

OBITUARY

Pablo Canevari (1951–2000): deeply inspired

On 22 March 2000, Pablo Canevari died in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the city where he was born on 22 May 1951. Pablo had lost his fight with a rare and never-beaten type of brain cancer. His death was sudden, shocking and untimely. Sofia, Andres and Valentina lost their fantastic father, Maria José her beloved husband. With Pablo (Figure 1), the rest of us lost a *rara avis*, an exceptionally gifted naturalist, conservationist and artist. The Wader Study Group lost its treasured Latin American member of committee. I lost my best friend.

* * *

Pablo is born as one of many brothers to a physician's family. As a child he goes to his cousins' homestead on the pampas outside Buenos Aires. As a teenager he befriends the son of another doctor, and this family has an "estancia" too. Over a long time Pablo is thus introduced to, and imprinted on, the spacious landscapes and the wonderful wildlife of the pampas, a love and source of inspiration that will never fade. He also gets to know the other love of his life, Maria José, his friend's sister.

In the 1970s, Pablo studies biology at La Plata University. Argentina goes through a particularly difficult period and although this does affect Pablo, his drawings and writings from this time radiate joy and curiosity. He makes sketches of funny summer scenes of young, playful people on beaches and terraces. He begins with nature photography, another passion in his life. He reads Konrad Lorenz's books on animal and human behaviour, William Henry Hudson's accounts of life and wildlife on the Argentinean pampas 100 years earlier, and he befriends the nestor of Argentine ornithology, Claes Christian Olog. Photos of both Hudson and Olog still decorate his home-office. He also contemplates his future. Living at a remote beach in Patagonia perhaps, studying the details of bird behaviour. Spending his time observing, reading, thinking and painting ...

During these years, Pablo also works as an honorary research assistant at the herpetological section of the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales "Bernardino Rivadavia". He participates in two environmental impact assessments on big dams in Argentine rivers and he joins many bird banding campaigns. The expeditions to round-up and band southern geese (*Chloephaga* spp.) in Patagonia perhaps leave the biggest impression. He takes part in Pete Myers' shorebird studies on the pampas grassland near Mar del Plata. In March 1979, he graduates as a master in "ecology and the conservation of renewable resources".

After graduation, he is hired by the Argentine National



Figure 1. Pablo Canevari in Europe. He was sufficiently homesick to even try his hand on an Argentine tea that he didn't particularly like, the *maté*.

Park Service. He is responsible for research and faunistic inventories in different national parks all over the country. Studies include flamingos in the Puna, understory forest birds in the jungle of Misiones province, birds of the wet Chaco, inventories in the southern temperate forests, and shorebird survey campaigns along coastal Argentina, the latter in conjunction with Guy Morrison and Ken Ross of the Canadian Wildlife Service. He also works for periods of two months as a teacher in the "guardaparques" school in Bariloche, near the Andes. He gains an in-depth knowledge of many of Argentina's fantastic wilderness areas and contributes to a major review of the National Parks of Argentina, an impressive book eventually (in 1995) published in English. During

his years with "Parques Nacionales", he is the main person pushing for Argentina to join and ratify the Ramsar convention. For example, he prepares all the information, including the Ramsar information sheets, for the first three Ramsar sites in the country. He also helps the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata as a member of their executive committee and acts as the vice-chairman of the Argentine branch of International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP).

In 1987, these activities lead to his full-time employment by ICBP and the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB), to run their joint Pan-American office in Buenos Aires. This job is followed by an almost three-year overseas assignment in the USA. Of course, he doesn't go alone, but takes Maria José, their two small children and a baby along. At Manomet Bird Observatory, Pablo works as the workshop co-ordinator of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). He is responsible for the organization of field- and policymaking-workshops in South and Central American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela.

In December 1990, the Canevari family returns to Argentina. To co-ordinate the burgeoning wetland and shorebird related activities in the region, Pablo establishes a Latin American office for WHSRN in Buenos Aires. In the meantime Pablo, together with his brother Marcelo and with G. Carrizo, G. Harris, J.R. Mata and R. Stranek, have prepared a bird guide for Argentina, of which he authored and illustrated about 20% of the texts and the plates. The two volumes (comprising 908 pages) of this *Nueva guía de campo de las aves de la Argentina* are published by Fundación Acindar in 1991. The guide includes full colour illustrations of 976 species with information on habitat, behaviour and distribution in South America.



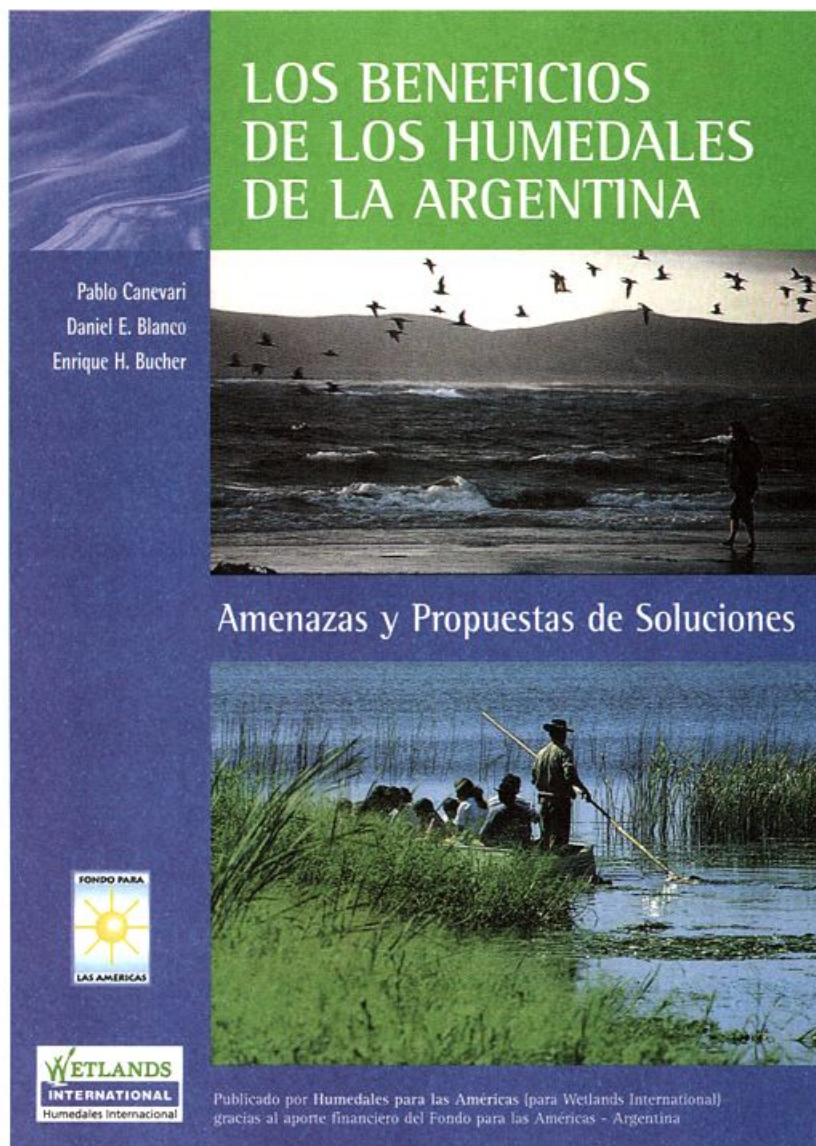


Figure 2. The book on wetlands in Argentina in which Pablo Canevari, Daniel Blanco and Enrique Bucher try to explain the value of these habitats and the threats for a wide public.

As WHSRN continues to expand its activities from the waterbirds to the wetlands in which they live, in 1992 Pablo helps to establish Wetlands for the Americas (WA). He becomes its first South American director. A tour-de-force, WA prepares an environmental assessment of the proposed Hidrovia Parana-Paraguay project (a major damming project threatening the Pantanal region). Pablo's life has become very hectic now as he co-ordinates the work of many consultants on major wetland issues all over South America. He oversees international waterbird censuses and is a consultant to projects with the World Bank and Argentina's National Park Service. Things don't slow down between 1992 and 1994 when Pablo is acting-President of Wetlands for the Americas with responsibility for offices in Canada, USA, Mexico, Argentina and a programme in Peru. During this period he helps arranging the conversion of Wetlands for the Americas in "Wetland International", a partnership with the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB) and the Asian Wetland Bureau. This process is completed at a meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1995. In

early 1995, during a late afternoon in summer, we pass his office in Buenos Aires. I remember him answering two telephone calls at the same time and chatting with us. The tricks that memory can do ... but surely he enacts the master-spider-role, busily weaving the great big protected-wetlands-web. That same evening we eat our first Argentine "asado" (BBQ) in the garden of the Canevari-house, with the sounds of a live concert by the Rolling Stones in the background.

In March 1996, Pablo and his family are on the move again. Pablo takes up an assignment as technical officer at the Convention on Migratory Species, a United Nations-administered global convention based in Bonn, Germany. Here he becomes responsible for the relationships of the bureau with the scientific council and with Latin American governments. He also administers conservation projects in South America, Africa, Europe, Middle East and Oceania. During this time (1998), Pablo and others publish *Los humedales de la Argentina*, a 200-page reference book on the ecological classification, conservation and legal status of all major wetlands of Argentina. In September 2000, this book received the prize "F.P. Moreno 2000" from the Sociedad Argentina de Estudios Geográficos. While he is in Bonn, the South American wetland assessment that Pablo has worked on for a long time with Ian Davidson, is finalised. This assessment, now published on-line, includes detailed accounts of all major wetland systems in South America.

Although he likes the peace of life in Bonn, he is very frustrated with the almost impermeable United Nations bureaucracy that makes progress so much slower than necessary. At the same time he much enjoys his family's exploits in Europe. On one occasion they travel to Genoa, where they find a street named in honour of a certain Canevari, most likely a forebear. But he misses his country and during the time in Europe he often speaks about his longing for the pampas.

In July 1999, Pablo and his family travel back to Buenos Aires, where he immediately starts reorganising the activities of Wetlands International in Latin America. Pablo is full of plans, enthusiasm and creative fire. Together with Enrique H. Bucher he is planning a new NGO, aiming at developing conservation in Argentina and Latin America. According to Bucher, the local conservation community saw his return to Argentina as a great opportunity.



Figure 3. The logo of Fundación Vida Silvestre, designed by Pablo many years ago.





Figure 4. "Eskimo Curlews in flight over the pampas" by Pablo Canevari.

Pablo and Maria José celebrate the start of the year 2000 at the "estancia" of Maria José's family. A beautiful sunset radiates over the pampas; the air is full of birds. A few days later, on the day that his new book *Los beneficios de los humedales de la Argentina* (co-authored with Daniel Blanco and Enrique Bucher; Figure 2) comes off the press, Pablo collapses and has to start his last big fight. The book outlines, for a lay public, the many values of wetlands. The back shows a photo of Pablo's legs, confidently stretched out in a canoe that sails to a sunset.

* * *

Pablo's legacy is immense. He authored and co-authored over 50 scientific and popular articles and technical reports on conservation, ecological problems of dams, national parks, birds, mammals, and reptiles of Argentina. Many of them are illustrated with his own photographs and drawings. He was a strong promoter of conservation in Latin America and can be considered one of its most effective advocates. Indeed, since his death I have met several young Argentinean and Chilean scientists and conservationists that found inspiration even without having known him personally. Since his death, two scientific papers have been dedicated to his memory (by Guy Morrison *et al.* on "Population estimates of Nearctic shorebirds" in the journal *Waterbirds* 23 (2000): 337–352 and by Sandra Caziani *et al.* on "Waterbird richness in altiplano wetlands of northwestern Argentina" also in *Waterbirds* 24 (2001): 103–117), and I am aware that more are in the making. The Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences established a Pablo Canevari Award to "annually recognise and support the work of an outstanding individual or organisation whose work reflects the type of personal and professional dedication to the conservation of shorebirds that marked the career of Pablo Canevari." In 2000, the award

was presented to Patricia M. González for her outstanding self-motivated and inspirational research and conservation efforts at San Antonio Oeste in northern Patagonia. Pablo was a member of the Executive Committee of the Wader Study Group since 1992, and his input will be sorely missed.

In brief, Pablo was passionate and optimistic but also realistic. He found wisdom where others saw despair. Friends have described him as "a bridge that brought together people interested and concerned for wildlife", "charming, polite but determined, the ideal combination for a leader", "gentle, kind and approachable; he held the world in his hands in terms of the respect that shined all around him" and "reliable, self-effacing, dedicated and tireless, with a wonderful dry sense of humour and mischievous smile." A friend also wrote that "the first thing that comes to mind is the twinkle in his eye. Then it would be shared words about the screwed-up-ness of whatever institution was under discussion – with Pablo's Argentine voice ebbing and flowing with annoyance. Then a little while later, we'd be giggling about some absurdity in the system. We'd get all that bothersome stuff out of the way and then we'd talk about our future dreams, how to help conservation in Latin America, how we could do things differently ... make a bigger impact. What would happen if ..."

As an artist, he left a large collection of wonderful watercolours and photographs, in which we can see nature through his eyes and revisit the natural world that he loved so much. At an early age, he drew the logo, an anteater, for Argentina's foremost conservation organization, Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina (Figure 3). Pablo oversaw the production and publication of a field guide to Latin American shorebirds *Guía de los chorlos y playeros de la región neotropical* for which he made most of the plates, including the one on the front-cover (Figure 5). Too bad he did not see it finished.

The source of his inspiration came from the wetlands and



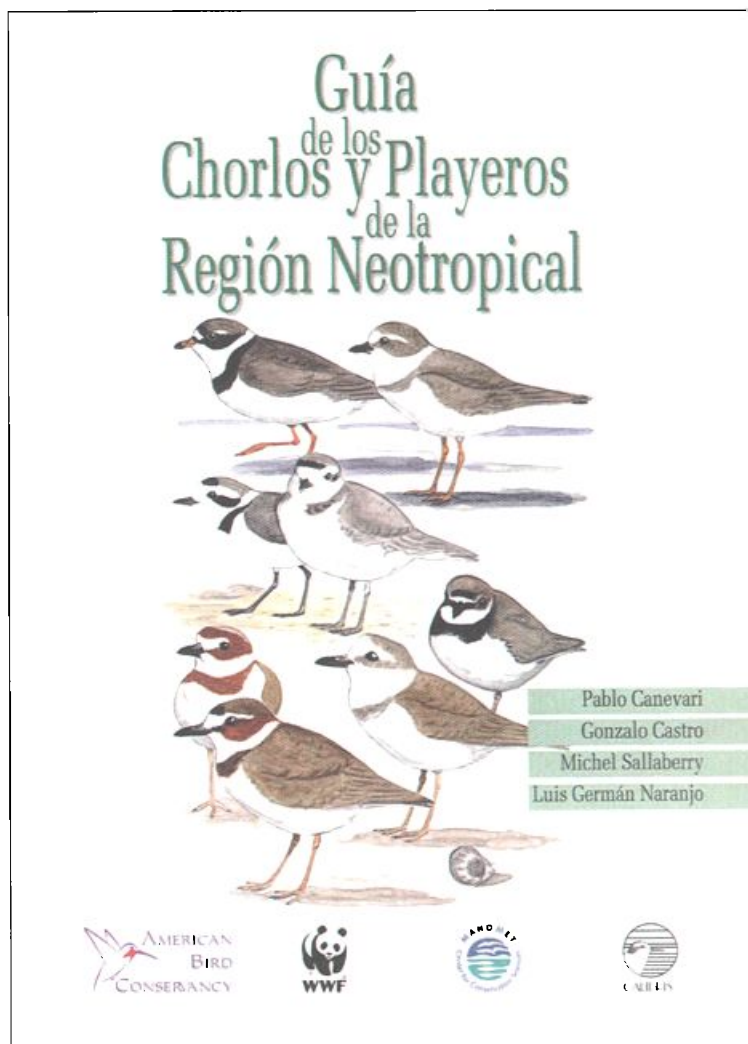


Figure 5. The fieldguide to the shorebirds of Latin America, published in 2001.

waterbirds of the pampas that he experienced as a boy on the estancia of what would become his family-in-law. He was deeply aware of the damage that humans can do to the world around them. That he had to miss out on experiencing the flocks of Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, once a common wintering bird in Argentina, caused him grief. With Bob Gill and Eve Iversen he co-authored the volume of The Birds of North America series on the Eskimo Curlew. Whatever the symbolism is, one of his last water-colours is of two Eskimo Curlews in flight over the pampas against a red sunset sky (Figure 4). The painting is not quite finished; the pampas-grass has yet to be filled in. Pablo Canevari, like the Eskimo Curlew, may be gone, but he lives on in our minds.

Theunis Piersma

* * *

