

A brief history of Ecuadorian ‘ornithofily’

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Presento un breve resumen de la historia de la ornitofilia, la afición por las aves, en Ecuador. El desarrollo de este ‘hobby’ en Ecuador es reciente y está en notable ascenso, aunque la investigación ornitológica lleva ya más de un siglo de vida. Los primeros albores de la ornitología en Ecuador fueron protagonizados por investigadores extranjeros, y recién hacia 1940 apareció el primer ecuatoriano en escena. De igual forma, el aviturismo también empezó como empresa de agencias internacionales (hacia 1980), pero los últimos diez años han visto el surgimiento de operadoras nacionales con guías de primer orden. Espero que esta reseña, junto con otras publicaciones previas sobre el desarrollo de la ornitología en Ecuador, incentiven la formación de una asociación nacional de observadores de aves, así como el incremento del trabajo de campo y la investigación.

Bird observation is the most popular nature-related activity, and now involves considerable sums of money¹⁰. Bird enthusiasts number millions in Europe and North America, with some of the oldest ornithological and bird protection societies numbering between 500,000 and 1,000,000 members (e.g., the National Audubon Society, in the USA, and Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds, in the UK). In Latin America, the ‘hobby’ is far less long-lived, but has grown significantly in recent decades. Here, I present a brief history of ‘ornithofily’ in Ecuador, coining this term to refer to the ‘empathy/love of birds’, as interpreted from its etymology (ornis = bird; filia = affinity).

Descriptions of Ecuadorian birds can be traced to the Spaniard colonial period¹¹, but such accounts do not necessarily entail empathy for birds. Rather, bird portrayals—and those of nature in general—are filled with fantastic, unreal descriptions that reflect the viewpoint of native wildness as a threat to humans. De Velasco¹¹ described bizarre birds taller than a horse, but also provided the first descriptions of some ‘real’ species like Black-headed Parrot *Pionites melanocephala* and Southern Yellow Grosbeak *Pheucticus chrysogaster*.

Going back further in time, we can find evidence for a fairly strong connection between people and nature, and in this case, with birds. Nevertheless, this relationship was more spiritual and religious, as can be inferred from numerous representations in ancient ceramics, silversmiths, rock craves, etc.³⁴. Similarly, in the oral tradition and history of most native cultures, both extinct and extant birds are associated with the origin of civilisations, the origin of life itself, and to fertility and food-gathering¹⁻².

In Ecuadorian traditional literature, references to birds are quite scarce, but interesting examples exist. For instance, Joaquín Gallegos Lara, a celebrated writer of the 1930s–1980s devoted an entire tale to the Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, regionally known as ‘Guaragua’³⁶, in which at least

five additional species from the western lowlands of Ecuador (probably the surroundings of Guayaquil, his hometown) are mentioned. The most notable example, however, is Jorge Carrera Andrade, renowned as one of the most brilliant Ecuadorian poets. Carrera Andrade, whose work appeared from 1922 through 1972, wrote several poems devoted to birds, such as ‘Golondrinas’ (Swallows), and ‘Micrograma sobre el colibrí’ (Microgram on the hummingbird), one of his most remarkable works. He seemed to have developed a real empathy for birds, although this is not specifically cited in biographies and mentions of his life and work, but can be inferred from his delightful ‘Biografía para uso de los pájaros’ (Biography to be used by birds). Another notable example is that of Miguel Saverio, a popular poet and storyteller from Olmedo, Manabí province, who has written a ‘redondilla’ (series of up to ten verses) in which he mentions 36 different bird species, using their vernacular names as used in the Olmedo region. It is remarkable that Sr Saverio, like all such poets and storytellers, mirrors the oral tradition of the *campesinos* of coastal Ecuador (known as *montubios*), and reflects a strong relationship between people and wilderness.

Ornithology in Ecuador commenced as a non-national’s activity in the late 19th century¹⁵. Ecuadorians, seemingly, participated only intermittently in expeditions until the arrival of those organised by the American Museum of Natural History (New York), headed by Frank M. Chapman who, curiously, never actually visited Ecuador. These expeditions also hired native collectors who helped create one of the richest bird collections ever made in Ecuador. However, with the exception of the Olalla family and a few others, most collectors remained anonymous, and most if not all collected solely for monetary gain, rather than through a genuine interest in birds.

During the first half of the 20th century, many ornithologists visited Ecuador and the Galápagos¹⁵.

Some made notable contributions to our knowledge of Ecuadorian avifauna^{4,9,33}, but most were ornithologists based at museums and research institutions with purely scientific interests, though many of them had a deep-rooted love of birds⁵. For example, one of the first collectors was actually a British diplomat who collected and observed birds in the environs of Quito (in 1847–49) during his spare time²⁶.

It was not until the 1940s that an Ecuadorian naturalist appeared on the scene. Gustavo Orcés pioneered field biology in Ecuador, covering all fields of vertebrate zoology, including ornithology¹³. Orcés' emphasis was upon research, not just leisure observation. During the 1950s and 1960s, more foreign ornithologists came to Ecuador. Bird science in the Galápagos took off, and the archipelago was acclaimed as one of the most important natural research laboratories in the world^{15,32}. Scientists like Robert Bowman, David Lack and Raymond Lévêque, amongst others, were prominent¹⁶. In mainland Ecuador, a noteworthy example was Stephen Marchant, a British oil engineer who lived in Ecuador for several years in the mid 1950s, who devoted long periods to bird observation in the surroundings of Santa Elena, resulting in well-known contributions to Ecuadorian ornithology^{20,21}.

During the 1970s another prominent Ecuadorian ornithologist emerged. Since his teenage years, Fernando Ortiz-Crespo had explored the still-wild areas in the environs of Quito, including several natural areas that no longer persist¹². His contributions over nearly three decades were outstanding^{22–26}, not only in terms of publications, but also by teaching and motivating numerous new biologists in bird observation and study. Although Ortiz-Crespo was also an academic ornithologist and biology historian, he became a keystone for both ornithology and 'ornithofily' in Ecuador, inspiring and encouraging new generations of 'bird people'¹².

Contemporary to Ortiz-Crespo were several non-nationals whose contributions to ornithology in Ecuador were also great. Among them, the most notable were Tjitte de Vries and Peter & Rosemary Grant, who made substantial contributions to avian knowledge in the Galápagos (de Vries also working in mainland Ecuador, to date). The Grants' case is noteworthy and renowned worldwide, with more than 100 papers on the ecology of Darwin's finches based on three decades of research¹⁷. Similarly, de Vries stands out as one of the most prolific ornithologists in Ecuador. Along with Ortiz-Crespo, de Vries was also crucial in the formative period for a new generation of ornithologists, myself included.

In the late 1970s Robert Ridgely arrived as a newcomer to Ecuadorian 'ornithofily' at a time when 'people interested in birds were a rarity'²⁸. He met Paul Greenfield, who was already living in

Ecuador, and formed a long-standing partnership that produced the most important book on the mainland's birds to date²⁸. During the 1980s, accompanied by several other ornithologists, notably Mark Robbins and Francisco Sornoza, they undertook numerous expeditions to unknown areas, resulting in the discovery of a multitude of new species for the country and several new to science^{30,31}. Concurrently, two Danes (Niels Krabbe and Jon Fjeldså) were also exploring mainland Ecuador. The two teams subsequently worked in partnership on several projects, thereby giving birth to a new state in Ecuadorian ornithology^{18,19}, and especially 'ornithofily'. Their research motivated an important upsurge in birdwatching in Ecuador during the late 1980s, with international birding tour groups (e.g., Birdquest in 1989, though Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours, in 1979, was the very first to come to Ecuador; R. Ridgely pers. comm.) already promoting trips to various parts of Ecuador, most of them led by Ridgely, Greenfield and other birding guides from overseas²⁸.

Ecuadorians were also becoming more interested in birds from a non-scientific viewpoint. In 1986 Juan M. Carrión published the first illustrated guide to the birds of an Ecuadorian region⁷ and a few years later he co-produced the first introductory guide in Spanish to the country's birds²⁶. In 1986 a group of ornithologists created the first conservation organisation devoted to birds: Corporación Ornitológica del Ecuador (CECIA, now Aves&Conservación). The following 20 years were crucial for the development of 'home-grown' ornithology and birding. In a survey conducted in 2004¹³, I found that the number of Ecuadorians publishing on birds had increased from 21 in the 1980s to 116 in the 1990s. Again, many of these new authors had a scientific slant, but a number of them were 'only' enthusiasts, spending a lot of time birding in the wild areas of Ecuador. In 1992 the first birding club was founded, named after Ted Parker. After five years of frequent activity, the club experienced a decline in both activities and membership, although in 1994 it had numbered 150 members.

Although international birding agencies were already operating in Ecuador, it was not until the 1990s that Ecuadorian tourism agencies truly realised that birdwatching held much promise for them. Neblina Forest, active since 1994, was the first Ecuadorian agency dedicated to bird tourism. The development of Neblina Forest over the last ten years has been extraordinary, and it is now operating in six countries, primarily with Ecuadorian guides (notably Lelis Navarrete). Several Ecuadorians have become first-class birding guides, working for Neblina Forest, other national and international birding agencies, and some reserves. The upsurge of birdwatching has

also led to the creation of private reserves that offer birding as one of their primary attractions. The famous Mindo area, one of the most renowned sites for birdwatching, is a pioneering example in this sense, where presently a large percentage of the population derive financial benefit from birding-related activities. However, the current state of tourism in the Mindo area is worrying, as it has created new environmental, social and cultural issues to tackle.

The 1990s were rich in 'bird people'. Expeditions from European universities, and other researchers, explored poorly known areas, especially in southern Ecuador, resulting in much new information on threatened species and additional species for the country's bird list^{3,5,6,27,35,37}. Independent naturalists and birders from overseas continued arriving and enthused over the birds and wild places alike, as well as contributing much new information. Amongst them, the late Paul Coopmans, Mitch Lysinger, Ben Haase and Harold Greeney must be highlighted. Ecuadorians also increased notably during this decade, with the advent of new names in ornithology and 'ornithofily' like Hernán Vargas, Tatiana Santander and Diego Cisneros, amongst others.

The first years of the new century saw further development. The publication of the Ridgely & Greenfield²⁸ guide was decisive in encouraging a new wave of birdwatching tours to Ecuador and in the impetus of Ecuadorians. Over 100 people are currently working in bird-related topics, from academic research and publication to conservation, birdwatching, education, etc.¹³. Several Ecuadorians are leading ornithology and 'ornithofily' in many ways, and cooperative work between non-nationals and nationals is strong. Fundación Jocotoco is wholly devoted to bird conservation and investigation throughout mainland Ecuador, establishing private reserves. Aves&Conservación also undertakes bird research and conservation, whilst many people, both in conservation NGOs and independently, are playing a key role in the further development of 'ornithofily' in our country. During a workshop to identify Important Bird Areas¹⁴ 130 people participated, whilst in the I Reunión Ecuatoriana de Ornitología, in 2003, nearly 120 participants attended. A recently created web discussion group already boasts c.150 members (85 Ecuadorians); though still small, it is increasing its reach.

It can be predicted that Ecuadorian ornithofily will only increase in strength with the recent publication of Ridgely & Greenfield's guide in Spanish²⁹. This will be crucial in engaging public enthusiasm for birds and fills a notable gap in the current needs of Ecuadorian ornithology and 'ornithofily'. Additionally, however, a guide to the

birds of the Galápagos and a guide to birdwatching sites in Spanish are sorely needed (the latter also in English, as the most recent such guidebook was published a decade ago³⁸). Small forward steps have been made, but further efforts are necessary. Besides the electronic discussion group, we need other means of communication and publication of field data, as well as a society or association to integrate 'bird people'. Collecting, though controversial, is also necessary. However, assessing current collecting needs is not the purpose of this paper and must be considered elsewhere. Our love of birds makes us realise the importance of defining common goals towards the conservation of bird populations across the whole country; 'rarities' and common species alike. However, it should not obscure the real conservation crisis that goes far beyond birds and wilderness. Birdwatching has the potential to contribute to nature conservation and development, but care must be paid, to avoid transforming it into another purely economic activity no different from current extractive activities in terms of ecological sustainability and, primarily, social justice and fairness. We must hope that bird enthusiasm will enhance new relations with our environment, in which respect and evenhandedness rule.

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CORRIGENDA

Ecuadorian ‘ornithofily’: a corrigendum

Soon after ‘A brief history of Ecuadorian ornithofily’² was published, a well-known ornithologist in Ecuador alerted me to a key step in Ecuadorian birding, perhaps the most relevant in recent years, which I had neglected to mention.

In 2006, following a process of research, workshops and interviews led by *Ministerio de Turismo, Corporación de Promoción de Exportaciones e Inversiones del Ecuador* and Mindo Cloudforest Foundation, the *Estrategia Nacional de Aviturismo* was released³. This document, the first for the country, assesses the current state of birding tourism in Ecuador, circuits, eco-routes, conservation implications and opportunities, whilst also delineating objectives, actions, stakeholders and outputs for further strengthening birdwatching. This document is crucial for developing birding tourism as a major source of income for communal organisations, landowners, reserves and tour operators, and for the country itself.

Alongside the *Estrategia*, two birdwatching guides for the southern provinces of Cañar, Azuay⁴, Loja and Zamora-Chinchipec¹ were recently published, further reinforcing birdwatching as an economic activity. These guides provide detailed information on birding routes in the austral Andes of Ecuador.

Not mentioning the *Estrategia* in my history of Ecuadorian ‘ornithofily’ was certainly a flaw. I hope this short corrigendum contributes to the continued understanding of the history, paths, present and perspectives of ornithology and ‘ornithofily’ in Ecuador. I express my sincere thanks and apologies to all those people and organisations involved in developing the *Estrategia*, and my thanks to Paul Greenfield for his insights into bird tourism in Ecuador.

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