-ever Peruvian birding tours. Ted often joined us at different locales. Ted was at my thirtieth birthday party in tranquil Tingo Maria, where two decades later the last two (British) birders to go there were executed

by *narcotraficantes*. It was a note from Ted in 1977, upon my group's arrival in Lima, that caused us to forgo Iquitos in the north and rearrange the entire tour to go to the new Explorer's Inn in the southern Amazon where Ted was the resident naturalist. That MAS tour, the first tour group into that remote outpost, was full of local birders such as Dorothy Arvidson, Mary Baird, Becky Barber, Bert and Pat Fox, Martha McClellan, and Pat Spencer.

Ted joined us for periods on other MAS trips including Itatiaia, Brasil (where I showed him a Swallow-tailed Cotinga nest), Iguassu Falls (where he taped in a Spotted Bamboowren), and Buenos Aires (where he was anxious to meet Chris Leahy). Of Ted Parker's old friends, now recognized authorities, Bob Ridgely may have seen more South American species, and John O'Neill may exceed Ted in the discovery of new species. But Ted, with the gifted ear and memory for bird song, must be acknowledged supreme in recognition of neotropical species.

While he later led a number of birding tours for Victor Emanuel, he spent much of his time in remote places in primitive living conditions. A true avian explorer, he had to go over the next hill, check out that valley, and trace that song. He loved the jungle and its music, and he was recently putting his vast knowledge into a new career as an international conservation bio-politician. Destined to influence conservation policies in Washington, D.C., the jungle took him back.

May birds forever cry out in the mist-shrouded forests of Ted's beloved South America.

PETER ALDEN is now authoring the *Audubon Society Field Guide to African Wildlife*, lecturing on the new *Marco Polo* ship in the Indian Ocean and Antarctica, and leading African safaris and South American tours for Overseas Adventure Travel, Thomson's Safaris, Creative Travel, Ltd. (Lindblad), the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and Harvard's Friends of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Peter wishes to thank Dorothy Arvidson for her input into this article.

The accompanying photograph is courtesy of Conservation International, which established the Parker-Gentry Fund in memory of Ted Parker and Al Gentry. Funds raised will be used to promote conservation efforts in the Andean region. Scholarships will be awarded to promising ornithologists and botanists in the region, and donations to the fund will support the continuation of the RAP, of which Parker and Gentry were original members. Readers interested in donating to the Parker-Gentry Fund should contact Conservation International, 1015 18th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, telephone 202-973-2280.

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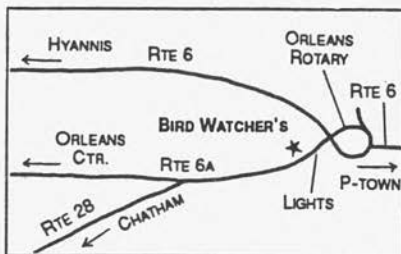
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