From the Editor

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From the Editor

As you will read in this monograph, Thomas R. Howell was a tireless field worker who, among numerous other accomplishments, focused for part of his career on the zoogeography of birds in Nicaragua. In the memoriam on Dr. Howell's life and career (Auk 122:1008–1010, 2005), however, we learned that he became seriously ill in retirement and was unable to finish writing the results of his Nicaraguan (and other) studies. Thus, the editors of this monograph stepped forward to complete the task that Dr. Howell was unable to complete.

I was fortunate to meet Dr. Howell in the late 1970s while working at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, an organization for which he served on the board of directors. Because I did not get to know him well, I have asked Lloyd Kiff—who studied under Dr. Howell at the University of California, Los Angeles—to provide the following remarks.

Michael L. Morrison

Thomas "Tom" Howell was an ornithological pioneer who began his work in Nicaragua before Eugene Eisenmann's seminal *The Species of Middle American Birds* was published in 1955 but long after the few previous ornithological studies in the country. At the time of his first field trip to Nicaragua, there was little formal ornithological activity underway in Central America, except for Alexander Skutch's ongoing studies on the natural histories of Costa Rican birds and the early stages of Alexander Wetmore's long-term work on the birds of Panama.

Tom amassed the most important collection of Nicaraguan birds, comprising more than 2,000 study skins, and the only one with modern specimen data; it is now a part of the UCLA-Dickey Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles. Such specimens, especially those with complete data, still provide the underpinnings to our knowledge of the distribution of birds in many ornithologist-deficient regions of the Neotropics. Over the years, Tom also tracked down several unpublished and almost forgotten manuscripts and sets of field notes on Nicaraguan birds, as it was clearly his intent from his earliest visits to Nicaragua to publish a comprehensive volume on its birds.

Tom was an academic descendant of the Joseph Grinnell–Alden Miller lineage, so, in true Grinnellian fashion, he not only reported the dry descriptive details on the specimens that he collected, but also included many incidental notes on diet, taxonomy, and behavior in his papers. Similar observations in early reports, dating back to the early years of *Ibis*, *Journal für Ornithologie*, and *The Auk*, still represent a fertile source for basic natural-history information of the kind that is now generally omitted from most country treatments of Neotropical birds. Tom's broad interest in all things avian was also reflected in his role as a university professor. I served for several years as the teaching assistant for his ornithology class at UCLA, and on class field trips, he provided his students with a constant stream of collateral information and unanswered questions on every species that we saw, perhaps hoping that he would awake in them an appreciation for the animal itself and maybe kindle a spark that would direct their own future careers.

Through a forensic analysis of the collecting dates on the labels of Tom's Nicaraguan specimens, the editors of this volume pieced together an itinerary of his trips to Nicaragua, and I was surprised to find that he went there 13 times. He was accompanied on most of these trips by his faithful friend and former graduate student John Zoeger, a giant of a man who was a painfully slow bird skinner and a hapless speaker of Spanish, but a great auto mechanic, ever-amiable companion, and expert marksman. John's sheer size was doubtless helpful in the remote regions of Nicaragua, where a Wild West attitude still prevailed. All of Tom's trips to Nicaragua were made during the years of the Somoza dynasty, which required a certain vigilance and a sure hand in dealing with the authorities, if only to obtain permission for a foreigner to use firearms in the country.

Most of these trips were straightforward collecting ventures of the old-school variety, intended to add to our collective knowledge of the distribution and taxonomy of Central American birds. However, in the mid- to late 1960s, Tom became highly interested in the new field of community ecology, particularly the studies of species diversity pioneered by Robert MacArthur and his associates. His visits to Nicaragua in 1966 and 1967 were made to the Mosquitia region of the Caribbean

lowlands, where an extensive pine savanna abuts the oldest gallery rain forest in Central America. This fortuitous juxtaposition provided Tom with a great opportunity to make comparisons between the avian communities of the physiognomically simple pine savanna and the incredibly complex primary rain forest only a few steps away.

Seven trips by Tom to La Mosquitia from 1955 to 1967 led to an important paper in *The Auk* on the pine savanna avifauna and an even longer one in *Living Bird* presenting a detailed analysis of the ecological differences between pine savanna birds and those in the adjacent rain forest. Among other contributions from these trips, Tom brought attention to the curious community of diminutive subspecies of familiar North American birds, including American Kestrels, Vermillion Flycatchers, and Eastern Bluebirds, which had differentiated in this well-defined, but rather small, portion of Central America within fairly recent times, or at least after edaphic changes caused by the constant burning of the area by aboriginal people. (As an indicator of the Lilliputian dimensions of these birds, the female type specimen of *Falco sparverius nicaraguensis* Howell weighed only 79.5 g!)

Tom's specimens, like most collected in low-latitude wet tropics, were hard won. Together with my office partner and fellow graduate student at UCLA, Gary Stiles, I accompanied him and John Zoeger on collecting–surveying trips to Nicaragua in 1966 and 1967, and they were enjoyable death marches. Our field station was an almost deserted lumber camp not yet in full operation, located in the Caribbean pine savanna near Waspam, not far south of the Honduras–Nicaragua border. We awoke between 0430 and 0500 hours each morning, gathered our field gear, and piled into our elderly Chevy wagon to drive more than an hour on a narrow track to the interface of the rain forest and the pine savanna. There, we made bird and vegetation surveys and collected specimens all morning, returning just in time for a noon lunch. We spent the afternoon preparing specimens, but faithfully suspended our activities each day at the appointed cocktail hour. Tom, and certain other members of the field party, enjoyed the occasional (daily) drink(s), and we always showed up in good cheer at the mess hall each evening. Despite the convivial atmosphere at dinner, we invariably returned to our barracks and continued preparing specimens and catching up on our field notes until the late hours of the night. After more than two weeks of this regime, we were all exhausted, but Tom had no problem convincing us that our limited time in such an incredible research setting was just too precious to waste.

I never understood why Tom did not finish his long-planned Nicaraguan book, although, when asked, he usually referred vaguely to the need to examine more specimens before he wrapped it up. When we visited Tom in the early 1990s at his lovely retirement home on the Mendocino County coast, he was still puttering with his Nicaraguan manuscript, but his enthusiasm for the project seemed to have waned. Perhaps the project stayed on the backburner for the same reason that Roger Tory Peterson's revision of his eastern field guide was delayed so long. I was told that Peterson once responded impatiently to a critic, who had remarked on his slow pace, "I am not procrastinating. I am just finishing other projects!" Indeed, Tom went on to finish other projects in grand style. In another compartment of his academic life, he always had a keen interest in behavioral and ecological physiology. During his post-Nicaraguan years, his studies on the breeding biology and ecology of the Gray Gull in Chile and the Egyptian Plover in Ethiopia, two poorly known species with very unusual ecological adaptations to extreme environments, rank among the finest of their kind ever conducted.

Juan Carlos Martinez-Sánchez and Tom Will, now among the leading authorities on Nicaraguan birds, deserve enormous credit for undertaking the task of turning Tom's notes into this useful publication. Fortunately, they both knew Tom and his work, and they patiently encouraged him to put his notes into some organized state, making sure that the information from his hard work and difficult field trips did not fall through the cracks. Along with Tom's other publications, this monograph provides the Neotropical ornithological community with a valuable baseline of knowledge of Nicaraguan bird distribution and abundance for the period just prior to several decades of accelerated habitat change in many parts of the country. It is hoped that it will stimulate a steady flow of new information on the birds of this biologically rich region.

Lloyd Kiff