

21 June 2007

To: Mr. Kenneth Berlin, Chair, Board of Directors  
To: Board of Directors  
To: Advisory Council ABC  
To: George Fenwick, President, ABC

Dear Mr. Berlin and American Bird Conservancy

We write to request a retraction and apology for the distortions and inaccuracies in the recent piece concerning collecting endangered species in *Bird Calls*.

As we note in detail in the appended document, this article contains misstatements, distortions, erroneous juxtapositions, and outright fabrications clearly intended to inflict damage to us and our institutions. The obvious absence of fact-checking reveals that the true intent of the author(s), strikes us as disrespectful, and suggests disdain on the part of the author(s) for our work, our integrity, and our contributions to ornithology and bird conservation. We are stunned and saddened to think that this is how some staffers at the American Bird Conservancy view collections-based science.

From the deliberately provocative and disingenuous linkage of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker with the situations and circumstances of the cases of the Jocotoco Antpitta and Recurve-billed Bushbird, to the erroneous example of a taxon described “without collecting a specimen”, to the inaccurate numbers of specimens of the bushbird collected, to the misleading characterization of the antpitta’s true status, to the dishonesty concerning the discovery of the antpitta in Peru, this article is an example of exceptionally bad journalism.

Far worse, from our standpoint, is the direct implication that museum scientists represent a major threat to endangered species, that we lack any conscience, and that we are willing to risk extermination of species to obtain a few specimens. Those who know us are struck by what a serious distortion this represents. Perpetuation of the antiquated and erroneous views espoused in the *Bird Calls* article hurts all museum scientists and is a direct attack on our morals and integrity.

Most perplexing to us is ... why was this piece written? We have much respect for progress ABC has made in bird conservation, as well as for many individuals on the ABC staff. We are certain that many ABC staffers know that the *Bird Calls* piece contains the distortions outlined above and in the appended document. Regardless of whether readers share the author’s point of view on collecting, they are certain to be concerned about the lack of truth and wonder why some American Bird Conservancy staffers would feel it necessary to make the case based on falsehoods. Why would some at ABC risk the organization’s credibility this way? What is the “upside” for ABC? The downside is obvious.

We urge the Board and the Advisory Council to request that the ABC publish an immediate retraction and apology as a necessary step towards restoring ABC's credibility and a productive working relationship with the collections-based scientific community (and the scientific community at large). We do not expect ABC to endorse scientific collecting, but we do expect honesty.

Sincerely,

Dr. J. V. Remsen  
Curator of Birds &  
McIlhenny Distinguished Professor of Natural Science

Dr. F. Gary Stiles  
Associate Professor and Curator of Ornithology  
Instituto de Ciencias Naturales  
Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

## ***Should the last Ivory-Bills be collected?***

*(italicized material taken directly from the article)*

*1. When we replied, “So you wouldn’t mind if the last Ivory-bills were collected?” he immediately recoiled and said emphatically, “Yes, I would!” Collecting the last Ivory-bills may sound absurd, but elsewhere in the world, species that are down to tiny populations are still being collected.*

Here the author deliberately confounds collecting Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, should they be found, with the events below, as emphasized in the title. Given that collecting an Ivory-bill is clearly unacceptable to anyone, the intent is to make the examples mentioned subsequently also unacceptable. However, any real conservation biologist knows that the antpitta and bushbird examples given are completely different from the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, for which tens of thousands of acres of the most suitable habitat have been searched intensively yet only shreds of evidence for the existence of perhaps a few birds has been produced.

*2. ABC believes that from this point forward, the world’s rarest birds should not be collected, especially given recent advances in genetics and digital recording media. As an ethical foundation to collecting, the survival of a species or subspecies should take precedence over the reference value of a skin or specimen.*

No one in the scientific community would disagree with the last statement. We are not aware of a single example in which a bird has been endangered by scientific collecting, and even most of the examples cited as such from the 1800s have been shown to either be false or unlikely as the primary cause.

*3. We were struck by some recent examples that provoked our thinking on this topic.*

Here, the author leaps from a statement about Ivory-bills that no one would disagree with to the conclusion that everything that follows represents such an outrageous example. Therefore, the author directly accuses us of being unethical and willing to cause extinction just to get a specimen.

*4. On 6 January 2004, a team of biologists from ABC’s Colombian partner group, Fundación ProAves, trapped a distinctive brush-finch during an exploration of the Yariguíes mountains. The description of the bird, now recognized as a subspecies new to science, was published in June 2006 in the Bulletin of the British Ornithologists’ Club. The description is noteworthy in that the type specimen was released unharmed after a DNA sample and photographs had been taken.*

In truth, the type is a specimen and was NOT released unharmed by ABC's partner group ProAves. This is a matter of public record that can be checked not only by reading the text of the description but also by examining the specimen, which was deposited in the Instituto de Ciencias Naturales in Bogotá. The author explained that the bird died after being held captive overnight, and that it was held overnight because he was concerned about releasing the bird after dark. The ethics of scientific conduct are not limited to scientific collecting. Trapping and holding a species so late in the day that the bird cannot be safely released is not appropriate. Beyond that, given ABC's stated involvement, the author of the article had every reason to know that the statement was false, even if he had not read the scientific publication. Such an outright falsehood requires explanation.

Further, as the example above poignantly illustrates, mist-netting is a known source of mortality and injury to birds, as is the taking of blood samples. Therefore, ABC supports an activity that risks and occasionally kills and risks the lives of individuals of endangered and threatened species. Some even believe that tape-playback causes trauma to birds and should be banned, particularly in the case of endangered species (and would be illegal in the USA). Yet we assume that tape-playback is a primary tool for ABC-sponsored surveys for endangered and threatened species. The sanctimonious tone of the Bird Calls piece could be adopted by those critical of your own standard field procedures.

*5. It was the first time a live type specimen had been used for the description of a new bird in the Americas, and follows last year's approval of the technique by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature.*

[Of minor note here, although consistent with the pervasive inaccuracy and distortions of the article, is that early descriptions were often based on composite recollections of living birds or paintings thereof. Further, there has been no change in ICZN policy.]

*6. By contrast, a collecting expedition conducted by another institution during the summer of 2006 visited a previously little studied region of northern Peru, and following up on reports of the Endangered Jocotoco Antpitta there, collected two of only three known individuals in Peru.*

The difference between 1 (brush-finch) and 2 (antpitta) specimens hardly deserves the "by contrast" lead in. Further, that expedition, from LSU, was planned long in advance of the report of the Jocotoco Antpitta. In fact, the antpitta was found during a scouting trip for that expedition by Todd Mark, who was sent there by LSU for reconnaissance. Todd has written a letter to the ABC Board and Advisory Council to present these facts in detail. What is truly disturbing is that some ABC personnel are clearly aware of the sequence of events, yet the wording above is intended to inflict damage on our institution by implying that once we

heard about the bird's presence, we hurried there specifically to collect some. In reality, the existence of the Peruvian population would still be unknown to ABC or the world if not for our expedition.

More importantly, the statement that our institution collected "two of only three individuals in Peru" is clearly designed to be inflammatory. True, only three birds were detected in the tiny fraction of habitat surveyed by LSU. However, as ABC personnel clearly know from communication with Todd Mark, suitable habitat extends for many kilometers in every direction. Todd Mark estimates that there are at least 70 sq. km of suitable habitat in Peru. We attach photos from the collecting locality taken by John O'Neill. They show undisturbed habitat extending to the horizon. Obviously, the LSU team was able to scratch only the surface of this wilderness.

Most importantly, had there only remained a fragment of suitable habitat, our team would not have collected those birds. Contrary to the implications of the ABC author, we have our own unwritten code of morals and ethics that prevents us from risking extinctions.

Using the same deliberately misleading wording, one could write an article noting that the ABC-sponsored expedition killed 1 of the 2 known individuals of the Yariguíes brush-finch.

*7. Even with the most optimistic estimations of the Ecuadorian population, this represents at least 1% of the species' maximum global population of 200 birds - perhaps much more - and two-thirds of the known, recently-discovered Peruvian population.*

Actually, the estimate of the Ecuadorian population according to BirdLife International is 250-1000 birds (*Jocotoco Antpitta* - *BirdLife Species Factsheet*: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html?action=SpCHTMDetails.asp&sid=9830&m=0>). Birdlife International (url above) also stated: "further surveys may find the species to be more widespread, perhaps resulting in a downlisting to Vulnerable." With Todd Mark's estimate of 150 sq. km of habitat in Peru plus Ecuador, and with Krabbe et al.'s (1999) estimate of 6 pairs/sq. km, the global population may be at least 1800 individuals. Regardless, it is obvious that the Peruvian population consists of more than 3 individuals. Thus, the big picture should be that our surveys produced very positive outlook for conservation efforts for *G. ridgelyi*, not an epitaph for the Peru population.

*8. In another recent case, approximately seven Recurve-billed Bushbirds were collected in Santander, Colombia, shortly after this Endangered species was discovered there in 2005. The bushbird had been lost to science for forty years, before being rediscovered in western Venezuela in 2004, and then in Colombia the following year. Despite its rarity,*

*this species is already well represented in the world's museum collections from historical specimens.*

Only three, not seven, specimens were collected. In fact, Oscar Laverde, who discovered this population and collected the first pair, conducted an auditory survey along 1.5-2 km of road through good habitat and detected at least 6-7 pairs; because the birds were apparently in family groups, this puts the population at 20 birds at the least. Add to this the fact that a number of pairs were heard vocalizing on adjacent but inaccessible mountain slopes in extensive habitat, and the population could easily be 2-3 times this. The true story of the discovery of this population (and the specimens) will shortly be published in *Ornitología Colombiana*, for those interested (at [www.ornitologiacolombiana.org](http://www.ornitologiacolombiana.org)).

In addition, the BirdLife article ([http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/12/lost\\_and\\_found\\_screen.pdf](http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/12/lost_and_found_screen.pdf)) makes clear that the species was not “lost to science” but that the species was “once fairly common, judging by the large series of specimens held in museums and the scatter of reports from a fairly wide area.” The BirdLife article goes to state that due to fear of rebel activity and narco-trafficking in the area, “there was a long gap in reports after 1965, before it was finally found in April 2004 in the Sierra de Perijá, Venezuela, on the third trip specifically planned to relocate it (C. Sharpe in litt. 2006).” In other words, it has been rarely seen, but that doesn't mean it is actually rare. In fact, the BirdLife article states that the species was also found at higher altitudes than expected, suggesting that any apparent rarity may also be a function of surveys that omitted suitable habitat.

To make matters worse, an application for an ABC grant by one of Stiles' students to do a thorough census of this population of Recurve-billed Bushbird was turned down because of “excessive collecting” ... although collecting was neither intended nor mentioned in this application. Clearly the information to be obtained in this project would have been useful for the conservation of this species; as it is, the student had to change her project. The Bird Calls piece dispelled at least part of our bafflement – it is now evident that the gross exaggeration in the number of specimens actually taken originated somewhere in the ABC-ProAves connection. We remain surprised, however, that nobody at ABC attempted to verify this information before turning down this application or producing the Bird Calls piece.

*9. Given that habitat loss is the most significant threat to most species, why is it important that we also consider the mortality of what might be only be a tiny fraction of their populations caused by collecting? Firstly, for some species it is not at all clear how large their populations are, and the loss of genetic diversity caused by the removal of even a few individuals could be costly.*

This is contradictory. If the individuals collected are only a “tiny fraction of their populations,” then the subsequent statement has no factual basis. Let’s say that ABC’s global estimate of ca. 203 birds is actually correct, that the clutch size is 2, that the annual adult survival rate is 90%, and that the nesting success is 50% (generous estimates from tropical bird demography). That means that each year, roughly 20 adults will die and that 50 clutches will be lost. That an additional 2 adult specimens were collected in one year at the southern periphery of the species’ known range would have any effect on genetic diversity of the population requires faith-based special pleading. What concerns us is that the many competent members of the ABC staff are aware of these sorts of calculations, but the article does not reflect this. In fact, the new genetic samples will allow us to determine whether the Peruvian population differs genetically from the known Ecuadorian population or any new populations subsequently discovered.

*10. Also, the most easily accessible sites for rare species are where collections are most likely to take place; these are also likely to be the sites where ecotourism based around these species could help to pay for habitat protection.*

LSU and ICN personnel have collected type specimens of more than 25 species that they have discovered in Peru and Colombia. In not one case has the species been extirpated by collecting a few individuals at the type localities. Therefore, there are no facts to support the concern implicit above. In fact, as ABC knows, 4 specimens of *G. ridgelyi* were collected at the type locality, yet the species survived there, attracted substantial ecotourism, and catalyzed a conservation organization that bears the bird’s name.

We also defy anyone who has read of our many expeditions in South America to claim that these were always the most easily accessible sites. To the contrary, many sites have never been resurveyed due to their inaccessibility.

*11. More importantly though, as demonstrated by the Colombian brush-finch example, the collection of these specimens is no longer necessary to establish the validity of species (ABC believes that potentially new species should be assumed rare until proven otherwise).*

The Colombian brush-finch example, as noted above, did not demonstrate this. A specimen was collected. [And it was a new subspecies, not a species.]

*12. ABC and others are investing significantly in the conservation of species, such as those mentioned above, many of which are teetering on the brink of global extinction. It is a philosophical contradiction for national governments and conservation organizations and their donors to invest in protecting these birds while others are shooting them for collections. It is ABC’s mission to ensure these species survive.*

Here again, the author's hyperbole is that survival of these populations depends on keeping them away from collectors, and that ABC represents the savior. As for the philosophical contradiction, this is a debate for another time, and not directly relevant to the factual misrepresentations that we would like retracted. Further, a starting point for any philosophy is honesty, which is notably absent from the *Bird Calls* article. Many conservation biologists acknowledge the importance of continued judicious collecting as providing information that aids conservation efforts for the populations as a whole. We hope that some at ABC will tolerate philosophical differences with their potential allies.

*13. In recognition of the contribution to ornithological knowledge that collecting has made historically, we begin our approach to this issue by calling on our friends in conservation and ornithology to suggest how we might find common ground that both enables us to advance science and protect species. We look forward to hearing from you with your views on this topic.*

Attacking the morals and ethics of those who strongly support conservation efforts is not the best way to begin such a productive dialogue. Further, failing to display any respect for the parties involved by not contacting any of us prior to the publication of this article – if only to fact-check – suggests that the invitation to dialogue is disingenuous. Failing to even send it to any of us post-publication, and instead leaving us to discover it on Surfbirds internet site (which appeared prior to the circulation of the notice on the BCA listserv, something that few of us receive), further suggests a lack of interest in dialogue.

Nonetheless, if we are mistaken about ABC's actual intentions, we say in good faith that we are willing to participate in a dialogue following a retraction of this article. We would prefer that ABC itself acknowledge the errors. We do not want to engage in a public airing of the misstatements, because we do not wish to damage ABC's reputation because of the irresponsibility of some of its staff. However, if forced to do so, we will publish a statement to clear our names of the erroneous allegations of wrongdoing and unethical conduct.