

Ted Parker: the Man, the Myth and the Legend

Ted Parker was an exceptionally talented birder. He was able to rattle off the names of all species in a tropical “bird party” at the speed of a machine gun, and his sense of hearing was supreme. His fascinating life and work in South America was of paramount importance to Neotropical ornithology. Indeed, his achievements might be said to have taken birding into a new dimension. Many birders have no doubt pondered over the qualities that made him one of the most accomplished ornithologists ever, so I will describe some of them here.

T O M A S C A R L B E R G

Ted Parker’s supernatural gifts as one of the most talented birders ever – which one might say were comparable to those of a shaman – allowed him to communicate with birds as if in a state of trance. This is the kind of imagery that springs to mind as I try to portray the American ornithologist Theodore A. Parker III. Alternatively, we might think of him as the Mozart of ornithologists, whereas most

other skilled birders might at best attain the level of a Salieri.

On Tuesday, August 3, 1993, Ted Parker, then aged 40, flew with five colleagues and a pilot in a small plane at very low altitude in order to scan the coastal forest some 500 km southwest of Quito, Ecuador. The others with him included Alwyn Gentry, aged 48, and Parker’s fiancée, Jaqueline Goerck.

A few years ago, I was myself a passenger onboard a small plane flying over the Andes and into the Amazon basin between Quito and Coca. The constant turbulence made this trip one of my most terrifying experiences. People vomited or held their breath, and the cabin crew was noticeably jittery, but in the end we landed safely. Ted Parker and his friends were, however, less fortunate.

On Friday, August 6, 1993, the NEW YORK TIMES published the news that Ted Parker’s plane



While birding, Ted Parker focused on vocalizations. With the use of tape playback, he methodically tracked down every avian sound in the rain forest. Besides, he remembered everything he had heard. Here during a field trip to Rio Heath, along the border between Peru and Bolivia, 1988. Photo: Ken Rosenberg

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From the mid-1970s through the 1980s Ted's primary source of income was to be a leader of bird tours. This gave him the opportunity to study birds in hundreds of localities in the Neotropics. Here with a group of birders at Explorer's Inn, Peru, 1982. Photo: Larry McQueen

had crashed into a cloud-covered mountain. Jaqueline Goerck survived, along with two Ecuadoran biologists. She and Carmen Bonifaz, a botanist, made their way downward through the rough mountain terrain for hours, despite broken bones and other injuries. Eventually, they were found by a few local villagers who took them to a seaside town for rescue by an Air Force plane, which flew them to Guayaquil for hospitalization. Later that day, Alfredo Luna, an ecologist who was severely injured, was also rescued. Ted, Al Gentry and the pilot had all died.

According to Russell Mittermeier, chairman of Conservation International (CI) in Washington, D.C., the organization for which the team was working, Ted Parker and Al Gentry “carried two-thirds of the unpublished knowledge of Neotropical biodiversity

in their minds.” Ted’s encyclopaedic knowledge of birds and bird song was legendary. A quick glance, for instance, at the reference list in the *HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD*, Volumes 8 and 9 (on several Neotropical bird families) should be enough to give you an idea of Ted Parker’s influence, since it is crammed with his publications. The premature deaths of Parker and Gentry were lamented throughout the biological world, not just among their colleagues and friends at CI and Louisiana State University (LSU), Parker’s research home. John O’Neill of LSU, the renowned Neotropical ornithologist, said that Ted was “an unsurpassed field ornithologist,” in part because of his ability to identify some 4,000 bird species by their calls alone. How many birders are able to identify even 400 species – or even 200 – in that way?



Ted Parker was well aware of the extraordinary risks that he took by working in remote areas. However, he had no aspiration of becoming a martyr. The thing he feared most about doing field work was that he had to rely on small planes in order to reach many otherwise inaccessible sites. Photo: Conservation International, Guyana, February 1993.

Many students of tropical biology have heard anecdotes about Ted Parker's field abilities. For example, he once listened to a recording made by Edward Wolf, a colleague of mammalogist Louise Emmons, whom Parker had asked to run some tape at a field site in Bolivia, so he could analyze it later. Amidst the many birds in the dawn chorus he heard a new song and postulated the existence of an undescribed antwren of the genus *Herpsilochmus*. Ornithologists are still working this one out based on Ted's discovery, but they will probably prove him correct (Gorton, personal communication).

Another anecdote tells of the young Ted Parker, while in his early college years, working out bird songs by listening to the earliest LP recordings of Mexican birds. But he was less interested in the intentionally recorded species than in the weak background calls and songs of birds not even listed on the jacket, which he identified one by one!

According to Roger Tory Peterson, the grand old man of American birding, Ted's acute sense of hear-

ing and sound analysis made him "one in a million". Phoebe Snetsinger, the great international superstar among birders for having been the first to see 8,000 species, experienced Ted's skills first-hand when she travelled with him on field trips. In her delightful memoir, *BIRDING ON BORROWED TIME*, she describes his ability to "name – at the pace of a machine gun – all bird species within a quick-moving flock, which a few seconds later was gone forever."

Thus far, I have mentioned four components of Ted Parker's greatness as a birder: he was a pioneer, he was willing to take risks and stretch his limits, he acquired a massive amount of hard-earned knowledge, and he possessed an exquisite sense of hearing.

During the late 1980s, Ted advanced a novel biological inventory concept he called "rapid assessment," which combined traditional field methods with cutting-edge technology. He enlisted a team of world-class field biologists for CI's new Rapid Assessment Program (RAP), which he had been hired to lead. The team of Ted Parker, Alwyn Gentry, Louise Emmons, and Robin Foster (a botanist and ecologist) – and, later, others – rapidly surveyed vulnerable habitats in the Neotropics in order to identify biodiversity hotspots for conservation. Thanks to Ted's leadership, the RAP team, CI, and in-country leaders and organizations, large areas of tropical forest were protected, most notably that comprising Alto Madidi National Park in Bolivia.

When Ted Parker spoke of the importance of protecting tropical ecosystems, his deep knowledge and passionate conviction often made a deep impression on listeners. He had acquired this knowledge by spending innumerable hours in the field, braving cold rainy mornings as well as long days and nights pestered by insects, periodically short of funding and proper food.

This makes it all the more remarkable that he was unfailingly generous in the way he shared his hard-earned knowledge, yet for the same reason it is not surprising that he was a rich source of inspiration to other ornithologists. Over his many years in the field he also made a vast number of Neotropical bird recordings, which comprise a veritable gold mine for



From 1974 through to 1993, Ted Parker averaged six months annually in the field. He rapidly achieved the reputation as the foremost authority on the identification and distribution of Neotropical birds. Here at Explorama Lodge, Peru 1984.

Photo: Larry McQueen

scientists and birders to this day. Over 10,000 of his recordings are archived in the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York.

Ted Parker's talents were, of course, only partly due to his genes. His parents whole-heartedly supported his career, despite some initial scepticism and much concern about his becoming a birding vagabond thousands of miles away from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he grew up. He also received the sort of vital initial support from older birders and ornithologists that every young birder needs, and later in life his colleagues at LSU were supportive and nurturing.

We may thus add the following items to the list of Ted Parker's qualities: readiness to use new technology, ability to communicate enthusiasm as well as knowledge, relentless energy and indifference to hardships during field trips and moral and scientific support from family, friends and colleagues throughout his life. That he never acquired an advanced academic degree sometimes got in the way. Certain academic ornithologists, for example, were reluctant to credit his accomplishments, but he persevered and ultimately was accepted and respected by virtually all of them.

The American birder and writer, Kenn Kaufman, begins his book *KINGBIRD HIGHWAY* in the following way: "Dedicated to the memory of Theodore A. Parker III (1953–1993): Ted Parker was not destined to slow down, ever. He was like a runaway train,

except that he was running on tracks that he had planned out for himself, and he knew exactly where he was going." The year 1953 was auspicious for another reason as well, for that was when Roger Tory Peterson travelled extensively in the USA with the British ornithologist, James Fisher. In his book *WILD AMERICA*, which describes their adventures, Peterson mentions in a footnote that his bird list for that year totalled 572 species, which of course was a new record. It was also an impressive one, at that, because the total known number of bird species in the USA at that time was only 650.

In 1972 Kenn Kaufman set out to become the first person to see 600 species in one year, but he gives a vivid description of how he was quickly defeated in that effort before he had really got started. In late January, he received news that an 18 year-old Pennsylvania birder had recorded 626 species the year before. That young birder was, of course, Ted Parker. Kaufman became increasingly intrigued by his rival. Who was he, and was he truly such an outstanding birder? Kaufman ran into someone who had met Parker in the field and the rumours were readily confirmed: "Is he ever! He could name all the shorebirds [waders] a mile away. He could name all the little birds flying overhead." I'm gonna hate this guy, Kaufman said to himself.

When Kaufman was included in the "Tucson Five", a group of young hotshot birders with Ted Parker as their obvious leader, he learned that Parker was actually a decent guy – at least when his mind was not



The Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager Buthraupis aureodorsalis is Vulnerable (VU) and only known from a very small area at high altitudes (3,050–3,500 m) in North-Central Peru. It was first described in 1974. Ted Parker was very eager to observe this species and report on it. When he finally connected with his dream bird in January 1975, he wrote in his diary: "... a larger bird moved into low bushes about thirty feet from me – it was the tanager, and in the early morning light its intense golds, blues, and velvety black colors against the lichen-covered limbs melted in to create a memory that will always be with me." Photo: Gunnar Engblom, Bosque Unchog, Huanco, Peru, December 2007.

fixed on a particular bird. Then he was oblivious of everyone and everything. When it came to deciding where to go or how to scan a particular area, or to discerning the most subtle bird calls, or identifying the most difficult species, or finding the most unexpected rarities, they all relied on Parker.

In **KINGBIRD HIGHWAY** Kaufman reflects on Ted Parker's talent: "I get the impression that Ted Parker regards birds in a way different from my own. I still strain my eyes to observe field characteristics, all those little details usually required to identify a particular bird species. Ted seems to register all that without even trying. Usually he just looks at the overall impression, and how the bird seems to fit into the habitat in question. He sees the whole picture rather

than the details." If we give this a religious twist, this resembles the way a Zen master always begins by focusing on the centre rather than the periphery of his object of study.

In his book **PARROT WITHOUT A NAME** – about the explorations of Ted Parker and John O'Neill in Peru – Don Stapp describes the way Ted Parker worked in the field: by walking slowly down a path, frequently pausing to watch and listen, picking out single calls from the flood of bird song, he acquired his knowledge of both the intricate web of bird life and the individual threads of which it is composed. When guiding field trips for Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, he would attract a particular bird species



Ted Parker was working for Conservation International, and his research home was Louisiana State University (LSU). Ted's encyclopaedic knowledge of birds and bird song was legendary.

Photo: John O'Neill

by using the playback technique (i.e., first recording a bird call and then playing it back to draw out the bird). He was able to predict how the bird, or even flock, would move, always positioning the participants so they would have good sightings.

Ted had intense concentration and focus when in the field. He simply cared a bit more than anyone else about birding, and focused completely on the birds. This did not prevent him from holding an informed opinion about most other things as well, or from being a great fan of the LSU basketball team. He was no simple-minded nerd, that's for sure.

Another anecdote from KINGBIRD HIGHWAY gives a good example of how Ted Parker's curiosity guided him to important discoveries. Ted urged Kaufman to take a break from his attempt to set a new year-list record: "You need to get out of this AOU listing area, take a vacation. Come to Mexico with us." A particular bird species, the Eared Trogon (now Quetzal), had caught his interest, especially since as far as he knew its nest had never been described. Ted said "If we can't learn about the bird by reading, we should go and learn about it through personal observation." After much searching, Parker's keen eyes eventually spotted a young Eared Trogon peeping out of an old woodpecker hole. Four years later, in the late 1970s, the Eared Trogon was spotted for the first time in the USA, in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona. This suddenly made it a highly interesting species to other American birders as well, and by then they also had Ted's recording of its voice – the first such recording ever made – to help them locate the bird.

But while the Eared Trogon had moved northward, Ted Parker's mind turned increasingly southward. The dazzling multitude of South American bird species would be his next challenge, and ultimately his story would end with some of those singing on a cloud-covered mountain in Ecuador.

The anecdotes and stories above tell us of some additional qualities that made Ted Parker such an accomplished birder and ornithologist: he had a particular way of taking in what he saw and heard, a unique ability to focus, and an insatiable curiosity.

I would like to believe that a few of today's young birders are made of more or less the same stuff as Ted Parker. It is fascinating and heartening to see how talented many of them are. But we must never forget that Ted Parker was more than just an exceptionally gifted birder. He was also a passionate conservationist, always ready to defend the pristine forests, the unpolluted rivers, and the unploughed prairies that must be preserved to give future generations the opportunity to enjoy today's amazing diversity of bird species, and indeed the Earth itself.

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Sammanfattning

Amerikanen Ted Parker betraktades tidigt som något av ett ornitologiskt underbarn, inte minst hade han sällsynt skarpa öron som kunde urskilja 4 000 fågelarter. Han var inte bara en ovanligt begåvad fågelskådare utan kämpade också för skyddet av fåglarnas livsmiljöer. Ted Parker lämnade en mängd publikationer och ljudinspelningar åt eftervärlden när han tragiskt omkom under en flygtur över kustskogar i Ecuador i

augusti 1993. Många av dagens begåvade fågelskådare delar en del av de egenskaper som Ted Parker hade, och som jag beskriver här. Denna artikel har publicerats i en tidigare version på svenska i Club 300:s tidskrift Roadrunner 2/2009. ■

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Lästips

Studies in Neotropical Ornithology honouring Ted Parker.
Editor: J.V.Rensen, Jr. 1997. Ornithological Monographs No. 48. The American Ornithologists' Union Washington, D.C.

Naturalists' Wall of the Dead

Twenty years ago the wildlife author Richard Conniff travelled with a team of extraordinary biologists studying a remnant of forest as it was being hacked down around them. In his blog he gives the following description: "Al Gentry, a gangling figure in a grimy T-shirt and jeans frayed from chronic tree climbing, was a botanist whose strategy toward all hazards was to pretend that they didn't exist. At one point, a tree came crashing down beside him after he lost his footing on a slope. Still on his back, he reached out for an orchid growing on the trunk and said, 'Oh, that's *Gongora*,' as casually as if he had just spotted an old friend on a city street."

Also Ted Parker was a member of this group: "The team's birder, Ted Parker, specialized in identifying bird species by sound alone. He started his work day before dawn, standing in the rain under a faded umbrella, his sneakers sunk to their high-tops in mud, whispering into a microcassette recorder about what he was hearing: 'Scarlet-rumped Cacique ... a Fasciated Antshrike ... two more pairs of *Myrmeciza immaculata* counter-singing'..."

Al Gentry and Ted Parker came to Richard Conniff's mind when thinking about how often naturalists have died in the pursuit of new species. In the 18th and 19th centuries, young naturalists routinely shipped out for destinations that must have seemed almost as remote as the moon is to us now, often travelling not for days, but for months or years. They went, of course, without G.P.S. devices, anti-malarial drugs, or any of the other safety measures we now consider routine, Conniff concludes. Disease was the unrelenting killer. But death also came by e.g. drowning, shipwreck, gun accidents, snakebites, animal attacks, arsenic poisoning and ritual beheading.

Richard Conniff emphasizes that it would be difficult to overstate how profoundly these adventurous naturalists have changed the world along the way. We go to great lengths commemorating soldiers who have died fighting wars for their countries, he says. Why not do the same for the naturalists who still sometimes give up everything in the effort to understand life? Another way of honouring the dead is to protect the living. Ted Parker's efforts, for example, have resulted in many protected areas. This would probably be their own idea of a fitting memorial.

Richard Conniff is the author of several books, most recently "The Species Seekers: Heroes, Fools, and the Mad Pursuit of Life on Earth." He blogs at strangebehaviors.com. Twitter: [@RichardConniff](https://twitter.com/RichardConniff)