Interview With Dr. Luis Baptista

by Stash and Carol Anne Buckley, Magnolia, NJ

Introduction to Dr. Luis Baptista

Dr. Luis Baptista is not a household name among the avicultural set, however, among the ornithologists and researchers world wide, he inspires great respect and credibility. Undoubtedly, Derek Goodwin's book, *Estrildid Finches of the World* (1982) is well known as the finch aviculturists' "bible." Less known is Dr. Baptista's great contributions to this work.

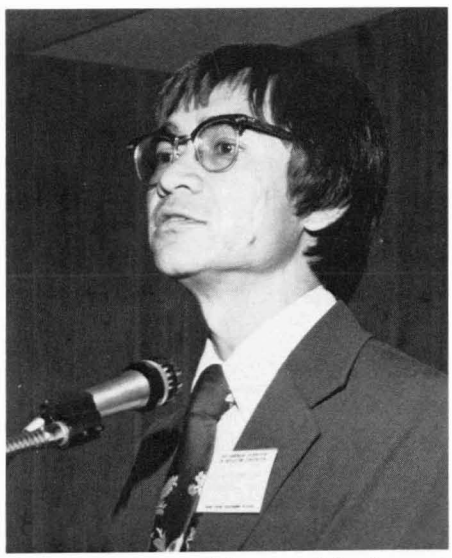
Indeed, we were only dimly aware of his standing in behavioral research when we phoned him several years ago on a question relating to finch behavior. We quickly developed a telephone rapport, and upon hearing of our behavioral observation on video tape, Dr. Baptista grew more and more intrigued. He said that on an upcoming trip to Washington D.C. he would like to swing by our place and see some of our videos. We were thrilled.

Sure enough, the day of his visit arrived and, upon seeing our video log books, he said that we had a goldmine of valuable, previously undocumented (but, of course, reported) behaviors and vocalizations (of special interest to him). We distinctly remember that he wanted to see the triangular head display of the Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus granatina*. So, of course, we edited it up on the monitor. Dr. Baptista was obviously glad to see that the birds were not just small dots in a huge screen. The behaviors were easily observed and at very close range. We spent the greater part of the afternoon and evening watching our documentations of finch behavior.

Indeed, we must say that Baptista was the perfect houseguest. It was summer time and when we asked him to make himself more comfortable and take his shoes off, sure enough, he did. Being a connoisseur of fine wine, he had brought along a bottle of excellent white wine, and over a dinner of poached salmon, we discussed birds into the night.

That was several years ago and we are now proud to consider Dr. Baptista not just a mentor, but a true friend. He has shown us what to look for in bird behavior, and without his guidance we would not be recording the behaviors we are today, many of which were previously unknown.

We suppose the thing that most impressed us about Luis Baptista, is his accessibility. If he does not return our calls promptly, then we can suppose that he is out of the department, if not out of the country. This was once confirmed when we received a postcard from him mailed from Vienna at the summer palace of Emperor Franz Josef. True to form, Baptista commented that the food was excellent and the wine divine. We cannot tell you how many times he has returned our calls from airport phones to answer a question of interpretation of finch behavior.



Dr. Luis Baptista will be one of the featured speakers at the upcoming AFA Convention in Concord, CA. Don't miss it.

Dr. Baptista is the academic's academic—a person who is always willing to listen and learn, despite the fact that he himself is a walking treasure trove of information on a wide variety of subjects. We certainly are not of his standing in avicultural and ornithological circles but he always takes time to listen to us and take us seriously. He has made us feel very comfortable.

Following is a short interview we conducted in the hope that you may more fully understand what this remarkable man is all about.

Buckley: We know you have been interested in all birds for a long time now, but what prompted this interest originally, especially your interest in estrildid finches?

Baptista: My interest in birds began early. My father kept chickens and ducks on our farm. By my eighth birthday my brother, Gaspar, bought me a pair of Budgies and my father added a Strawberry Finch to the menagerie. I heard the finch's flute-like song and was hooked forever.

Buckley: We know that in addition to your responsibilities as head of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy at the California Academy of Sciences, you are currently working on the dove book for the Birds of the World series.

We are glad that you can use some of our input on vocalizations and behavior of estrildid finches for your upcoming book on that subject—an update of Goodwin's *Estrildid Finches of the World*. Many books have come and gone since Goodwin's work but we feel this updated version is the one finch aviculturists have been waiting for. Can you tell us a little about the book and when it can be expected in the book shops?

Baptista: The book is co-authored by Joe Forshaw, Peter Slater, and myself. Every species of estrildid will be illustrated in Slater's magnificent plates. Do you know that Slater won an important award for his plates? Hopefully, the book will be finished within three years.

Buckley: On the subject of books, what else do you have to your credit and how might aviculturists obtain them?

Baptista: I have co-authored a college textbook with the late professor Carl Wilkie. It is called *The Life of Birds*, fourth edition, and is available from Saunders College Publishing.

Buckley: You have been to New Guinea to do field research on mannikins (Lonchura sp.). Could you share some anecdotes about this experience and other field work in which you have participated?

Baptista: This could take a whole essay. One highlight of my New Guinea trip is discovering a flock of Grand Mannikins, mixed with a few Sharp's Mannikins and a Meyer's Mannikin. Seeing these birds in the wild is much more exciting than seeing

them in captivity. Sharp's Mannikin is one of the New Guinea subspecies of the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin *Lonchura castaneothorax sharpii.* When the sun lights it up, it looks like it has a silver Mohawk haircut on its head. It is magnificent to behold in the wild.

Buckley: You have done a great deal of work studying the vocalizations of New World sparrows. Could you tell us about this and your discoveries?

Baptista: I studied the New World Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys* which is not related in any way to the Old World sparrows, genus Passer. I studied how song was passed down by vocal tradition and tested whether females preferred to pair with males singing their daddy's dialect. It turns out they didn't really care what he sang as long as his real estate allowed her to raise kids. A very detailed summary of my work has appeared in the journal of *Bird International* and this is a popular journal.

Buckley: Those who have heard you lecture have commented on your uncanny ability to reproduce bird vocalizations. Hopefully, at the AFA convention, attendees will be treated to some of them. How did you develop this unusual skill?

Baptista: I accidently discovered as a boy that I could make bird-like sounds blowing through my teeth and vibrating my lips—and went on from there.

Buckley: We know that you have traveled extensively both in the U.S. and around the world. Could you share with us some of your more memorable travel experiences?

Baptista: Memorable experiences are many. However, one that always stands out is a visit to the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge in 1983 to see wintering geese. It had been drizzling, and the sun was just appearing. The sky was a mosaic of patches of white cumulus clouds, gray nimbus clouds, a silver spot where the sum shone through, and patches of blue sky. Suddenly there were Snow Geese and White-fronted Geese. They came from all directions and at different heights. As birds passed the silver spot, they lighted up then faded as they passed gray and white clouds, and lighted again as they passed patches of blue. It was a giant kaleidoscope in the sky, accompanied by a background of some 30,000 honking voices.

Breeding the Lesser Flamingo in Europe

by Maarten de Ruiter
Cambron Casteau, Belgium

Of the five species of flamingo, only the Greater *Phoenicopterus ruber* and the Chilean Flamingo *P. chilensis* are bred with any regularity in captivity. The two endangered species, the Andean *P. andinus* and James' Flamingo *P. jamesi* are only kept in a few collections and are in small numbers. Both of these flamingos have been previously bred in captivity. The fifth species, the Lesser Flamingo *P. minor* is the most numerous species in the wild. It is also kept in good numbers in zoos, bird parks and private collections. It is strange, however, that this species has so few breeding successes in captivity. In the U.S.A., the Bronx Zoo (New York) has bred it, but the young failed to survive. Sea World of San Diego also bred it and successfully raised it making it the first successful breeding in the U.S.A. In Asia, the Jurong Bird Park keeps a colony of over 100 individual birds. They hatched a Lesser Flamingo in 1991, but it was later killed by a Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porhyrio.* In the zoo guidebook of the Nihondaira Zoo in Japan, I found a picture of a Lesser Flamingo chick being hand raised, but no further information was available to me as to the results of this hatching.

The Lesser Flamingo was not bred in Europe until 1992. An attempt was done at the Bird Park of Walsrode (Germany), one of the greatest bird parks in the world. I have had the privilege to care for all five flamingo species. We had a colony of over 50 Lesser Flamingos. Mixed in with this colony were a few Andean and James' Flamingos. Although there was copulation and nest building, the Lesser Flamingos were not successfully reproduced.

The Lesser Flamingo had more success in the private collection of Mr. Roman Alraun in Evensen, Germany. This colony contained 32 Lesser Flamingos, along with a few Chilean Flamingos. Two female Lesser Flamingos laid one egg each in 1991, but both proved infertile. In 1992, three female Lesser Flamingos each produced one egg. One egg was broken by an adult Chilean Flamingo and a second egg was fertile but died after 10 days of incubation. The third egg, however, was successfully incubated by both parents and hatched after 27 days. As far as I am aware, this was the first time the Lesser Flamingo was hatched and successfully raised in Europe. Of interest is the fact that the summer of 1992 had the hottest temperature ever recorded in Germany this century.

In Belgium another private bird-keeper was also successful in reproducing the Lesser Flamingo in 1992. His colony contained 26 birds and they were kept in his back yard. He had built a large enclosed aviary specifically for the flamingos. This way the flamingos did not need to have their wings clipped. They were fully flighted and this was very important for the flamingos to copulate successfully.

Within this Belgian flamingo colony, five females laid one egg each in 1992. Of these, three young were successfully hatched and reared. The incubation period was only 26 days in these hatchlings. The summer weather was also very hot in Belgium in 1992.

One must hope that more collections keeping this species will try to produce the Lesser Flamingo. This way it will not be necessary to remove this flamingo from the wild.

To achieve success, I feel the following points are very important:

- One must keep a colony as large as possible. If one has fewer than 20 birds, try to cooperate with other collections, either sending out one's birds or receiving additional birds to enlarge one's colony. It is also important to keep an equal sex ratio in each colony. Thus all birds should be sexed.
- One must keep one's birds in as large an aviary as possible. The aviary should be dry and hot.
- If possible the birds should not have their wings clipped. This way the birds are able to fly and thus be able to copulate more successfully.
- Mirrors should be placed around the enclosure. This way the birds 'think' the colony is larger than it actually is.

I hope I have given some useful information on the Lesser Flamingo and wish success to those who are trying to reproduce this wonderful bird.