A photograph of a Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager (Buthraupis aureodorsalis) perched on a tree trunk. The bird has a blue head, black throat and back, and a bright yellow-orange belly. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage and a tree trunk.

A Trip to Find the Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager (*Buthraupis aureodorsalis*) in the High Andes of Peru

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by Theodore A. (“Ted”) Parker, III

with annotations, commentary,
and an introduction by Gregg Gorton

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Theodore A. (“Ted”) Parker, III, became a legend in birding and Neotropical ornithology between his record North American Big Year in 1971 and his tragically early death in 1993 on a cloud forest mountain in Ecuador. In the story that follows, we glimpse both his youthful zeal for pursuing a new bird and his dedication to gathering new knowledge about the birds of the New World tropics. His willingness to endure hardship in pursuit of these ends was one of the characteristics that made him remarkable.

As a sophomore in high school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Parker—already an aspiring naturalist and accomplished birder—became inspired to pursue the birdlife of South America when he came across a paper by two ornithologists who would play key roles in his life much sooner than he could have imagined. In the January 1969 issue of the *Auk* (the journal of the American Ornithologists’ Union), Parker found a paper by George Lowery and John O’Neill of Louisiana State University (LSU) describing the newly discovered Elusive Antpitta (*Grallaria eludens*) from Amazonian Peru. The accompanying plate by O’Neill depicted the plump, long-legged bird lurking among dead leaves and plants in the shadowy forest understory. Parker later recalled, “I must have read it a hundred times.”

When two years later he left home to enter college at the University of Arizona, he was pointedly and inexorably edging toward more southerly latitudes in a trajectory that would lead him to spend fully ten of his last 22 years pursuing the birdlife of Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and The Bird Continent itself.

As an undergraduate, he would sit in the bird range at the university and listen intently to graduate students describing their South American field adventures; then he would return to his room “to scheme and plot”—as Don Stap (*A Parrot Without a Name*) tells it—his own pathway to the Neotropics. He was about to drop out of college and head south when, one auspicious day in April 1974, he received a call from the Director of the LSU Museum of Zoology, Dr. Lowery himself. Would he be interested in joining Dr. O’Neill’s LSU expedition to Peru in three

weeks? According to Stap, Parker managed to blurt out, “Ahh, Ahhhhh, I’ll have to think about it—can you call me back tomorrow?” Then he hung up the phone, and nearly fainted.

What follows—apparently written within a few months of the events—is the story of how Parker came to be in Acomayo, a small village in the Andes northeast of Lima, in search of a bird no ornithologist had ever seen alive. Along the way he also encounters another species—the Pardusco—that had not yet been formally described to science. Shortly before the events described below, Parker had been the first to study and document that species’ behavior. Dr. Lowery refers to Parker’s “superb field notes,” which were utilized extensively in the paper by Lowery and Dan Tallman describing and naming it (*Nephelornis oneilli*, in homage of John O’Neill). Therefore, his candor about not instantaneously recognizing it when his immediate focus was on the elusive target bird is refreshing—and entirely in keeping with his unwavering integrity about his field identifications. Ironically, while pursuing one mystery bird, Parker also encounters another, the Bay-vented Cotinga (*Doliornis sclateri*), never studied in life until the previous year, at which time it had been known from only two specimens nearly a century old. His voice recordings of the cotinga were the first ever obtained.

The trek Parker relates here was an important part of his very first trip to South America, an eight-month journey with colleagues and field assistants almost entirely in Peru, with many notable discoveries, which inspired Dr. Lowery later to write to him, “To say that you ‘made ornithologic history’ would be putting it mildly.”

Left: Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager (*Buthraupis aureodorsalis*).
Bosque Unchog, Huanuco, Peru; December 2007. © Gunnar Engblom.

NOTE: Bracketed material in the text is by annotator Gregg Gorton, who has adhered closely to Parker's original. This sketch was found among Parker's papers, which Gorton has been studying in preparation for writing a biography of Parker.

Years before I had the opportunity to travel beyond the borders of the U.S., I read about the exploits of a number of naturalists in South America—exciting men like Humboldt, Darwin, Bates, and more recently (during this century) Chapman, Carriker, and many more. Due to their skill and determination, our knowledge of the South American fauna is amazingly complete. I wondered how many unexplored regions remained to be vis-

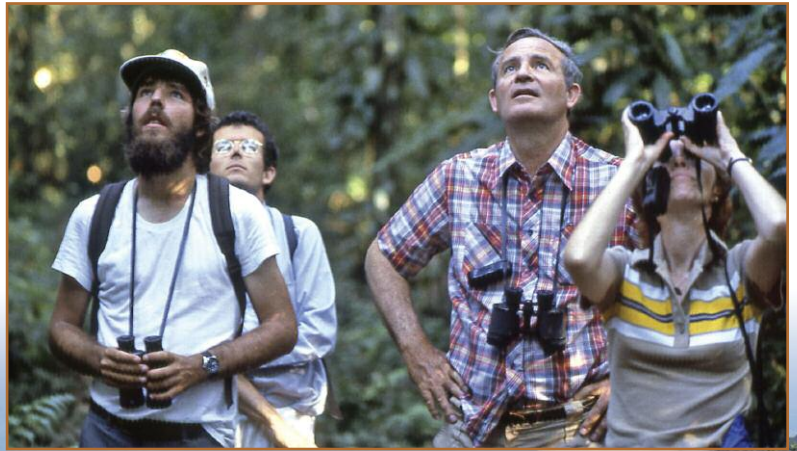
ited and dreamed about undescribed, elusive species of birds still lurking in the fogbound Andean cloud forests and vast Amazonian rain forests.

Unexpectedly in May 1974 I suddenly found my dreams becoming reality as I was invited to join the Louisiana State University Museum of Zoology's Peruvian Expedition (1974–1975). In June 1975, I met Reyes Rivera, a resident of the village of Acomayo in the eastern

Guyana; February 1993. Image courtesy of © Conservation International.



Explorer's Inn, Peru; August 1985. © Larry McQueen.



Urubamba Valley, Peru; July 1977. © Dale Zimmerman.



Cordilleran Snipe (*Gallinago stricklandii*).
Falkland Islands; December 1998. © Hanne
and Jens Eriksen / VIREO.

cordillera of the Andes east of Lima. For [eight] months we traveled from one region to another studying birds and collecting specimens for LSU. Reyes and his [half-] brother Manuel Villar had already discovered [in 1973] three distinct new species of tanager within a few miles of their homes above Acomayo in treeline forest, and we hoped to [find] these and possibly additional ones. Of greatest importance to us was behavioral information and knowledge of distribution and relative abundance so vital to ornithologists and conservationists. One of the highlights of my stay in Peru was a backpacking trip to Quilluacocha, the locality where Manuel [had] discovered the Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager. Only Reyes, Manuel, and Manuel's father had ever seen the bird, and I very much wanted to observe the species myself and report on it†.

Field notes courtesy of Blanford Parker.

†Emmett Blake and Peter Hocking first described the bird to science in 1974 (Wilson Bulletin 86:321–324), but neither had ever seen the bird alive, the type specimen having been collected by Manuel Villar, Hocking's field assistant.

Before years before I had the opportunity to travel beyond the borders of U.S. I read about the exploits of a number of naturalists in South American exciting. Henry Bates, Darwin, Humboldt, Bates and more recently in the early 20th century, Chapman, Carriger, and many more. Due to their skill & determination our knowledge of the South American continent remained to be visited and dreamed about. Undescribed species of birds still. Unexpectedly, in lurking in the forested cloud forests and vast Amazonian rain forests. Suddenly I found in May 1974 I found my dream, becoming reality as I was invited to join the Louisiana State University Museum of Zoology's Peruvian Expedition (1974–75). In June 1975 I met Reyes Rivera, a resident of the village of Acomayo in the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes east of Lima. For months we travelled from one region to another studying birds and collecting specimens for LSU. Reyes and his brother and law Manuel Villar had already discovered not three distinct new species of tanagers within a few miles of their homes above Acomayo in high treeline forest (in 1973) and we hoped to find refine these and possibly additional ones. A well build a collection of nearly any observations that we hoped to gain and knowledge of distribution and relative abundance so vital to future ornithological work and ornithologists and conservationists. One of the highlights of my stay in Peru was a backpacking trip to Quilluacocha, the locality where Reyes discovered the Gold-backed Mt. Tanager. Only Reyes and, Manuel and Manuel's father had ever seen the bird and I hoped to have long wanted to observe the



White-browed Spinetail (*Hellmayrea gularis*). El Oro, Ecuador; December 2001. © Doug Wechsler / VIREO.

The journey began on an overcast day, 26 January 1975. Reyes, his nephew Celis, and I left Pachachupan (above Acomayo) early in the morning with two pack animals and a week's provisions. My companions soon vanished as I paused more and more frequently to rest. My pack became increasingly heavy as the trail narrowed and steepened. The dark, dripping forest was eerily quiet, though occasionally the whining of a mountain-toucan would announce its presence down the slope. Eventually I reached a ridgetop where the forest was [made up of] scattered, stunted [trees]. To my amazement, the trail became even steeper, and a stinging, icy rain and strong wind and fog combined to make the ascent nearly impossible. I screamed for Reyes, hoping that a temporary camp might be raised at this elevation, but my cries were in vain. Only a howling wind answered. But then a curious, large-eyed Undulated Antpitta hopped to the trail's edge and viewed me briefly before slipping away—and on I climbed with a renewed vigor.

Upon reaching treeline and a bunchgrass [meadow],

walking became easier but the rain turned to sleet and visibility was zero. At nearly 12,000 feet and about one-half hour before total darkness I came upon the tent that Reyes and Celis had already raised. The smell of hot coffee had an instant rejuvenating effect. [Thus,] after eleven hours of difficult climbing up a narrow, slippery trail, with a near constant freezing rain falling, and strong east wind, we [had] reached the crest of the eastern cordillera and made camp. With Acomayo 6,000 feet below and the nearest Indian habitations miles away, I readied myself for some of the most enjoyable days of my life. That night, unbelievably, Reyes and Celis hiked back down the mountain with the pack animals and didn't return [to the camp] for four days. [This event had not been] planned that way but I adjusted rapidly and found the solitude delightful. I prepared for several days of solitary work. By eight o'clock the sky was clear and a full moon rose, illuminating the open bunchgrass meadows and [...]

The following excerpts from my field journal describe

highlights of the week.

27 January 1975: “After a restful sleep that was interrupted only by the ringing calls of *chocaperdizes* (Cordilleran Snipe), I arose to an azure sky and frosty meadows bordering the dark olive forest. I hiked east to the *cumbre* that overlooks seemingly endless forests that drop thousands of feet into deep valleys. To the west were the snowbound peaks of the western cordillera. At 10:00 a.m., upon descending the ridge that rises east of camp to a near[ly] impenetrable thicket of low trees and shrubs, all with moss-covered limbs, I noticed a pair of Bay-vented Cotingas perching atop a tree, and noted an interesting head-bobbing display between them. Upon moving to the [woodland] edge, [I encountered] a noisy mixed flock of tanagers, honeycreepers, and small flycatchers. I began to swish [i.e., pish] and several Golden-collared Tanagers came in close, followed by a number of small, drab brown birds—all chipping excitedly. At first, the tanagers seemed more attractive but then I realized with a start that the drab ones were *parduscos*” (another previously undescribed species found by Manuel

and Reyes; they represent a new genus and species, and even family placement isn't certain). Flocks of *parduscos* were seen again each day and were fairly common. On that first day [I encountered a variety of birds, including] Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager, Drab and Three-striped Hemispinguses, Blue-black Conebill, and quite a few White-throated Tyrannulets, but no Golden-backed Mountain-Tanagers.

After three days without observing [one], I began to wonder whether I was searching in the right place. Then, on 29 January:

“As I stepped out of the tent this morning to stretch, I heard the call notes of tanagers issuing from the forested slope just west [of] and below a rise above the tent. I grabbed my binoculars excitedly, for the calls were reminiscent of those of the Hooded Mountain-Tanager, which isn't found this high. Upon reaching the edge and look-



Undulated Antpitta (*Grallaria squamigera*). Napo, Ecuador; October 1999. © Kevin Schafer / VIREO.

ing down into the low forest, many birds were visible. Glossy and Carbonated Flower-piercers flitted about the yellow flowers of some broad-leafed trees while many hummingbirds, including [an unidentified] metaltail and Purple-backed Thornbill, were chasing about. I had not again heard the tanagers when all at once 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. This was one of four individuals of a group. Their calls were very similar to those of the Hooded Mountain-Tanager (emphatic *whee-whee, whee-whee*) but were somewhat softer and hoarser.” The Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager apparently replaces the Hooded species in treeline forest, especially woodlands isolated above continuous forest.



Golden-backed Mountain-Tanager (*Buthraupis aureodorsalis*). Bosque Unchog, Huanuco, Peru; December 2007. © Gunnar Engblom.

30 January, early a.m. “As I reached the upper end of the bog at the wood edge, I heard a Bay-vented Cotinga calling, so I struggled up the slope through dense bamboo and very dense shrubbery. As I was tape-recording the cotinga calls—a pair of which was perching tamely close overhead—I was kneeling quietly and slowly sinking into the ice-cold sphagnum moss, with dripping bamboo slapping my face. I noticed two small birds hopping about in the thicket about thirty-five feet away. At first they appeared to be Mountain Wrens, and as they approached they still looked like wrens—a *Thryothorus* of sorts—but their manner of foraging was very ovenbird-like.” Here, I thought, with a light head, *must* be a “new” species. How many birds of this appearance inhabited impenetrable thickets at 12,000 feet in the Peruvian Andes? Who would have ever before found this one?

For two weeks after that day I was convinced I must

surely have discovered an undescribed species. But then my joy was swiftly dispelled one day as I read the description of the White-browed Spinetail (*Synallaxis gularis*), an atypical-looking *Synallaxis* [now accorded its own genus, *Hellmayrea*]. Believe me, this feeling was much worse than having a first state record rejected by a rare bird committee back in the States!

My purpose in putting together this article was mainly to make other adventuresome naturalists aware of the kind of work that is still being done today, in 1975. Opportunities are still rife.



Remarkably, perhaps, more than 30 years after Parker wrote these words, opportunities in the Neotropics both for discovery of new species and for field study of bird behavior and bird distribution are still “rife.” Witness the various new species described from Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil in the past couple of decades. Indeed, some of this recent work draws directly from Parker’s original observations in the field. In 1989, for example, Parker heard a tyrannulet with vocalizations that differed from a supposedly identical population in Brazil and Argentina, but it was not until 2008 that S. K. Herzog and colleagues confirmed it as a new species, the Yungas Tyrannulet (*Phyllomyias weedeni*) of northwestern Bolivia and adjacent Peru (*Auk* 125:265–276).

More generally, little is known today about the life history of the majority of Neotropical species, and some of their voices are unrecorded and nests still unknown. Some of Parker’s colleagues—as well as a new generation of ornithologists and birders, many inspired by Ted and his contributions—continue to pursue the sort of field work he has shared with us here.

Acknowledgments

This sketch is published with permission from Prof. Blanford Parker, Ted’s brother. I have drawn two quotations from Don Stap’s book, *A Parrot Without a Name*, a vivid account of field expeditions by John O’Neill and Ted Parker. Ted Parker’s family kindly granted access to letters he had received from George Lowery. John O’Neill, Mark Robbins, Van Remsen, Peter Hocking, and Nate Rice gave advice and assistance.

For the biography I am preparing, I would appreciate hearing from anyone wishing to contribute memories of Ted Parker, or from anyone with relevant letters, photographs, and audiotapes or videotapes.

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