

IN MEMORIAM: MIGUEL ÁLVAREZ DEL TORO, 1917–1996

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“To write without the capacities of a writer is a difficult task. However, it is not my intention to make literature, just narrate simply and plainly the adventures, some funny, some serious, and some dangerous (why not?) that occurred in forty years of travelling along Chiapas.”

Those were the words of Miguel Carlos Francisco Álvarez del Toro (Don Miguel) in 1985. By the time of his death, on 2 August 1996, at age 79, he had accumulated more than 50 years of intense and fruitful work as one of the most devoted naturalists in Mexico, most of it in a region of intense and difficult social, political, and biological problems, the state of Chiapas. He was a member of the AOU since 1947, an Elective Member since 1953, and a Corresponding Fellow since 1967. He is survived by his wife Clementina, and children Becky, Hebe, Federico, and Barbarella.

It is a difficult task indeed to summarize the contributions of Don Miguel to ornithology. He was born on 23 August 1917 in the city of Colima, state of Colima. However, most of his life was spent in Chiapas, a state that he “. . . loves more than my own home-town,” where he moved in 1942 after spending a few years living in Mexico City, which was an understandable slavery for a young lover of tropical nature.

His interest in natural history arose in his youth, in Colima, collecting insects and small vertebrates. Once in Mexico City, he worked as taxidermist in the recently founded Museum of Fauna and Flora, in Chapultepec Park. Political and internal factors, including the resignation of the Director, ended his working as a housekeeper in the Museum. However, his deep knowledge of zoology led him to a job as a collector of birds for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia from 1938 to 1939, during which he collected around Mexico City, in Mo-

relos, and later at Colonia Sarabia, Oaxaca, his first great encounter with rain forests.

He moved to Chiapas in 1942, hired by the then Governor of the state as a taxidermist for the not-yet-established Museum of Natural History in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. There, Don Miguel started collecting vertebrates near the city and surveying more remote areas such as Montecristo, El Ocote, El Sumidero, and many others. The collection of the Museo grew, surviving a series of political changes in the state government and within the institution. The many years of field work yielded multitudes of memories for Don Miguel, who recalled precisely most of the dirt roads of Chiapas, his encounter with a black jaguar, a Horned Guan at El Triunfo, the killing of the man-eating crocodile, or the beautiful sight of a Quetzal in the mist at Pueblo Nuevo.

Don Miguel had no formal education. Nevertheless, his fascination and expertise with wildlife made him a great teacher, scientist, and conservationist. He taught at the Colegio de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, as well as at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. His devotion to science was honored by the Universidad de Chiapas and the Universidad de Chapingo with the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa. He obtained multiple honors in his life, including the “Chiapas Prize” (1952), the “Alfonso L. Herrera Medal for Merit on Ecology and Conservation” (1985), the “Paul Getty Prize for Conservation of Nature” of the World Wildlife Fund (1989), membership in the “Roll of Honour for Environmental Achievement” of the United Nations Environmental Program (1993), as well as recognitions by the American Society of Zoological Parks and Aquaria, the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment of the Mexican Government, and the Chicago Zoological Society. He was a member of nu-

merous scientific societies and also of several specialist groups of the IUCN. His role in conservation in Chiapas was critical, being the principal force behind the creation of 6 of the 11 protected areas in the State. Also, a nonprofit foundation, the "Fundación Chiapaneca Miguel Álvarez del Toro para la Protección de la Naturaleza A.C." (FUNDAMAT), was created to continue efforts for the preservation of the natural resources of Chiapas.

Another major contribution of Don Miguel was the creation and design of the zoological park at Tuxtla Gutiérrez—the ZOOMAT, or "Zoológico Regional Miguel Álvarez del Toro," named to honor him. This zoo was revolutionary in that he wanted the animals to be free in their environment, and humans ("the most destructive and dangerous species in the world" as a sign in a mirror at the Zoo depicts) to be "caged" in the aisles to observe the animals.

No other Mexican naturalist has been so productive in publications in his lifetime. Don Miguel published more than 40 papers on birds,

including aspects of the ecology, faunistics, distribution, systematics, behavior, and conservation of the birds of Chiapas. His main contribution was *Birds of Chiapas* (1971, 1980); he left nearly finished a new, updated version, soon to be published. Many of his papers are the first or only ones existing on the biology of rare bird species such as the American Finfoot, the Belted Flycatcher, and the Horned Guan.

The death of Don Miguel (Don Mike, for those of us who had the pleasure to work with him) was a major loss, hurting deeply the scientific and conservation communities in Mexico and in other countries. A teacher of many generations of biologists, always concerned about the rapid changes that humans are making to the environment, he left us the perfect example of what "love for Nature" means, and how it can be a force that can change political, economic, and social views of what conservation is. His ashes rest in the Selva El Ocote, as he desired. We thank Oscar Flores and Marco Altamirano for supplying information, and Dr. A. Townsend Peterson for improving our English.