



## **In Memoriam: Juan Mazar Barnett, 1975–2012**

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## IN MEMORIAM: JUAN MAZAR BARNETT, 1975–2012

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Juan Mazar Barnett, known also as Juancito, was a rare character. One of those natural wonders that appears from nowhere, then slips from view without farewells, leaving a strong mark on all who met him. It would be a disservice to remember merely his vast ornithological knowledge without first mentioning his capacity to marvel at the natural world and his need to share that admiration with other human beings.

Juan was born in March 1975, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and was touched by the avian world at the age of nine. Knowing Juan, I can only wonder how he had managed to survive nine years without birds. In his own words, he got into birds “after going through a dinosaur phase, an airplane phase, and then a general wildlife phase, in that order.” But Juan was a born ornithologist, and everyone knew that, even 30 years ago. Juancito rapidly gained fame among fellow members of the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata (today Aves Argentinas) as the boy that knew the scientific name of every Argentine bird. No matter which plate in the bird book the old ladies pointed to, the society’s youngest member knew its name (both Spanish and scientific), range, patterns of migration, diagnostic characters, abundance, and where one had to go to see the really rare ones (depicted on the last page). No matter the subject, if it was about birds, he knew all the details.

If during his childhood Juan was unanimously seen as a gifted boy, in his teenage years he established himself as perhaps the most complete field ornithologist of his generation. Older members of the society would come to him with extensive field notes that he would rapidly transform into a bird name, or, in the absence of proper data, he would politely ask whether the shape of the bill or any other distinctive character was noted. His patience and politeness transformed him into a virtual guru for seasoned and novice birders alike, and in 1996 he was awarded the Young Ornithologists’ Award by the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata, the association that had witnessed his growth.

Juan’s field’s experience was unbeatable. During his early years as a birder he visited every corner of his home country in search of the feathered wonders that he knew so well from books. Once he entered “the bird phase” he never stopped exploring. I could devote many pages to listing the places that Juan visited during his youth; each one of his trips is carefully described in his more than 20 field catalogs that remain in his office. His first birding trip was to northern Patagonia (Lanin National Park) in 1985, when he was almost ten years old. This trip was followed by many others to different regions, including the lowland subtropical forests of Iguazú Falls, the Yungas and cloud forests of Calilegua, the shrubby thorny habitats of the Chaco, the shorebird paradise of Punta Rasa, the Patagonian steppes of the Peninsula de Valdés, the *araucano* forests of



southern Patagonia, the marshes of Esteros del Iberá, or the Puna highlands of Jujuy. Along with bird lists and descriptions of sites, his field catalogs are filled with beautiful drawings, careful behavioral notes, descriptions of nests, eggs, chicks, and anything that drew the attention of the young naturalist. Those notes, if properly used, should provide outstanding data for the future.

His natural curiosity led him to read most of the avian literature available, and his presence at the society’s library was constant. His preferred subjects were the fields of biogeography, taxonomy, systematics, and conservation, although natural history remained high too. Over the years, Juan developed a critical mind that remained with him throughout his life. Juan never accepted statements without questioning them; even as a young boy, he sharply criticized inconsistencies in the only field guide for Argentina available at the time. Some of his book reviews are masterpieces (Mazar Barnett 1997a, b, 1999c, 2000a, c, d, 2001a, 2002, 2003a, c, d). His sharp eye invariably exposed any inconsistencies, but his most passionate attacks were directed at sloppiness, a fault he could not accept. On the other hand, he was never short of praise when he felt that other people’s achievements merited it.

His first scientific articles reported nothing less than a series of first records for Argentina, including those of the Sooty Grassquit (*Tiaris fuliginosa*) (Mazar Barnett and Herrera 1996), Giant Conebill (*Oreomanes fraseri*) (Mazar Barnett et al. 1998d), and Pink-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus creatopus*), the latter based on a specimen “forgotten” in the drawers of the Museo Argentino de

Ciencias Naturales in Buenos Aires (Mazar Barnett and Navas 1998). These discoveries were followed by the first Brazilian record of the Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*), an Old World shorebird that strayed to the tropics coincidentally with Juan (Mazar Barnett 1997b), as well as several new birds for Paraguay (Lowen et al. 1997a, b). He also published several articles addressing the natural history and distribution of many Argentine birds (Mazar Barnett 1999a, b, 2001, 2003, Roesler and Mazar Barnett 2004, Areta et al. 2006, Lowen et al. 2009, Lowen and Mazar Barnett 2010). In 2001, Juan and Mark Pearman published an *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Argentina* (Mazar Barnett and Pearman 2001), which has become established as the country's official bird list (Mazar Barnett and Pearman 2009).

After several years of exploring the pampas and other Argentine landscapes, it was time for him to visit other countries. Between 1995 and 1998 Juan made several trips to Paraguay, which resulted in more discoveries and several publications (Lowen et al. 1997a, b, Capper et al. 2001a, b, Clay et al. 2001, Mazar Barnett et al. 2002, 2004a, Mazar Barnett and Madroño 2003). He then went to Bolivia and surveyed the dry valleys of Cochabamba in 1999 and 2000, calling attention to a cryptic species of Tyrannidae in the genus *Serpophaga* (Herzog and Mazar Barnett 2004). And then came Brazil. This country, like no other, offered Juan a mixture of dry habitats, luxuriant forests, and many threatened and range-restricted species that he learned to identify with a swift and impressive authority. In Brazil, he worked in most biomes, including the Atlantic Forest, the Cerrado, the Caatinga, the Pantanal, and Amazonia, publishing many articles with a productive network of collaborators, most of whom were close personal friends (Mazar Barnett 2000b, Naka et al. 2000, 2001, 2007, Kirwan et al. 2001a, b, 2004, Raposo et al. 2002, Buzzetti and Mazar Barnett 2003, Mazar Barnett et al. 2003, 2004b, Whitney et al. 2003, Mazar Barnett and Kirwan 2004, Stouffer et al. 2011). More recently, Juan joined the advisory committee of the Wildlife Conservation Society's "Birds of Brazil" series of field guides (Gwynne et al. 2010). Although many trips surely left a mark on Juan's personality, his journey to the thorny interior of Bahia (northeastern Brazil) in 1997 was particularly memorable. It is impossible to forget Juan's excitement on first glimpsing the last wild Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopitta spixii*, a species now extinct in the wild), flying from tree to tree.

For many years, his main interest seemed to be in finding rare or lost species, including many without records for decades. He first co-authored notes on the rare Plushcap (*Catamblyrhynchus diadema*) (DiGiacomo et al. 1997), a bird with just a handful of previous records for Argentina. Subsequently he described the ghostly presence of the Lyre-tailed Nightjar (*Uropsalis lyra*) in Argentina (Mazar Barnett et al. 1998c) and published notes on other very rare birds from the Andes (Mazar Barnett et al. 1998a, 2001), several of which were known in Argentina from just one or two records. His most important records, however, included those birds either lost to science or generally considered to be extinct. One of these is the Austral Rail (*Rallus antarcticus*), which remained unseen for 40 years until Juan and his friends Santiago Imberti, Marco Della Seta, and Germán Pugnali rediscovered it in the marshes of southern Patagonia (Mazar Barnett et al. 1998b) and Chile (Imberti y Mazar Barnett 1999). Juan also played a role in locating a new population of the extremely rare White-winged Nightjar (*Eleothreptus candicans*), which remained elusive in the Paraguayan savannas, until its rediscovery in 1995 (Clay et al. 1998, 2001, Capper et al. 2001a). In Brazil, Juan was instrumental in documenting the rediscovery of another lost bird, Kaempfer's Tody-Tyrant (*Hemitriccus kaempferi*), an understory species previously unknown in life,

its existence resting solely in the type specimen collected by Kaempfer himself in 1929 and a second bird collected by H. F. Berla in 1950 but noticed by scientists only in the early 1990s (Mazar Barnett et al. 2000, Buzzetti et al. 2003a, b). With these credentials, Juan was optimistic about the survival in Paraguay of a small population of the Glaucous Macaw (*Anodorhynchus glaucus*), a bird that has been considered extinct since the mid-19th century. Two unidentified dark macaws seen and tape-recorded in flight during his field work in Paraguay ignited this hope.

During those productive years, Juan paid special attention to avian vocalizations, making a substantial collection of recordings. In fact, one would never expect to find him in the woods without his tape recorder. His recordings, often of outstanding quality, can be heard on a variety of publications, such as "Birds of Bolivia" (Mayer 2000), "Sonidos de aves de Calilegua" (Krabbe et al. 2001), or "Bird sounds of Argentina and adjacent areas" (Imberti et al. 2009), which he co-authored. Juan's generosity in sharing his data is apparent from his many recordings that are freely available for downloading ([www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org)), even as popular ringtones through the Center of Biological Diversity's website (<http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/>).

Although Juan had an exceptionally scientific mind, the idea of spending his precious days in a demanding six-year undergraduate course in biology at the Universidad de Buenos Aires was far from appealing. Fortunately, friends like Guy Kirwan and James Lowen, with whom he worked in Paraguay, convinced him of the importance of a formal education, and in 1999 Juan flew to Norwich, UK, to work toward a bachelor of science at the prestigious University of East Anglia. He graduated with first class honors in ecology and biology in 2001, presenting a pioneering molecular study on the "Taxonomy and biogeography of the South American species of the genus *Picoides*." Besides yielding his bachelor's degree, his three years in Europe were important for his professional life, as he worked in the Threatened Birds of the World program of BirdLife International at Cambridge and was a member of the editorial board of the journal *Cotinga*, published by the Neotropical Bird Club.

Following his return from the UK in 2001, Juan devoted most of his time to leading birding tours in South America. For a few years, it proved to be the perfect life for him, as he visited some of the most fascinating parts of the Americas. His fluency in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, along with his unparalleled bird knowledge and empathy with tourists, rapidly transformed him into one of the most popular tour guides in the market. Together with some of his life-long friends (Germán Pugnali, Hernán Rodríguez Goñi, and Hernán Casañas), he founded Seriemas Nature Tours. He spent months at a time in the field, visiting every corner of southern South America and Brazil, as well as making several trips to Antarctica, which touched Juan, perhaps more than any other place on earth, with the raw beauty of nature. Away from South America, Juan did not pay too much attention to birds, and he enjoyed remarking on how few times he had been birding in the UK. On the other hand, trips to more exciting destinations, such as Cuba, Honduras, China, and Borneo sparked his interest in "foreign" birds.

In addition to being a full-time birding guide, Juan worked on several conservation projects, in both Argentina and Brazil. His collaboration with the Sociedade para a Conservação das Aves (the partner of BirdLife International in Brazil) was particularly fruitful. Between 1999 and 2003 he made several trips to the Brazilian northeast, researching possibly the greatest environmental tragedy of our time: the almost complete destruction of the wonderful Atlantic

forests of Pernambuco and Alagoas, well known for their many endemics and highly endangered species. During his trips to that region, together with his friend Dante Buzzetti, Juan made some of his greatest ornithological discoveries, including three species possibly new to science that his friends and collaborators should publish in the near future. In fact, much of his energy in his last years was devoted to the description of one of those new species, which apparently is critically endangered but had passed unnoticed by dozens of top-notch ornithologists in one of the most visited patches of the Brazilian northeast. The team of researchers, however, experienced first-hand the conflict between collecting the specimen needed for the formal description of a new bird and trying to gather additional data in the hope that every individual in the wild would contribute to the survival of the species, already on the brink of extinction. Although Juan witnessed the brutal destruction of the Atlantic forest, he remained optimistic, as his article “Renewed hope for the threatened avian endemics of northeastern Brazil” suggests (Mazar Barnett et al. 2005).

From 2004 onward, Juan’s ornithological adventures were punctuated by health problems. His body had to fight an immunological disease that kept him far from the field for several months at a time. Typical diseases that a healthy person could fight effectively turned into long and complicated battles. The final one that took him away was meningitis. Nevertheless, his last months were intellectually intense. Juan formed part of the *Condor’s* editorial board for Latin America, and his efforts were important in increasing the number of publications by Latin American researchers in top journals. Additionally, Juan had decided to devote less time to guiding tours and finally join a Ph.D. program. His plan was to study the endemic and endangered birds of the Brazilian northeast, which include the *gritador-do-nordeste*, his new species, yet undescribed. Those forest fragments represent the fight for survival of wounded nature, a forest that lacks its natural defenses and needs our help to survive. Juan was ready for the fight, not only for saving his own life, but also to preserve the last patches of an amazing forest.

Juan will no longer make us laugh, lead our way to rediscover birds thought extinct, or shine a light in what for us were dark corners, but his love of nature will continue to inspire us. From a professional standpoint, Juan was the pride of a generation. He had a rare gift for understanding birds, and somehow to know how to look for them, even ones no one had seen in decades. With more than 50 scientific articles, he made a lasting contribution to the ornithology of the Neotropical Region. Juan had an exceptional life; he was master of his time, and his characteristic sense of humor won over dozens of good friends. “And because birds are not everything,” as he stated a few months before he died, we can also remember him having his favorite drink, a Brazilian *suco de maracujá* (passion fruit juice), talking enthusiastically about music and fine art, and wearing his U2 t-shirt, something that he “enjoyed as much as most of the birding I’ve done.”

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Kirwan, and Weber Girão also helped me with details of his trips to Bolivia, Paraguay, the UK, and Brazil, respectively. And finally I thank Juan, for giving us the honor of sharing his life with us and continuing to inspire us.—LUCIANO N. NAKA, Laboratório de Ornitologia, Departamento de Zoologia, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil.

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