

Until late in the 20th Century, Ted Parker was science fiction. By the beginning of the next decade, he will be a biological impossibility.

To further Ted Parker's unique scientific legacy, the W. Alton Jones Foundation has awarded grants totalling \$100,600 to three institutions: Conservation International, Louisiana State University, and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. These grants will assist in ensuring that Parker's field observations and recordings are made accessible to the scientific and conservation communities, and that his scientific collaborations are completed and published. Additional contributions from Parker's many admirers would add significantly to these goals. For information about how you can help these efforts, contact J.P. Myers at the W. Alton Jones Foundation, or any of the three institutions mentioned.

TED PARKER PERISHED August 3, pushing beyond human limits, caught in a passionate quest to ensure that some measurable, important fraction of the biological diversity on Earth persists through the twenty-first century and beyond.

Ted died in a small plane in an Ecuadorian forest near the coast. He died doing what no one else in the world could do as well as he: pinpoint the most crucial spots on the planet for biological conservation. The single-engine Cessna crashed because *close* just wasn't *close enough*. He and his companions, including Al Gentry—as skilled with Andean plants as Ted was with birds, and who died with Ted in the crash—wanted to be right at the edge of the canopy. A mountain interfered.

Ted possessed unique skills. "Unique" is a word too often used.

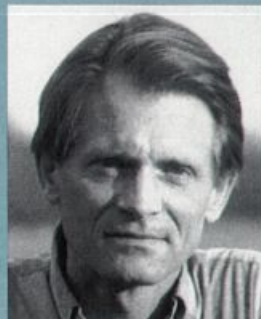
But with Parker, it is no exaggeration. He was and is irreplaceable. No one else—now, before him, or in the future—will master birds of the Neotropics as thoroughly as Ted Parker.

Ted's great genius was his extraordinary knowledge of bird songs and calls. Reports vary. Some describe him as able to identify 3000 bird vocalizations from the Neotropics. I have seen estimates up to 4000. Who is to quibble? Suffice it to say that no one else could come close.

Spend time around dawn with Parker in a forest anywhere between the Durango Highway and Misiones, and you would begin to understand

J. P. Myers

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what it might be like to develop a new sensory modality. What it would be like to have night vision equipment for your ears. What it would be like to have a personal supercomputer doing digital sound analysis in real time.

But surely I exaggerate. Even if Ted was the best of his time, who is to say that no one before him, and no one afterward, will rise to his mastery? I don't think the claim is that far-fetched. Think about two things: technology and habitat destruction.

As to technology, Ted's ability to recognize sounds came in large part from native genius and his relentless application of those talents. Who else, other than Parker, spent six months every year in the tropics for twenty years honing his knowledge of bird sounds? But it also was a result of his use of modern

tape recorders and shot-gun microphones, and the access to remote places that has been made possible by jets and helicopters and by small, nimble planes that keep away from mountain escarpments, most of the time. No one living before this age of recording equipment and easy transportation could have possibly experienced, much less studied so minutely and learned so thoroughly, the diversity of bird song that Parker knew.

And as to the future? Living as we do in this epoch of habitat devastation, no one will ever again have the chance. It's that simple. Until late in the 20th Century, Ted Parker was sci-



Ted Parker in the Kanuku Mountains in Guyana

ence fiction. By the beginning of the next decade, he will be a biological impossibility.

Ted's genius went beyond his ability to recognize many different bird sounds. His years of wandering through the tropical Andes had left no room for self-delusion. A naturalist, a trained observer, he could not ignore the changes taking place.

In the span of his experience within the region—just two decades—what had seemed remote, pristine, untouchable wilderness had fallen before machetes and bulldozers, chainsaws and fires, and into the maw of proliferating herds of cows, goats, and sheep. Not just in Peru. Not just in Bolivia or Ecuador. But in a swath of rainforest devastation stretching across tropical America from Laguna Catemaco in Mexico to San Ramón de la Nueva Orán and Iguazú in Argentina. Ted's journeys confronted him with the disappearing legacy of tropical evolution with every step he took.

Somewhere in that odyssey, proba-

bly sooner than most of us who have borne witness to the same destruction, Ted's focus shifted from the glory of exploratory birding and guiding to a forced, indeed hurried, march for conservation. The last years of his life were consumed by this commitment: identifying those places of greatest value to biological diversity, and working to ensure their conservation.


I last saw Ted in Miami. We had flown there together from Manaus, where I had spent a week with him in the forest and on the Rio Negro. He had joined us in Brazil from field work in Ecuador. He was spending the night at the Miami airport before heading southeast to Guyana for a research expedition to the Kanuku Mountains.

From Ecuador to Brazil, Manaus to Guyana. Kanukus to Colombia, or to Venezuela or Paraguay or the Maya Mountains of Belize. Parker never stopped. With us on the Rio Negro he spent the days searching for birds. Quintessential Parker, unmistakable

for those who were ever with him in the field: LSU baseball cap. Microphone pointed, tape recorder slung in front, fingers switching between *record* and *play*, luring one more obscure antbird out into the open and onto the tape. And then in the nights, long after everyone else had retired, Parker prowled back into the forest, recording insects and amphibians and nocturnal birds. So much to do. So little time before it disappears.

It didn't take long for me to calculate, after I had heard about the accident, that the very moment that Ted crashed I was in an office at Conservation International, where he worked in Washington, making arrangements to meet him when he returned. I needed his advice on where it made sense to place priorities for conservation work in the upper Amazonian watershed.

Of all tropical America, this region was his greatest passion, especially the low and mid-elevation eastern slopes of the Andes. No wonder, with places like Manu and Tambopata. Rivers like the Madre de Dios, the Alto Madidi, the Alto Beni. Ranges like the Cordillera del Condor, the Cordillera Vilcabamba.

No place on earth is richer in life. Parts of it are impoverished already, overwhelmed by the burden of human activity. Parts stand under imminent threat. But there also remain immense expanses of pristine forest, so remote that they still may persist, full of the tropical exuberance that was Ted's life. If people still benefit from the biological diversity and ecological services of this area's watersheds and forests in 2100, it will be in no small part because of the steps Ted Parker took here during these past 10 years. 

—J.P. Myers is Director of the
W. Alton Jones Foundation