

MARIA KOEPCKE AND HER CONTRIBUTION TO PERU AND NEOTROPICAL ORNITHOLOGY

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Resumen. – *María Koepcke y su Contribución a la Ornitología del Perú y Neotropical.* – IX CON- El IX CON celebrado en Cusco, Perú, rindió homenaje a Maria Koepcke, ornitóloga que contribuyó al conocimiento de las aves Neotropicales y al estudio de aves del Perú. Para este homenaje, recopilamos una lista completa de las publicaciones de M. Koepcke, muchas de las cuales fueron publicadas en coautoría con su esposo, el ecólogo Wilhelm Koepcke.

Abstract. – The IXth NOC celebrated in Cusco, Peru, was dedicated to Maria Koepcke, ornithologist that contribute greatly to the knowledge of Neotropical birds and the study of Peruvian birds. For this homage, we compiled a complete list of the publications of M. Koepcke, many of which were published as coauthor with her husband, the ecologist Wilhelm Koepcke.

Key words: Birds, Peru, Lima, IX NOC

Maria von Mikulicz-Radecki arrived in Peru in 1950, after her Ph.D. graduation at the University of Kiel in Germany, her country of origin. She was 22 when she decided to make a life in the “wonderful country” described by her fiancée, the ecologist Hans-Wilhelm Koepcke, to whom she married in 1951. Hans-Wilhelm was professor at the prestigious San Marcos National University (UNMSM) in the capital city of Lima and Maria’s activities were mainly related to the ornithological collection. After her arrival, Maria contributed greatly to the Museum of Natural History (“Javier Prado”) of the UNMSM, where she became head of the Bird and Mammal Section in 1952. The work of María as curator of the bird collection was remarkable. She deposited more than 1500 specimens collected during her expeditions,

which included 14 type specimen’s described by her from 1954 to 1971 (Koepcke, M. 1954a, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1971, Plenge 1979) which would put Peru on the ornithological map. Among the new bird species Maria discovered are the White Cheek Cotinga (*Ampelion stresemanni*) (Koepcke 1954a, 1955) and two new Furnariidae, the Russet-bellied Spintetail (*Synallaxis zimmeri*) (Koepcke 1957) and the Cactus Canastero (*Asthenes cactorum*) (Koepcke 1959). Maria had a profound interest in several bird groups, especially the Emberizidae (Koepcke 1963) and the Furnariidae. Her paper on Furnariidae of the western Peruvian deserts is a classic (Koepcke 1965).

María and Hans-Wilhelm’s legendary expeditions started in the coastal habitats, continued in the Andean west slopes near Lima, and

expanded in geographic scope to survey all major habitats of Peru. However, of all places, it is perhaps the Zaárate Forest (known at that time only to the locals of San Bartolome, the nearest village), that will be most closely linked to their name forever since their “discovery” of it in 1952. In Zárate, the Koepcke’s collected an important number of species new to science (Koepcke, H. W. 1961, Koepcke, M. 1954a, 1954b y 1958, Kraus, 1964, 1955 y 1958). In 1964, they wrote a pioneering proposal to create a conservation unit to protect the Zarate forest to preserve its unique flora and fauna (Koepcke & Koepcke 1964). The proposal, supported by many scientists (Franke and Valencia 1984, Franke 2010) became a reality in 2010, when Zarate Forest was declared a National Protected Area.

In Lima, Maria and Hans-Wilhelm managed to transform their home into a “field station” known as Casa Humboldt. For years, Casa Humboldt was the gathering center of foreign scientists doing fieldwork in Peru, where for a modest fee; they could lodge on their way to and from field sites in the Amazon lowlands, the Andes, or the arid coast of Peru. At Casa Humboldt, they also had the opportunity to meet other fellow workers to discuss their findings. There, a young F. Vuilleumier, J. Terborgh, or J. P. O’Neill visiting Peru for the first time, shared with the Koepcke’s passionate discussions of their observations, distributional records, new species or simply information on how to reach remote places (Vuilleumier 1995). Some of the guests at Casa Humboldt, famous scientists today, have rendered tribute to Maria’s “burning interest in the animal world and pleasure in discussions of natural history problems” (Niethammer 1974) by naming species after her, such as the Koepcke’s Cacique (*Cacicus koepckeae*) (Lowery & O’Neill 1965) and Koepcke’s Hermit Hummingbird (*Phaethornis koepckeae*) (Weske & Terborgh 1977). Her continuing influence is reflected in more recent species descriptions

such as Koepcke’s Screech Owl (*Megascops koepckeae*) (Hekstra 1982).

Maria’s enthusiasm and vitality were contagious; we can only imagine her on expeditions throughout Peru, observing birds, collecting specimens, meticulously preparing specimens and writing detailed labels. Maria possessed an astounding talent to draw birds quickly and accurately with an economic depiction of field markings. She personally illustrated every species in “Las Aves del Departamento de Lima” (The Birds of the Department of Lima) (Koepcke 1964; translated to English in 1970) and the series of 19 leaflets entitled “Las Aves Silvestres de Importancia Económica del Perú” (Wild Birds of Economic Importance of Peru) (Koepcke and Koepcke 1963 - 1971) that she coauthored with Hans-Wilhelm for the Ministerio de Agricultura, Servicio Forestal y de Caza. The series consists of 152 pages representing 148 species, all of them contained in a green jacket adorned with the sketch of the head profile of a Razor-billed Curassow (*Mitu mitu*). Each species description has its own page and includes a black and white drawing showing a close-up of the bird against a background of its natural habitat. A description of the bird and data on size, voice, and ecology is provided. Her artistic talents were known in Peru, where postage stamps with drawings of five colorful species of Peruvian birds were in circulation for some time after her disappearance in 1971.

After many years spent exploring the Andean and Pacific regions of Peru, the Koepcke’s decided that in order to continue their life work of understanding and describing Peru’s biodiversity through their own experience, they had to live in the Amazon forest east of the Andes. After closing Casa Humboldt in 1967 they moved to a small parcel of land on Río Lullapichis, a tributary of the Río Pachitea within the great Ucayali watershed, where they established Panguana, a research station named after the most common tinamou of the



(a)



(c)



(b)

FIG. 1. (a) Maria and Hans-Wilhelm Koepcke in Zárate Forest (Photo: Oliver Pearson). (b) Illustrations of Birds of the Department of Lima. (c) Maria with a specimen of *Ampelion stresemanni*, the new species she discovered (Photos: Courtesy Julianne Koepcke).

region. Panguana has now become an officially recognized Private Conservation Area.

Maria published 22 works in German,

Spanish, and English and coauthored 11 other publications with her husband (See list below). The Koepcke's publication on the "Corte

ecológico transversal en los Andes del Perú central con especial consideración de las Aves. Parte I: costa, vertientes occidentales y región altoandina” (Koepcke 1954b) remains a bedside table book to all ornithologists working in the region. Part II was to have been the eastern transect, which she planned to complete only after she and her husband had spent more time gathering data in eastern Peru to match the vast store of data they had obtained west of the Andes (Koepcke 1958, 1961, Koepcke and Koepcke 1953). Fate decided otherwise about Part II, but even without the eastern transect, Maria’s legacy has been solid and pervasive in Peruvian and Neotropical ornithology. Commemorating 40 years of her early and tragic disappearance, we dedicate the IX Neotropical Ornithological Congress and VIII Peruvian Congress in appreciation and recognition for the many contributions of a great Neotropical ornithologist: Maria Koepcke.

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