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NEWS

Lice-naming an honour for renowned insect expert

Matt Stewart
SCIENCE

IT IS a lousy tribute, but one that has made a Wellington scientist proud.

The Papa entomology curator Ricardo Palma is short of stature, but long on scientific kudos as a world-renowned expert on bird lice.

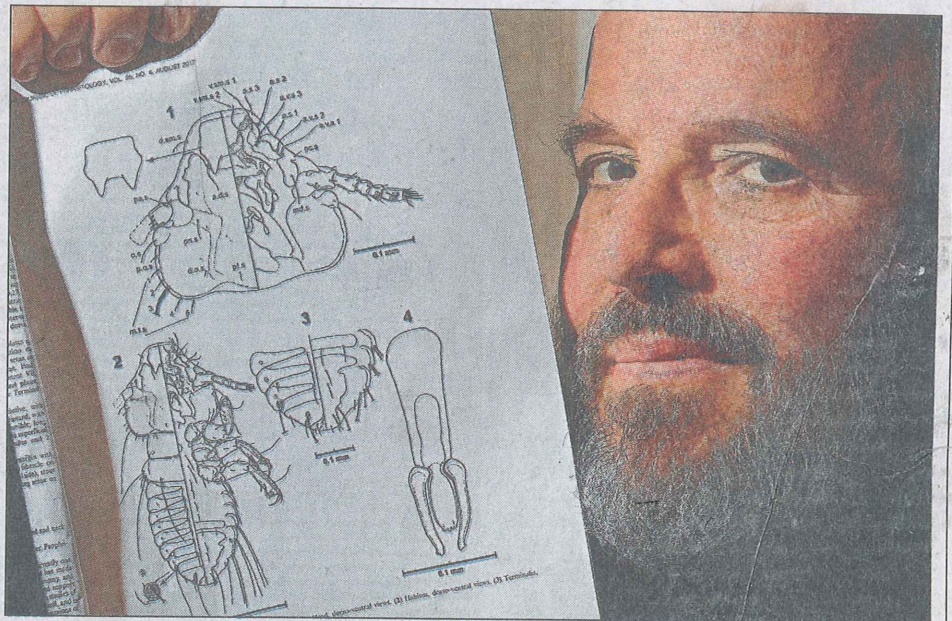
The new genus of chewing lice dubbed *Palmaellus inexpectatus* was named after the Argentine-born scientist by colleagues working in the Amazon jungle after it was unexpectedly found on well-studied trumpeter birds in 2007.

At less than a millimetre long, the louse is – like the 1.6-metre (5ft 3in) Mr Palma – smaller than average, which immediately made Brazilian and American entomologists Michel Valim and Jason Weckstein think of their friend.

“Because they know I’m small they’re being cheeky, but they’re not trying to offend me.”

In their paper published this year, the scientists say the Latin suffix *ellus* (or *small*) is used “in an affectionate way and because of the small body dimensions of this new genus”. His hard work contributing to the knowledge, classification and evolutionary biology of bird lice is also noted by the authors.

Mr Palma came to New Zealand in 1974 as a political refugee fleeing General Augusto Pinochet’s brutal Chilean dictatorship, first to Canterbury University and then to Wellington in 1976 as an entomologist for the National Museum,



Sharing his name: Ricardo Palma has a new genus of avian lice named after him – the *Palmaellus inexpectatus*, which lives on the Amazonian trumpeter bird.

Photo: CHRIS SKELTON/FAIRFAX NZ

where he was appointed entomology curator in 1991.

Although he has had several species named after him, this was his first genus – special because new genera are not as commonly discovered as new species. “I feel proud – this is recognition of my scientific achievements from my peers.”

