

Reviews



EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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A CARRIKER TRILOGY: CHAPTERS IN A SAGA OF
NEOTROPICAL ORNITHOLOGY

Vista Nieve. The Remarkable, True Adventures of an Early Twentieth-century Naturalist and His Family in Colombia, South America.—M. R. Carriker. 2001. Blue Mantle Press, Rio Hondo, Texas. xiii + 313 pp., 56 figures, 3 maps. ISBN 0-9665485-2-3. Paperback, \$18.95.

Experiences of an Ornithologist Along the Highways and Byways of Bolivia. Collecting Birds in an Isolated, Magnificent Land in the Nineteen Thirties.—M. A. Carriker, Jr. Edited by M. R. Carriker and R. C. Dagleish. 2006. Author House, Bloomington, Indiana. xxiii + 452 pp., 28 figures, 1 map, 2 appendices. ISBN 1-4208-8352-6 (e). Paperback, \$13.50.

The Bird Call of the Río Beni. Adventures of Father and Son on an Ornithological Expedition in the Jungles of Western Bolivia, South America in 1934–1935. A Diary with Commentary.—M. R. Carriker. 2006. Narrative Press, Crabtree, Oregon. 225 pp., 2 tables, photographs. ISBN 1-58976-290-8. Paperback, \$15.95.

Melbourne Armstrong Carriker, Jr. (1879–1965), known to friends and family as Meb, was the most prolific and energetic collector of Andean and other Neotropical birds in the history of ornithology. He was also an authority on the Order Mallophaga, or chewing lice (Phthiraptera) of birds. His studies in the Neotropics began in Costa Rica and later extended to Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia,

and Mexico. For an outline of Carriker's ornithological career, see Wiedenfeld and Carriker (2007) in this issue of *The Auk*.

Melbourne Romaine Carriker, known as Mel, is the first of Meb's five children. Now in his nineties, Mel has taken time from a distinguished career as a marine biologist, with a specialty in drilling gastropods, to see through to publication the three memoirs reviewed here.

Vista Nieve is a history of the Carriker family centered on Meb Carriker and on his coffee *hacienda*, Vista Nieve, on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. Because it chronicles some of the pioneering days of coffee growing in that country, a Colombian coffee company produced a Spanish edition of the book that is said to be out of print already (M. R. Carriker 2002). *Vista Nieve* contains a vignette of life on a coffee plantation in the early 20th century, with brief histories of each of the principals in the Carriker family after 1927. Some of this will be of passing interest, at most, to zoologists, but the accounts of Meb's expeditions in Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia make the work an essential reference in the history of ornithology in the Neotropics.

Meb eventually secured a salaried job as a curator at the Philadelphia Academy in 1929, a position he held until 1938. During that time, he led four expeditions to Peru and three to Bolivia, so he was in the field for a major portion of that interval. *Experiences* documents the Bolivian ventures: the first with son Mel as assistant in 1934–1935; the second with Berto, his former assistant in Peru, in 1936; and the third with Berto and a greenhorn teenager

from New Jersey, Mike Howe, in 1937–1938. Not long after his return, Meb was laid off by the Academy, supposedly because of “financial problems related to the depression,” but there was more to it than that.

Experiences was written between construction jobs while Meb was supporting his family as a skilled carpenter in the Beachwood area. It is a narrative extracted from daily journals and, of course, differs from the latter in that the revising author can speak of the future consequences of present actions. The manuscript was never published, although in 1981 Mel and his brother Frederick edited it and distributed a dozen copies to various libraries, including the Smithsonian, where I first read it some years ago. Wiedenfeld (1997) excerpted portions of this narrative and included biographical information and Carriker’s ornithological bibliography.

Meb’s intended audience was evidently one with little interest in ornithology, as there is exasperatingly little about the exact kinds of birds that were encountered in Bolivia. There are only tantalizing mentions of a very rare tinamou, a huge fiery-eyed owl, or a species of hummingbird known only from the two types in Berlin. Granted, Meb could hardly have conceived of the army of birders today who can converse knowledgeably about Andean birds using English names that did not exist at all in 1938, but the lack of specifics about birds is undeniably frustrating to an ornithologist. Statements such as Sandillani being “near the area where the types of many species of birds had been taken by one of the more famous of the old English collectors” could have been made much more interesting and relevant by giving the person’s name (Thomas Bridges, in this case).

Thus, the narrative is one of places and people encountered, and at times reads like a catalogue of miseries endured. The setting is in the height of the Great Depression, so funding was minimal. At the outset of the Bolivian expeditions, Meb was 55 years old, and already had “store teeth,” as he put it. Bolivia was engaged in a debilitating war with Paraguay in the Chaco, and most young men not already conscripted for the army were in hiding from the press gangs, which made it difficult for Meb to hire help. Overt hostilities had ceased by the last two expeditions but the eastern part of the country was still heavily militarized, making

transportation difficult. And transportation was almost always difficult. On the first expedition, it consisted almost entirely of pack mules, oxcarts, or balsa rafts. Meb was a master at packing and arranging the mountains of gear and specimen boxes needed so that pack mules would be balanced and specific items could be located easily. Later there were white-knuckle drives in military trucks along impossible precipices. In one case, the ride got so bad that Meb was forced to tell the driver “in no uncertain terms to slow down or I would blow him into small pieces, and hauled out my 38 Colt to make sure he understood my Spanish. That helped matters tremendously, and we thenceforth proceeded at a less hair-raising pace.”

The diversity of topography and climate in Bolivia assured equally diverse miseries. Floods, droughts, bone-cracking cold, stifling heat, dust storms, mud wallows, huge boulders rolling down mountainsides obliterating roads, dysentery, plagues of insects, bad food, no food, bad water, malaria, altitude sickness (Meb was by then immune to the last two), and an arid valley so filled with vegetation covered with spines and thorns that clothing and flesh were mercilessly rent. Once, forest fires threatened to burn down the oil camp where Meb was staying and the constant smoke was so bad that he had to hunt on the Argentine side of the border, a fact that does not appear to be reflected on specimen labels or in the literature.

Perhaps the most bizarre mishap occurred on a passage by automobile over the immense salt beds of the Salar de Uyuni. With 30 miles behind them and 45 to go in crossing the ancient sea bed, a torrential downpour overtook the party and soon they were driving through as much as two inches of brine. This sprayed up on the engine and mixed with battery acid, creating chlorine gas that nearly asphyxiated the travelers, as the windows could only be rolled down a crack on the lee side until the rain finally ceased.

Meb’s endurance was phenomenal, and he sometimes traversed 25 to 30 miles in a day in mountainous terrain, on foot. A camp at 13,000 feet entailed daily hikes to 15,000 and 16,000 feet. Injuries such as a cracked rib that made breathing painful and a severely sprained foot that made walking impossible for weeks added to the other afflictions. And then there were the rats, cats, and cockroaches that attempted to

make off with specimens both before and after they were prepared, though a falcon that tried to abscond with one of Meb's downed birds became a specimen itself.

And there was always the human factor. Transportation that did not show up on time, or at all, was a never-ending problem. The presidential coups, for which Bolivia probably holds the world's record, could render all papers and passes issued at the start of a journey utterly worthless. Frantic negotiation of bureaucratic mazes and runarounds at the end of each trip to get export permits were routine. Perhaps the worst incident involved a crazed Indian derelict of the Chacoan war who mistook Meb for a Paraguayan and would have stabbed him in the back had Meb not heard his approach in time to turn his gun on the attacker and make him drop his weapon.

Despite his dour appearance and intensity of purpose, Meb was a very sociable person who liked his liquor when the occasion was appropriate and who had an eye for the pretty woman. He was an accomplished raconteur and his fluency in Spanish was well suited to lubricating the machinery of bureaucracy and insuring a positive outcome in many difficult situations. Although Wiedenfeld found Meb's writing to be "flat," that characterization may have stemmed from disappointment that there is so little said about birds, as *Experiences* is replete with lyrical, poignant, and humorous passages.

Carriker's three Bolivian expeditions netted 7,954 specimens of birds. In addition there were specimens of mammals, fish, other vertebrates and invertebrates, and, of course, thousands of specimens of Mallophaga. An appendix listing all the species of birds obtained in Bolivia (how *Strix varia* got in here is a mystery) reveals that Carriker himself described 4 full species (*Myiophonus inornatus*, *Myrmotherula grisea*, *Leptasthenura yanacensis*, and *Simoxenops striatus*) and 18 new subspecies from his Bolivian collections; and after he was turned out of the Academy, Bond and Meyer de Schauensee named another species (*Pauxi unicornis*) and 20 subspecies based on Carriker material. Although some of the subspecies may no longer be considered valid, others will no doubt be elevated in rank because of changes in species concepts. A second appendix lists 81 species and subspecies of Mallophaga named by Carriker, along with their hosts, from the Bolivian collections.

Bird Call is a more personal memoir, a daily journal kept by an exceptionally articulate and reflective teenager abroad in a world full of exclamation marks. We might forget how fast and important the adolescent years are until we stop to realize that Mel left South America at age 12, a mere boy, and only 6 years later returned as a man, sometimes sporting a full beard, smoking, and quaffing his dram when the *pisco* was passed. At his father's side, he learned fast and well. After some perhaps revisionist misgivings about shooting birds, he became an enthusiastic hunter vying to bring back more specimens than his father, but seldom successfully. And he put in many hours at the prep table as well, where he usually did the skinning and Meb did the stuffing and final preparation (which Mel misters "mounting," one of few minor technical inaccuracies, such as referring to anything larger than #12 dust as "buckshot"). This must have been Meb's usual procedure, judging by the enviable uniformity of his specimens, which greatly facilitates size comparisons among his series. To account for why the *gringos* were carefully skinning, stuffing, labeling, wrapping, and carefully packing away little birds, "Dad has memorized a fascinating explanation for the visitors, no doubt repeated hundreds of times over his long collecting career."

At Vista Nieve, Meb's office on the *hacienda* was open to children only by invitation, and one gets the definite impression of a distant, and perhaps stern, parent. Thus, it is revealing when early in the expedition Mel finds that "during the trip thus far I have begun to appreciate what a pleasure it is to travel with Dad; he seems so much more companionable here than at home!" This may be the best summation yet of Meb's life and character. His place was in the field.

The expedition *impedimenta* included cots, skinning table and chairs, personal saddles, and photographic equipment in addition to guns, ammunition, and all the supplies for preparing and packing specimens. Mel learned to load ammunition, develop photographic negatives, and take care of the camp cooking when needed, including roasting coffee beans because the natives tended to burn them. Staples such as coffee, rice, flour, and lard were also part of what had to be packed in, but otherwise the plan was to live off the land. Mel noted that "a large *ñeke*" (= *ñequi* = agouti *Dasyprocta*) brought in by a hunter "will provide us meat for several days!" This would have meant eating rather

small portions and not sharing with anyone else, as *ñequi* is very dainty meat.

Parts of Mel's diary were originally written in Spanish, and these portions have been translated. Excerpts from *Experiences* and Meb's diaries are interjected from time to time to provide background and clarification. I found it amusing to read the accounts of father and son simultaneously, switching back and forth as they progressed from camp to camp. Needless to say, the perspectives are not always the same. On leaving one collecting site: "Dad's farewell was not especially cordial... 'Señora Blanca was the only sincere one in the group; the Doctor and his son were just as oily as ever: that sleek Spanish politeness'. Clearly, Dad left the beautiful Sandillani valley with a bad taste in his mouth. On the other hand, I very much enjoyed the *hacienda* and its owners."

The 1934–1935 Bolivian expedition was unquestionably the defining event in a unique father–son relationship; one that made an indelible impression on them both. They would never be together in the field in the same way again. Mel went off to Rutgers and his own career, and his mother and father eventually divorced and each later remarried, happily we are told.

The first Bolivian expedition resulted in 2,265 specimens of birds collected during seven months in the country. The amount invested by the Academy was a pittance by comparison, even including Meb's salary. Mel correctly points out that

Dad was a frugal person, and made 'no bones' about demanding the most for his dollars. In retrospect, I am persuaded the Bolivian expedition was highly successful, not only in the number and variety of birds we collected, but also for the low average cost per bird, a bargain that will probably never be achieved again.

In light of this, subsequent developments took a decidedly sinister turn.

Going back to the Academy to refresh his acquaintance with the specimens collected nearly 70 years ago, Mel encountered in the archives a rather shocking letter, portions of which he quotes, from Charles Cadwalader, Director of the Academy, to Meb after he had already departed on the second Bolivian expedition, taking him to task for not using arsenic on his specimens, a few of which had been found with insect damage. What Mel did not see was Meb's detailed and

forceful response (Olson 2007), which is also in the Academy archives, to the effect that it was well known that Meb had long ago abandoned the use of arsenic as being ineffectual and insalubrious. The whole issue had clearly been manufactured by one of the other two curators at the Academy in what Meb correctly recognized to be a case of professional jealousy. From that point, however, it would have been clear to Meb that he had an enemy in Philadelphia.

Despite this, Meb went on to complete his second and third Bolivian expeditions, but shortly thereafter was out on the street, supporting his wife and five children doing carpentry while the well-to-do toffs at the Academy published leisurely on the spoils of his labors. The Bolivian expeditions were summarized in one of the most lackluster and pedestrian compilations in the literature of Neotropical ornithology (Bond and Meyer de Schauensee 1941, 1943). One need only compare this with Gyldenstolpe's (1945) detailed and erudite account of the birds of northern Bolivia, written with far less material and fewer resources, to appreciate its deficiencies. It brooks no comparison whatever with the enduring value of Todd and Carriker's (1922) Santa Marta monograph.

Experiences stands as a revelation to posterity of just what it took to garner new biological knowledge in Bolivia in the 1930s. Although the impetus for writing it may have come from the treatment that Meb received from the Academy, the narrative has no trace of vindictiveness or self-pity. It is a testimonial to an endurance that could never be emulated by country-club day-trippers and armchair ornithologists.

As proof of this endurance, Meb collected briefly for the Smithsonian Institution in Veracruz, Mexico, in 1940, and, after another short stint of carpentry, returned to Colombia, where he spent the rest of his life. From here, he supplied thousands of specimens of birds to museums, mostly the Smithsonian, but with more than 8,100 going to the Los Angeles County Museum, the Field Museum in Chicago, and Yale University. The total at these museums and at Carnegie, Philadelphia, and Washington comes to more than 75,400, which is an average of more than 1,000 specimens per year for every year of Meb's life from birth until his death in Bucaramanga in 1965. Carriker's specimens are admired not only for their quality of preparation but for the quality of species represented.

His ability to collect such recondite birds as ant-pittas (*Grallaria*) is legendary and all the more remarkable for their having been obtained before the days of mist nets and tape recorders.

This is an induplicable achievement and a priceless ornithological legacy when one considers that native habitats in many of the places that Meb Carriker collected have since been destroyed and that populations of birds that perhaps only he ever obtained have gone extinct (see Graves 1986). All Neotropical biologists should be grateful that Mel Carriker has left us with these singular insights into his father's remarkable life.—STORRS L. OLSON, *Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. E-mail: olsons@si.edu*

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Ecological Consequences of Artificial Night Lighting.

—Catherine Rich and Travis Longcore, Editors. 2006. Island Press, Washington, D.C. i–xx + 458 pp., 49 figures. ISBN 1-55963-129-5. Paper, \$29.95.—Seventeen chapters, including an introduction and final synthesis by the editors, consider the effects of pervasive artificial lighting on various organisms. There are sections on mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, fishes, invertebrates, and plants, each with one to four chapters by different authors with different approaches. Sections begin with excerpted essays on natural darkness from literary and natural-history sources (e.g., Thoreau).

Of the three chapters on birds, the first is “Effects of artificial night lighting on migrating birds,” by Sidney A. Gauthreaux, Jr. and Carroll G. Belser. They “examine how and why birds are attracted to light and the mechanisms of avian vision.” Mainly they provide a concise review of the literature on bird mortality at lights or lighted structures during migration, together with some original radar evidence and discussion of differential behavior by migrants at red- as opposed to white-lighted transmission towers, a long-debated topic.

The second bird chapter is “Influences of artificial light on marine birds,” by William A. Montevecchi. With a literature review that complements that of the first paper, this chapter focuses on the proliferation of artificial lighting at sea, especially bright lights for attracting and trapping fish, and those associated with oil rigs