

# The Neotropical Companion Translation Project

John Kricher's *Neotropical Companion* has been widely admired since it was first published in 1989. With more than 25,000 copies sold, the book is a handy reference for natural historians working in the New World tropics, and it is frequently assigned in college-level tropical biology courses in the United States and elsewhere. Although the first edition (lovingly known as "the little green book") focused mainly on Central America, the revised and expanded second edition (1998) contains extensive information on South America and is thus a vital resource at a hemispheric level.

But there has been one problem.

*A Neotropical Companion* has been printed only in English and Japanese. That's suitable for North American and Japanese visitors to the tropics, but what

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of the several hundred million Latin Americans whose native language is Spanish? Enter Birders' Exchange and the *Neotropical Companion* translation project. Many folks are involved in this worthwhile and exciting effort to translate *A Neotropical Companion* into Spanish, and in the interview below, we highlight the contributions of three especially important contributors: ornithologist, author, and tour guide Alvaro Jaramillo, who is coordinating and overseeing the translation; biology professor

and author John Kricher, who wrote the English-language editions and who is providing guidance throughout; and Birders' Exchange program director for the ABA Betty Petersen, who is overseeing the complex logistical and promotional aspects of the project.



Male Resplendent Quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*).  
Cordillera Central, Costa Rica; April 2002. © Ralph Paonessa.

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**Birding:** What attracted you to the translation project?

**Alvaro Jaramillo:** I became acquainted with *A Neotropical Companion* when I was getting ready to do research on ants in eastern Ecuador. I learned a lot from the book, and I could tell that it was a superb reference. But due to the fact that it was not available in Spanish, it was useful to only a small portion of the people living in the Neotropics. The greatest appeal to me is the conservation effect of having this resource available to Latin Americans who are interested in learning more about their environment. I was also drawn to the challenge of doing something brand new for me.

**Birding:** Who is the audience for the translation project? And how large?

**John Kricher:** The short answer: Large numbers of Spanish-speaking people. The most frequently asked question that I get about *A Neotropical Com-*



*Neotropical Companion* into Spanish. It certainly helped that the author, John Kricher, was and is a friend of many years and a mentor.

**Birding:** What sorts of technical difficulties are involved in translating a work such as *A Neotropical Companion*?

**Alvaro Jaramillo:** Initially, I thought that issues of style and the nuts and bolts of writing would be more straightforward than the matter of correct translations of difficult ecological concepts. On the contrary, I have discovered that editing for a consistent style

Birders' Exchange recipients monitor the passage of Mississippi Kites over Suchitoto, El Salvador. *Suchitoto, El Salvador; 8 September 2005.* © Ricky Perez.

*panion* is, "Why no Spanish edition?" Imagine what most American birders would say if all of the field guides to Panama, Peru, etc., were only in Spanish. Lots of information, but no easy access—very frustrating. There is a need for a Spanish translation not only of *A Neotropical Companion* but also of numerous other books on the ecology and natural history of Latin America. A conservation ethic is definitely emerging in Latin America, and the question now is one of effectively spreading the message. The potential audience for the Spanish-language translation is huge, and I hope that many thousands of copies will make their way into the hands of Latin Americans.

**Birding:** How did Birders' Exchange become involved with the translation project?

**Betty Petersen:** Since the inception of the Birders' Exchange program in 1990, Birders' Exchange applicants in Latin America have often asked for a donation of copies of *A Neotropical Companion*. I knew that this was an extremely informative book about the New World tropics, and I often wondered why it was printed only in English and Japanese, languages that are not very helpful to the people whose natural environment the book is about, and whose first language is Spanish. When I began my tenure as Birders' Exchange program director, a long-term goal of mine was to be able to facilitate the translation of *A*



has been much more of an issue. As a Spanish speaker, I was well aware of the different accents and words used by Latin Americans of different regions, but I did not appreciate that there are clear differences in writing styles, as well. Luis Segura of Argentina has been of great help in keeping the writing consistent. There are no standard Spanish names of organisms, so choosing a common name for each animal and plant has been quite a task. How does one translate 'gorgonian coral' or 'French grunt' into Spanish, anyhow?

**Birding:** Tropical biology is a fast-evolving field. How do you stay current, and how do you keep the book current?

**John Kricher:** Numerous studies in tropical ecology are published every month, but I know of relatively few that

are importantly distinct from what is synthesized in *A Neotropical Companion*. Much of the recent research in tropical ecology has refined or augmented earlier results, rather than advancing major new ideas. There has been recent work on the role of rainforests in carbon uptake and release, on the dynamics of tree species diversity, and on bird ecology; but the reader will nonetheless gain a solid grounding in tropical ecology from reading *A Neotropical Companion*. Eventually, there will be another edition of *A Neotropical Companion*, reflecting the work being reported in various books and journals that pertain to tropical ecology.

**Birding:** A lot of people are at work on the *Neotropical Companion* translation project. Besides you and Alvaro and John, who are some of the other folks who are heavily involved?

**Betty Petersen:** Two other people who have been especially important are Luis Segura of Argentina and Susie Vancura of Rhode Island. Luis originally volunteered to translate one chapter. He has gone far beyond his original commitment, translating text, creating a glossary of terms, and editing and proofreading the entire Spanish translation. Both he and Alvaro will be acknowledged as editors of *Un Compañero Neotropical*. Susie has coordinated all of the efforts of the thirty-five translators—an immense undertaking. Not only has she kept everyone on schedule, but she has also sent thousands of e-mails, answered myriad questions, catered to everyone's needs, and remained undaunted and cheerful! At the beginning, none of us knew how complex and how time-consuming this project would be. Susie was the catalyst, the consummate cheerleader, and above all a devoted friend to all of us.

**Birding:** What sorts of things have you, personally, learned from your work with the translation project?

**Alvaro Jaramillo:** I have learned a lot, from a refresher in

tropical ecology to a much more nuanced understanding of language. More significantly, I have come to revisit my longstanding opposition to the standardization of Spanish bird names. I had long appreciated the fact that each nation has so many culturally significant names—which make sense to the folks who use them. And I thought that standardizing the nomenclature would bulldoze all of those wonderful names into oblivion, the linguistic equivalent of clear-cut-

ting a tropical forest in order to plant sun coffee. However, doing this work has allowed me to see that there is a need for a common set of names, in order to further unite those in Latin America who are interested in the natural world.

**Birding:** In what ways will the Spanish-language translation differ from the current, English-language version?

**John Kricher:** The content will not differ from that of the English-language version, as the plan is to have a verbatim translation into Spanish from the current edition of *A Neotropical Companion*. I am quick to point out, by the way, that a strict translation involves considerably more skill and

care than one might think. The current plan is to bring all of the current illustrations and other figures from the English-language version into the Spanish translation. The finished product should be a high-quality, standalone, Spanish edition of *Un Compañero Neotropical*.

**Birding:** What might the legacy of the translation project be?

**Betty Petersen:** It is hoped that the Spanish-language edition of *A Neotropical Companion* will be a major educational contribution that will help empower bird conservationists at the grassroots and professional levels to be more effective in their conservation priorities and projects. If this is the end result, then all of the hard—and sometimes frustrating!—work of everyone involved will have been worth it.



Male **Violet-crowned Woodnymph** (*Thalurania colombica*), Cordillera Central, Costa Rica; 7 April 2005. © Ralph Paonessa.