

An appeal to support a connection between birders in Northeast Ohio and Mérida, Venezuela

By Beth and Steve Cagan

In June of 2002, we had the wonderful opportunity to be part of a group led by Stan Searles and Vicki Davison, both of the Cleveland Zoo, to the Andean Venezuelan state of Mérida. Our group had several missions, not the least of which was to attend Stan and Vicki's wedding. For us, getting in some birding and meeting the only Venezuelan ornithologist in the area, Carlos Rengifo, were high on the list.

Carlos introduced us to a number of habitats that were entirely new to us, as well as helping us see some wonderful birds. We also were privileged to talk with him about the scientific research and environmental education projects that he, his students, and his associates are engaged in.

The scientific work includes collection of some very basic data on neotropical migrants, surveys of torrent duck population, and data collection on the threatened red-faced parrot. Education work includes creating birding and nature groups in the high schools and the university, which are developing and spreading a consciousness of the importance of conserving the valuable and threatened habitats in that area of Venezuela.

Part of his work has included education and training of the rangers in the two national parks that occupy most of the land area of the state of Mérida. These people are underpaid and somewhat isolated. They have had very little possibility to increase their knowledge of the flora and fauna of the parks they care for. But Carlos and his associates have trained them in bird identification, so they can in turn educate park visitors. Carlos reports that they are committed to their work and enthusiastic about learning and sharing.

One of the key obstacles to their effectiveness is that in the twenty or so ranger stations, there is not even one pair of binoculars (not to even mention spotting scopes) or one field guide.

So even while we are looking for ways to find money for the larger scientific research work, we have undertaken to collect some resources for these park workers. We know that there are many opportunities for birders to donate used binoculars and books. Now we are adding one more. We have spoken about this project to the Kirtland Bird Club in Cleveland and the Akron Audubon group. We would like to ask you to do a couple of things:

- 1) Donate binoculars and field guides. The bins can be used, as long as they are decent and in alignment. The guide we're looking for primarily is de Schauensee and Phelps, *A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela* (or even better the Spanish version, Phelps and de Schauensee, *Una Guia de Las Aves de Venezuela*). Or of course, the new guide book that has replaced this one (we haven't seen it yet, but it's in the big catalogues). But if you have other good guide books to Venezuelan or northern South American birds, they would also help. It's good if they're in Spanish, but English versions will also be helpful.
- 2) We'd be happy to speak to other birding groups, or any group you know that might be interested in a general introduction to that part of the world. We're

not experts (yet), but I think members of the two groups we've presented to so far agree that it's an informative and entertaining talk.

- 3) If you know of people or organizations that might be interested in donating to the research projects, we have three proposals (in English) that we'd be happy to share .

Stan has offered the Zoo as a fiscal umbrella, so that donations can be tax deductible. To get in touch with us about responses to any of these requests, you can send a note to stevecagan@igc.org, or call us at home: 216-932-2753