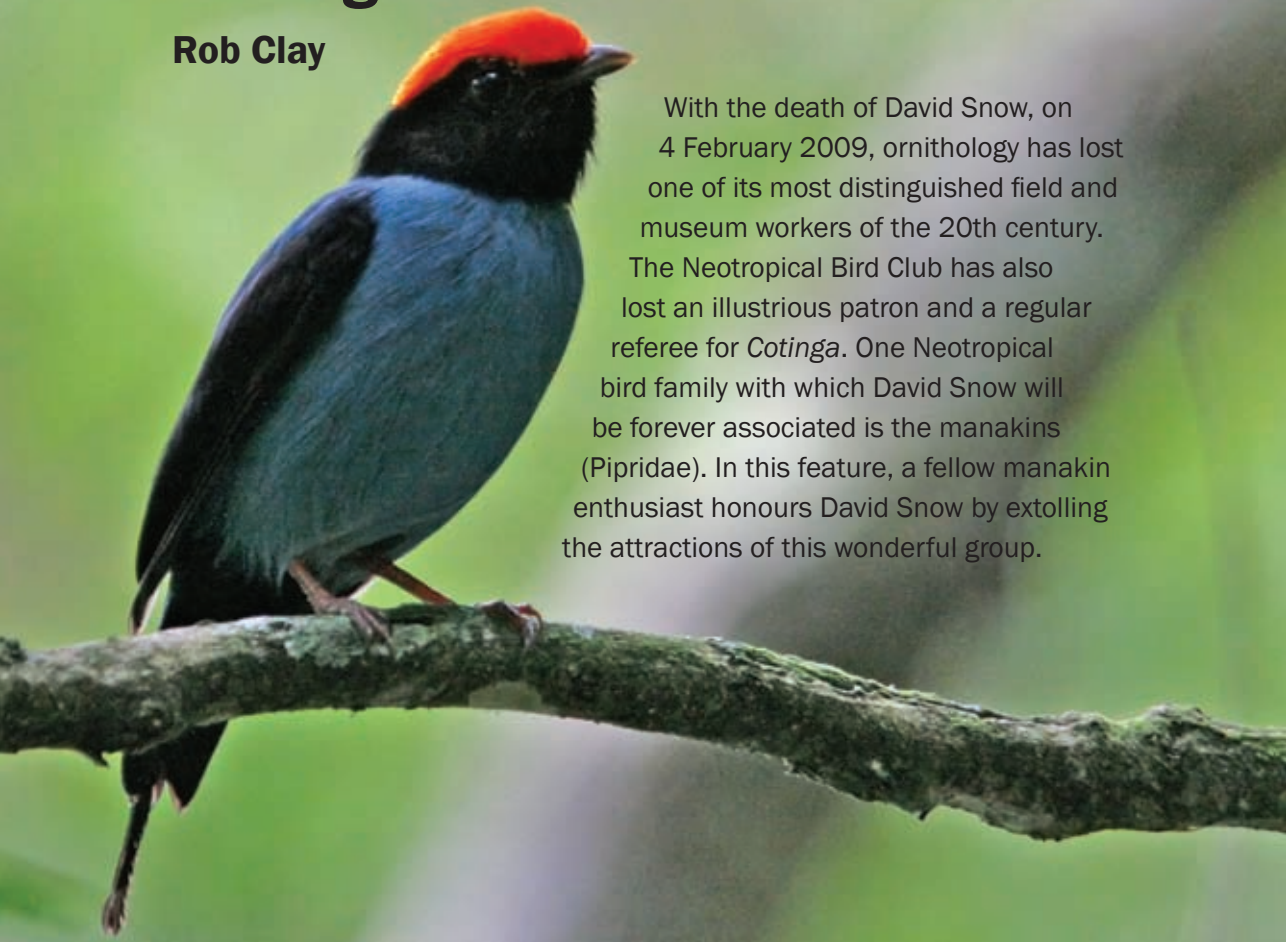


NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 5

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# Musing on manakins: homage to David Snow

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With the death of David Snow, on 4 February 2009, ornithology has lost one of its most distinguished field and museum workers of the 20th century. The Neotropical Bird Club has also lost an illustrious patron and a regular referee for *Cotinga*. One Neotropical bird family with which David Snow will be forever associated is the manakins (Pipridae). In this feature, a fellow manakin enthusiast honours David Snow by extolling the attractions of this wonderful group.

Blue Manakin *Chiroxiphia caudata* (Stuart Elsom/www.stuartelsom.co.uk): "... to see [a Blue Manakin] alive in its dim retreats inclines one to believe in some woodland sprite rather than a mere matter of flesh and blood, bearing the diagnostic character, feathers, that would forever relegate it to a humdrum class along with chickens and ducks and English sparrows."<sup>1</sup>

Amongst Neotropical ornithologists and birders, David Snow's name, output and fame are legendary. With his late wife, Barbara, David studied and published extensively on two Neotropical bird families, cotingas (Cotingidae) and manakins (Pipridae).

And who can blame them. Manakins are jewels among passerines, typified by colourful males that perform elaborate courtship displays, usually at established arenas termed 'leks'. These rituals include some of the most complex movements and highly evolved social systems

in the avian world. Only writers as eloquent as David himself can do linguistic justice to manakins' dazzling displays, but I will nevertheless endeavour to evoke their charm and beauty.

No Neotropical birder should miss the opportunity to observe the antics of *Pipra* manakins on their display perches. Not content with merely darting back and forth or leaping 180°, male Golden-headed *P. erythrocephala*, Red-capped *P. mentalis* and Red-headed Manakins *P. rubrocapilla* indulge the attendant females with 'backward slides'. In a 'moonwalking'



Captions on following page

manoeuvre reminiscent of the late Michael Jackson, males perform a reverse glide with head down, tail elevated and yellow thighs flaunted.

But the twinkle-toed *Pipra* don't stop there: in the so-called *aureola* group—which comprises Crimson-hooded *P. aureola*, Band-tailed *P. fasciicauda* and Wire-tailed Manakins *P. filicauda*—two males perform coordinated displays around the perch of the dominant male. In the case of Wire-tailed Manakins, this exhibition culminates in the dominant male using his tail filaments as a tactile organ, 'tickling' the female under her chin.

Meanwhile, the 'firecracker' displays of *Manacus* manakins represent the avian equivalent of pole dancing. These dancing kings leap between saplings (the 'poles') around cleared courts,

accompanying their manoeuvres with sharp cracks (thought to be produced by the wings) and harsh grunts. The action suddenly pauses when males freeze and extend their 'beard' of elongated throat feathers, and peaks when the male slides down the 'pole' to copulate with a receptive female.

The *Manacus* show is undoubtedly spectacular, but the most elaborate piprid repertoire and social organisation belong to members of the genus *Chiroxiphia*. The blue, black and red males duet to attract females. Should a potential mate appear, these circus performers cartwheel over one another along a slender perch in the undergrowth while calling nasally; they punctuate these performances with extended 'butterfly flights', conducted in comparatively eerie silence. Usually just two males perform, but up to seven Blue Manakins *C. caudata* have been observed cartwheeling together.

Most birders think of manakins as undergrowth species, so imagine researchers' surprise when they discovered that several species have aerial displays above the canopy. Members of the genera *Corapipo*, *Heterocercus* and *Tyrannetes* are now known to undertake such courtship flights, the most remarkable of which is that of the Orange-crested Manakin *H. aurantiivertex*. Having spiralled upwards as high as 100 m above the forest canopy, the male plummets with a hissing sound. Levelling out immediately above the canopy with an explosive 'pop', the bird then flies in a horizontal arc before descending rapidly to its terrestrial display arena.

It was as a Neotropical neophyte, barely out of my teens and having just returned from my first three months of fieldwork in Paraguay, that I first came across David's name. Strange snaps and plaintive cries from the undergrowth (displaying White-bearded Manakins *Manacus manacus*) and cartwheeling flashes of blue and red (dancing Blue Manakins) harried me from the field into my university's zoology library. There I found seminal works by David on Golden-headed, White-bearded and Blue-backed Manakins *Chiroxiphia pareola* in Trinidad and Tobago, all of which led me from the library back to the field.

Over the following years, questions raised in David's publications inspired doctoral studies that provided me with the opportunity to spend many privileged months studying *Manacus* and *Chiroxiphia* manakins. The long quiet hours waiting at each lek provided an abundance of time for musing, and—as I bet David found—led to more questions than answers. But nothing can compare to the mad minutes of action when a

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Captions to photos on p 13

Top row, left and right: Red-headed Manakins *Pipra rubrocapilla* (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding). Manakin displays include a number of highly stylised postures and movements, some of which may help establish dominance hierarchies

Second row, left: The male Red-capped Manakin reveals his yellow thighs while displaying (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Second row, center: David Snow's contributions to Neotropical ornithology were honoured in 2001 by the creation of the genus *Snowornis* for two species of Andean green pihas, including Olivaceous Piha *Snowornis cryptolophus* (José Illanes/Tropical Birding)

Second row, right: In the Crimson-hooded Manakin *Pipra aureola* and other members of the '*aureola* group' of *Pipra* manakins, two males perform alternating display flights, but only the dominant or alpha male gets to mate (Maxime Dechelle; <http://lepaparazzo.skyrock.com>)

Third row, left and right: Blue-backed Manakins *Chiroxiphia pareola*. Male *Chiroxiphia* pass through an age-specific series of subadult (predefinitive) plumages (e.g. left: Maxime Dechelle; <http://lepaparazzo.skyrock.com>) before acquiring full adult (definitive) plumage in their fourth year (as with these dancing birds, right: Ciro Albano/[www.nebrazilbirding.com](http://www.nebrazilbirding.com))

Bottom left: Uniquely among birds, alpha male Wire-tailed Manakins *Pipra filicauda* use tail filaments as a tactile organ, tickling the female under her chin prior to copulation (Hadoram Shirihi/ *The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world*)

Bottom right: Males of the four *Manacus* species have a similar plumage pattern, differing primarily in the colour of the collar, throat and belly. Yellow appears in three of the species, but not White-bearded Manakin *Manacus manacus*, so it is surprising that this individual of the greyest-bellied subspecies *guttatus* shows some yellowish feathering on the cheeks (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

lek of *Manacus* males explode into life upon the arrival of a female. And there is nothing like the rush of adrenalin that courses through a manakin-watcher's body when the plaintive *teamoo* call (in Spanish, *te amo*: 'I love you') of a dominant male Long-tailed Manakin *C. linearis* suddenly shifts to a delighted *wit wit* that indicates that he's found a male partner willing to duet and dance.

I found myself becoming personally attached to individual male manakins, and I bet that David would have been the same. I like to think that David would have wept, just as I did, when I found the top male White-collared Manakin *M. candei* at my study site with a broken leg—his 'career' surely over. My tears of sorrow were replaced with joyous (and astonished) weeping the following season, when this male reappeared to continue copulating. Clearly a champion among the 'stickmen' (the local name for *Manacus* in Trinidad), he miraculously managed slides and bounces despite having just one functional leg.

My champion stickman *Manacus* continued to contribute to future generations even after a seeming demise. In similar vein, David Snow's work will doubtless continue to shape future aspects of Neotropical ornithology and ornithologists. I never had the honour of meeting David personally, but he was generous

with his time in providing guidance through correspondence. Those who know him have described him as kind, shy and extraordinarily modest. It seems somehow appropriate that such a man should become the ornithological godfather of what is probably the most ostentatious of Neotropical bird families, the manakins.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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