

## THE INDIAN AND THE SENATOR:

### OLGER LICUY'S IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

The Epic Story of a Quichua Indian from the Jungle, Who Became One of the Greatest Bird Guides in Ecuador

This is the story of an incredibly talented Indian. I'm Mark Blazis. I lead bird tours, safaris, and research expeditions all over the world. I've birded with many of the best bird guides on the planet. If I had to pick one man to guide me to a rare bird in Ecuador and be able to show it to me, he'd be my man. In my opinion, this birding genius may well be the best bird guide in Ecuador. His story is fascinating.

They said he couldn't come here. They refused to grant him a visa. Few Ecuadorians can pass the strict requirements. No jungle Indians can. Olger Licuy, our loyal guide for so many years, was devastated. I was crushed. I had promised to bring him to America to thank him for all he had done for my students on twelve Amazon expeditions. I couldn't keep my promise.

I bought a round-trip ticket for Olger Licuy, my adopted Quichua Indian brother from the Napo River, Ecuador's main source of the Amazon, and our home each February and April, when the Auburn Middle School Amazon Expedition Team explores one of the last wild paradises on our planet and I continue my pioneering bird research.

Olger was like most young Quichua Indian men. He owned nothing of great substance. He had no savings. He's unmarried. He was precisely the kind of person to whom the United States Embassy doesn't want to grant a visa. Too risky. They may come to America and stay on illegally, disappearing in our vast labor force, sending home money to their families.

Getting a visa is a Herculean task, a virtual impossibility for the vast majority. Consider the requirements. You need a bank account with a minimum of three thousand dollars. Olger has no bank account. You need to own property. Olger owned nothing. You need to own a car. Olger has no car. You need to have a credit card. Olger has no credit card. How could I have gotten him to the children Auburn, who had invited him to our community to thank him for his many years of service to us and to help us in our birdbanding studies of neotropical migrants? The educated, financially sufficient manager of the hotel we were staying at in Quito told us she couldn't get a visa either. I felt a bleakness in my heart that I hadn't felt before.

I thought my letter of invitation, including assurances that I would feed and house Olger entirely at my own expense for two months would suffice. After all, I had succeeded a short while back in securing a visa for Dr. Vytautas Logminas, author of *THE BIRDS OF THE LITHUANIA*, to bring him here to work with us on our birdbanding research. I was naïve. I was about to be disillusioned and frustrated by our system.

My letter, my airline ticket, my assurances, and Olger's credentials (he is a world expert on rainforest birds of the Napo) all meant nothing. Upon visiting the American Embassy, paying forty-five dollars for the privilege, he received the bad news with great disappointment. He had been so looking forward to his visit, even studying English in

his spare time and memorizing from a field guide I gave him all of the bird species that he would encounter in our research. His Quichua friends later told me he hardly spoke after the Embassy rejection. This wasn't at all right. Olger Licuy, you see, is a very special man.

Yes, he can shoot blowguns, catch caimans barehanded in the dark, and turn the rainforest into his pharmacy, grocery store, and Home Depot. Yes, he never gets lost in the jungle, where I need a GPS to survive. But these are skills that many of his Quichua tribe possess.

What separates Olger from the rest is that he is an ornithological prodigy of awesome skills, our loyal guide and teacher, who for years has sweated from 4 am to midnight, each day of our expedition, to bring the magic of the rainforest to us all. Olger knows every bird species in Ecuadorian Amazonia, their songs, their calls, and their subtle identification features. He knows how to find them and even call them in to show us. His ability to quickly get a difficult bird in a scope for a birdwatcher to see is beyond belief. The rainforest grudgingly reveals her jungle jewels. Olger is Shaman of the Birds. He brings them to us.

Olger is also one of the Indians I have trained to carry on birdbanding research. I've taught over the years many to perform these same skills. Graduate students. Veterinarians. Biologists. He is, by far, the best bird banding student I ever had. No one has ever learned how to take a bird out of a net faster or more easily than Olger. It's in his blood. His eyes and hands were somehow made for this difficult and delicate task. Usually after a year or so, most of my apprentices can do the job proficiently. Olger could do it perfectly in two weeks. Better than his mentor, and I've probably taken over 80,000 birds out of nets. He has an unexplainable instinct, a feel for a bird that is impossibly tangled in a net. When rookie banders can't quickly extricate such an individual, they must quickly and safely cut the net around the bird with fine cuticle scissors, and release it. This harmlessly saves the bird, but causes considerable damage to the expensive and fragile research nets. It is the unavoidable cost of training new research banders. Olger has never had to cut a bird out. Several PhD's working with us have in desperation given Olger birds they couldn't get out. The man just has the magic touch. His level of skill can't be taught.

When we first started exploring the Napo, we needed to teach him everything about birdbanding research. How to choose an area that would likely hold the special species that we sought. How to cut the net lanes clear of vegetation, how to set up the nets. How to take out the birds. Today, he and an entire team of Quichuas have the skills to run a banding station for a research institution like Cornell or L.S.U. It pleases me that they have skills now that can one day translate into dollars to help their families.

Some people are allergic to hard work. At the end of a typical day in the rainforest of LaSelva, Olger's sweaty T-shirt had likely been diluted in a deluge. He'd probably used his machete to cut a tree that blocked our dugout canoe's route. He certainly had carried heavy expedition equipment, food, and precious drinking water for us all. And he'd used, in those early years, his minimal English skills to translate for us the thoughts and needs of other Quichua Indians, whom we daily encountered.

Olger has been my brother in the jungles of Ecuador. He has taught me lessons of the rainforest found in no books. He is admired and loved by so many of my former expedition team-mates. How many of them have released a toucan, antbird, or other

jungle jewel thanks to Olger? How many have seen a rare bird, like an Ochre-striped antpitta because of his incredible eyes and ears? How many students have felt the magic of tiny heart beats pulsating in their hands, thanks to his efforts, I can only guess. Probably around six hundred. Olger has shown me half a dozen secretive antpittas, including the Jocotoco antpitta, and countless other jungle rarities. I've been amazed at his vision, particularly at night when he'd shine a light on an owl that was previously invisible to all of us. I was driven to help Olger receive the thanks that he so deserved and that our community wanted to pour out to him. I couldn't allow the pain to stay in his heart or the disappointment to persist in our town's students.

Massachusetts has had over the years a great and powerful asset in Senator Ted Kennedy. I have personally come to find him a man of considerable heart and sensitivity to people of little means. He and his staff, upon my request, were determined to help bring Olger to Auburn.

If you've lived very long, you come to realize there are inequities everywhere. No one starts the race of life from the same spot. It struck me that as one of the most knowledgeable bird guides in all of Amazonia, maybe the greatest of all the bird guides there, Olger deserved to have a few breaks, to compete with the non-native guides from America and Europe, who earn good livings leading tours of well-to-do birdwatchers on his own turf. What did they have to succeed that he didn't?

All of the professional birding guides have the best optics to identify difficult species. 1. I bought him a pair of Swarovski binoculars. Best in the world. 2. They all have special recording instruments to tape and attract secretive, calling birds into view for their clients. (When a male bird hears another male of his species in his "bedroom," he comes flying in to investigate fast!) I bought him a Sony T-C 5000 and German Sennheiser microphone. Nothing finer. And a laser pointer to pinpoint birds to people who just can't see well. 3. ENGLISH. This was Olger's weakness. It was something I couldn't buy for him. It's the one essential skill that can come only from much time and effort. With little more than an elementary school curriculum vitae, he needed to immerse himself in the English language. Ergo my buying him a round trip ticket to live with our Auburn community for two months. To see his former expedition team-mates now as his friends and teachers. To send him home finally armed with the linguistic skills to prosper and match up with the great American and European bird guides.

I remember that fateful last day of our April Amazon expedition many years back, when instead of accompanying the rest of the team shopping at an Indian market up in the Andes, I stayed with Olger at the American Embassy, requesting a reconsideration for his visa. Four hours of pure tension, with Olger's future at stake. Olger was grilled to verify his alleged credentials. They had a poster of special Ecuadorian birds for him to identify. He impressively zipped through every one of them all, even though several species, like the vermilion flycatcher and rufous-tailed hummingbird were from the highlands, far from his rainforest home. But what mattered most was the letter from our Senator. Thanks to Senator Kennedy and Susanna Payne at the American Consulate, Olger was granted a visa at the last possible moment. Olger, as a result of his improbable turnabout in fortune, shed a rare tear. A special privilege for me to witness in a macho society from a man who fears no jaguar, caimen, or anaconda. I must confess, I was equally misty-eyed and choked up with joy as well. There is poetic justice in this world, though sometimes you need to fight for it. It's not always wise, though it is easier, to paint by

the numbers in making bureaucratic decisions. Great leaders don't paint by the numbers. Olger, his team, and I will never forget the efforts of our Senator and the wise decision of Susanna Payne. Olger flew home with us that April with my name in his passport. I had to guarantee his care and return. He was with us for two months! Apparently the only Quichua Indian ever to do so. My wife, Helen, who is a foreign language teacher, worked with him every day to polish his English and provide him opportunities to interact with other and have to use and improve his language skills.

When he arrived here in New England, he showed his disarming big smile that he is noted for. He was greeted by hundreds of his former expedition mates that he had helped in the Amazon. They now would share with Olger their passions and the uniqueness of New England: Red Sox games, Newport mansions, whale watches, soccer games, striper fishing, moose watching in Maine, Battle Ship Cove, Cape Cod Beaches, Boston, at Harvard meeting the great E.O. Wilson and Kenya's Richard Leakey, Manomet Bird Observatory, and most of the great birders of Massachusetts -- all to help repay him for all he had taught our children and members of our community, for all the magic he had brought into their hearts.

On the back of Olger's LaSelva T-shirt are words that have come to have a special meaning for all of my Amazon expedition team-mates: "In the jungle, anything is possible." There is always magic for every one of us at LaSelva. But at least this once, there was magic for one deserving Indian, too. The magic did not end there.

Olger returned to the jungle like a pupa that had metamorphosed into a butterfly. He worked so hard to learn English that he became a birding weapon: powerful and articulate, skills that finally matched his incomparable eyes and ears and bird guiding skills. He no longer was suited to guide just in the lowland rainforest: the world had opened up to him, and he had the courage to move out to the new world of the rest of Ecuador. He was already well-known, and bird tour companies hired him immediately to guide for them. Soon, it became apparent that he was a master. It was time for him to start his own bird company. He has established JUNGLE BIRDERS, a uniquely talented bird tour company that specializes in native Ecuadorian expert guides who know the birds and the country as well or better as anyone else. Olger Licuy has come so far because of incomparable character, strength, honesty, and talent. I have the feeling he's going to be in great demand for a long time. I'm so proud of this great man. He is part of Ecuador's birding history, and one day will be looked upon as one of the greatest bird guides of all time.