

Natural Science collections, and looked at all available literature. Davis and I were then convinced that the bird did represent a new species.

We had the very highest regard and admiration for our good friend and colleague Ted Parker, and very easily and quickly decided that we would name the bird after him. It was even more appropriate, because Ted deeply loved antbirds! We prepared the manuscript and I painted a color plate for a frontispiece (part of which is reproduced here). The description of the Ash-throated Antwren (*Herpsilochmus parkeri*) was then published in the *Wilson Bulletin* (Vol. 98, No. 3, pp. 337–352) in 1986. Ted was very pleased with this honor, but we knew that he wanted to see the bird, make his own tape recordings, and compare the voice of all members of the genus before he could be 100 percent sure that the bird should be given full status. That was just the way he was.

Ted was never able to see “his” bird and make those comparisons. First, he became more and more involved in his passionate conservation work, and rarely had time to go off on his own or with friends to simply study birds.

And then the tragic plane accident occurred, that took his life and ended all of his dreams and desires. Both Tristan Davis and I are now very grateful that we did not hesitate to finish the description of this species and get it into print. Ted knew about his bird, and for this we are happy.

In the years to come, there will be up-and-coming young ornithologists who will study Neotropical birds, and birdwatchers who travel to the tropics. We hope they will enjoy birds in areas saved because of the influence of Theodore A. Parker III. We hope they know of his legacy, forever preserved in the name of the Ash-throated Antwren, *Herpsilochmus parkeri*.

—John P. O'Neill, *LSU Museum of Natural Science, 119 Foster Hall, LSU, Baton Rouge, LA 70803*

# Theodore A. Parker III 1953–1993

by Kenn Kaufman

FORTY YEARS, FOUR MONTHS, and four days. That was all there was between his life's beginning, in Pennsylvania, and its abrupt ending against the side of an Ecuadorian mountain in August 1993. But in the achingly brief span between those two endpoints, he traced a high trajectory that no one else could match. His friends look back now at the bright arc of his passage, and we try to comprehend what we had in Ted Parker, and what the world has lost.

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## Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, Ted was rewriting our knowledge of South American birds.

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It's even hard to know what to call him. Wasn't he a birder? Sure; he was a birder just like Jesus was a wandering preacher. In knowledge and understanding and skill, he towered above all the other “birders.” On the other hand, the term *ornithologist* could mislead—at least in this era, when ornithologists sit at desks and send out students to do heavy mathematics. Parker would not come in from the field, because the field was the source of all original knowledge. You can say he was a field ornithologist, then; and, if you accept the biased testimony of this close friend,

say he was the greatest field ornithologist of my generation.

Do not imagine that the preceding statement is just hyperbole inspired by grief. I would have written the same thing (though in a different tone) a month ago, before they brought us the news of the plane crash. Simply stated, Parker knew the birds of the Neotropics, the American tropics, far better than anyone else ever had; and the Neotropical region is by far the world's richest area for birds.

In the stretch between Texas and Tierra del Fuego, nearly half of all bird species are packed into one-sixth of the world's land area. A single square mile of Amazonian forest may harbor more than 500 bird species. The richest habitats are mostly dense forests, where the birds are often hard to see, and none of those birds can be named just on range or on assumptions: That skulker glimpsed in the undergrowth could easily be something unknown to science, or unknown within a thousand miles of here. In other words, the birds of the Neotropics are the most difficult, challenging birds on Earth. Ted Parker went to the Neotropics to seek out that challenge, and he came to know those birds more thoroughly than anyone else in history.

The knowledge of Neotropical birds, as late as the beginning of the 1970s, was still fairly primitive compared to any other part of the world. Reference works on the distribution

of South American birds had been produced mainly by ornithologists sitting at museum desks, puzzling over a handful of specimens and a stack of maps. Those ornithologists had done as well as they could from a distance. But what was really needed to determine bird distribution was fieldwork: hard, slogging fieldwork, thoroughly surveying one locality for weeks or months, then moving to another locality and covering it for more weeks or months, over and over, to develop a solid base of knowledge.

Fieldwork of this sort was being carried out by collecting expeditions from Louisiana State University in the 1970s, in a program initiated by Dr. John O'Neill. Parker—though only an undergraduate student, and from a different school—had made such an impression as an amazing young fieldman that he was sent on one of these expeditions in 1974. In one sense, he never came back. His first Peru trip lasted more than eight months, and thereafter he spent more than half of every year in the tropics.

Those early expeditions had been intended as collecting trips. But even in his first months in South America, Ted was taking notes more intently than specimens. In later years he did even less collecting, and concentrated instead on building up an exhaustive file of tape recordings. His thousands of recordings became the backbone of the tropical series at the Library of Natural Sounds at Cornell. His tapes also served as a tool in the development of his amazing skill at finding birds by ear.

A natural talent for discerning and remembering sounds, compounded by an extraordinary amount of concentration and hard work, gave Ted an unparalleled ability to recognize bird voices. Ultimately he was able to identify some 4000 species by sound alone. This unmatched knowledge made him uniquely qualified to find birds in the dense forest that characterizes so much of the Neotropics.

Legends grew up around his exploits. He could survey the birdlife of a forest tract in a couple of days as thoroughly as anyone else could in a month. He could go into areas where ornithologists had been working for weeks, and find dozens of birds that they had overlooked. Even in the Manu region of Peru, where talented teams from Princeton had worked for years, Ted discovered the little-known Rufous-breasted Anthrush right in the middle of the major census plot.

Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, Ted was rewriting our knowledge of South American birds. He authored or co-authored dozens of scientific papers. More far-reaching, perhaps, was his effect on other researchers in the tropics. Parker served as an inspiration, a source, the one person who could present an overview of the entire Neotropical avifauna. By the late 1980s, he was growing more and more concerned about habitat loss. From the maps in his head, he could see likely scenarios for extinction of bird species. And he realized that he was in a unique position to help change the course of tropical habitat conservation.

It was Ted's unrivaled bird-finding skill that led to the formation of the Rapid Assessment Program of Conservation International. The accelerating destruction of habitat in the tropics was creating an information crisis: If only a few of the threatened areas could be saved, which few should they be? How could such decisions be made without thorough studies of every remaining forest? The answer was a kind of "ecological SWAT team," a small cadre of exceptional field biologists who could quickly gauge the relative diversity in any tropical site. Parker, the obvious choice, was hired to head up the team. Working with a botanist, a plant ecologist, and a mammalogist, he organized a whole series of surveys of threatened sites, beginning in eastern Bolivia in 1991.

On August 3, 1993, Parker was right where we would have expected him to be, deep in the tropics, flying at treetop level, surveying possible boundaries for a new national park to protect cloud-forest birds in western Ecuador. With him on this reconnaissance flight were Alwyn Gentry, the remarkable American field botanist, and Ecuadorian ecologist Eduardo Aspiazu, among others. When the pilot flew into a cloud that happened to have a mountain inside it, an irreplaceable store of knowledge was lost in an instant.



I was fortunate to spend a lot of time running around with Parker in the 1970s, beginning when we were both teenagers, before he went to South America for the first time. When I first met him, in 1972, he knew ten times as much about birds as I did. Although his influence inspired me to redouble my efforts, the gap between us continued to widen; by 1992 he knew a hundred times as much as I, maybe a thousand. Comparisons were meaningless by that time. But maybe they had been from the start. All of us could tell, even in 1972, that this kid was completely off the charts when it came to birding skill and knowledge.

The Tucson region was where we did a lot of our birding together. Ted had chosen the University of Arizona solely for its birding potential, and for its proximity to Mexico. Even though he had no car, he never had trouble getting out in the field, because he could always talk someone into going birding. Ted had a gift for leadership, an ability to convince us all that the place he wanted to go birding right now was the best possible place to go.

Often on trips around southern Arizona, or into western Mexico, we would pack five or six guys into Mark Robbins' long-suffering station wagon and go roaring down the highway, the radio blasting out rock music,



**Ted Parker on Curlew Island off the mouth of the Mississippi River in May 1990.**

until we hit the next birding stop and everyone piled out to scour the area. Robbins himself was already a stellar bird-finder, but after another day in the field, he would just shake his head in amazement at Ted's abilities: "He's the Solitary Eagle, man," Mark would say. "He's the king." And he was. We all were certain, even then, that Ted was the greatest fieldman we would ever encounter.

Everyone who birded with Parker learned from him—not just facts, but attitudes as well, because he thought deeply about everything related to birding and ornithology. And he always had strong opinions. "The size of your bird list doesn't mean a thing," he would say. "Big Days, maybe...you have to know the birds of your area to come up with a one-day list. But life lists, year lists—forget it." Traveling in Mexico, he would say, "Birding in tropical forest by sight alone is like watching the news on TV with the sound turned off. You'll miss most of what's going on." Or he would say,

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**There was integrity in his sheer drive to learn more about birds, in his pure, uncompromising quest for knowledge.**

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"Degrees don't mean much. There are plenty of Ph.D. ornithologists who don't know anything about birds. They're just 9-to-5 bird people." As pointed as his comments often were, they never sounded like put-downs to the listener: In conversation, he always managed to imply that *you* knew all these things, *you* understood already, and it was just those other guys out there who were still unaware. And Ted genuinely liked people; throughout the time I knew him, he was constantly going out of his way to share his knowledge with anyone who was interested.

If I had to choose one word to ap-

ply to Parker, the word would be "integrity." There was integrity in his sheer drive to learn more about birds, in his pure, uncompromising quest for knowledge. This single-minded focus did not make him easier to live with—his two turbulent marriages were probably doomed from the start—but it kept him going in the field long, long after another person would have slowed down. Ted Parker was not destined to slow down, ever. He was like a runaway train, except that he was running on tracks that he had laid out for himself, and he knew exactly where he was going.

...Now he's gone beyond the horizon, and he won't be replaced. The best thing I can hope for is that a generation of naturalists will remember his example, and that in remembering, we will work a little harder to understand and to preserve the wonderful diversity of birds that Parker knew best.