

## 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 Over the years, Tom also tracked down several unpublished and almost forgotten manuscripts and sets of field notes on Nicaraguan birds, as it was clearly his intent from his earliest visits to Nicaragua to publish a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