

# Neotropical Birding

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# *Birds and People* in the Neotropics

**Mark Cocker and David Tipling**

A top writer and photographer duo invite you, the Neotropical birding community, to contribute your stories and experiences about the cultural importance of the region's birdlife as part of a new groundbreaking project.



Hummingbirds such as the Rufous-crested Coquette *Lophornis delattrei* captivate modern Latin Americans, as they once did ancient societies like the Toltecs (David Tipling/[www.davidthipling.com](http://www.davidthipling.com))

**B**irds and People sets out to be the largest-ever survey of the cultural importance of birds. The final aim will be a book that presents a global survey of the multitudinous ways in which humans and birds interact; publication is planned for 2012. In this short note, we outline this major new project, a collaboration between BirdLife International and the publishers Random House, and invite *Neotropical Birding* readers to contribute their knowledge and experience.

## Neotropical birds in human culture

It is hardly surprising that the Neotropics, as the most bird-rich continent in the world, has produced an extraordinary array of relationships between humans and the region's avifauna. The

most obvious part that birds play, as they do worldwide, is as a domestic source of protein, chicken now outstripping all other meat sources.

Of course, these cultural roles have not just been a matter of providing food; sometimes the manner in which Neotropical birds have been incorporated into Latin American life has been unique to the region. Typical is the elaborate feather-craft once practiced by pre-Columbian peoples including the Maya and Mexica (Aztecs). The inherently fragile yet apparently spectacular works of art, which barely survived Spanish conquest, exploited the rich palette of colours present in the plumages of native bird families, including the macaws and trogons. Many were specifically kept in captivity to provide feathers, which were extracted without killing the birds.

**Hummingbirds** (Trochilidae): hummingbirds have had a long history of capturing human attention well before modern birders started to relish them. They are embedded in many traditional stories and myths, very often as bringers of precious gifts to humankind, such as light, sun and medicine. For the Western world hummingbirds were once a major source of adornment in costume and hats. They may still be hunted by indigenous communities for their plumage and for other

products. For example, Marvellous Spatuletail *Lodigesia mirabilis*, a stunning hummingbird classified as Endangered, was killed in Peru for the supposed aphrodisiacal properties of its minute heart<sup>2</sup>. But is it still? In the USA, nectar feeders are a commonplace part of bird-feeding stations, and the backyard enjoyment of hummingbirds is a big part of the North American garden experience. Yet how widespread are these practices in the Neotropics?



Violet-bellied Hummingbird *Damophila julie* (David Tipling/[www.davidthipling.com](http://www.davidthipling.com)). Guatemalan children still shoot hummingbirds (albeit not this species, which occurs from Panama to Ecuador), in mid-air with slingshots, in the self-fulfilling belief that eating their hearts will improve their aim. Does this folklore occur in other countries?

In this lost art, as in so much of Mesoamerican culture, the centrality of the Resplendent Quetzal *Phoromacchrus moccino* (manifest, for instance, in the name of the deity and culture hero, *Quetzalcoatl*) can hardly be overstated<sup>7</sup>. Some of the bird's ancient cultural significance still resonates in modern Central America, where quetzals are even now hunted for their plumage<sup>1</sup>. However, other responses to this Near Threatened species have been very positive. In Guatemala the Resplendent Quetzal is the national bird and the currency is called the *quetzal*, a direct echo of a time when their real feathers functioned as money for the Maya. Today a quetzal image appears on both coins and bank notes.

This one example illustrates how birds are present in our daily lives at an almost subliminal level. They are a major inspiration for music and art. They appear on flags, in business logos, commercial designs, on television and every conceivable human product. They act as national emblems, but also as totems to define local communities. Birds are also deeply embedded in language, as a source of metaphor and idiom. 'Chick', 'cock', 'cold turkey', 'crow', 'eagle-eyed', 'gullible', 'kite' and 'swan about' represent just the tiniest sample of avian donations to spoken English, while *chacalaca*, meaning 'chatterbox' in Spanish-speaking areas of the United States is just one such example in Spanish.

We perhaps ignore these many-faceted 'usages' of birds at some risk, since they can often influence attitudes towards the living creatures. Once again the Resplendent Quetzal makes the case. The bird's powerful historical and symbolic associations in Central America mean that it is frequently selected and highlighted as a flagship to promote forest conservation.

## Some important bird-human stories

Many important cultural responses to birds are not to be found in mainstream ornithological literature, or indeed in any written form. By their very nature they are part of a folk and oral tradition, which is one reason why we are appealing for help from NBC members. The adjacent box contains just a small selection of some of the stories that we hope NBC members will help to illuminate and document with first-hand information.

## How you can get involved

The *Birds and People* book will be unusual in incorporating the experiences, stories and words of as many individual contributors as possible. These will be used, under the author's own name (with full acknowledgement), to capture the numerous meanings and values which Neotropical birds carry. There is a dedicated website [www.birdsandpeople.org](http://www.birdsandpeople.org), where you can contribute to discussion fora on specific topics. Alternatively, you can e-mail or send surface mail to us directly (see contact details below).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Rheas** (Rheidae): both species have been traditionally hunted for meat, leather and eggs and are now widely kept in a semi-domesticated state. Their feathers are widely used as feather dusters, and sold by itinerant peddlers on the streets of cities such as Santiago and Buenos Aires. Are they exploited for any other purpose?



An Argentine cleaning lady using a duster made from the feathers of Greater Rhea *Rhea americana* (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

**Muscovy Duck** *Cairina moschata*: one of only a handful of native South American birds to be domesticated, it is still kept widely throughout the region. But is it also valued as a pet and consumer of unwanted household invertebrates? The rather odd English and scientific names (*Cairina* means 'from Cairo', the Egyptian capital) are thought to be based on false assumptions about the bird's Old World origins<sup>4,5</sup>. Does anyone have information that would prove otherwise?

**Andean Condor** *Vultur gryphus*: an enormously important bird in stories and legends, its feathers have been used in ceremony and its bones famously made into musical pipes. Condors are still trapped to feature as a centrepiece in cultural celebrations at the high Andean town of Cotabambas, Peru. The ritual contest between a condor and a bull, in which the bird represents the resistance and triumph of indigenous people over Spanish tyranny (symbolised by the bull), is held on the country's independence day. Known as the *Yawar fiesta* (Yawar is 'blood' in the Quechua language) it typifies the manner in which birds often stand as emblems for our highest ideals.

**Trumpeters** (Psophidae): these loud-voiced birds are still kept as pets in Amazonia, where they are valued for raising the alarm, day or night, when disturbance occurs around the homestead. Firsthand accounts of this widely repeated—but little documented—practice would be especially welcome.

**Parrots** (Psittaciformes): their cultural importance as pets, plumes, meat, hard currency (through the pet

trade) and status symbols almost needs no introduction. Yet parrots are also frequently featured in poetry, myth, story and song, film and popular culture. We want your help to cover all these diverse themes.

**Owls** (Strigiformes) and **nightjars** (Caprimulgidae): many members of both families are still credited with the powers of prophesy, often proclaiming evil news to the hearer. They are shunned and even persecuted on the basis of these beliefs. Some species may be more feared than others. Which are they?

**Oilbird** *Steatornis caripensis*: this colonial cave-dwelling species is reported to be widely in decline because of human activity. It was traditionally valued as a source of oil, which is said to burn cleanly without smoke or odour, and is used for cooking and lighting. The name in Spanish-speaking regions, *gaucharo*, refers to the bird's harsh scream, a sound once steeped in superstition<sup>2,3</sup>. Do the name and the folklore still survive, and is the species still exploited for oil?

**Toucans and barbets** (Ramphastidae): as well as providing food, many members of this family supplied plumages whose tropical palette formed a dazzling contribution to indigenous Latin American ceremonial dress. Toucans have the additional benefit of bright, often geometrically patterned, mandibles, which can be arranged into striking head and chest ornaments. Museums around the world house examples of these beautiful feather/bird-part display garments<sup>6</sup>, but are they still made and worn?

**Ovenbirds** (Furnariidae): this exclusively Neotropical family represents a perverse inversion of the norm. The manner in which ovenbirds have largely ducked beneath the cultural radar is itself intriguing and noteworthy (though it is perhaps matched or even surpassed by the lack of human attachment to the tyrant flycatchers [Tyrannidae]!). It can be explained partly by the ovenbirds' dull colour, their unobtrusive manner, relatively small size—and therefore insignificance as food. For many species, if not all, this lack of interest might also be partly explained by their forest habitat, where they are seen by few. One striking exception is the furnariids' importance to aficionados of rainforest birding, particularly for the memory-straining identification challenge that they represent. This is itself a cultural theme we wish to pursue. The **Rufous Hornero** *Furnarius rufus*, Argentina's national bird, is another glaring exception. The *horneros* (Spanish for 'baker') are the genus from which the whole family takes its English name, and the Rufous Hornero is well known for its huge mud oven-like nest. It has importance in folk history, stories, poetry etc. Which aspects are significant in your area?



Parrots such as these Red-and-green Macaws *Ara chloropterus* have been eaten as food, kept as pets, traded for the cagebird market, converted into headgear or human costume and treasured as emblems of the tropics for centuries (David Tipling/[www.davidthipling.com](http://www.davidthipling.com))



Andean Condors *Vultur gryphus* are the focus of a massive body of folklore throughout their entire range (David Tipling/[www.davidthipling.com](http://www.davidthipling.com))



Keel-billed Toucan *Ramphastos sulfuratus* (David Tipling/[www.davidthipling.com](http://www.davidthipling.com)). The soft part of toucans and barbets once featured widely in traditional ritual costume in many parts of the Neotropics. Are they still harvested for such purposes?