

Theodore A. Parker, III (1953-1993)

Early influences and education

Ted Parker was born in 1953 and spent his childhood in Lancaster County. His family is widely credited with encouraging his early curiosity about the natural world. As a 4 to 5 year old, he recognized and remembered bird calls from annual family visits to Ohio. As youngsters, Ted and his brother Blanford would spend hours exploring the woods and fields near their home in Lancaster. By the age of 8, Ted knew that he wanted to immerse himself in the natural world.

By the age of 12, he was giving lectures to friends and relatives in an attic space outfitted with rows of chairs.

Also at age 12, Ted Parker joined the Lancaster County Bird Club (LCBC). No one of his age had previously applied but with the permission of his parents, Ted became its youngest member. From the start, Club members were deeply impressed by Ted's ability to recognize birds by sound alone. Ted participated in birding trips, Christmas Bird Counts, and at the age of fifteen, met his most influential mentor as a youth, Harold "Hal" Morrin, on an LCBC birding trip. Hal, Ted, and fellow Club ornithologists embarked first on weekend forays to surrounding states. Before long, Ted and Hal were travelling the continental US in search of rare sightings, adding to their life lists. As a high school senior and college freshman, Ted stunned the birding community by smashing through the previous record of 598 species in one year with his Big Year total of 626. By this point, he could recognize nearly all North American birds by voice and was ready for a new challenge.

Ted chose college at the University of Arizona in Tucson. His new challenge would be the birds of Mexico. Between 1971 and 1976, Ted embarked on 22 birding trips to Mexico. In 1974, word of Ted Parker's astonishing ability reached Dr. John O'Neill of the University of Louisiana. Dr. O'Neill was a distinguished neotropical (Central and South American) ornithologist who identified several new Peruvian species in the 1960's and 1970's. Ted's association with Dr. O'Neill opened the door to many trips to the Peruvian rainforest and nurtured a deep interest in neotropical species and conservation of their habitats. By 1977, Ted had finished his degree at the University of Arizona and already led several of the earliest birding expeditions in the Peruvian rainforest.

Accomplishments

From his high school days, Ted recorded wildlife sounds. By the time he finished his college degree, he had fine-tuned his skills in recording bird sounds, mainly for playback in order to attract individual species. In 1977, he approached the Library of Natural Sounds (now McCauley Library) of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, NY with the proposition they if they support him with the latest technology, he would provide them with the world's most comprehensive collection of neotropical bird sounds. This collaboration provided the library with nearly 11,000 vocalization of 2,000 species of not only birds, but also amphibians and mammals. Through this time, Ted relied upon his guiding of bird tours to facilitate his field work. He became restless and desired to link his field skills and vast knowledge of neotropical birds with habitat preservation and earn a living in the process. Despite the fact that Ted identified several new species, and had species and sub-species named after him, he had no salaried academic position. This was one result of his avid pursuit field work and experiential learning in lieu of advanced academic degrees.



During a fortuitous encounter on a birding trip in Venezuela in 1988, Ted told Bill Murray of the MacArthur Foundation of his vision for a rapid assessment plan to quickly assess biodiversity and conservation potential of imminently threatened tracts. This approach would short-cut the typical month to years-long assessment process and hopefully fast-track conservation. In short order, Conservation International was funded and Ted hired as a senior scientist to lead their Rapid Assessment Program (RAP) team. Ted assembled a group of preeminent specialists in neotropical botany and mammalogy. Together, they succeeded in securing their first site and the second largest national park in the world at 4.5 million acres, Alto Madidi National Park in Bolivia. Their success demonstrated that quickly entering and evaluating at-risk habitats is a viable path to conservation. It was on the seventh expedition of Ted Parker's RAP team - into cloud forest of the Peru-Ecuador border region - that their small Cessna crashed on a mountain. Three passengers did survive but Ted, two other scientists, and the pilot perished.

Conservation legacy

Ted Parker was only 40 years old at the time of his death. He is most renowned for his phenomenal ability to recognize animal sounds; he knew over 4,000 birds by voice. His sound recordings live on in the McCauley Library. His volumes of thorough field notes are still in the process of transcription by the same institution. Ted Parker is considered to be one of the world's very best field ornithologists and an expert in South American birds.

Ted Parker's zeal lives on in habitats preserved and people he inspired. His rapid assessment approach to evaluate biodiversity of threatened habitats is now the preferred method. Ted drove himself to be the best that he could be and inspired other to do the same. Some postulate that he somehow knew that his life would be cut short and tried to fit in as much as humanly possible. It is no secret that he was well-aware of the risks entailed in flying in small aircrafts to survey the remote regions he cared for so deeply.



1982: Ted with a birding tour in Peru.

<http://blog.aba.org/2013/10/open-mic-remembering-ted-parker.html>

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/the-lasting-legacy-of-ted-parker/>

http://www.artdata.slu.se/FaunaochFlora/pdf/faunaochflora_1_2011_Parker.pdf