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Viste Nieve by Melbourne R. Carriker

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BOOK REVIEW

Viste Nieve. Melbourne R. Carriker. Blue Mantle Press, Rio Hondo, TX. 2001. \$18.95, paperback; 312 pages + xiii, 3 maps numerous black-and-white photos. ISBN 0-9665485-2-3.

This is a difficult book to review from the perspective of a scientist because in reality it is a biographical sketch, or annotated itinerary, recounting the life and adventures of an early naturalist-collector while engaged in establishing a farm and coffee plantation in Colombia. As the author states (p. iv), "My reason for writing *Vista Nieve* was to record for my extended family an accurate historical account of their unique heritage. For historians I also wished to document the courageous explorations, development, and operation of coffee plantations by intrepid foreigners in the rugged Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains. . . ."

The book begins with Carriker's grandparents, the Flyes, in Maine and Ohio in the mid-1800s. The author describes the various genealogies of the principal naturalist in the story, Melbourne (Meb) Armstrong Carriker, Jr. Meb was a collector-ornithologist-entomologist-naturalist who made major contributions to ornithology while working at the Carnegie Museum with W.E. Clyde Todd. Not only did Meb write the early major reference book *An Annotated List of the Birds of Costa Rica*, but later he coauthored with Todd *The Birds of the Santa Marta Region of Colombia: A Study in Altitudinal Distribution*.

Major collecting expeditions are described: Venezuela (1909–1911), several to Colombia between about 1911 and 1918, and again to Venezuela in 1922. The narrative of these expeditions is intertwined with family matters at the coffee plantation and the science of collecting birds.

It seems to me that the book will have more interest to the historian desiring a flavor of life in the late 1800s and early 1900s in northern South America than to the biologist or ornithologist. From the limited perspective of an ornithologist, I feel it would have been helpful had the author given some details of the specimens reported to be collected. For example, on page 150 in recounting the Colombian Atrato-Páramo de Ruiz expedition of 1918, the author makes the following statements: "Meb took 389 birds; they took 147 birds; shooting 228 birds; shooting 153 birds; Meb shot 344 birds." There is absolutely no information here. What was the habitat? The nature of specimens collected? Some of the species? Were they passerines and birds of the canopy or of other habitat? Much useful ecological information could have been provided that would be useful today in evaluating the changing nature of habitat or bird fauna at given locations. In the author's defense, however, perhaps the journals gave no additional information.

I also wish the book's photographs had been larger so that more detail could be discerned. Granted, most were taken in the early 1900s and are understandably of lower quality and somewhat grainy, but much information is lost because of their size.

This is a worthwhile book for a public library and perhaps some home libraries wherein the reader has a particular interest in Colombian life in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, while I found it interesting reading, I cannot recommend the book for most libraries.

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