

A potted history of the Neotropical Bird Club



Chris Balchin

How did the Neotropical Bird Club start – and why? And what has it achieved in the 25 years of its existence? Neotropical Birding invited the man who has probably dedicated more of his life than anyone to helping the NBC to give his personal perspective on its story.

For me, it all started in 1992 when fellow British birder Tim Marlow contacted me and asked: “Are you interested in starting a new club for the Neotropics based on the Oriental Bird Club?” Tim had been impressed by what the ‘OBC’ had achieved in promoting birds and bird conservation in Asia, and – along with his friend Guy Kirwan – was keen to do something equivalent for South and Central America, and the Caribbean. Tim’s suggestion fell on fertile ground. As a ‘world birder’, I had always been motivated by the belief that I should give something back to conservation as opposed to just adding ticks to my list. I had also had numerous conversations with other birders about whether any North Americans might be forming such an organisation.

The credit for starting the ball rolling goes to Guy, who struck up discussion with Tim while they were journeying aboard on an overnight bus between Quito and Guayaquil in Ecuador. By the time they arrived, the pair had galvanised themselves into forming a ‘club’ dedicated to the birds of the Neotropics. In July 1992, Tim, Jeff Blincow and I gathered at Guy’s house in Norwich, UK, to discuss how we might put the idea into practice. Between us we put together a list of people who might also be interested in establishing such an organisation and bounced around ideas



1 Chris Balchin’s notes of the meeting (Norwich, July 1992) where the first plans for the Neotropical Bird Club were put in place. (Chris was clearly the NBC’s natural secretary, right from the start! *Ed.*)

about what it might most usefully do (Fig. 1). To be frank, I am not sure if *any* of us really knew what we were getting into – but we had a great deal of enthusiasm and knew we could benefit from the experience of two existing organisations: the Oriental Bird Club (formed in 1984; see orientalbirdclub.org) and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME, formed in 1978; osme.org).

Momentum gathers

So it came to pass that on a warm sunny day the ‘launch committee’ convened at 11h15 on 30 August 1992 in the ‘Old Warden’s Hut’ at Cley-next-the-sea, Norfolk, UK (Fig. 2). Those present were Jeff Blincow, Simon Cook, Jon Curson, Simon Fogg, Mark Golley, Nigel Goodgame, Guy Kirwan, Frank Lambert, Tim Marlow, John Mason and me. We agreed the name of the organisation – that bit was easy – and agreed to call our journal *Cotinga* (although *Crax* and *Tapaculo* ran it close). Given differences of opinion on what geographical coverage was intended by ‘the Neotropics’, we agreed to use the definition contained in *A dictionary of birds* (Campbell & Lack 1985), i.e.

“I enjoyed my spell chairing NBC and am proud of what NBC has done for its members and conservation over the last 25 years. Well done to all involved and especially to David Fisher, Chris Collins and Chris Balchin for their unstinting service and to Guy Kirwan and James Lowen for continuing to deliver such great products. When I retire, I hope to return to Council!”
Dave Capper, NBC chair 2001–03

