

Editors' Note

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Editors' Note

AS ORNITHOLOGISTS WHO have dedicated substantial portions of our professional lives to promoting bird conservation in Nicaragua, we have found the work of Thomas R. Howell to be a constant source of inspiration. Until this time, however, one of his most important contributions, the "Check-list of the Birds of Nicaragua," had remained unpublished.

Tragedies and delays in the publication of substantial contributions were not new to the history of Nicaraguan ornithology. Waldron DeWitt Miller was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1929 just before completing a full account of the birds of Nicaragua coauthored with Ludlow Griscom. Soon after Miller's death, Griscom left the American Museum of Natural History and abandoned publication of the manuscript altogether. In the 1940s, Fr. Bernardo Ponsol, a Spanish Jesuit, started a bird collection while he was the director of the Colegio Centro America in Granada, Nicaragua. From 1940 to 1946, he collected over a thousand specimens and compiled numerous field notes. By 1945, he had prepared a manuscript entitled "Zonas Biogeográficas de la Flora y Fauna Nicaragüense y Factores Asociados," but his tragic death in a plane crash in April 1946 left this document unfinished and part of his notes lost. Fortunately, Tom Howell examined Ponsol's collection and managed to send 352 specimens to the University of California (Howell 1964a). In 1958, years after Ponsol's death, a draft of the "Zonas Biogeográficas" was published locally (Ponsol 1958). In 1981, James Silliman, a recent Ph.D. graduate from the University of Arizona, moved to León to teach at the Universidad Nacional. As a professional ornithologist, he soon accumulated considerable information on the birds of coastal areas near León, but his 1983 death in a car accident truncated a potentially brilliant career. Silliman's notes were collected and summarized by Tom Howell, and many of his observations are included in Howell's manuscript, but Silliman's death left a gap in the inspiration for bird research in León that has yet to be filled.

Tom Howell's substantial work in Nicaragua was just one chapter in a diverse and productive career (cf. Cade et al. 2005), but it was one about which he was extraordinarily enthusiastic. He first visited Nicaragua in 1951. This trip and his 12 subsequent trips to the country (Table 1) produced a fine collection of over 2,000 bird skins deposited at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as a number of publications that form the backbone of Nicaraguan ornithology. Most of Howell's personal familiarity with the Nicaraguan avifauna was concentrated in the area around Managua and Granada; in the Central Highlands between Matagalpa and the Honduran border; near the towns of Juigalpa and San Carlos; and especially in the Caribbean lowlands near Rama, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur, and in the northeastern pine savanna between Puerto Cabezas and Waspan, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte. See Figure 1 for locations of the Nicaraguan localities and departamentos referenced in Table 1 and throughout Howell's text.

Tom Howell's last visit to the country was in 1967, but the first version of this "Check-list of the Birds of Nicaragua" was not ready until 1983. Juan Carlos Martínez-Sánchez had the good fortune of meeting Howell that year in Los Angeles, where they exchanged information and discussed his plans to publish the manuscript. From March 1982 to August 1993, they exchanged 31 letters and shared information on the distribution of Nicaraguan birds and the location of professional collector William B. Richardson's obscure collecting sites. With Howell's support, Martínez-Sánchez published some of his new records from Nicaragua (Martínez-Sánchez 1989), but a great deal of his new information on bird distributions remained unpublished, since the idea was to include the records in the comprehensive check-list on which Howell was working. Martínez-Sánchez started the Museo de Zoología de Nicaragua at the Instituto Nicaragüense de Recursos Naturales y del Ambiente, but the Museo was abandoned in 1987, and the greater part of its bird collection was subsequently lost.

With the end of the Contra war in 1990, other ornithologists became interested in Nicaragua. Tom Will moved to Managua during 1990 and 1991 and conducted studies and made voice recordings of Nicaraguan birds, most intensively in the forests surrounding Bluefields, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur, and along the Río San Juan. Like Martínez-Sánchez, he was inspired by Howell's studies, and he was soon corresponding with Howell, being copied on the correspondence with Martínez-Sánchez, and sharing his new findings with Howell, convinced that the developing body of information on Nicaraguan ornithology would best be served by providing a solid baseline in a

TABLE 1. Dates and primary localities of Thomas R. Howell's trips to Nicaragua documented by published research and specimens deposited at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Dates	Primary localities (Departamentos in parentheses)	References
December 1951– January 1952	Area around Managua (Managua and Carazo) Santa María de Ostuma (Matagalpa)	UCLA specimens
January 1953	Granada and Volcán Mombacho (Granada) El Corozo, near Jalapa (Nueva Segovia)	UCLA specimens, Howell 1956
August 1953	El Recreo, near Rama (RAAS ^a)	UCLA specimens, Howell 1957
June–July 1954	El Recreo, near Rama (RAAS)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1955, 1957
January–February 1955	El Corozo, near Jalapa (Nueva Segovia) Tablazo (Jinotega) Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN ^b)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1965, 1971
January 1956	Granada (Granada) Hato Grande, near Juigalpa (Chontales)	UCLA specimens
January 1957	Managua (Managua) Hato Grande and Villa Sandino (formerly Villa Somoza), near Juigalpa (Chontales)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1958
November 1961– May 1962	Managua (Managua) Volcán Casita (Chinandega) Santa María de Ostuma (Matagalpa) San Rafael del Norte (Jinotega) Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN) Volcán Mombacho (Granada) San Carlos and Río Frío (Río San Juan) Cum and Siuna (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Buchanan and Howell 1965, 1967; Howell 1964b, 1965, 1971
January–February 1963	Leicus Creek and Waspan (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1965, 1971, 1972
August 1965	Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1971, 1972
March 1966	Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1971, 1972
November– December 1966	Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1971, 1972
April 1967	Puerto Cabezas and Waspan (RAAN)	UCLA specimens; Howell 1971, 1972

^aRegión Autónoma del Atlántico Sur.

^bRegión Autónoma del Atlántico Norte.

single comprehensive manuscript. Howell, in his characteristic meticulous fashion, wanted to complete his thorough review of specimens by checking obscure bird collections in Paris and Stockholm before finalizing the manuscript. Will and Martínez-Sánchez continued to work with Howell, contributing records and encouraging him to finish the manuscript in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, by the late 1990s, Howell had all but stopped working with birds, and his death in December 2004 left the "Check-list of the Birds of Nicaragua" still unpublished.

As of late 2004, various draft versions of Howell's manuscript were circulating informally, but with no published document to cite, there was no universally recognized frame of reference for the results of new field work by Nicaraguan ornithologists. In fact, as a result of the tragic deaths of Miller, Ponsol, Silliman, and then Howell, the amount of unpublished information on Nicaraguan birds far exceeded that which had been published. Most of the information remained in museum collections and field notes deposited in these museums. Even today, two of the largest collections of Nicaraguan birds—in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and the British Museum of Natural History, Tring—are not catalogued in an electronic database. It was clear that publication of the Howell manuscript would be a huge asset for the developing ornithology of the country.



FIG. 1. Current political divisions (departamentos) and frequently referenced localities in Nicaragua.

Inspired by meetings with Nicaraguan ornithologists in Managua in November 2004 and with encouragement from colleagues, Will was in the process of tracking down Tom Howell's whereabouts to offer assistance in moving toward publication of the manuscript when he learned of Howell's death. In January 2005, he contacted Tom Howell, Jr. and Yvonne Howell, secured permission from them to finalize and publish their father's manuscript, and solicited the advice and assistance of Martínez-Sánchez in the effort. Will and Martínez-Sánchez started with the last typewritten draft that the latter had received from Howell in 1993, with numerous additional typed fragments stapled to its pages, and added several pages of Howell's handwritten notes, a separate note he wrote on W. B. Richardson's collecting localities, and maps (Figs. 2–4) from B. W. Taylor (1963), because Howell had used these maps extensively to describe the vegetation of the country and to establish distributional categories for the birds. Distributional records from both Martínez-Sánchez and Will that had been penciled into the original manuscript or that were discussed with Howell by letter or conversation were also included, because this had been Howell's intent. We set 1993 as a final date for the manuscript, since this was essentially the conclusion of the period in which we were in most active discussion with Tom over details of the manuscript and because he had made numerous additions and corrections between 1983 and 1993, in the drafts and by letter.



FIG. 2. Distribution of the major geographic regions in Nicaragua (based on Taylor 1963).

In editing the manuscript, we decided to maintain the style and flavor of the original rather than update its content or attempt to modernize its format—this decision was also in keeping with the wishes of Tom’s family. We added the Literature Cited section, corrected spelling, revised punctuation, and reinforced consistency in the style of reporting of dates and localities he had developed over many years of revisions. We took particular care in retaining the original details of specimen data, especially locality data, while also providing alternative modern names parenthetically. Standardizing locality names for Nicaragua was challenging, because Spanish, English (Caribbean), and indigenous names were often interchanged, and even spelling in official gazetteers was inconsistent. We followed Howell’s original taxonomic arrangement and use of nomenclature but added current scientific and associated English names after the species accounts (American Ornithologists’ Union 1998 and Supplements 42 to 50) when they diverged from those used by Howell. Finally, because we consider

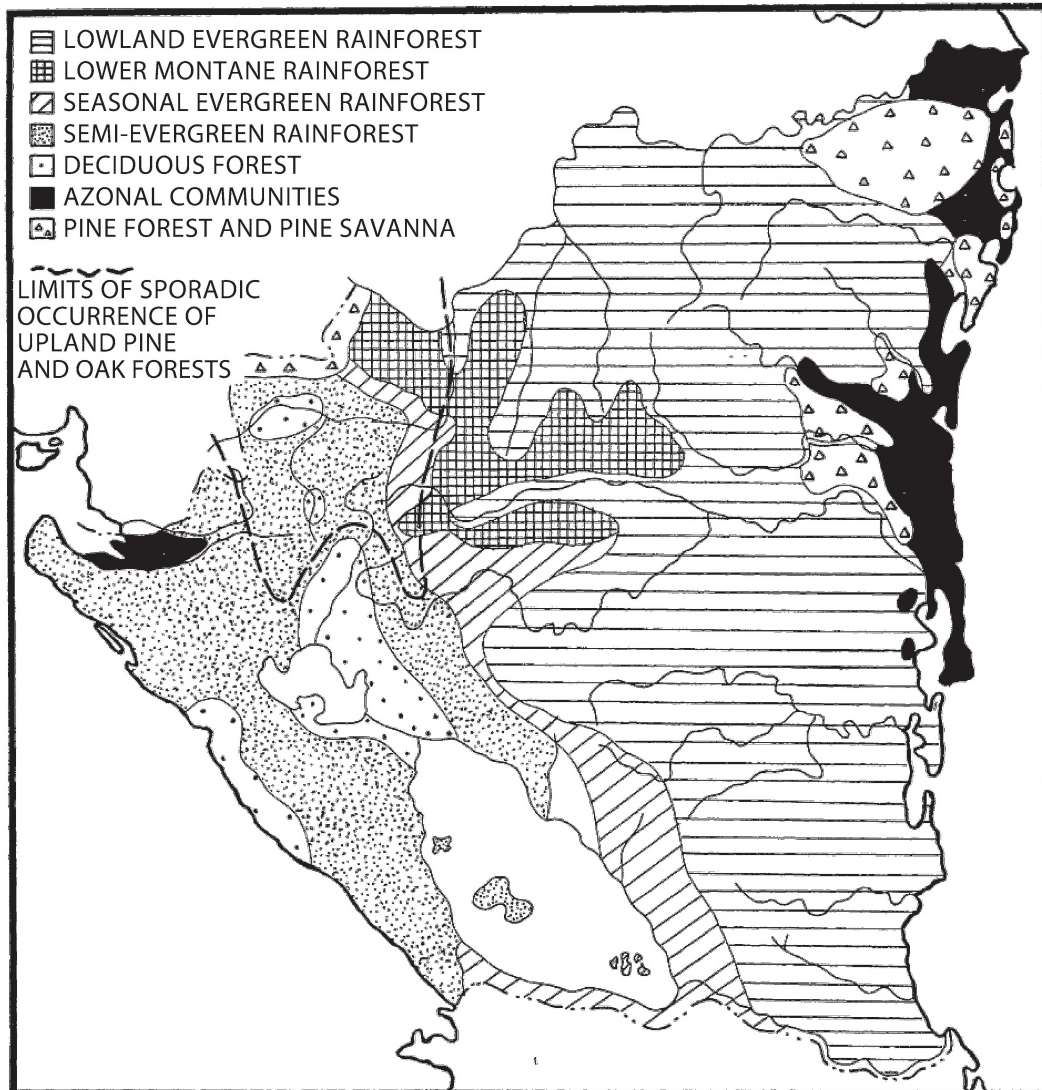


FIG. 3. Distribution of the major vegetation zones in Nicaragua (from Taylor 1963).

the manuscript to be fundamentally an important document of historical ornithology, we decided to incorporate Howell's name into the title of the publication to remind readers of the original authorship of the account.

Had Tom Howell been alive to see his manuscript published, he would undoubtedly have included a long list of field collaborators and Nicaraguan residents who assisted with his research in the country. Because we can only speculate whom that full list might have included, we refer the reader to the acknowledgments in Howell's many publications. We ourselves received prodding and encouragement over the years from many Nicaraguan ornithologists who desired to see the Howell manuscript in print. We especially wish to thank Tom Howell, Jr. and Yvonne Howell for helping to bring the project to fruition, Lloyd Kiff and F. Gary Stiles for their insightful comments and review of the manuscript, and Richard Earles for his meticulous copyediting.

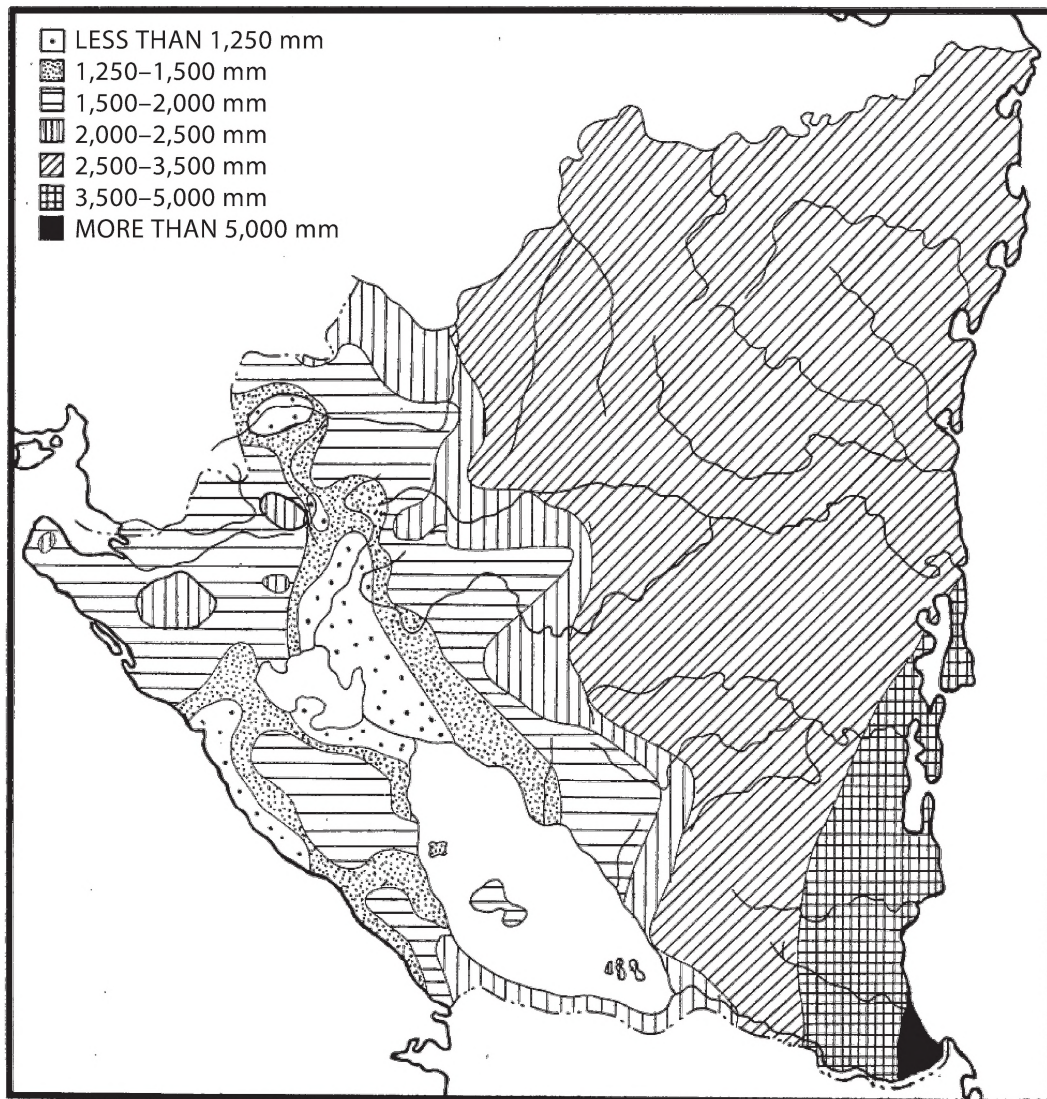


FIG. 4. Mean annual rainfall in Nicaragua (from Taylor 1963).

We sincerely hope that this publication of Tom Howell's invaluable contribution will help to close a chapter in the history of Nicaraguan ornithology. The document is historical in nature, recognizing the impressive scope of Howell's work, and does not pretend to be a complete compendium of our current knowledge of Nicaragua's birds. Nevertheless, we believe that the document provides a solid baseline for our understanding of the country's avifauna as of 1993 and should serve as a springboard for all those working today with the rich birdlife of this beautiful country. We leave it to others to consolidate the numerous records that have accumulated from 1993 to the present—over 50 new species (Martínez-Sánchez 2007)—and hope that the document will also serve as a reminder of the pressing need to publish investigations in peer-reviewed journals in a timely fashion in order to preserve this knowledge for future generations.

Much remains to be discovered about the birds of Nicaragua and their distributions. Nicaraguan forests comprise the largest tracts of extant lowland and subtropical forest in all of Central America,

large portions of which still remain essentially unexplored—especially in the hill regions west of San Juan del Norte and in the more rugged and relatively inaccessible Bosawás Biosphere Reserve. There is also much to be learned about the hilly habitats in the far northwest and the wetlands bordering the Golfo de Fonseca. It is our sincere hope that the publication of this manuscript will inspire both the ever-growing number of Nicaraguan biologists and the increasing number of North American birders and ornithologists visiting the country to work together to increase our collective understanding of Nicaraguan birds, their habitats, and their conservation.

Juan Carlos Martínez-Sánchez and Tom Will
15 March 2010