

Neotropical Companions

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

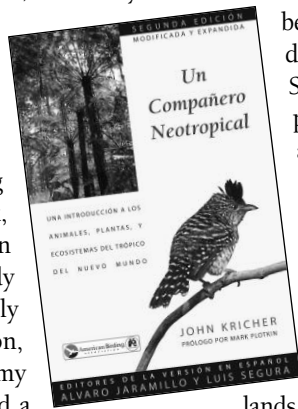
Late February found me in Guatemala, participating in the Third International Birdwatching Encounter. Naturally, I was dazzled by the birds; on this, my first Central American trip, I came up with more than 100 lifers, a feat I will never again accomplish in this hemisphere. Much as I enjoyed the birds, though, there were frequent times during the two weeks when I stared with equal admiration at the Guatemalan birders who had staged the entire event, and in a mixture of gratitude and growing fondness, I asked myself over and over what I could do to help in this beautiful country with a young and increasingly vibrant birding culture.

I kicked myself, of course, for not bringing books with me to leave behind—not just field guides, but more general works on the ecology of tropical ecosystems, so that the local guides, admirably skilled as they already are, could learn even more about the habits and habitats of the birds they so proudly introduced to us. If only, I thought, I had brought a few copies of Steve Hilty's *Birds of Tropical America*, or John Kricher's *Neotropical Companion*.... And then one day I asked one more in my unending series of naïve questions, and our guide whipped out, you guessed it, a copy of John's familiar book—but in an unfamiliar guise. This one was in Spanish, an already well-thumbed but obviously treasured copy of the newly issued translation; the guide answered my question, returned the book to his daypack, and we were off to my next lifebird, a bit of new knowledge in my head and a great deal of pride in my heart: for this was *Un compañero neotropical*, the new Spanish translation sponsored by the ABA's Birders' Exchange.

I thought that I might have been the first ABA birder to actually see the book in actual use in the actual neotropics, but when I got



Participants in the Tabasco Wetlands Conference heartily approve! Photo © Jim Corven.



home, I found out that the book had been flying off the shelves like hotcakes, to batter a metaphor. Within four days of the official announcement of the release, nearly every book had been spoken for and was being (or had already been) distributed throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America. Copies have ended up in universities, public libraries, and in the hands of professional guides and conservationists throughout the tropics, where what goes around truly has come around: the modest support my wife and I have been able to offer Birders' Exchange helps not just the birds, not just the local guides and ornithologists, but us North American birders as well.

Jim Corven, a birder from Massachusetts, had a similarly enlightening experience at this year's Wetlands Ecology and Conservation Workshop in Tabasco, Mexico. He found the staff and participants of the workshop using, and greatly appreciating, materials and binoculars supplied by the ABA's Birders' Exchange, including fresh copies of the new *Compañero*. ABA's efforts in the tropics make a real difference: for biologists, for birders, and for the birds.

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