

OBITUARIES

Edited by James Wiley

(To whom obituary manuscripts should be sent)

Virgilio Biaggi, Jr. 1913–2007. — Virgilio Biaggi was the first Puerto Rico-born academic ornithologist. He was born in Mayagüez, PR, in 1913, as the oldest of six siblings, just 15 years after Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States. He died on October 17, 2007, in Guaynabo, PR, at age 94, after a productive life that provided impetus for the current dramatic increase in interest in birds and natural history among Puerto Ricans.

His family was academically oriented, and he studied for his B.S. degree in his hometown at the University of Puerto Rico, College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (CAAM). At age 24 as a relatively mature undergraduate, he began work as an Assistant Instructor. He was 27 years old when he finished his BS degree in 1940. He completed a M.Sc. degree at Texas A&M in 1942 and returned to Mayagüez, where he became an instructor at CAAM in the same year. Biaggi was already an Associate Professor when he finished his Ph.D. at Ohio State in 1949, the same year that Luis Muñoz Marín became the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico. Biaggi was named Professor in 1952. He accepted more than his share of administrative responsibility and served as Acting Director of the Department of Biology (1953–54), followed by two stints as Director (1958–59 and 1967–74), with an intervening turn as Assistant to the Dean of Arts and Sciences (1959). He retired from the renamed University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez in 1974. He was made Professor Emeritus at that institution in 1995.

Whereas a substantial part of Biaggi's academic career was dedicated to university administration, he is remembered for his excellence as an educator and for his work in ornithology. During his years on the faculty at CAAM, this respected, good humored professor taught thousands of students. He was considered an outstanding teacher. In his classes he passed on the academic skills and love of learning that had been developed in him as a student.

Biaggi's passion for birds and his rapid rise at the University of Puerto Rico were at least partly inspired by the generosity and example of an early mentor, Stuart J. Danforth (1900–1938), a young zoology professor at CAAM, who imparted the training and motivation that sparked a career. While Danforth amassed a significant insect collection, he was particularly interested in ornithology and undertook trips to collect and observe birds throughout the Greater and Lesser Antilles during his 12 years on the faculty at CAAM. Biaggi participated in Danforth's trip to St. Thomas, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, Grenada, the Grenadines, and Martinique in summer 1935; Vieques, December, 1935; as well as Guadeloupe, Desirade, Marie Galante, and other islands in summer, 1937. Biaggi also traveled with Danforth to the United States to study ornithological collections from the Caribbean held in academic collections (Wetmore 1939). These experiences shaped his development as an ornithologist.

Among his early publications is the monograph on the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*) in Puerto Rico (Biaggi 1955), that summa-

rized his doctoral dissertation. Principally in response to this publication Biaggi was promoted to the honorific category of Elective Member of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1957.

He is most widely known for his book "Las Aves de Puerto Rico," first published in 1970. The revised edition, released in 1997, remains in print. The book continues as a best selling entry in the catalog of the University of Puerto Rico Press and is still the most complete text available on birds of Puerto Rico. It contains detailed historical and life history information, and, significantly, it is in Spanish and so is accessible to all Puerto Ricans. The section on history of ornithology in Puerto Rico, and the accompanying list of ornithological publications, are particularly valuable and are the direct consequence of a Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to spend a year at the Smithsonian conducting research for the book. Although the book has been in print for almost 40 years, there has been no superseding volume. People in Puerto Rico are becoming ever more aware of the uniqueness of the natural history of the island. This book, which made information about Puerto Rican avifauna widely available to the public, has played a central role in this

awakening.

Biaggi was an active participant in Puerto Rico's economic development during the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1950s he dedicated time to leading the formation of consumer cooperatives in Puerto Rico. He served on the boards of several cooperative groups and was president of the board of directors of both Unico-Coop of Puerto Rico and the "Cooperativa de Consumo de la Región Oeste de Puerto Rico." He traveled internationally to learn more about successful strategies for management of coops. He also served as president of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Conservation Trust (*Fideicomiso de Conservación de Puerto Rico*).

Virgilio Biaggi is survived by three children, all residents of Puerto Rico, seven grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

I am grateful to family members and former colleagues of Dr. Biaggi for providing me with information on his life. — Allen R. Lewis, Department of Biology, University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, PR 00681-9012.

REFERENCE

- Wetmore, A. 1939. Biographical sketch of Stuart T. Danforth. *J. Agri. Univ. Puerto Rico* 23: 1–8.