

EDITORIAL

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF *ORNITOLOGÍA NEOTROPICAL*?

In the current world, with seemingly endless options to publish scientific content, it may be of interest to question where does our journal *Ornitología Neotropical* (hereafter ON) stand and what sort of niche does it fill. Or, in other words, what does ON publish and what content is missing that we would want to see published in the journal?

Having started my editorial duties at the end of last year it struck me that we did not have a clear statement of the scope of ON detailing the type of work that is appropriate for the journal. The only editorial statement of scope goes back to the first issue in 1990, where it says: “*The journal will cover analytical and descriptive life history studies, biogeographical patterns of distribution, speciation, systematics and taxonomy, and faunistics. Experimental studies in ecology and physiology will only be considered if they contribute to understanding the biological adaptations of birds concerned.*” (Ramos & Schuchmann 1990). This is rather broad, but notice that conservation-oriented studies are not explicitly mentioned. Also, I cannot envision the circumstances under which sound experimental studies on the ecology and physiology of Neotropical birds would not be welcome in the journal. On the contrary I think that we certainly need more of those (e.g., only three studies with the word ‘experiment’ in the title can be found between 1990 and 2006 in the journal).

But, to be valid, experiments need to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the biology and life history of the species concerned (Bijlsma 2010). This is where ON shines, and shows its importance as a prime outlet for descriptive studies on the natural history of Neotropical birds. The relevance of sound natural history knowledge has been recently emphasized (Beehler 2010) in response to the apparent push by leading journals to publish largely hypothesis-driven, cutting-edge research. For example, recently the journal *Ardea* announced that their scope was going to emphasise the publishing of solid descriptive studies on aspects of avian natural history (Bijlsma *et al.* 2014). Whether this kind of statements will be reflected in an increased number of natural history studies remains to be seen. At ON we will continue to welcome descriptive natural history studies on Neotropical birds, hopefully constituting one of the first choices for authors interested in publishing this kind of studies. I emphasise however that, even though we do not discriminate against descriptive studies, those natural history studies that follow a clear research question or hypothesis are the ones that contribute most to the understanding of avian biology.

Many of the studies published in ON are comprehensive, multi-year studies (Lara *et al.* 2011) that often follow marked individuals (Jahn *et al.* 2010, Nolazco & Roper 2014), and we are delighted to be able to publish this kind of work. However, ON also publishes descriptions of single observations of unusual/unexpected patterns (behaviour, food sources, nesting, etc.) as short notes. What is the value of these observations? On their own such quirky events may be disregarded as weird exceptions, uninteresting to most ornithologists concerned with the broader picture of avian biology. However, sometimes the plural of anecdote might be data. For example, Lefebvre *et al.* (2004) compiled cases of novel feeding behaviours from the literature and noticed that those species with higher frequency of feeding innovations also had larger forebrains. This suggests a link between brain morphology and behavioural innovation similar to that observed in primates, and provides a tool to assess inter-specific differences in cognition (Lefebvre *et al.* 2004). Thus, data collected by many observers apparently without a clear goal in mind other than describing the natural world, can nonetheless be used to address questions of

broad interest. Unfortunately, Neotropical birds were not included in this analysis since this region was deemed to have too few reports. With the recent increase of meta-analytic studies (Nakagawa & Santos 2012) such observations will be increasingly harnessed using statistical tools to yield support for general theories or even generate new hypotheses.

While ON has certainly no shortage of manuscripts describing unusual observations, I feel that we tend to lack a related type of short communication, namely those more speculative studies that propose new hypotheses or explanations based on limited field data (although for a recent example in ON see Pinheiro & Campos 2013). For examples outside ON, papers such as Willis' hypothesis that *Actitis* sandpipers are 'inverted flying fishes' (Willis 1994), or Straneck's observations suggesting that *Synallaxis albescens* nestling begging calls resemble the sound of a rattlesnake to deter potential predators (Straneck 1999) come to mind. To have broad appeal and potentially trigger new research such contributions should include a clearly articulated hypothesis and the authors should suggest the observations or experiments necessary to test it.

Another type of contribution currently underrepresented in ON are methodological papers (e.g., Winker 1998) that describe in detail a set of methods useful for ornithologists working in the Neotropics. One may argue that ornithological methods, at least those that are established, are well described elsewhere. This is generally true, however, detailed methodological accounts in Portuguese or Spanish are generally lacking, which may lead to the use of inadequate methods that could affect data quality (Santiago-Alarcon & Carbó-Ramírez 2015). Thus, ON welcomes suggestions by authors interested in writing methodological papers of interest to Neotropical ornithologists. Similarly, we would be interested to hear from our readers about aspects of methodological practice that are inadequately covered at the moment and that could warrant seeking out contributions by experts.

We are also eager to see more reviews that synthesise and critically assess knowledge on topics of interest to Neotropical ornithologists. While ON has recently published reviews summarizing the knowledge on diverse groups of Neotropical birds (e.g., Figueroa & Alvarado 2012, Cortes *et al.* 2013), we are also seeking contributions that focus on specific questions especially relevant to Neotropical birds and how the insights from these reviews apply (or not) to birds in other parts of the world.

Finally, a word about what we do not publish. ON is not the place to publish extralimital records of occurrence unless these are accompanied by exhaustive revisions of the literature and provide broader biogeographic implications (Martinez-Curci *et al.* 2014). For example, new country records are not of interest to ON unless they are the result of a demonstrable process of range expansion or showcase hitherto unknown areas of distribution for the species. Whether these conditions are met and the degree of novelty of the contribution will be assessed by the editor in consultation with the editorial board and/or reviewers. Annotated lists of species recorded at a particular site are not usually published in ON, unless they represent semi-quantitative or quantitative analyses within a broader (i.e., ecological) context.

In summary, ON will continue to be a prime outlet for sound ornithological research on Neotropical birds including descriptive studies on natural history, biogeography, taxonomy, novel observations, etc. In addition we would like to see more experimental papers, papers on ornithological methods, well-argued yet speculative pieces coming up with new hypotheses, and reviews relevant to Neotropical birds. Furthermore ON will continue to be one of the few international journals that allow authors to publish in Spanish and Portuguese as well as in English. Providing this opportunity is, and will remain, one of the main aims of ON, although I

stress that mastering English should be a priority for all Latin-American students pursuing an academic career.

Time to stop reading and start writing!

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