

Birding Ecuador: a tribute to Paul Coopmans

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Received 18 May 2007; final revision accepted 25 June 2007
Cotinga 29 (2008): 12–14

I first met Paul a decade and a half ago in Ecuador. It was a bit hard for me at first, to have a newcomer overtaking a veteran at full speed, but I just had to accept it, and soon Paul became a good friend. He was great fun to be with, always full of bright, witty stories and biting remarks, and over the years we had many good times together, both in the field and at home. We put in some good partying too!

His talent at learning and distinguishing bird sounds was legendary, perhaps unsurpassed, and his acute hearing soon earned him the reputation for having ears in every part of his body. Being in the field together was not always easy, as he would constantly discuss bird sounds uttered so distantly that they were barely audible.

Paul worked hard at his craft—he always seemed to have either some eclectic music or a bird tape blasting on his living room speakers when I visited him—but such talent must be innate. Most of the high-power field people that I know started very young, but Paul's real interest in birding only took off during his one-year guiding stint (1985–86) on the Galápagos, when he was already in his early twenties. I have been told more than once that he was a fantastic interpreter of the archipelago's natural history. Without even a copy of Hilty & Brown's *A guide to the birds of Colombia*⁴ to his name, he was more than ready to jump ship near the end of his time there, to undertake his plan of crisscrossing the Neotropics, in a quest to absorb as much as he could about bird habits, distributions and vocalisations.

Armed with his first TCM-5000 Sony recorder, purchased during a visit to the USA, he went to Venezuela in 1987, where he seemed to master the birds in the blink of an eye. But this was only the beginning. Within a two-year period, Paul scoured most of the countries in Central and South America, producing 'mountains' of tape-recordings, many of which you hear on our audio publications^{3,6,7,9,10}. Before too long, word of Paul's abilities got out and he easily plugged himself into tour leading, where he rapidly became one of the most respected names in the business. Paul's intensity in the field was a hard act to follow, but it always seemed to pay off; if you could keep up with his pace, you could probably tackle the highest peaks in the world. Given the choice between guiding a relaxed group or one that preferred to rise at 04h00, he'd take the latter, because he really did get a thrill out of every moment spent afield . . . for Paul, making every dawn chorus was like that first

cup of coffee, and he could think of nothing worse than to waste the most precious 20 minutes of a day at a breakfast table.

Paul did not put up with sloppiness and mediocrity; he always told people to their faces when they did not live up to his standards. He was like that, even on his deathbed. You might have expected him to soften a little, when he knew that he only had a few more days to live, but not Paul. And his standards were high indeed. He would go through new publications of vocalisations and customarily find a great many mistakes. He found so many mistakes in the *Birds of Ecuador* DVD-ROM⁸ that he decided it would take him too long to tell me about them all and limited himself to special cases, when he would suddenly write and tell me about several misidentifications, or when he was discussing a cut in some other context. I will obviously have to be much more critical in the second edition, which will include all of Paul's (and John Moore's, Mitch Lysinger's, Lelis Navarrete's and hopefully several other people's) cuts from Ecuador.

During the last few years Paul was the 'grand old man' on the 'Aves_Ecuador' cyber forum, and always made sure that standards were kept high. Dwelling on subjects like albinistic birds or cagebirds was not permitted for any length of time, and users that had not even attempted to do the least bit of homework before asking questions were told to do so.

In 1991 Paul told me about a tyrant flycatcher song he had heard, but did not know. Tyrant flycatchers are a huge assembly of similar-looking species⁵, so I did not think much of it right away. However, I soon became aware of his skills, so, when he told me a few years later that he now knew the songs of all other tyrant flycatchers, and that he was sure that this one must pertain to an undescribed species, I immediately obtained the necessary collecting permits. We went to the field together to obtain specimens of it after tape-recording them, first at Bombuscaro, then twice along the 'Ministerio' (Loreto) road, and sure enough, it proved to be a species new to science¹. On one of the trips to the 'Ministerio' road, Mitch Lysinger was with us. We camped at the foot of Volcán Sumaco. The following morning was fantastic. It was the most bird-rich morning I have ever experienced at that place. Spirits were high.

Paul also independently discovered that several forms treated as subspecies in the literature were

better ranked as full species, or should be treated under a different species. Some of them he told me about, such as the nominate race of the Unicoloured Tapaculo *Scytalopus u. unicolor*², but generally he was full of secrets—his typical remark at the end of nearly every conversation about these discoveries was, “but don’t tell anyone”—so I am sure he knew about many other possible new species and interesting taxonomic cases.

Despite Paul’s brilliance in the field and uncanny ability to unearth new taxa from already ‘known’ species, he rarely found the time to publish his findings; he had certainly amassed enough material for many great papers. Whilst important in many ways, his grueling tour-guiding schedule occupied much of his valuable time. One can only imagine what more Paul might have achieved had he been permanently associated with a museum and had the chance to participate on expeditions to unexplored regions on a regular basis. He would surely have made several more discoveries, and with specimens to back them up, they would have been easier to publish.

It is a strange and empty feeling not to be able to send cuts to Paul for identification. The ongoing publications of Ecuadorian bird sounds, with John Moore and others^{3,6,7,9,10}, all of which Paul co-authored, have suffered a tragic setback due to the loss of Paul’s final security net, proofing against mistakes. Paul spent a great deal of his free time in a relentless effort to discard dubious recordings, yet, as much as possible, doing his best to include all known vocalisations of a given species. He was ruthless when rejecting cuts but, to my knowledge, was never proven wrong. I remember him once questioning a recording of mine (published as cut 3 on the DVD-ROM⁸) that I had labelled as a Grey-breasted Crake *Lateralus exilis* and suggested for use in *The birds of southwest Ecuador*³, a publication of which Paul was lead author. Instead, he decided to represent the vocalisation type with an (inferior) recording of his own. I was really annoyed at having my excellent recording rejected and was supported by another co-author in asserting that it was a typical vocalisation of Grey-breasted Crake. I complained to Paul, telling him that I suspected he had rejected my recording simply to get another of his own recordings included, which would result in there being more of his recordings than mine . . . in retrospect, a simple case of petty professional jealousy. In his usual straightforward manner he made it clear to me that he would never dream of undertaking such a lowly deed. And it didn’t take me long to realise that Paul’s stance was nothing more than his usual hallmark style; he demanded a flawless publication and simply did not agree that it sounded like a Grey-breasted Crake. I assured him that it had to be, because I was sure that it sang from a hidden

place in a patch of long grass in a ditch with just a few bushes behind it, and I knew of nothing else with a similar song. He just brushed my assurances aside, and said that it sounded more like a recording he had once heard of a Squirrel Cuckoo *Piaya cayana*. I was left with little other recourse than to go home and make more careful comparisons. To my great dismay (and admiration for Paul) I had to admit that he was probably right. I could finally detect the fine differences that ruled out Grey-breasted Crake. Once again, Paul’s genius ear set the record straight. *The birds of southwest Ecuador*³ is probably one of the most flawless and fine-tuned publications ever made of bird sounds. The last year, before his all-too-early death, Paul also commenced work on another of John Moore’s projects, *The birds of eastern Ecuador II, the Amazonian lowlands*. Whilst he did not have time to listen to all the cuts of the nearly 600 species, he did make a valuable contribution with respect to the choice of species, and listened to a lot of them, thereby avoiding the inclusion of many dubious or misidentified cuts. There is no doubt that the remaining co-authors will have to be more critical than before, now the safety net is gone. Unfortunately, this void may also result in several key vocalisations being omitted, simply because we do not have Paul to verify them.

Even now, when leaps and bounds have been made in our knowledge of tropical birds, we still have so much to discover about their distributions and habits; the chore of predicting well-guided conservation efforts, and bringing them to fruition, is a continuing and difficult task. Knowing the voices of these birds is a crucial skill when attempting to map their true distributions, in the hope that conservation be directed to where it is most needed. In many areas of the Neotropics, Paul knew this better than anyone. He was dedicated to recording bird sounds and could immediately hear what was most important to record.

Fortunately, Paul had the foresight to deposit his large collection of recordings from Central and South America at the Macaulay Library (LNS, Cornell University), making them publicly available. He may even have deposited a few from Africa as well; at least, I remember him coming back from a trip to Uganda and being very excited about having made a recording of a rare ground thrush. I would appreciate learning which species it was, as Paul’s excitement gave me the impression that it might be the only recording of the species. Paul’s collection includes a large number of unique or poorly known vocalisations, some of birds so rare that use of playback by tour groups simply to see the bird could adversely affect the species, and the use of such recordings is restricted to students of bird sounds or to researchers aiming to map the species’ distribution. Many of Paul’s cuts were

made on bird tours that he guided and, if you listen carefully, some include that distinctive and memorable whisper all his own . . . telling everybody to be quiet: a master bird-recordist at work. He will be missed greatly.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Mitch Lysinger for valuable comments and contributions to these reminiscences.

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