

In memoriam: Professor Raúl A. Pérez-Rivera, 1948–2025

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It is with profound sorrow that we let you know that we lost a fellow avian conservationist in the Caribbean. Raúl Pérez-Rivera (1948–2025) passed away on 25 December 2025 after a brief battle with cancer. He dedicated his professional life to advance the conservation of the Caribbean avifauna, particularly of his native Puerto Rico. Raúl's professional career began at the University of Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras) where he received his B.S. (1970) and M.S. (1976) degrees. He initiated a Ph.D. program in wildlife management at the University of Michigan, but could not complete it owing to demands from work and family. He joined the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in 1972 as an Instructor, where he eventually became Full Professor of Biology in 1994. He retired after 50 years of service, but was involved in numerous extra-mural activities (e.g., consultant for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, founding member of the Puerto Rico Ornithological Society). Among his most significant accomplishments in his capacity as faculty at the University of Puerto Rico was the creation of the only university undergraduate degree focused on wildlife conservation in Puerto Rico (Programa de Manejo de Vida Silvestre, UPR-Humacao). He played a primary role in conceiving, justifying and implementing the program, which amplified his reach to aspiring new talent with interest in natural resource conservation. Also at UPR-Humacao, Raúl hosted the "Coloquio sobre la fauna de Puerto Rico" for many years, and edited the resulting proceedings "Memorias" from those events. Those symposia were especially important for those with wildlife and conservation interests and featured biologists from the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, diverse federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Fish and Wildlife



Fig. 1. Professor Raúl A. Pérez-Rivera.

Service [USFWS], U.S. Forest Service [USFS]), NGOs, and others from island academic institutions. It was certainly a valuable introduction for UPR-Humacao students enrolled in the wildlife program as well as an opportunity for many to learn about wildlife research in Puerto Rico. These symposia were open to the public.

While opportunities for field experience were limited for most Caribbean students, Raúl was one of the few professors on the island who took his undergraduate students into the field. These experiences proved invaluable for undergraduate students, stimulating both interest and appreciation of wildlife and conservation, and motivating many to follow a career in this field. I, Jaime, am among those who he encouraged, Fig. 2 captures three of Raúl's other former students, Dr. Jose Cruz-Burgos, Leopoldo (Leo) Miranda, and Dr. Miguel Laboy.

Raúl was originally trained as an invertebrate biologist (M.S. degree), but soon after developed an interest in avian conservation. The transition was facilitated by behavioral studies of captive animals, which included *Zenaida aurita* (Zenaida Dove) and *Streptopelia decaocto* (Eurasian Collared-Dove). These studies were followed by an interest in wild populations, especially *Patagioenas inornata wetmorei* (Plain Pigeon, Paloma Sabanera). Raúl was the most vocal and persistent advocate for this species over time. His concern for *Patagioenas inornata wetmorei* started in the early 70s, when a population was reported in eastern central Puerto Rico, just barely 10 years after the species, believed extinct, was discovered by Nathan Leopold in 1963. Raúl's work covered all aspects of its life history and ecology, including providing supporting evidence to recognize three separate subspecies in the Caribbean (*P. i. exigua* – Jamaica; *P. i. inornata* – Cuba and Dominican Republic; and *P. i. wetmorei* – Puerto Rico).

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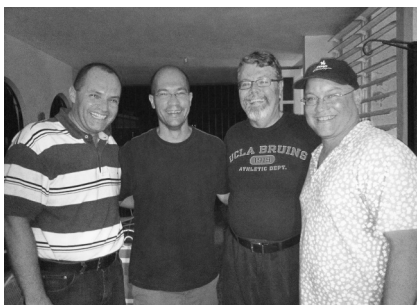


Fig. 2. The photograph captures three of Raúl's other former students. Raúl is wearing the UCLA t-shirt and at the extreme left is Dr. Jose Cruz-Burgos (Chief of Endangered Species, USFWS, Puerto Rico). To the right is Leopoldo (Leo) Miranda (Executive Director of Conservation without Conflict, and former Regional Director of the Southeast Region of USFWS). Dr. Miguel Laboy (center), also a former student of Raúl, became a medical doctor.

He also developed captive breeding protocols (1983–2003) aimed at facilitating the reintroduction of *P. inornata* to other locations within its historical range, and at generalizing protocols for the benefit of other species in peril. Unfortunately, the program was terminated because the island wide population of *P. inornata* was estimated in the tens of thousands. Ironically, the species at present is in a precarious state (~1,000 individuals), attributed mostly to the impacts of multiple hurricanes in the last decade. Not surprisingly, our last communications with Raúl were about how to draw attention to the possible use of captive breeding, population supplementation, and reintroductions to help the species recover.

Raúl's early contributions in the literature focused on reproductive behavior, dietary composition, nest description and nesting success of avian species, particularly rare species. Topics reflected the fragmented state of knowledge in the early 70s, most of which was recorded in the seminal book "Las Aves de Puerto Rico" by Dr. Virgilio Biaggi. In this sense, Raúl was a quintessential field naturalist, always keeping records of sightings, unusual behaviors, and distribution patterns. Subsequently, his interests expanded to include a diverse range of ecological questions and fauna across the Caribbean.

Altogether, Raúl published over 150 articles in ecology, natural history and environmental education (Wiley 2000). Below we share a handful of selected publications covering various topics and interests. Publications include multiple opinion articles in *El Nuevo Día* (local newspaper, elnuevodia.com/autor/raul-a-perez-rivera/) over a wide range of conservation issues.

If you knew Raúl, you knew he was collegial, willing to share his knowledge with whomever approached him, and was always ready to support worthy initiatives on behalf of wildlife conservation. Those who value and appreciate the Caribbean avifauna, especially the avifauna of Puerto Rico, will be forever grateful for Raúl's commitment and dedication.

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