

A BIRD-MAN'S ADVENTURES IN EL SALVADOR

By AUSTIN L. RAND*
CURATOR OF BIRDS

My son Stanley and I are at work in the tropical research station of El Salvador, known officially as Instituto Tropical de Investigaciones Cientificas de la Universidad Autonoma de El Salvador. The institute, a pleasant, cool, one-story building, is situated on the edge of the city, with the Volcano of San Salvador rising behind it. Two wings contain working quarters for biologists, chemists, and geologists. Administrative offices connect the two wings, and there is a library. In construction next to the institute is a three-story guest house that will supply modern living quarters for five guest-workers.

The director of the institute, genial Dr. Carlos Llerena, a man busy with his medical practice and with civic duties, finds time many mornings to visit the institute. The technical director is Dr. Adolf Meyer-Abich, who is interested in philosophy and the history of science.

THE MANANA MOOD

It's a pleasant, friendly atmosphere we live in here. There is nothing of the hustle and bustle that characterizes our northern life. If something doesn't get done today, there is always tomorrow. Gradually we have been brought to accept this pleasant idea of *mañana*. The first time it took two weeks to get a manuscript from the post office, we raged. But by the time it had taken a month to get our equipment from Pan American Airways and into use we had accepted the philosophy of the country. In the long run, say one hundred years more, no one will know the difference.

Though we spend more time commuting than I did in Chicago, we don't begrudge the time. We go past little sidewalk restaurants where women are patting out tortillas and cooking them on an iron plate over an open fire; past pack animals loaded with great tins of what must be milk; past two-wheeled oxcarts loaded with firewood; past vendors of little bits of this and that, from religious pictures to cigarettes and sweets. There are big shops, too, with all the amenities one could hope for; but it is touches like the children naked but for a tiny shirt and the women with huge baskets balanced on their heads that intrigue us.

Sometimes we go down the streets where farm people bring in their produce, and the snail's pace at which we travel allows us to inventory the contents of the baskets. Still more intriguing are the glimpses we catch of what goes on behind the doors of the houses. In most sections of the city the walls of the buildings rise from the sidewalks. Doorways and tall windows, often

barred, have solid doors that close them; but when open there are half-length shutters that make at least a pretense of keeping out the vulgar gaze and let in air. Glimpses past them show a surprising variety of things. Behind one window may be a room with stacks of firewood for sale; behind another, a bedroom. Behind others may be a little general store, a charming living room, a tailor shop, a patio with palms and greenery, a kitchen with dining room or restaurant. And once, in a village, I looked in and saw a mule. From the outside the windows all look alike.

ADVENTURES AFIELD

Once at the institute our day starts officially. The institute is laid out so that work can be done there, with material brought in and kept there. But the value and the importance of a biological station should be in studying nature at first hand in the field. So we set out to see, study, and collect as much as we can. Only necessary writing and preparation keep us in the institute.

To work on foot from the institute has its adventures. Dodging the bulldozers and the construction crews we go through the little groves and the gullies where there are a few trees left. There's a rustle in a bush. We look, expecting a tinamou, and see a chicken or a cow or a pig. Up in a tree there may be a boy getting green mangoes or a woman gathering pito flowers to flavor the frijoles for the evening meal. Our collecting that involves shooting necessitates constant vigilance. We want especially to find and study orioles' nests. Orioles nest on the tips of branches, but the people here have a habit of climbing trees and lopping off branches for firewood. This removes the orioles' favorite nesting places, and makes the area less attractive to them.

Finally we come to farm country, where fields and hedges, tiny coffee plots, and banana clumps cover the country cut up by brush filled ravines, and the houses are farther apart. Birds are generally common, and we record things like the habits of the russet-tailed sparrows that recall our white-crowned sparrow, the big, long-crested, blue-and-white magpie-jays, and the white-throated saltator whose song recalls the towhee's "Drink your tea."

COWS LURE CUCKOOS

One project we have in hand is on the efficiency of cows as beaters for anis. Anis are black, grackle-sized cuckoos that, despite their short legs, walk about in the grass catching insects. But if there is a grazing cow in the vicinity the anis go to it, stand about its head, and catch the insects the cow scares up. Tentatively we think the ani catches twice as many insects in a given time by following a cow as it does by its own unaided efforts.

But on foot we can reach only a little

of the country. We like to make longer trips afield by jeep. The institute has one jeep for the use of maintenance, and for field trips by the geologist (Dr. Sharat K. Roy) from the Museum, a botanist from Germany, a chemist from Germany, an entomologist from France, and ourselves. So we combine our field trips or take turns using the jeep. In the month and a half that we have been here we have made four trips by jeep. We have been twice to Lake Ilopango, where lake and streams vary the habitat and birds swarm. Once we went to Santa Tecla, where coffee plantations predominate, and once we made a long week-end trip to the cloud forest, where the high point of the trip for us was to see two quetzals. Trips into the field for more than a day or so need special personnel and preparation. Food and water, as in any tropical country must be looked after for health reasons, and the camp must have an attendant.

Over Holy Week (Easter), when all work stopped, the Salvadorean government geologist who works at the institute, Dr. Helmuth Meyer-Abich, kindly took us under his wing and showed us the country from end to end—from Anamaros and Santa Rosa to Metapan. Except for the coastal lowlands we saw most of the country accessible by car: the farmlands, coffee *fincas*, scattered trees and forest, old lava fields, and cornfields on steep hillsides. It's the dry season now, and most trees are leafless, except the mangos and the trees along the water courses, dry or otherwise. The grass is bleached pale red, or yellow, or whitish, and most water courses are dry. From the pine forests at La Palma and at San Jose, where the pines start at 800 meters altitude, we looked up through our binoculars at the little bits of cloud forest that lap over the mountain tips from Honduras and come down to 1,800 meters altitude.

MILES DON'T COUNT

Miles and kilometers lose their value as an indicator of distance in this country. The roads, once off the one main highway, are oxcart tracks. To the traveler hours and minutes are units of distance. It's more important to know that the trip to Ilopango takes 45 minutes than that the distance is 15 kilometers.

Everywhere we go we keep our eyes open for birds. Everything is grist for our mill. Our main object at this institute is to write the sections on the habits of the birds for a forthcoming book *Birds of El Salvador*, which is to be translated into Spanish and used by the people here. We have a good start on it now, for in the Museum Melvin Traylor, Jr., Research Associate, has already done the descriptions and the keys. These we use to identify the birds we see. Little by little, as our notebooks fill with data and our collecting chests with specimens, we see our way to our goal.

*Dr. Rand is a member of the current Salvadorean Project of Chicago Natural History Museum.



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1951. "A Bird-Man's Adventures in El Salvador." *Bulletin* 22(6), 4-4.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25639>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/370801>

Holding Institution

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.