



El Oro Parakeets, Photo: Doug Wechsler

## Jocotoco: Conservation at the other end\*

*David Brewer recounts the beginnings of the conservation NGO Fundación Jocotoco in Ecuador and reflects on its importance to Canada's migratory birds and endemic species.*

It's a peculiar fact that a large number of the bird species that we regard as "Canadian" would, under the regulations of the Department of Manpower and Immigration, not be eligible for citizenship; they never spend the requisite six months of any year in Canada. Ironically, this includes the Canada Warbler! From September until May, a majority of our insect-eating birds, from nighthawks to warblers, are south of our borders. From a conservation point of view, this is extremely important to recognize; all our efforts at preserving the breeding populations of these species will come to naught if their vital winter habitat is being destroyed--which in fact is occurring at an alarming rate as we speak

I take a very modest amount of pride in having been involved, by a set of curious chances, in the creation of a highly effective conservation organization dedicated to preserving habitat in one of the most crucial areas, namely Ecuador. While its initial focus was the



Canada Warbler, photo: Paul B. Jones

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protection of endemic native species, it also preserves important habitat of many of Canada's wintering species.

A good friend of mine, David Agro, was in the late nineties working at the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences, one of the premier centres for ornithological research in North America. When I was visiting one day he introduced me to Dr. Robert Ridgely, a highly distinguished Neotropical ornithologist and author of "The Birds of South America". Shortly after this Bob discovered a spectacular new species of bird, later named the Jocotoco Antpitta, *Grallaria ridgelyi*, in southern Ecuador.



Jocotoco Antpitta, photo: Doug Wechsler

In January 1998 an expedition was hastily organized to capture and photograph a specimen. By an extraordinary twist of good fortune, at that very time I was aware that an old high-school birding crony, Nigel Simpson, who had enjoyed a hugely successful career as an industrial chemist, was considering using some of his assets for conservation purposes, and needed little persuasion to sponsor a fund to protect the habitat of the new species---literally in the nick of time. On the 1998 expedition we were alarmed to look down into a nearby valley to see a line of men with machetes, busily converting antpitta habitat into cattle pasture. (We now know that the entire world range of this species would comfortably fit within the borders of Greater Toronto.)

This was the inception of the [Fundación Jocotoco](#). The need for habitat preservation all over Ecuador was so obvious, so urgent and so dire that the initial reserve, now called Tapichulaca, was only the first of many. In fact, the organization has been so successful in fund-raising that there are now thirteen reserves, conserving habitats varying from wet montane forest, high-altitude páramo to dry xerophytic woodland, all over Ecuador. Sites were usually chosen for the protection of critically endangered species and in several cases pretty well encompass the entire world range of that species. For example, the Yungilla reserve was hastily

acquired when a tiny population, some fifteen pairs, of the Pale-headed Brush Finch (previously feared extinct) was discovered. This has now increased five-fold, with colonization of adjacent managed habitat. The Yanacocha reserve, just outside Quito, is crucial to the survival of the critically endangered Black-breasted Puffleg, (an exquisite hummingbird), while most of the world population of the El Oro Parakeet nests on the Buenaventura reserve.



Black-breasted Puffleg,  
photo: Fundación Jocotoco

Birds are not the only organisms protected. The high-altitude Antisana reserve hosts significant populations of the spectacled bear, while at least a dozen species of frogs, and numerous orchids from Foundation reserves have been newly described to science.

From a Canadian point of view, several of the reserves provide vital wintering habitat for northern migrant birds—at least fifty species--including some, like Olive-sided and Acadian Flycatchers, whose Canadian populations are the cause of serious concern.



Spectacled bear with cub at Antisanilla, Ecuador. Photo: Adela Espinosa, Fundación Jocotoco

The Foundation is currently engaged in its most ambitious project to date, the acquisition of a huge (some 30,000 hectares) tract of forest in the north-west of Ecuador which is currently under threat from logging interests. There is an urgent need for donations for this project; anybody interested can get more details at the websites listed below this article.

Finally, if anybody is interested in seeing the work of the Foundation in person, there are now five lodges located in reserves in diverse habitat. Not only do these give visitors a first-hand look at some superb wildlife areas, but by providing local employment, create a fund of goodwill among local people, so essential to the long-term success of any conservation organization. ■

David Brewer (a supporter of ICFC) was born in Worcestershire, England. He read Natural Sciences at the University of Cambridge and received his PhD from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. After a fellowship at the University of Arizona he emigrated to Canada. David has watched birds on all seven continents, but his main area of interest is the study and conservation of birds of South and Central America. His publications include *Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers* (Helm, 2001), *Where to Watch Birds in Central America and the Caribbean* (with Nigel Wheatley) (Helm, 2002), the four-volume *Canadian Atlas of Bird Banding* (Canadian Wildlife Service, 2001-2010), and contributions to three volumes of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (Lynx, 2005-2010). He has been a Research Associate in Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, for more than 25 years. His latest book is *Birds New to Science: Fifty Years of Avian Discoveries* (Helm, 2018).

Further information:

ICFC project page: [Saving the Chocó](#)

[MAAP #102: Saving the Ecuadorian Chocó](#)