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In Memoriam

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IN MEMORIAM: LUIS FELIPE BAPTISTA, 1941–2000

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LUIS FELIPE BAPTISTA, 1941–2000

(Photograph taken 1991. Photo by Caroline Kopp.)

My passion for birds and their songs began when I was a boy in Hong Kong. There my father took me to a teahouse where the top floor was reserved for bird lovers. You brought your caged birds and drank tea and enjoyed their song. The practice enchanted me. . . . I also kept canaries and I was impatient to get them singing. So I started singing to them. To my amazement, when they were adults, they sang like me.

That passion propelled Luis Baptista through life and into an amazing career that would illuminate many aspects of bird song, spanning the disciplines of ethology, systematics, and conservation. His career was launched after Luis emigrated from his native Hong Kong to San Francisco where, as a teenager, he served as curatorial assistant in Botany and later Ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences. There he came under the influence of the late Dr. Robert T. Orr, then chairman and curator of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy, who introduced him to the study of birds as a discipline. That tutelage totally diverted Luis from a probable career in banking, the vocation of his family, when, to his astonishment, he realized that one could actually be paid to go out, watch birds, and study their songs.

Of Portuguese–Chinese descent, Luis Baptista was born 9 August 1941 in Hong Kong and resided in Hong Kong and Macau until 1961. He gleaned much from his early experience in that subtropical environment, keeping and breeding birds as pets and cultivating succulent plants. His education was in the Catholic tradition, which not only instilled academic discipline but also nurtured his affinity and love for the arts, especially music and poetry. He completed BA and MS degrees at the University of San Francisco, and, with the encouragement of Dr. Orr, entered the University of California at Berkeley in 1968 as a Ph.D. student under the direction of Dr. Ned K. Johnson in Zoology. His dissertation (1975) on song behavior of the White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) was the first study in a series that would endure throughout the remainder of his life.

After completing his Ph.D., Luis was awarded a NATO post-doctoral fellowship and studied in Germany in the laboratory of Klaus Immelmann and, as a Fellow at the Max Planck Institute of Physiology and Behavior, with Hans Löhrl. In Germany, his study of Common

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) vocalizations demonstrated that different calls were produced for specific kinds of threats, not unlike some primate calls. He returned to California in 1973 as curator of the Moore Laboratory of Zoology, Occidental College, Los Angeles (Assistant professor, 1973–1978; Associate Professor, 1979–1980). With his colleague Martin L. Morton, he returned to study the White-crowned Sparrow in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. From 1980 until his death, he was Curator of Birds and Chairman of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy at the California Academy of Sciences and was, in 1982, named a fellow of that institution. Once again he could study his birds just out his front door, on the grounds of Golden Gate Park. There he knew nearly every White-crowned Sparrow by voice.

Studies of that sparrow by Luis, performed with a cadre of students and colleagues including the second author, were crucial in expanding our understanding of avian song and song learning. In those studies, that sparrow has become one of a few key species. Of the more than 100 peer-reviewed research papers that he authored or coauthored, 72 were devoted to White-crowned Sparrow research, and mostly, but not exclusively, to song and song development. Eight book chapters also drew from that body of work. His studies documented subspecific differences in song, local dialects with bilingual birds at population boundaries, and the roles of genetics and social interaction (nature vs. nurture) in song development. His experiments contributed importantly to vigorous debates on the mechanisms of song learning and the functional significance of song dialects. In addition, his interest in song learning and language (Luis spoke five languages and had a working familiarity with more) led him to speculate about parallels between bird song and human language. Recently he followed a branch of this interest by documenting dialects amongst his Portuguese–Chinese speaking community in Macao, especially the patois and the creole variant “Macaista.”

The body of his scientific work is impressive, and the breadth is astounding. He was a brilliant collaborator, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and, seemingly without effort, finding ways to facilitate further

collaboration. Bird song and song learning in species other than White-crowned Sparrows was often a theme of those collaborations, and recent works in progress with the first author and others involved an extension of song learning studies to the nonpasserine hummingbirds, for example, Anna's Hummingbird (*Colypte anna*) (Baptista and Schuchmann 1990 Ethology 84:15–26) and Violet-ears (*Colibri thalassinus*) (Gaunt et al. 1994 Auk 87–103). Many students of ornithology have been introduced to the discipline through the text book he coauthored with the late Joel C. Welty, *The Life of Birds*. He also collaborated on studies crossing many disciplines such as taxonomic descriptions of numerous avian and nonavian species often based on behavior, work on avian integument and water balance, writings on animal husbandry and welfare of animals used in research, and perhaps most importantly, conservation.

The Socorro Dove (*Zenaida graysoni*), endemic to Isla Socorro in the Revillagigedo Archipelago of Mexico, became extinct in the wild in 1978. With his partner, Helen M. Horblit, an avid aviculturist and keeper of Aye-Aye (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*) at the San Francisco Zoo, Luis founded the Island Endemic Institute (IEI) and began a program to breed captive populations of the dove for release in the wild. For that project he was awarded an Honorable Mention from the Rolex Awards for Enterprise in the field of conservation in 1990. The IEI, in cooperation with the Mexican government, Mexican colleagues, especially Juan Martinez-Gomez, and Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas A.C., will continue his work to reintroduce the dove to its ancestral island by restoring the island to its historic condition, reforested and devoid of introduced predators. The soon-to-be-published book, *Las Aves de México en peligro de extinción*, edited by Gerardo Ceballos and Laura Márquez, will be dedicated to Luis.

Luis was an avid teacher, especially generous and anxious to share his knowledge, and he had a special wit and charm when doing so. Pointing to an African Aloe tree in Golden Gate Park in a recent interview, Luis exclaimed

This is where a White-crowned Sparrow I used to know once lived. She was very dominant to her husband, whom she beat up on all the time. However, one day, she divorced him, moved to a different tree a few hundred feet away and married another guy who then beat up on her. I couldn't understand what

she saw in him. But they raised more White-crowned babies than anyone else in the park. She must have realized there was something special about the new guy in terms of his fitness.

This statement is so reflective of his personable style and humor, not only in informal chats but also in the most formal of lectures as well. He would frequently accompany his dialog with perfectly mimicked, whistled renditions (at half speed) of White-crowned Sparrow song, thus avoiding the cumbersome and often unpredictable performance of a tape recorder. The way Luis' mouth looked when he made those songs lingers, almost disembodied, in memory.

Luis had a passion for music as strong as his affinity for bird song. He often accompanied his then young daughter, Laura (Aya), to her summer dance camps in northern California, to enjoy not only the beauty of her movement, but also the fellowship of the musicians. One of his last lectures drew upon this love of bird song and music—speculating on how bird song and human music invention are similar. The AAAS symposium in which the lecture was given was entitled "Biomusic: The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music" and he intended his lecture ". . . to bring biologists and artists together to celebrate Biodiversity." We like to think that among the seeds of ideas from which that lecture sprang was one from an exhibit at the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, where, as we listened to music from a panorama about native Indian life, Luis exclaimed excitedly (as always!) that the flutist was performing a perfect rendition of the song of a Riverside Wren (*Thryothorus semibadius*). The lecture was a resounding success, drawing national attention, and will be published posthumously.

Luis also rendered much service to the ornithological community on committees for the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) and Cooper Ornithological Society (COS), as a member of the both AOU Council (1982–1984) and the International Ornithological Committee (1982–2000). He also served as Chair of the Fulbright Scholar Program for Mexico and Central America (1992–1996) and member of National Scientific Foundation panels (1976–1978, 1986). He was an Elective Member (1976) and Fellow (1980) of the AOU, and an Honorary Member (1996) of the COS. Luis died unex-

pectedly at his home in Petaluma, California, on 12 June 2000. Dying young and still engaged with colleagues, staff, students and volunteers, Luis' loss is deeply felt by those at the California Academy of Sciences, and especially by the dedicated staff of his department: Kathleen Berge, Betsey Cutler, Andrea Jesse, Douglas Long (Acting Chair), and Lisa Thomsen.

We miss his work, his service, his *joie de vivre*—we can never forget him.

Excerpted quotations are from an interview with C. Dreifus, reported in the New York Times on 16 May and 17 June 2000. A memorial to a man who touched so many with his exuberance, grace, and charisma can not be accomplished without input of many people, and we relied on many, especially D. E. Kroodsma, M. R. Lein, M. L. Morton, D. A. Nelson, I. Pepperberg, S. I. Rothstein, and B. A. Schreiber.