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Bird Thou Never Wert

So sang the poet, and indeed the horned guan, an exotic denizen of Central American mountains, is so rarely seen as to seem almost fabulous. A saga of a quest for a bird whose mating call is like a "moo"

Robert Cantwell

El Triunfo is a small village high on a big, bulky, flower-covered mountain in the state of [Chiapas](#) in southern [Mexico](#) near the [Guatemala](#) border. Aside from a little snake that the natives call the *chica bringa*, which they say can jump six feet, there is nothing extraordinary about El Triunfo, the triumph. It is in the cloud forest, on the southern end of the [Sierra Madre](#), whose peaks on the [Guatemala](#) side rise to 14,000 feet. There are no challenging heights to be climbed, no ruins, no legends, no colorful markets in picturesque villages. The settlement consists of four dirt-floored houses in a grassy clearing on the continental divide. Clear, cold streams flow in opposite directions there, steeply down to the west and south some 8,000 feet to the Pacific, which you can see from the heights in an immense, blue panorama, or more gradually down to the east, through zones of pines and oaks, into the jungle and the savannas of [Chiapas](#) to the [Gulf of Mexico](#) some 200 miles away. The El Triunfo area is a wilderness. Most woods are active—trees moving, branches waving. But when the clouds hang around its tree trunks in the morning the woods about El Triunfo are ghostly, and in the afternoon, in the semitropical sunlight, they seem not so much wild as drugged and somnolent.

Nonetheless, El Triunfo is an irresistible lure for one possessed type of visitor for whom it provides the ultimate experience. It is one of the most glamorous places on earth for bird watchers. To take the more familiar species first, there is the wonderful singing quail, sometimes glimpsed peering up anxiously out of the underbrush, excessively shy except at dawn and dusk, when it bursts into a song that consists of tuneful whistles followed by a flute solo. The rose-throated becard is there, a bird the size of an English sparrow and almost as plain-looking, except for a large headdress that resembles an ill-fitting Harpo Marx wig. Also the acorn woodpecker, a demented red, white and black bird that drills innumerable small holes in dead trees and pounds an acorn into each, apparently driven by an innate fear of impending famine, meanwhile giving out a hoarse cry that sounds like "Jacob! Jacob!"

These are ordinary oddities, not hard to come by. The rose-throated becard and the acorn woodpecker are frequently seen in the Southwestern U.S. as well as elsewhere in [Mexico](#), in places far easier to reach than El Triunfo. But there are also such rare, or infrequently sighted, birds as the black penelopina which likes to glide down from the top of a tall tree, giving astoundingly humanlike whistles and whirring its wings to produce a rattling, rushing and crashing noise that sounds like a falling tree. Another rarity is the aptly named resplendent quetzal. When the American explorer and secret agent John Lloyd Stephens prowled around [Chiapas](#) in 1839 he reported, "The quetzal is the most beautiful bird that flies." Modern ornithologists are more cautious. Roger Tory Peterson says merely that the quetzal is the most spectacular bird in the New World. In any event the quetzal, with its radiant red and gold-green plumage and its filmy train of feathers, shimmers in these remote woods. Its feathers were once the royal plumes of the Aztecs, their use restricted to members of Montezuma's immediate family.

There are some 10 to 12 species of hummingbirds around El Triunfo. They endure the cold mountain nights by slowing down their basal metabolism, a process akin to hibernation. Among them are the green-throated mountain gem, each of its throat feathertips a shining metallic green; the garnet-throated hummingbird, perhaps the most vividly colored of the 50 species of hummingbirds found in [Mexico](#); the tiny wine-throated hummingbird, scarcely larger than a bumblebee, still so rarely seen that the most practiced bird watcher is transfixed by the sight of one; and the beautiful hummingbird, so named because it is just that—the beautiful hummingbird.

However, the birds that give El Triunfo its special flavor are the mountain trogons, encountered frequently enough elsewhere in [Mexico](#), but there in such numbers as to have become its symbol. They often fly in pairs, fast and fitfully in the morning, landing in a tree and taking off at once as though delivering urgent messages to someone hidden in the leaves. Later in the day you see them perched unconcernedly close-by, in plain sight, watching the bird watchers who are watching them, perhaps waiting for something to happen. In the soft light before sunset you see them in unhurried flight around the forest edge. High up on the tip of a dead branch in the last rays of the sun, they symbolize the strangeness and remoteness of the tropical mountain and its uncanny wildlife.

But why bother with them? "We find [in the forest] whatever we seek," said Alexander Skutch, the pioneer naturalist of [Costa Rica](#). "If we seek

beauty, it is there profusely. If we yearn for peace, it awaits us there. If, on the other hand, we gloat in strife and violence, it offers us that, too." If you carry into this bird-enlivened wilderness an overpowering sense of the civilized world, you find yourself pitted against more enduring images—billowing vapor in the trees of the cloud forest at the first morning light, smoke rising straight up from the open fires by the cabins, birds constantly in motion and yet changeless, all of which you know you will always remember.

"We are almost certain to see the resplendent quetzal," said Victor Emanuel before we set out for El Triunfo. "It is possible, though less likely, that we will see the azurerumped tanager. Whether we find the horned guan depends on many things, including the weather. There have been several expeditions in the past 10 years, and the horned guan has been seen only once. But those were brief expeditions, two or three days, and we will have five days."

We were a party of 12 ornithologists and amateur bird watchers, organized to publicize the importance of the El Triunfo area as a bird sanctuary and to search for its rarest bird, the horned guan, which exists only in a few locations in the chain of volcanic peaks and mountains that stretch from [Chiapas](#) into [Guatemala](#). We assembled at the airport in Tuxtla Gutierrez and traveled in two rented [Volkswagen](#) buses by roundabout roads, through Villa Flores to a coffee plantation called Finca Prusia in the foothills below El Triunfo. In addition to Victor Emanuel and his partner in a company called Victor Emanuel Nature Tours—John Rowlett, a [Texas](#) ornithologist—the party included [George Plimpton](#), a lawyer and his wife from [Wisconsin](#), the chairman of the board of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, a dentist from [Massachusetts](#), a photographer from [Austin, Texas](#), a retired real-estate dealer from [Houston](#), an [Ohio](#) coal-mine owner and a journalist and his wife.

We ran a wide range of ornithological experience. [Dave Johnson](#), the dentist, was an expert. He had once worked as a missionary in the [Guatemala](#) highlands, winning the friendship of Indians by extracting infected teeth, and was at home in the woods. [Plimpton](#) had been a bird watcher in his childhood. His interest was revived when he went on a bird count in Texas with Victor Emanuel a year after the famous Christmas bird count headed by Emanuel in which 226 species were sighted, an alltime record for such efforts. [Plimpton](#) had also searched with Emanuel and Rowlett for the imperial woodpecker in the Mexican highlands north of [Durango](#). (Almost two feet long, it is the biggest woodpecker in the world; there have been no verified sightings since the 1950s.) Mary Ann and Tom Neuses, youthful-appearing parents of grown children, had taken bird-watching trips to the [West Indies](#) and to the Big Bend country of [Texas](#). My wife Allison had made marvelous bird paintings in her girlhood, before she gave it up to make a living painting portraits; she had never been camping before. We were a miscellaneous collection of interested but undisciplined observers and experienced veterans, held together by Victor Emanuel's determination to find a horned guan.

It was impossible for Victor to imagine that anyone might not want to see a horned guan. He had been studying birds for 25 of his 36 years. When he talked about the guan, or any other bird, he seemed to be trying to sell it. The son of a [Texas](#) newspaperman, he had a gift for bird identification that had made him useful to ornithologists when he was a [Boy Scout](#) in [Houston](#). While he was still in high school he went on ornithological expeditions to [Mexico](#) with scientists. After [Harvard](#) and a brief political career working for Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough, he became a professor of political science at [Rice University](#) and at the [University of Houston](#) but gave it up to lead bird expeditions. Slight, even frail-appearing, he displayed demoniac energy as he hustled through the woods, peeking into thickets, motioning imperiously for silence, spotting birds invisible to everyone else. He seemed to pluck them out of the trees. His expedition to El Triunfo was a five-day lecture, in which the professor seemed constantly to be breaking off to rush down the trail to identify another bird—or a dozen more—before returning to continue where he left off.

And what is the horned guan? Back in 1859 *The Ibis*, the authoritative ornithological journal of the time, said, "This bird, one of the most curious as well as the most interesting in [Central America](#), is extremely rare." The first known specimen was shot by a hunter in [Guatemala](#) in 1848 and was given to an English trader, who presented it to the Earl of Derby to add to his collection. This resulted in its being known as the Derbyan Mountain-Pheasant (*Oreophasis derbianus*). Eleven years later Osbert Salvin, a member of the British Ornithologists' Union, happened to be in [Guatemala](#) and hired a professional hunter to shoot additional specimens. The hunter came back with a black, turkey-sized bird, found that it was what Salvin wanted and returned the next day with two more. Salvin asked to be taken to the place where they were shot.

At dawn he set out with the hunter for the 12,000-foot Volcán de Fuego in the [Sierra Madre](#) near the Mexican border. They reached the mountain by nine o'clock and climbed through dense lowland growth to a region of pines and coarse grass and the cloud forest. Then they descended into steep ravines with thick growths of a palm called the hand plant—*la mano de mico*, the monkey's hand of the natives—where the horned guan reportedly lived, feeding on wild fruit. Four grueling trips failed to produce another specimen, leading to suspicions that the natives were keeping their source of supply to themselves, although Salvin denied this. The natives had no reason to go through an elaborate and difficult deception. He concluded that the horned guan was a rare bird, even on the single mountain where it was known to exist.

Fourteen years later, during another visit to [Guatemala](#), Salvin reported to *The Ibis* that he had seen the skins of several horned guans but had no accurate information as to where they had come from. And there the matter rested for some 60 years. In 1934 Emmet Blake, who later wrote

a field guide to Mexican birds, hunted for the guan on 14,000-foot Tajumulco in Guatemala—"the last stronghold," he said, "of the most magnificent and least-known game bird of the western hemisphere." Blake and a native guide camped at the 10,000-foot level for a week without seeing or hearing a guan. Dropping down to the cloud forest at 6,000 feet, they were at the point of starting back to camp empty-handed when the guide happened to pound on a tree trunk with his machete. There was an instant response from a guan overhead. It was so close that a shot would have blasted it to pieces, so Blake backed away, and the guan disappeared into the trees. Four days later Blake returned to the same spot and heard "a monotonous sound like the distant low mooring of a cow.... It suddenly stopped, and a big male guan strutted out upon a branch in plain sight and within easy range. I fired just as it flushed and could have whooped for joy as it crashed to earth. Immediately two other guans, unseen before, took flight, and a quick snapshot scored another hit. Two Derby's guans in a single day!"

In all, Blake killed 17 horned guans. Large, tame and conspicuous, the guan is one of those trusting birds which, as Salvin wrote, will watch a hunter come close "with a vacant rather than an alarmed expression." The reason for the guan's scarcity was simple. It was good eating. The main reason a few horned guans survived around El Triunfo was that the steep mountain country discouraged anyone from hunting them.

That is, anyone except bird watchers. Miguel Alvarez del Toro, director of the Institute of Natural History and Zoological Park in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, included an account of the horned guan in his catalog of Chiapas wildlife in 1952; he had seen a male horned guan on the top of a small tree in the El Triunfo cloud forest. Robert Andrie, an ornithologist from the Buffalo Museum of Science in New York, made a difficult backpack trip to El Triunfo in 1965. He saw a horned guan there (he also found one in Volcán Tajumulco in Guatemala) and observed it for half an hour. It hopped from branch to branch, uttering short guttural croaks and clacking its mandibles at the rate of two clacks per second. If you consider that an inadequate reward for such an arduous trip, you do not know bird watchers. "We know so little about the bird," Victor Emanuel said earnestly. "Does it nest on the ground or in the trees? We don't know. Nobody has ever seen it nest. How many eggs? We don't know that either."

Alexander Skutch reported that he came upon a horned guan one clear, frosty February morning on a ridge of the Sierra de Tecpán, 130 miles southeast of El Triunfo in Guatemala. The bird was a velvety black with bright yellow eyes, its head surmounted by a tall slender spike the color of ripe strawberries. It gave "a loud guttural outcry, almost explosive in its suddenness and power." Skutch described it as an apparition, "its small yellow bill opening and closing with a loud clacking, as though the strange fowl tried to intimidate me by this menace.... I have seen among birds few appearances so bizarre."

If Skutch found it rare, what hope could there be for the rest of us? Skutch began studying Central American birds in 1928, when he was a 24-year-old Johns Hopkins graduate. He bought a small farm in the remote Costa Rican woods, married the daughter of a Costa Rican naturalist and turned out such patiently assembled works as *Life Histories of Central American Birds* and the monumental *Parent Birds and Their Young*, the culmination of more than 40 years of observation. The books made him a venerated figure among ornithologists. If he had seen few stranger birds than the horned guan in a lifetime of observation, it could be taken for granted that nobody else had seen more unusual ones. And it was this elusive fowl that Victor expected us to find.

There were frequent stops on the way to the coffee plantation to enable the newcomers to add Mexican birds to their life lists—a black robin, a blue-crowned chlorophonia, a Montezuma oropendola, a melodious blackbird—and there was a long pause before sunset to photograph a swallow-tailed kite, not because it was a rarity, but because it posed invitingly on a dead tree, totally indifferent to the bird watchers creeping toward it. The projected eight-hour drive from Tuxtla Gutiérrez lengthened to 14 hours; the plantation was wrapped in sleep and inhospitable darkness when we arrived. We were quartered in a guesthouse dormitory adjoining a platform where coffee beans were washed. Here we were required to reduce our packs to the bare essentials. Sleeping bags, warm clothing, tents, rain gear and the like went into duffel bags, to be loaded on pack animals in the morning; anything else had to be carried in backpacks. It was a silent, serious operation. Binoculars, cameras, film, socks, notebooks and insect repellent were ranged in piles around each hiker, to be appraised, weighed by hand, examined under the dim light of an unshaded low-wattage electric bulb and then added to the load or left behind.

Plimpton examined his pack with puzzled concentration. He had barely made connections to Tuxtla; he had been on a lecture tour, speaking on successive nights at the University of Massachusetts, Miami University in Ohio and the University of Oklahoma. "My wife packed my pack," he said. "I don't know what's in it."

He drew out objects from its depths: sweaters, thermal underwear, Arctic garb.

"I say," he said at last. "I've got somebody else's pack."

It was, in fact, the pack of someone bound for skiing in Colorado. People crowded around Plimpton as he continued to extract items suitable only for snow country. He looked like a magician holding an audience mesmerized by sleight-of-hand tricks. Finally he drew out a wallet. "His name is George Harrison," he said, "and he's from White Plains, New York. There's a lot of money in here."

"Now make it disappear," someone said.

Who could George Harrison be? At which of many airport changes had Plimpton's backpack been exchanged for Harrison's? What was Harrison going to do when he arrived at some ski resort with no money and a backpack full of tropical wear and field guides to Mexican birds? Discussion of such questions went on into the night, along with emergency preparations to scrape together enough supplies to enable Plimpton to survive on the mountain.

"Did you notice how calm George was?" my wife said. "If that had happened to you, you would have thought it was part of some gigantic international conspiracy."

"I think it is."

We waited in the morning at an outlying coffee-separating shed while the pack train went ahead up the trail—12 elegant little mules, light and trim, lightly laden, one horseman in the lead and another following, both men erect and poised like circus riders before the audience of ourselves and the coffee workers. Then we got underway in a line strung out for a quarter of a mile along a narrow path, clay or rock on one side, the tops of trees on the other.

It was slow going, fortunately, with a long wait to let the woods quiet down after the mules passed. Because the trail was steep, any attempt to hurry might have ended the hunt for the horned guan right there. Emanuel and Rowlett ranged ahead, scanning the trees and motioning for the rest of us to catch up whenever anything unusual was sighted. There were emerald toucanets, bright green birds with immense, curved, black-and-yellow beaks; a gray silky-flycatcher; a slate-throated redstart; a cinnamon flower-piercer; a hooded grosbeak; a rufous-collared (Andean) sparrow. The serious bird watchers studied them through their glasses and entered each sighting in their notebooks—time, place, species. Conversation was limited. Mary Ann Neuses might call out, "Victor, was that a blue mockingbird or a blue-and-white mockingbird?"

"It was a blue-and-white."

The birds quickly became familiar objects. The first blue-throated motmot you see—or any motmot, for that matter—is likely to be arresting, but interest declines fast: there's another motmot. The trail grew steeper. The stops became more frequent. There were fewer and fewer huddles to locate something in the trees; people just sat down wherever they were. And now the long line ahead became discouraging in itself. You could see the leaders far in advance, until they passed out of sight, and then you would see them again, coming out of the tree ferns 200 feet or so above on the mountainside, going in the opposite direction. They had merely rounded some despicable switchback, and all the plodding still to be done would bring us back almost to where we were.

Some hikers moved as effortlessly as strollers on a city street. Dave Johnson studied the woods and the rocks along the path with something like admiration. Minturn Wright, the Academy of Natural Sciences chairman, and Rod Thompson, the coal-mine owner, moved slowly and steadily onward while almost everyone else rested. They looked like a lawyer and his client walking to an important appointment in the business district, their calm features showing none of the ravage and strain evident on almost everyone else's faces. W. E. Saunders, a well-known ornithologist, has written that you could measure the loss of your hearing ornithologically. At the age of 60 he found he could no longer hear the notes of the golden-crowned kinglet. At 65 he could no longer hear the song of the cedar waxwing. At 68 he could not hear the Cape May warbler. Saunders understated the cost of bird watching. By mid-afternoon I could not even see any birds. In fact, I could hardly see the trees. In a way Allison had an advantage over the rest of us. Never having been camping before, she thought all outdoor recreation was like this. Bird-watching stops were now perfunctory—the pretext that they were to look at birds was dropped. They were to rest. I noticed that instead of scanning the trees, Allison was staring straight upward at heaven. Later she told me that she had once read a newspaper account of a helicopter that landed in the yard of a Mexican prison and plucked out an important convict; she was hoping it might come back and rescue her.

I was reduced to walking 200 steps and stopping, counting slowly to 100 before walking another 200. By four in the afternoon I was walking 100 steps and counting to 200. Soon I was down to 50 steps and repeating the Lord's Prayer. Somewhere along about here I began to have hallucinations. I thought I was the last climber in the line, but suddenly there was somebody behind me. An Englishman, tall and extremely pale, materialized on the trail and lifted my pack off my back. "Let me help you with this," he said. It was not an Englishman, it was George Plimpton. He walked on ahead, staggering a little from the weight of my pack and that of the mysterious Harrison. My first reaction was one of deep gratitude, followed by an impulse to ask him if he would carry me, too. I met him again, half a mile on. He was sitting beside the trail with the two packs beside him, looking exhausted. I picked up my own and went on. He seemed pleased.

About seven o'clock we tumbled and slid into the broad clearing at the summit. Camp was made in darkness on the banks of a small stream, a quarter of a mile from the settlement. "We will get up at five o'clock," said Victor, "and start out as a group as soon as it is light. Then we will separate into small groups to cover as much territory as we can, in the hope that somebody will hear the guan calling, and we can concentrate in

that area."

The cloud forest is inanimate. The cloud is a filmy, gossamer vapor rather than a fog; it drips down unevenly, like a sagging tent, sometimes only an arm's reach overhead, more often entangled in the lower branches of the trees. There is nothing to compare it with. Sometimes it suggests film sets for German expressionist movies like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or those old scary illustrations of Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods, but mostly it seems displaced, rolling slowly and billowing gently among the motionless trees. Looking down from a ridge in the sunlight, the cloud is a milky, wavelike expanse of piles of vapor, through which dark branches project like those of trees partly submerged in a flood.

The call of the horned guan is a low, vibrant, mooring sound that seems to radiate in all directions; it is almost impossible to determine where it is coming from or from what distance. "You don't hear it," Victor said. "You feel it. It is the heartbeat of the cloud forest." Every ornithologist who has studied the call has remarked on its ventriloquial character. Blake said, "Few sounds in nature are more difficult to trace...the most unpredictable bird I have ever hunted." Authorities are uncertain about the call itself, sometimes describing it as a soft, distant lowing, or as a resonant dovelike sound, or as a low, mooring booming. The amateur bird watchers among us were more imaginative; they said it was like a cow mooring and snoring at the same time, or like a foghorn muffled by distance, or like the bass strings of a giant harp.

On the first day it was heard only once, faint and untraceable. On the second day it was not heard at all. If it really was the heartbeat of the cloud forest, the forest was dead; there were no vital signs. We were now divided into small groups, straining our ears over wider expanses. Victor and the experts carried a parabolic microphone, borrowed from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, to record the call of the guan in the wild. Victor also carried a large tape recorder with an amplifier and a battery of tapes of the calls of birds—quetzals, trogons, even the horned guan.

We split up into small groups so that we could cover more territory and enhance our chances of spotting a guan. Our group of four was assigned to the trails that ran down the Pacific slope from El Triunfo. Except in the early morning, before the sun burned off the cloud, there was little chance of finding a horned guan in that direction. This may have been just as well. Neither Tom and Mary Ann, nor Allison and I, were skilled enough to add any scientific information about the bird if we saw it. There was, however, a chance that we might see the second great rarity of El Triunfo. Back in 1866 Dr. Jean Cabanis, editor of the *Journal für Ornithologie* in Berlin, reported a new species of tanager in Central America. It was a small green-and-blue bird, the upper back a light metallic green, the lower back and rump a soft, washed blue. This was the azure-rumped tanager, *tangara cabanisi*, and a specimen was given to the Berlin Museum. Two years later P. L. Sclater, secretary to the Zoological Society of London, received another specimen, shot at Costa Cuca near the border of Guatemala and Mexico. These two stuffed birds were the only proof that the tanager really existed. "Extremely rare," says Peterson and Chalif's *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. In 1937 an azure-rumped tanager was collected on Mount Ovando in Guatemala not far south of El Triunfo. Two more were collected in Chiapas in 1943.

We did not find it. But rounding a bend in the trail, coming out of the thickets, we did see the Pacific beyond a wide expanse of headland. On this side of El Triunfo the mountain dropped almost straight down; an ancient trail, even steeper than that from the coffee plantation, threaded around ridges and spurs. Along this trail in 1972 an expedition saw three azure-rumped tanagers and the species has been observed several times since. We saw other treasures—a black-throated jay, a brown-backed solitaire, a spotted nightingale-thrush—but we failed to see a trace of the tanager. It was not possible to spend much time looking for it, or for anything. While going down the steep trail was easy, our problem lay in getting back up to camp before dark.

By the end of the third day Victor appeared to be growing a little desperate, even though the guan had been seen once. Bill Failing, a former Army counterintelligence officer, spotted it as it flew across the trail, but it was merely glimpsed, and it produced no sound.

Bird-watching books assert that the great advantage of the sport, or pastime, or hobby, or whatever it is, lies in that it can be practiced anywhere. Start in your own backyard. "It is not necessary to walk vast distances," says *A Guide to Bird Watching*. Wide varieties can be found in "cultivated fields, farm buildings, orchards, ungrazed wood lots, stream borders, springs, cattail swamps, sedge marshes, conifer groves, sandy fields, cliffs, bogs, golf courses, airports, cemeteries and so on."

All this is nonsense. Bird watchers yearn to get as far away as possible from familiar scenes. After the experts have combed Trinidad and Madagascar and Nepal and Peru, they can return home and write of the pleasures of watching blue jays and robins. Bird watchers have their heroes, and they almost always discover, or rediscover, rare birds. One hero of bird watchers' folklore is Charles Bendire. Stationed at Fort Lowell near Tucson in 1872, Major Bendire rode out alone one day to look for the zone-tailed hawk. He found a nest. "The bird was so very tame I concluded to examine the nest before attempting to secure the parent," he wrote, "and it was well I did so. Climbing to the nest I found [an] egg, at the same instant saw from my elevated position something else—namely, several Apache Indians.... In those days Apache Indians were not the most desirable neighbors, especially when one was up a tree and unarmed." Bendire put the egg in his mouth and slowly descended, knowing that any haste would indicate to the Indians that he had seen them, which might lead them to attack him. He grabbed his shotgun, mounted his horse and raced back to the Fort, holding the egg in his mouth—"and a pretty big mouthful it was"—thus preserving for posterity a

specimen of the zone-tailed hawk's eggs.

Bird watchers exult in at last finding the bird they searched for, but they have trouble communicating this exultation to anybody except other bird watchers. William Dawson, in *The Birds of California*, tried hard to express his surprise at hearing a western yellowthroat utter a unique and unexpected song. "We...were not unprepared for shocks," he wrote, "when *Hoo hee, chink I woo chu tip* fell upon the ear. Again and again came the measured accents, clear, strong and sweet." In *The Trail of the Money Bird*, Dillon Ripley of the [Smithsonian](#) told of his search in New Guinea for bruijn's brush turkey, *Aepyodius bruijnii*, discovered by plume hunters in the late 1800's and not seen again until 1939, when Ripley examined birds shot by one of his native hunters, "and there, wonder of wonders, was *Aepyodius bruijnii*!"

This was the heroic tradition in which Victor Emanuel grew up, and the fading hope of finding the horned guan was painfully evident. By the fourth day he had taken to showing the beginners the birds of the forest edge. "We're trying to get lots of birds to lots of people," he said philosophically. At night he set out to look for owls.

"I am in awe of Emanuel," Plimpton has written. "Just a flash of wing, or the mildest of sounds, and he has himself an identification." His instant mastery of the elusive cloud-forest birds was startling; he saw them where you could not see them until he patiently directed your glasses to the right branch; he guessed a bird might be one hitherto unspotted and, when you looked in the field guide, he was invariably right: a yellowish flycatcher, a yellow-throated brush-finch, a black hawk-eagle, a white-bellied chachalaca. He indicated the subtle differences between species. "The social flycatcher, the boat-billed flycatcher and the great kiskadee are incredibly similar," he'd say. "They have black-and-white striped heads and yellow breasts and short tails and they're chunky birds..." When your attention-span limit was reached he held out the promise of future pleasures. "Tomorrow we'll go back to that first ridge we climbed. I have a wine-throated hummingbird staked out there." There were birds enough to give even a beginner an impressive life list. But the horned guan was not among them.

Evening of the fourth day. We were sitting around the fire at the camp. [Dave Johnson](#) had not returned. He had gone down the Pacific trail toward Mapastepec the day before with Minturn Wright and Rod Thompson. At 1 p.m., Wright and Thompson decided to climb back, but Dave said he would look around a little longer. It was agreed that he must have been caught by darkness and decided to spend the night on the trail. If he was not back by dark tonight, we would start out after him with flashlights. At 6:30 p.m. he appeared through the underbrush and stretched out on the grass by the fire. "I found it." he said.

He had seen the azure-rumped tanager. After Minturn and Thompson left him he had gone farther down the trail. At 3:30 he stopped to watch a number of warblers. "All of a sudden," he said, "while I'm looking at them, I saw it. I said, 'Holy smoke, that's it!' An azure-rumped tanager. Eight of them! They stayed there. Then *whust!* They're gone. Then four or five minutes later five more came whizzing by and lit in the same tree."

He decided to stay there, which meant that he could not hope to get back to camp before dark. Shortly before sundown the tanagers returned. They acted like the warblers they traveled with. A spotted nightingale-thrush appeared with them on the trail, close to where he sat motionless.

When Dave realized he would have to spend the night there, he lit a fire and stacked rocks around it. He had no food and very little treated water left. He made a brush bed near the fire, which he fed every hour or so. When the cold became intense, he put the warm rocks under his bed.

"That was ingenious," Mary Ann Neuses said.

In the morning the azure-rumped tanagers returned. Dave studied them and made notes until 7:30 a.m., then he started back to camp, a climb that took 11 hours.

As he was telling us this, John Rowlett and three other exhausted bird watchers came into camp.

"We saw it!" John yelled. "We saw the guan!"

"Where?" Victor asked.

"About an hour away—too far to get there," he added hastily, because Victor appeared ready to take off. "We went up and birded along the ridge and went on as far as we could go. Before coming back down off the ridge we just sat down. Then we heard it, but we couldn't track it down. Really sneaky. But it looked like a perfect habitat...and there it was! It was thrashing around on a tree. It actually made a little foray out. It flew. It flew up higher in the tree and just hunched there. You could see the white band across the tail and the red horn...."

"How high up?"

"About 60 feet. Way up there. We saw it at 3:30, and it blasted off at 4:10. Rod Thompson tried to get some movies, but it was too dark in there. Then on the way back we saw two more. They were up in a tree over the creek, about 30 feet up. Where is my tequila?"

"We saw quetzals, too," said Minturn Wright.

"Everybody has to get up at five," Victor Emanuel said. "Everybody is going to hunt for the guan."

The last day. Complications about the mule train coming up to get the camp gear delayed the early start. It was 10 a.m. before Victor joined a small group heading for the ridge. "It is too late for guan to be calling," Victor said. "I don't expect to see any."

As he reported later, in a kind of formal address to the entire party, "It wasn't very productive birding." He located some mountain-gems and a slate-throated redstart for the bird watchers, but his thoughts kept returning to the cloud forest. What could be done to preserve this area? And what was its real value? What could be done, in terms of personnel and funds and international support, to keep its natural state from being destroyed?

"We walked around," Victor continued. "I was kind of lost in thought. Anyway, there were very few birds. I said, 'Let's sit down.' I wanted to tape these thoughts. I didn't want to lose them. We were chattering about the preservation problem. I said, 'We're in the forest. Be quiet.' All of a sudden I heard it, except you don't hear it. You feel it. It kind of creeps into your consciousness. I said to Mary Ann, 'There it is.'"

"I am bad at sound directions. I have a partial hearing loss in one ear. I asked Allison and Mary Ann and Tom where it was coming from. They said, 'Across the creek.' That meant back down the trail and up a hillside. But after we got up the hillside we couldn't hear it. Through the brush I could see light at the top of the ridge. I said, 'I've never been to the top of this ridge. Let's go there.' We pushed to the top of the ridge. There was a beautiful view, a valley and a wide sloping forest on the other side. There was a path on the top of that ridge. But we couldn't hear the guan any longer."

It was a bitter moment in the life of a great bird watcher. It was as though he were the only person in El Triunfo who had not seen a guan. He looked desolate when he realized his recorded guan call was not going to summon one and that his last chance to see a guan was gone. But he merely said stoically, "Let's follow this path back to camp."

The ridge path was steep and grew steeper. The bird watchers, lagging far behind, out of breath, were widely spaced when Victor put down his parabolic microphone and motioned for silence. He was on a high point of the ridge, in a kind of country favored by quetzals, and he put a quetzal call into the tape recorder, hoping to call in one of them as a parting gift.

The call of the quetzal is a low double note, sounding like *wahco, wahco* and a whistled *whew-oooh*. Everybody had long since learned to remain absolutely silent and motionless when Victor worked the parabolic microphone or turned on the tape recorder. Now, simultaneously with the recorded quetzal call, a guan began calling, but Victor, close to the tape recorder, did not hear it. It was a dull grunting sound, so porcine that the first reaction was, what are pigs doing up here? At first there was no bill-clacking or mooing, just a low steady repetition of the snorting grunt that pigs make while feeding.

Victor, preoccupied with the quetzal tape, still had not heard the guan, and an awful fear gripped those who had. They could not call out to him, and they were afraid that if they moved, they might frighten the bird away. But Allison, closest to him, whispered urgently, "There's the guan!"

"I shut off the tape recorder," Victor said later in his report, "in order to hear what she was saying. And then I heard the bill-clacking. I walked along the ridge, and there it was. It was just standing there! Just after spotting it, I had this terrible conflict. I just wanted to soak it up, but at the same time I wanted to make sure everyone saw it, but I didn't want to take my eyes off it. The others came along quickly, and we watched it for 10 minutes. Then it began walking back and forth on the branch, clacking its bill for a minute or two, looking around, getting more agitated. It jumped up to another branch, and when it did it went *ohh—waugh!*, its most agitated call.

"We were watching it hopping around. Then some tree growths got in the way, and we couldn't see it. I thought we might go down the slope to the base of the tree, where our nearness might disturb it and start the bill-clacking again so we could locate it. But it just vanished. The same thing happened to Alexander Skutch; he described that mysterious disappearance in a German ornithological publication, *Grzimeks Tierleben*."

Nobody saw the horned guan again. No one got a picture of it. There were new tape recordings now of its wilderness call, but that was all. Back in civilization [Plimpton](#) managed to locate [Harrison](#). He was pleased to have his money and belongings returned, and interested to learn where his pack had ended up.

There was no question in Victor Emanuel's mind but that the El Triunfo trip had been a glorious success. We had set out to find the horned guan, and we had found it. For less dedicated searchers the results were not so clear-cut. "We find there what we seek," Skutch wrote in *A Last Home of Mystery*. "But in spite of beauty, tranquillity and endless variety, the forest at last becomes oppressive.... We lose our proud pose as the lords of creation and come at last to feel what we actually are, small, bewildered creatures wandering timidly amid forces immeasurably more powerful and enduring than ourselves."

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