

A Birding Interview with Alvaro Jaramillo

Chilean-born Alvaro Jaramillo is a walking encyclopedia of bird information and an expert on the birds of Chile and New World Blackbirds. He started birding as a youth in Toronto, Ontario, and now works as a tour guide for Field Guides, Inc. and as Senior Biologist with the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Jaramillo authored *Birds of Chile*, coauthored *New World Blackbirds: The Icterids*, has contributed to National Geographic and Sibley bird guides, writes a column for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and is an associate editor for the ABA publication *North American Birds*. He helped translate the *Neotropical Companion* into Spanish, serves on the American Ornithologists' Union's South American Classification Committee, and is active in the ABA.

In this *Birding* interview, Jaramillo effuses about cowbird tricksters, giant tapaculos, gulls, and flycatchers—and tells how a cheap ticket changed his life.

—Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How would you profile the modern birder?

Alvaro Jaramillo: It depends on how you identify a birder. There are countless definitions. I think we are becoming an entity that is more difficult to pinpoint now. I see that birding as a hobby is becoming more diverse. When the “birder” movement that spawned this magazine started, it was a way to separate the active and hardcore birders from backyard birdwatchers; the emphasis was heavily on listing. Today, we have a range of ways to enjoy birding, and fewer of them are list-oriented. Birders are becoming much more focused on enjoying time in the field. I always tell people that birding is adaptable. You can practice it anywhere and in whatever manner fits your personality.

Birding: Can you describe your work on the American Ornithologists' Union's South American Classification Committee? Tell us about cryptic splits.

AJ: Cryptic species are, as the name implies, hidden. We haven't been aware of them because they don't look different from one another. Often, we get clues as to their real status from some other aspect of their biology. South America has many species of suboscines (flycatchers, antbirds, tapaculos, and so forth), and voice is of primary importance in this group. In these birds, song is not learned. It is hard-wired, so accumulated differences in voice mean that populations have been separate for long periods. These birds speak different languages. Although they may look exactly

alike, they are unlikely to mate with each other. Multiply that by hundreds of species, and you begin to understand what is going on in South America. There are countless hidden species. We need more birders and researchers to tackle these problems—and write up publications!

Birding: Why don't the South American and North American committees agree? What is the real English name of *Gallinula chloropus*?

AJ: If you ask me, it is the Common Gallinule, not the Common Moorhen. The South American committee voted on this and chose the gallinule over the moorhen mostly based on historical usage of that name in the New World. But committees are run by people with differing points of view and personalities. It was agreed when the South American committee was formed that it would be independent from the North American committee. There is communication between the two, and, if applicable, proposals sent to one are sent to the other with some minor modifications. But given the same data, different folks can come up with different conclusions. With English names, there is no right or wrong, just opinion and philosophy.

Birding: What inspired your deep interest in New World Blackbirds (icterids)?

AJ: I used to work in a nature and travel bookstore as a college student. While waiting for customers I'd read William

Henry Hudson, a gem of an author who wrote about the Argentine Pampas in the late 1800s. In his books, I read about a trio of cowbirds—the Baywing, Screaming, and Shiny—that were involved in a complex host and parasite system. I was hooked. So, I went to chat with a professor and asked him if he would let me work on cowbirds if I did a master’s program with him. Those cowbirds are fascinating. They are involved in trickery, evolutionary arms races, and even mimicry. One of the species, the Screaming Cowbird, clearly mimics the young stages of the host Baywing (an unrelated species); the resemblance is so uncanny that the only way I could identify the young was by the shape of their nostrils!

Birding: What is your technique for changing a larophobe (gull hater) into a larophile (gull lover)?

AJ: It gets back to your birding personality. If you hate uncertainty or logic puzzles, stay away from gulls. There is no rule that says you need to know how to tell gulls apart. Hang out with birders who like them and they can tell you when you are seeing lifers. If you do want to get to know gulls, look first at adults. And let go of stress. Don’t worry about making every identification. Move on to the next one and look at something else if you get frustrated. Gull fans have a habit of making things extra complicated. So my strategy with larophobes is to simplify things, look at the big picture, and not get muddled in details.

Birding: How can birders resolve a love-hate relationship with flycatchers?

AJ: If flycatchers all look the same, they are probably going to look the same no matter how long you stare. So tackle the problem with different data. Listen. Or look at their habitat, even during migration. If you are detail-oriented, look at features that are often ignored, like the length and spacing of primaries, or even the exact bill shapes and extent of dark on them. Always be prepared to let a few get away. There’s nothing wrong with that.

Birding: Why are you so active in asking and answering bird-identification questions on internet discussion groups?

AJ: Relatively early in my birding career, I realized that the best way to crystallize your understanding of a topic is to explain it to someone else. In answering bird-identification questions and explaining my logic, I clarify my own understanding. I think it is important to explain *why* it is an X rather than just say, “It’s an X.” The answer is not as important as how you got there.

Birding: When was the last time you were stumped by a bird identification?

AJ: Usually, my misidentifications in the field involve sightings that trigger that first-impression, auto-identification reflex that veteran birders tend to rely on. In such cases, I always stand back and try to analyze why species A was triggered rather than B, and I try to learn from it. I tell beginners that the biggest misconception out there is that experienced birders identify birds using field marks. Instead, they recognize birds as whole entities. A whole branch of cognitive psychology deals with this process; it’s not magic, but it takes time to get there. This is why patchy plumages, worn feathers, and feather abnormalities trip beginners more than experts. In their mental Rolodex, the experts see

wholes rather than parts. So, they are less likely to be misled by abnormal marks like white tail feathers on an atypical Song Sparrow—while the beginner will think this must be a Vesper Sparrow, since it has white outer tail feathers.

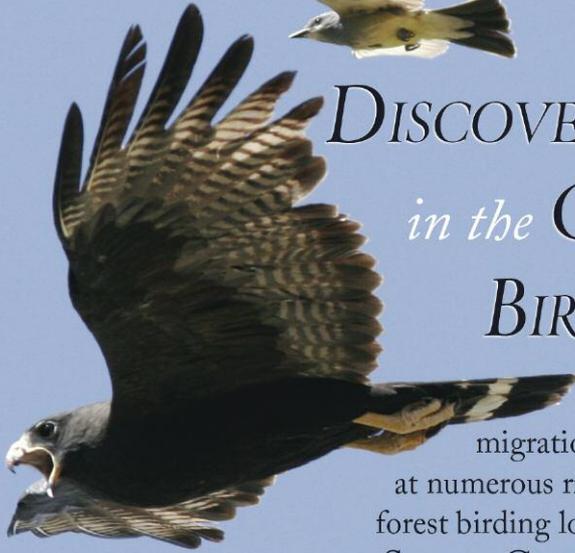
Birding: What was it like to spend much of your young adulthood backpacking in the Neotropics?

AJ: I remember landing at Asunción, Paraguay, way off the beaten path of birding in South America. I was 18, and had found a cheap ticket from Toronto to Santiago, Chile that allowed a stop in Paraguay. Why not? Cool birds are everywhere, and Paraguay was absolutely fantastic. There was no field guide to go by, just brief text descriptions, which was actually good fun. Taking the time to travel and put off college was absolutely the best thing I could have done, and I recommend it to all young people. The experience of travel can be rough, but you grow as a person as things happen. You experience other ways of life, foods, and people, and realize, for the most part, that people on this Earth



Alvaro Jaramillo. Photo by © Katja Rimmi.

Common Black-Hawk
and Western Kingbird



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are good. Travel in Latin America has shaped every aspect of my life and career. Now with kids of my own, I can't wait to show them the world. It's a fantastic planet we live on, and, as a birder, I believe that every single part is worth seeing.

Birding: Why do you advocate the translation of English-language bird publications into Spanish?

AJ: Imagine that *Birding* and all of the field guides in North America were in Spanish, but you did not speak Spanish. How difficult would it be to understand the natural world? If you can't truly understand the natural world, you're less motivated to conserve it. I think it's a linear process. Many people in Latin America speak English, but the overwhelming majority do not. With Spanish or Portuguese materials, they learn about their wildlife and enjoy it more. Knowing names is important to getting in tune with the diversity around you.

Birding: How would you compare birds and birding in Chile with your home in Half Moon Bay, California?

AJ: I have not yet found the exact mirror image version of my Californian hometown in Chile, but I suspect it's there. The climate is similar, as are the fruits, wine, mountains, freezing cold ocean, and seabirds. California Quail were introduced to Chile, and are now more common there than here! I love to see the ecological replacements: Instead of crows, there are Chimango Caracaras; instead of Canyon Wrens, Crag Chilies; and juncos are replaced by sierra-finches. But then some birds are utterly unique. The huge Chilean tapaculos, like the Moustached Turca and Black-throated Huet-Huet, are rotund birds with huge Velociraptor feet and tails cocked at an absurd angle; when I see those, I realize this ain't California anymore!



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