



Heinz Plenge

'Extinct' Bird Found in Peru

Hernando de Macedo-Ruiz

The author was one of the first people to see the white-winged guan *Penelope albipennis*, an endemic Peruvian bird thought to be extinct, after its rediscovery in September 1977. It is believed now that a few hundred of the birds may survive, and if protected could become a viable population. But some are taken for food, and it is urgent to create a sanctuary for them. The author is Head of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy in the Natural History Museum in Lima.

In September 1977 the white-winged guan, thought to have been extinct for a hundred years, was rediscovered in the dry forests of north-west Peru. Numbers are estimated at a few hundred. Before this *Penelope albipennis* was known to science only from three skins from the two northernmost coastal departments of Peru. The type specimen is a male collected by J. Stolzmann at Santa Lucia (Tumbes Department) on December 18th 1876, and now in the Polish Zoological Museum in Warsaw; a second one, now in the Natural History Museum of San Marcos University in Lima, is a female taken by C. Jelski at Hacienda Pabur (Piura Department) on January 10th 1877, and a third of unknown sex, now in the British Museum (Natural History), probably also came from Tumbes.

Stolzmann's notes, however, show that he obtained the type specimen, not at St Lucia, but on Countess Island near the colony of Santa Lucia, the only place near Tumbes city, he says, that one could expect to find *P. albipennis*. The island is ringed by thick mangroves; in the centre are taller trees characteristic of the dry north Peruvian forests, such as *algarrobo*, the mesquite *Prosopis chilensis*; *guarango*, the wattle *Acacia macracantha*; and *chileo*, probably erroneous for *chilca* the groundsel trees *Baccharis lanceolata* and *salicifolia*. The guan was said to stay in inaccessible bushes all day, leaving only at sunrise and

sundown to search the *algarrobe* trees for food. Stolzmann also noted that in January and February the bird ate the black berries of the *lipe* bush, the buckthorn *Scutia spicata*. After eight expeditions to the island he finally shot one bird, having had only three opportunities to shoot. He concludes, 'Je n'ai pris qu'un seul individu qui se trouve au Musée de Varsovie.' Countess Island lies at 3°31'S and 80°29'W; the Hacienda Pabur, from which the Lima specimen came, is at 5°15'S and 80°2'W, about 200 km south-east of the Tumbes delta and 130 km from the coast.

The late Maria Koepcke, one of the very few ornithologists to visit north-west Peru since Stolzmann, suspected that the guan might not be extinct.² Between 1952 and 1968, when she was Curator of the Natural History Museum in Lima, she searched for it, but without success. During her search she met the agriculturist and conservation-minded sportsman-hunter, Sr. Gustavo del Solar, and encouraged him to look for the bird in his plantations near the suspected area. This he did for nearly ten years without success, until one day a local man told him of a place where a white-winged guan was supposed to have been seen alive. With Dr John P O'Neill, specialist on Peruvian ornithology and a well known artist who was working in north Peru at the time, Senor del Solar went to the place, a deep pass on the foothills of the western Andes, and on September 13th 1977, in the thickets of a dry forest, they saw *Penelope albipennis*. This was almost exactly a hundred years after the bird had last been seen alive by a scientist. The place was at Hacienda Querpon about 5°35'S and 79°48'W, some 40 km south from Hacienda Pabur, and further south than Maria Koepcke had suggested, but within the area foretold by Stolzmann: 'Cependant je peux supposer d'après certaines données qu'elle se trouve encore dans toutes les vallées des rivières plus considérables du Pérou Septentrional jusqu'à la vallée de Chicama'.⁷ This valley is about 7°45'S.

On 27th and 28th September 1977 I went to the Hacienda Querpon, and with Don Gustavo del Solar and Heinz Plenge, well known bird photographer, went to one of the dry forests that extend in a line between about 500 and 900m above sea level in these deep valleys—a six-hour journey on horseback with a guide, although only 12 km east of the Panamerican Highway.

The first pair of white-winged guan that we saw ran rapidly for some distance on the ground with raised tails, and disappeared among the dry herbaceous vegetation. The site where Sr del Solar had found them is much greener thanks to a spring. Places like this are called locally 'jagüey' or 'jahuay', and are comparatively rare in this dry country. In this 'jahuay' area, we saw two more pairs of guan flying, showing their neat white wings. The flight is short and heavy with a moderate wing beat, and the birds reveal themselves also by a loud peep. Heinz Plenge succeeded in getting the first photograph ever taken of a white-winged guan in its natural habitat.

Next morning we started watching the trees very early but it was 6 am before the guans flew over. They settled on a wattle *Acacia macracantha* and pulled at the black pods, which can be added to the buckthorn *Scutia spicata* as one of the food plants. The local people said that the bird also eats the pods of the pea *Pithecolobium multiflorum* and the fruits of a species of *Ficus*. We noted that the bird strikes the many big red flowers of a species of *Erythrina* with its beak, presumably to get the abundant nectar. We saw the white-edged oriole *Icterus graceannae* drinking nectar from the same flowers.

During the twelve hours that we kept watch on the area, the guans made only

four flights that we saw. We could not follow their movements either on the ground or between the thick mass of branches, and in the three-kilometre-long valley we saw only three pairs. We also found some feathers near the ashes of a recent cooking place, and discovered later that two families, one of whom had a shotgun, take the birds for food; we tried to convince them of the necessity to conserve the guan. Dr O'Neill estimates that the total population is around a few hundred, and that immediate protection could preserve a viable population.

Acacia macracantha and *Bombax discolor* seemed to be the dominant tree species in the guan habitat. In flower were *Caesalpinia paipai*, with minute yellow flowers, and an *Erythrina* species that here and there displayed a magnificent bouquet of big red flowers. Spanish moss *Tillandsia usneoides* hangs profusely from all the trees and shrubs and is so abundant that cattle use it as extra forage, and *T. recurvata* clothes the twigs. Bigger epiphytes, like large perched birds, are scattered among the thicker branches. Other species were *Celtis iguanea*, *Ficus* sp., *Pithecolobium multiflorum*, *Bursera graveolens*, *Loxopterygium huasango*, *Cordia rotundifolia*, *Grabowskia boerhaviifolia*.

Of the two score birds sympatric with *P. albipennis*, the most frequently observed were Turkey vulture *Cathartes aura*, white-tipped dove *Leptotila verreauxi*, lineated woodpecker *Dryocopus lineatus*, vermilion flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*, white-tailed jay *Cyanocorax mystacalis* and white-edged oriole *Icterus graceannae*. Mammals include great anteater *Myrmecophaga tridactyla*, tayra *Eira barbara*, South American coastal fox *Dusicyon sechurae*, puma *Felis concolor*, Peruvian gray squirrel *Sciurus stramineus*, and white-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*.

A century ago, according to Stolzmann, the white-winged guan lived in the small islands of the Tumbes river delta, where 'one such island, besides the mangrove-tree zone, has the character of a coast valley'.⁸ To verify this interesting observation, I visited the Tumbes delta with the botanist Professor Ramon Ferreyra, on December 18th 1977. I am now convinced that the interior of the larger islands, protected by a mangrove belt, contains essentially the same floristic elements as the dry forests covering the foothills of the north-western slopes in the Peruvian Andes. The plants they have in common include *Acacia macracantha*, *Prosopis chilensis*, and *Scutia spicata*, the first and last both being food plants for the guan. *Laguncularia racemosa* ('jeli') and *Avicenna germinans* are on both the islands and the adjacent mainland. The buckthorn fruits were not ripe, but people told us that in season they are red and very sweet, and taken by many birds. If, as Stolzmann suggests, the *algarrobo* pods are probably food for the white-winged guan, the birds could certainly thrive in the interior of the islands though not in the mangrove associations encircling them.

A direct consequence of the varied floristic composition of the Tumbes river delta is the curious mixture of continental, littoral and marine elements in the birds: brown pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*, neotropic cormorant *Phalacrocorax olivaceus*, magnificent frigate bird *Fregata magnificens*, great egret *Casmerodius albus*, little blue heron *Florida caerulea*, tricoloured heron *Hydranassa tricolor*, white ibis *Eudocimus albus*, slate-coloured hawk *Leucopternis schistacea*, osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, clapper rail *Rallus longirostris*, common gallinule *Gallinula chloropus*, whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*, common stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, white-winged dove *Zenaida asiatica*, coastal

miner *Geositta peruviana*, pale-legged hornero *Furnarius leucopus* the mud nest of which was hanging on the branch of a *jeli*, vermilion flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*, Baird's flycatcher *Myiodynastes bairdi*, long-tailed mockingbird *Mimus longicaudatus*, great-tailed grackle *Cassidix mexicanus* and yellow warbler *Dendroica petechia*.

We saw no mammals in the islands, but the small coastal fox *Dusicyon sechurae* was in the salt edges of the Tumbes river, at Malpelo Point. It was interesting also to see the dry-forest iguana lizard *Iguana iguana* crawling on the branches of a *Cryptocarpus pyriformis* (*nacupillo*), the succulent leaves of which it eats, and the marine common American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* lives in the delta; only a month earlier a juvenile had been accidentally caught in a fishermen's net. In sum, this delta reveals interesting peculiarities in its juxtaposition of dry forest and marine elements, and should be included somehow within the system of 'conservation units' that the Forestry and Fauna Direction of the Peruvian Ministry of Agriculture, is currently creating.

Even a century ago, circa 1876, Stolzmann revealed himself as a worried conservationist when he wrote about the guan: 'this species, the unique representative of the family on the Peruvian coast, is nearing complete extermination. I have not seen it except at Tumbes, where thirty years ago it was yet common and was to be found very near the city; due to continuous persecution it has retired into the inaccessible mangrove forest, where as I presume, there are no more than fifteen pairs.' We found it was useless to ask the older people about the white-winged guan; they had no notion or remembrance of a cracid in their islands.

Now, where it does survive in the deep valleys of the Andean foothills, *P. albipennis* is in serious danger of extinction mainly because of habitat destruction. Trees are being felled to get charcoal or wood for fruit boxes, as in the case of the myrrh *Bursera graveolens* (*palo santo*) or for parquet in the case of *Loxopterygium huasango* (*hualtaco*). The establishment of a sanctuary is urgent. Our Museum has asked the officials to do this, and also to add the bird's name to Peru's list of endangered species.

The local people told us that *P. albipennis* lays two white eggs and that if the nest is discovered by man, the bird 'throws them to the ground'. Stolzmann records that on January 10th 1877, C. Jelski hunted a female (no doubt the old one we possess in the Museum of Natural History in Lima) which concealed two chicks under its wings; one was taken alive and reared by the two ornithologists, until in April 1877, when they said 'it lacked very little for complete development', it accidentally died. Stolzmann informs us also that 'on the same tree was a thick nest negligently made with dry twigs 3m from the ground'. Recently Sr del Solar obtained a chick and has been studying the nidification and oology of the species.

We can confirm Taczanowski's excellent description of the colour of the freshly killed animal, apart from the feet which are not 'reddish brown' but simply rosy.

The specific name *albiblanca*, cited by Vaurie⁹ as being found in Stolzmann's notes, is a redundancy, repeating the white quality. Clearly, the ornithologist-traveller did not hear properly the native name *pava aliblanca*, literally 'white-winged turkey'. We have adopted this, as the Spanish vernacular name, since *pava* is used widely for guans.

Finally, we agree with Ogilvie-Grant and Delacour and Amadon who regard

P. albipennis as a valid species and not simply, as Peters and Vuilleumier suggested, a partial albinism of *P. ortonii*.^{6,10} The grounds for this are the constancy of the precise demarcation of the white areas circumscribed by the darker, to be found in populations extending through fully two degrees latitude, and also because the bird is easily distinguished from *ortonii* by the larger wings, tail and tarsus.

If we follow the late Maria Koepcke³ in considering Garriker's *inexpectata* as a subspecies of *argyotis*¹, there would be only two species of *Penelope* on the western slope of the Andes among the 15 known for the genus. Both are restricted to the extreme north of the Peruvian coast where the Cracidae family has thus its southern limit on the Pacific side. This distribution can be explained because it is only in northern Peru that the coast has forest habitats, and because the genus *Penelope* is primarily arboreal, as O'Neill noted.⁵ Nevertheless *P. albipennis*, thanks to its strong feet and long and solid tarsus, runs rather well on dry ground and is well adapted to its relatively open habitat. We hope that this most elegant bird, endemic to Peru, will receive the preferential attention it deserves from conservationists and scientists alike.

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**GRAY'S
MONITOR
LIZARD**

The close-up
shows the
characteristic
slit-like
nostrils