

## **Preface**

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## *Preface*

ONE DAY IN 1961, two very tall men, Mark Buchanan and John Zoeger, appeared in our driveway. They got into a rugged-looking jeep with our father and drove away. A long time passed; the jeep returned. The men all had long beards now—except our father, who could only grow stubble. He returned to Nicaragua several times after that, while we were still too young to understand the purpose of his trips. Instead of presents, he brought back stories—like the one about taking the first hungry bite of his burger in a cantina and knocking his teeth against a bullet still embedded in the patty. Looking back on it now, we realize that the stories were not just for our amusement and distraction—they were consistent with the larger message he wanted to convey to us as well as to his students. The study of Nicaraguan avifauna might seem exotic and “specialized,” but it was ultimately connected to everything else on the planet. All ecosystems, including the variety of human societies within those systems, were part of everyone’s responsibility. Another time he came back with a small three-toed sloth that had been orphaned. It hung on to life—and to the back of one of our kitchen chairs—for days, and when it died, our father explained to his weeping daughters that ultimately this was not a tragedy, but an illustration of how beautifully Nature had fit the sloth to its own unique habitat.

At home, our father sat on a sofa in the living room, evenings and weekends, papers spread around him, filling yellow legal pads with his neat handwriting. Classical music, usually Mozart, poured from a large mono speaker. Every page he wrote contained corrections written into the margins, then corrections of the corrections. The manuscripts, including the early drafts of the present one, were typed out by secretaries attached to his department. Then he would begin rereading and revising the typed copy. We heard banter about his big Nicaragua project from time to time. When we visited his office, we saw the cases with bird specimens and an oversize map of Nicaragua in a frame that leaned lopsidedly from the top of a cabinet. We imagined his project would eventually become a big book, with lots of pictures, filled with accounts of adventure of those men who drove off in jeeps. Of course, what he was writing was completely different—instead of trying to make a large book, it appears he was editing it down to make it as concise and to the point as possible.

Because he retained this manuscript throughout his professional life without publishing it, he returned to it a number of times. There were many revisions of the content, but there were other small corrections that indicated simply his desire to say something in a more felicitous or precise way. For this reason, we are grateful to Juan Carlos Martínez-Sánchez, Tom Will, and the editors of the American Ornithologists’ Union for bringing this manuscript to publication with so much of our father’s original words and intent still intact. We have no perspective on the research, but we are glad that his commitment and powers of intense concentration—in short, his personality—are preserved here.

*Thomas R. Howell, Jr. and Yvonne Howell*  
22 March 2010