

## IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM H. PHELPS JR.

FRANÇOIS VUILLEUMIER

*Department of Ornithology, The American Museum of Natural History,  
Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, New York 10024 USA*



WILLIAM H. PHELPS JR., 1902-1988  
(From an undated photograph taken in the late seventies)

With the death of William H. Phelps Jr. (Billy to those who knew him) in Caracas, Venezuela, on 13 August 1988, an extraordinary era in the ornithological and geographical exploration of Venezuela and in the development of Neotropical ornithology has come to a close. With Billy's help, his father, William Henry Phelps (1875-1965; *In Memoriam*, 1970, *Auk* 87: 419), started in 1938 to build the collection known to all students of Neotropical birds as the *Colección Ornitológica Phelps*. This collection now contains more than 76,300 skins and a small num-

ber of anatomical specimens, and is housed in the *Edificio Gran Sabana* in Sabana Grande (Caracas).

Billy contributed in no small measure to the curation and growth of this unique biological resource, the largest bird collection in Latin America and probably the largest private collection in the world. No less a part of the collection itself is the extremely rich library (6,000 books, 800 journals, and 5,500 reprints) that accompanies and completes it. The great majority of specimens in the Phelps collection are from

Venezuela and were obtained during field expeditions sponsored by the Phelps family. To give an idea of the scientific value of the collection, there are on average approximately 60 skins for each species of bird on the Venezuelan list. For some species, the collection has series of up to several hundred skins. What a treasure trove for studies of geographical variation, for example!

At present the staff of the Phelps Collection consists of one curator (Mr. Ramón Aveledo Hostos), one curatorial assistant, and three collectors and preparators. At the time of his death, Billy was President of the William H. Phelps Foundation, originally established by his father. The main goal of the Foundation is to maintain, curate, and augment the bird collection and the library. Billy's wife, Kathleen Phoebe Deery, whom he married in 1941, and who is affectionately known as Kathy, is now the President of the Foundation. She was recently nominated a Corresponding Fellow of the American Museum of Natural History.

Billy Phelps joined the AOU in 1940, became an Elective Member in 1948, a Corresponding Fellow in 1975, a Patron in 1979, and an Honorary Fellow in 1986.

Billy was born 25 December 1902 in San Antonio de Maturín, Venezuela, attended high school at the Colégio Muñoz Tebar and the Colégio of the French Fathers in Caracas. He then went to Lawrenceville School and to Princeton University, where he obtained his Bachelor of Science degree in 1926.

With his father and his wife, Billy organized expeditions to all corners of Venezuela. Both he and Kathy participated in a number of these collecting trips, including visits to some of the most remote areas of Venezuela's mountains, forests, and savannas. Many of these expeditions were strenuous and full of hardships, which were not mentioned in the technical reports. There were approximately 49 expeditions to islands of the Caribbean, 15 to the tabletop mountains (tepuis) of southern and southeastern Venezuela, 15 to Amazonia, 10 to the Llanos, and four to the Sierra de Perijá. Some of these expeditions lasted two or even three months and large numbers of birds were collected. The Phelps Collection has grown at an average rate of ca. 3,800 bird skins per year between 4 September 1938 (when the first catalog entry was made) and 1988. Billy continued to be most interested in the tepuis and helped

sponsor a multidisciplinary expedition to the Neblina area just a few years ago, which resulted in a number of faunistic discoveries.

Ornithologically, Billy was dedicated (as was his father also) to the exploration of his country's avifauna and to the description of species ranges and of new species and subspecies. Billy's last paper, the description of a new subspecies of hummingbird, *Amazilia viridigaster laireti* (characteristically dedicated to a friend, Dr. André Lairé, and co-authored with Ramón Aveledo, Curator of the Phelps Collection), appeared in the July 1988 volume of the *Boletín de la Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales*, an active society that he helped found and of which he was President during two different terms. Alone, or in co-authorship with others, Billy wrote and published over 65 papers and books. By far his best-known works are his books "Lista de las Aves de Venezuela con su Distribución" (1950, 1957, 1963, in junior authorship with his father) and "A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela" (Princeton University Press, 1978; and in Spanish translation "Una Guía de las Aves de Venezuela," Gráficas Armitano, Caracas, 1979; co-authored with Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee and illustrated by Guy Tudor), a book which paved the way for several recent field guides. Other well-known papers include "The origin of the bird fauna of the south Venezuelan highlands" (Bulletin of The American Museum of Natural History 136: 269-328; with Ernst Mayr), and "Contribución al análisis de los elementos que componen la avifauna subtropical de las cordilleras de la costa norte de Venezuela" (Boletín de la Academia de Ciencias Físicas, Matemáticas y Naturales, Caracas 26: 14-43). The latter paper was presented to the Members of the Venezuelan Academy of Sciences when Billy was elected to occupy the chair to which his father had been elected earlier.

Billy received numerous honors during his lifetime—including the Explorers' Club Medal (1963), the David Livingstone Centennial Medal of the American Geographical Society (1968), the Order "Conservación del Ambiente" (Caracas 1986)—and several posthumously—including the Order "Diego de Lozada," conferred by the President of the Republic of Venezuela for Billy's invaluable contributions to his country.

Billy had a long association with the American Museum of Natural History. From 1952 until his death, he was a Research Associate in

the Department of Ornithology, and from 1956 until 1959, he was a Member of the Board of Trustees of the Museum. The majority of the type specimens of taxa described from material in the Phelps Collection are deposited in the Museum's Department of Ornithology.

Billy was elected to several important posts on committees of the International Ornithological Congresses, including the Permanent Executive Committee of the International Committee of the IOCs. Billy worked for years in important organizations, especially the International Council for Bird Preservation (of which he became President of the Venezuelan Section and of the Pan-American Section) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (of which he became Vice President). For years Billy was perhaps South America's foremost avian conservationist.

But we must not forget that Billy's wide-ranging work in ornithology and in nature and bird conservation occurred while he was a leader in the Venezuelan business community. He was Vice President of the *Compañía Anónima Phelps Syndicate*, President of the *C. A. Almacén Americano*, President of the *C. A. Radio Caracas*, and President of the *Corporación Radiofónica Venezolana, C. A. (CORAVEN)*, and *Radio Caracas Televisión*.

In Ernst Mayr's words, Billy "was one of the most generous, friendly, and modest people I have ever encountered." I had the privilege of knowing Billy since 1965 and can vouch for this

statement. Ever since the sixties, when I was a budding Neotropical ornithologist, Billy encouraged me to pursue my research goals and helped me in many ways. Every time I sent him a reprint, he would acknowledge it with a note of congratulations and a warm remark. I cherish the inscription he wrote in my copy of his "A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela": "... with all my best wishes—and hoping this book will be useful on your next trip to Venezuela." I wish Billy could see how dog-eared my copy of his book is today!

Billy Phelps was also a very courageous man. Late in life he had to undergo difficult surgery. A short time after the operation, he was cheerfully trying out his new leg, as he called it, looking forward to every day's progress.

Billy's and his father's contributions to geographical exploration, to Neotropical ornithology in general, and to Venezuelan ornithology in particular, as well as to nature conservation in the Neotropics, have been profound and unique. Billy will long be remembered for continuing his father's life work and making it, in turn, his own life work. He will be remembered also for having helped lay the foundation for all further ornithological work in Venezuela. In this task he was helped and supported by his wife, Kathy, who now shoulders the responsibility of the Phelps Foundation, which will ensure the future well-being of the extraordinary *Colección Phelps*.