

The Mexican field guide is now in Spanish

Roger Tory Peterson

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Roger Tory Peterson/Edward L. Chalif

AVES DE MEXICO

Guía de Campo



DIANA

Cover of the new Spanish edition of Aves de Mexico Guia de Campo, illustrating the Keel-billed Toucan (top) and the Emerald Toucanet (below).

MANY YEARS AGO, JUST ABOUT the time I put the first edition of *A Field Guide to Western Birds* in my publishers' hands, Edward Chalif, who had birded with me in the West, suggested that a field guide to the birds of Mexico, using my schematic system, was much needed. Why not do one together? He had already probed the delights of the Mexican avifauna, I had not.

Eddie was a remarkable man. Born in Russia, he was smuggled out in a market basket while still a baby. His father had been the imperial ballet-master—Nijinski's ballet-master. As a young man in this country, Eddie tried ballet, and even danced with Pavlova, but being short of stature, ballet was not his forté. Instead he turned to ballroom dancing and in his two large schools he taught literally thousands of privileged young people in northern New Jersey and Philadelphia the art of the ballroom. His wife, Margaret, had been one of his pupils and later an instructor.

Although dancing was his profession, birding took over his leisure time. He became hooked on birds as a Boy Scout. Attaining the rank of Eagle Scout, he later became influential in the affairs of that organization.

Our involvement in the armed services during the next several years drove out all thoughts of a Mexican bird guide, and it was not until World War II was behind us that we talked about it again. The task of dealing with an avifauna of more than 1000 species seemed overwhelming, and I felt I could attempt it only if another artist or two would help.

Edward Chalif made a number of subsequent expeditions. I took part in some of them so as to acquaint myself with as many birds as possible (I eventually had field experience with more than 900 of the 1000+ species found in Mexico). Chalif prepared the first draft of the text, but the prospect of painting so many species staggered me. We approached George Sutton who already had painted many portraits of Mexican birds, and he tenta-



Roger Tory Peterson (left) and Edward L. Chalif (right), with two of R.T.P.'s original color plates in the background, before the publication of *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds* in 1973.

tively agreed to take part. Soon afterward, because of an overloaded work schedule he was reluctantly forced to withdraw. We next tried Don Eckelberry, who was becoming increasingly intrigued by the birds of the American tropics and who painted them brilliantly. He said "yes", then after some realistic second thoughts, "no". It was evident I would have to do them all myself.

Inasmuch as so many years had elapsed since Chalif prepared the first

draft of the text and so much new information had surfaced while I was painting the colorplates, it fell to me to prepare the final revisions. These were checked again by Chalif before we submitted them to the fine-tooth scrutiny of several of our colleagues, notably Eugene Eisenmann of the American Museum of Natural History. As chairman of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list Committee, which planned to include all of Middle America in the next



Plate 17 in *Aves de Mexico* (Plate 4 in the English edition) illustrating the colorful and brilliant large birds of prey.

check-list, he had an up-to-the-minute knowledge of publications, records, range extensions and taxonomic decisions as they affected Mexican birds. He also had the specimen trays of the American Museum at hand to examine when necessary.

The book was intended basically for American birders who already had one or both of the other field guides—East and West. To encompass more than 1000 species in a book of field guide size, we were forced by the economics of publishing to make drastic cuts. With few exceptions, all birds already illustrated in the North American field guides were not illustrated. However, their occurrence in Mexico was given briefly, as well as a one-line memo on their field marks. The field birder in Mexico really needed all three books to cover everything adequately.

When the World Wildlife Fund decided to sponsor a Spanish edition there was no recourse but to get everything into a single book, albeit a thick one (670 pages), that would still fit the pocket.

Now, after several years of hard work by some of Mexico's top birders, notably Hector Ceballos-Lascurain and Mario Ramos, we have a complete, single volume bird guide, translated into Spanish with supplemental plates and text excerpted from the eastern and western field guides. It has 87 plates as against 48 in the previous book and includes not only Mexico but also Guatemala, Belize and El Salvador.

On December 6, 1989, we held a celebration at the Natural History Museum in Mexico City and the book, published by *Editorial Diana*, was formally introduced by its President, Jose Luis Ramirez, to a select Mexican audience. Andres Sada, a noted Mexican birder, and President of PRONATURA, the most important conservation organization in Mexico, then spoke. My own Spanish is minimal, so my remarks from the podium were translated by Hector Ceballos who has an impeccable command of both languages.

The following day it was good to get into the high mountains southwest of Mexico City where I could reacquaint myself with Bumblebee Hummingbirds, Red Warblers, and the like. I only wish Eddie Chalif could have been there. ■