

## **Introduction to Conservation Geography**

In eastern Honduras, the Three-wattled Bellbird is a wanderer of many names and inspirations. In one village it is *pájaro cafetero*, the coffee bird that heralds a ripening crop. In another it is *pimentero*, bellwether of the allspice harvest. Olanchanos call it bell ringer, bell tuner, bellbird, *calandria*, a lark in the rural imagination. This loudest of birds competes with the jet-plane roars of mantled howlers along the cloud forest spine of the Cordillera de Agalta, drowning out the calls and cries of intrepid human visitors. Well below Agalta's jagged ridge crests, young male bellbirds practice their calls in the canopy of Hurricane Mitch-scarred coffee farms, straying occasionally to the highland pine woods and even to tropical dry forest near human dwellings in the densely settled lowland plains.

Bellbird refrains infiltrate the soundscapes of rural culture on the eastern Honduran frontier, conveying multiform meanings to farmers and hunters, scientists and conservationists. In Vermont-sized Olancho (the largest of eighteen Honduran provinces), bellbirds are among the most flamboyant of an avifauna numbering close to six hundred species. Their evocative names signal connections between people and birds that characterize Olancho and many other parts of Latin America. These connections can be highly productive relationships in which species, habitats, and ecosystems flourish in the presence of people.

This book is a paean to sharing, a geographical tale of intimate but immensely significant ways in which people and birds coexist in a Neotropical world. I show that "conservation geography" should be a geographical approach to conservation that cuts across artificial boundaries separating what is "natural" from what is "cultural" in the landscape. In the chapters that follow, I suggest by example that we analyze and appreciate local conservation knowledge and practice before attempting to impose new beliefs and new techniques. I show that outsiders need not condemn local relationships between people and birds as somehow inherently harmful or "anti-nature."

My ethnographical approach to understanding and writing about relationships between local people and birds focuses on stories of individuals and families, their traditional knowledge of the avifauna, and

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in some cases their participation in avian conservation efforts that may or may not follow “official” bird protection guidelines and projects. However, I do not attempt to prove that birds have secure futures in Neotropical landscapes that I recognize to be ravaged by human pressures and unpredictable natural events such as hurricanes. I am trying to tell a story that in some ways gives the lie to assumptions about people in the Neotropics destroying birds and habitats because they want to do so. Indeed, in many instances, birds are safe and even thrive in the immediate presence of local people, some of whom celebrate the birds as often as others persecute them. There is little support in Honduran culture for dislike and destruction of biodiversity beyond needs for sustenance and sport.

During a decade in the field in Honduras, I became convinced that outside experts who focus only on habitat destruction and bird persecution can easily amass data “proving” that rural Hondurans are anti-bird, anti-tree, anti-forest, anti-nature. I followed another path, searching instead for what I thought at first were rare cases of bird-friendly people who could inform and aid conservation projects. I found such people with little effort, and it may surprise and please people elsewhere to know not only that certain types of ornithocentric behavior exist in Honduras but also that many Hondurans observe and appreciate birds, weaving them into folklore and protecting them as far as possible.

As I searched, I found that many—perhaps most—Hondurans do not celebrate habitat destruction and consequent loss of biodiversity. Indeed, they are horrified by it; but they understand that the true culprit is not the slash-and-burn farmer. Rather, it is a complex web of worsening economic and political conditions at the national and international level. Honduran peasants often tell me, for example, that they don’t cut down the forest because they hate it; they destroy their resource base because their only other option is to emigrate to the cities or abroad. Nevertheless, readers may doubt that Hondurans favor birds and conservation, because this flies in the face of conventional wisdom about Neotropical biodiversity loss. I therefore offer numerous examples and intricate details in this book, in the hope that each example can be understood as a victory. Each quetzal or bellbird or owl unharmed on a coffee farm or cattle ranch or in a town plaza is evidence that the destruction of biodiversity is not as generalized and purposeful as it is sometimes portrayed to be.

I am an expert on neither birds nor biology. As a cultural geographer, I am trained to document the relationships between people and nature. I study the entangling of human and nonhuman elements in the landscape. One way to do this is through ethnography, a method that combines practices of research and documentation in the field with retrospection and writing “back home.” Ethnography can be realized only by close observation and especially participation in events within the society being studied. My research informants are my friends, confidants, and confidantes, from whose experiences I have built my case for conservation geography.

Ethnography serves in this book as a bridge between academic geography and on-the-ground conservation — between documentation and action. I hope conservationists will recognize that human geography complements biology and that knowledge of both is necessary to protect biodiversity. In essence, I am attempting to show that conservation strategies informed by knowledge of how cultural landscapes function will be far more effective than strategies predicated on a view of humans simply as agents of disturbance, destruction, and fragmentation.

To help the stories flow more smoothly, I try not to clutter the body of this text with too many suggestions, reflections, and prescriptions relating anecdotes to conservation. Most of my substantial suggestions are summarized in chapter 9, where I depart from what is in essence an ethnography of birds and enter the realm of conservation geography through a laundry list of prescriptions.

Conservation geography, I submit, is the preaching and practice of geography with conservation in mind, and in this book the term applies specifically to the problems of Neotropical biodiversity protection and the contributions of knowledgeable local people. Conservation geographers should attempt to understand the intertwining worlds of birds and people before trying to alter them, and to that end we are aided by a preexisting Honduran and perhaps Neotropical tendency to respect, to shelter, and to cherish birds. Chapter 1, “Ornithophilia,” contains vignettes of a Honduran and of a birder when they were still children in the Olancho landscape. They, like others portrayed later, are indicative of a cultural reality present probably in all places and in many people. My neologism hearkens to “topophilia,” the love of places, coined by philosopher Gaston Bachelard and popularized by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, as well as “biophilia,” Stephen Kellert and E. O. Wilson’s famous

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hypothesis. Ornithophilia is within us all, to a greater or lesser extent. It is manifest in individuals, families, social groups, and entire societies in some cases. Bird lovers, because they are such rich mines of ethnographic information, are keys to unlocking many secrets of human-bird relationships. Some of the secrets that proliferate in later chapters are deceptively simple, like this one: “I love birds because they are pretty.”

Chapter 2 sketches a background history and geography of birds and people in Middle America, Honduras, and Olancho. Later I aim to convey the vastness and complexity of Olancho itself, as felt by its 420,000 inhabitants. As a preliminary, though, it is necessary to establish without a doubt that certain types of relationships with birds are generalized in the region and that birds have been a preoccupation of people in Middle America, and Latin America in general, since remote times. This is a result not only of indigenous beliefs but also of African and Iberian mores.

In chapter 3 I look at what rural women and children know and do about birds in a society dominated by men. Two families introduce everyday Olancho and some of its ornithophilic inhabitants. Women and children have a lot to say that is highly distinct from the perspectives held by men. The rhythms of their lives are different, and the places women and children frequent—home, river, and the undersides of hedgerows, for example—are subject to patient observation and painstaking discovery.

A Latin American provincial urban center, Juticalpa (Olancho’s capital), is the subject of chapter 4. The *zopilote*, or Black Vulture, and the *zorzal*, or Clay-colored Robin, are two of Honduras’s most popular birds. In urban areas, they represent, respectively, the boisterous, contaminated public sphere and the quiet, introspective private sphere. The words of townspeople in this chapter make evident not only the micro-geographic intimacy of people and birds in cramped spaces but also the increasing disconnection between city and country that is occurring across Honduras.

Can large private landowners be conservationists? The answer given in chapter 5 may be surprising, given that Honduran society at large and many outsiders vilify large landowners (in many cases justly) for their tactics of land-grabbing and oppression of the rural poor. They often seem, as a group, to be concerned solely with profit, social status, high-yield export agriculture, and above all cattle. However, several

*terratenientes* in Olancho profess ornithophilia, in some cases making their lands de facto reserves for waterfowl and terrestrial species. The Black-bellied Whistling-Duck or *pichiche* is especially cherished. Another species, the Honduran Emerald (*Amazilia luciae*, a hummingbird), depends for its survival as a species on the thorn scrub of large ranches. It is Honduras's only endemic bird, and ranchers who for a variety of reasons preserve thorn forest on their properties in the Valle de Agalta should be the recipients of substantial conservation attention.

Chapter 6 describes the *pajara* or “place of many birds,” the rural domestic landscape mosaic of kitchen gardens, orchards, and woods in and around villages. This is a landscape worthy of intense scrutiny by conservation geographers because the situation of its biodiversity is highly distinct from the extensive monocultures of the large landholders or the ongoing drastic transformation of woods to field occurring on the rain forest frontier. Olanchanos entertain their most intimate and frequent contacts with avifauna in their lush home villages, and it is in these *pajarales* that biodiversity conservation may be most successful.

Anyone unfamiliar with the landscapes of Honduras may be surprised to learn that rain forests are the natural vegetative cover only of certain regions—the majority of the country is given over to drier pine-oak woodlands and broadleaf deciduous (“tropical dry”) forests and savannas. This is not a result of recent “degradation” caused by human beings; rather it is a natural consequence of the region’s complex geology and mountainous terrain, where rain shadows that favor intense dry seasons are common except in the far eastern Moskitia, the North Coast, and the cloud forest tops of the higher interior ranges. Though pine forests and dry forests are biotically impoverished in comparison to rain forests, they nevertheless hold unique avifauna that cannot be found in wetter regions. Too often, non-rain forest habitats are ignored by biologists and conservationists because they appear neither “virgin” nor in possession of a great number of important species. The result is that certain avifauna are marginalized or ignored, even when they may need protection as desperately as rain forest species do. Chapter 7 looks at a few of these situations in Olancho, where remote and inaccessible non-rain forest areas contain a plethora of intriguing species. Birds of another type of margin, the night, are also important in this context because they include some of the species most endangered by local cultural practices.

The Montaña de Babilonia, one of the largest and most rugged

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montane rain forests in Central America, is the subject of chapter 8. I describe its birds within the context of local lifeways such as the coffee harvest, which brings thousands of pickers from the low-lying plains (*valles*) up into the outer fringes of the forest — the buffer zone of the Parque Nacional Sierra de Agalta — for several months of the year. Here, as everywhere, raptors are the group of birds most affected by direct human persecution, while Three-wattled Bellbirds and Resplendent Quetzals are mostly left alone. The landscape at the edge of the great forest is a meeting ground for birds that thrive in human landscapes of the plains — Groove-billed Anis, Melodious Blackbirds, and Clay-colored Robins, for example — and birds such as Great Curassows and Great Tinamous that come out of the deep *pura montaña*. Meanwhile, subsistence hunters penetrate the old-growth forest in search of avian and mammalian prey. Rather than condemn all human practices affecting the zone of highest avian diversity in Honduras, I suggest that there is common ground between farmers and park managers (as long as frontier expansion is halted), because local conceptions of the deep forest's enchanted qualities coincide with outsiders' near-religious obsession with tropical rain forest biodiversity.

Chapter 9, "Landscape Dialogues," returns to the theme of conservation geography. I propose various general approaches to avian conservation geography that are both low-cost and effective. One such project is the bird count workshop.

All translations of texts and conversations in Spanish are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have utilized the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list of North American Birds*, seventh edition, in its online version as my authoritative source for common and scientific names. The AOU *Check-list* online (<http://www.aou.org/aou/birdlist.html>) is kept current as the "List of the 2,030 bird species (with scientific and English names) known from the A.O.U. Check-list area" and incorporates changes made in supplements 42 and 43 to the *Check-list*, as published in the *Auk* 117:847–58 (2000) and 119:897–906 (2002). Some readers will note that AOU varies slightly in taxonomic sequence and nomenclature from the two most useful field guides for the eastern Honduran region (Howell and Webb 1995, Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). Because neither guide alone contains plates of all possible species in eastern Honduras, avid birdwatchers may want to carry both guides into the field in Olancho; a North American guide is also useful for plates

of Neotropical migrants. For plants, I have relied on Cyril Hardy Nelson's wonderful two-volume *Plantas comunes de Honduras* (1986). Fiona Reid's 1997 *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Central America and South-east Mexico* is my authority on mammalian names.

Throughout, at the suggestions of several reviewers, I have insisted on the use of local Spanish names for birds wherever possible. At the beginning of chapter 1, I have placed the Spanish name in parentheses after the English name; in later chapters I generally employ the Spanish name first, with the English name in parentheses. To a limited extent I do the same with plant names, mammal names, and landscape terms, aiming to give the work a certain Olancho flavor without unduly taxing readers who do not speak Spanish. Spanish terms are also translated and explained in the glossary.

Finally, I have included as an appendix a list of 476 bird species known to occur in central Olancho, with names in English, Spanish, and Latin. This is a summary of a long-running bird inventory containing far more detailed data, produced by Francisco Urbina and me in 1994 and updated three times since then.