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[An Enlightening Book](#)

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In his brief prologue to *Stelzvögel*, professor Franz Klamm explains that Dr. Ludwig Boitus travelled from Gottingen to Huayllén-Naquén with the sole purpose of studying *in situ* the assimilative attraction of the long-legged bird popularly known as calegüinas (this name has almost unanimous acceptance in the specialist literature in Spanish and it will be used here). *Stelzvögel* fills an acute gap in our knowledge of the subject. Before Dr. Boitus' exhaustive investigations -- the presentation of which takes up almost a third of the volume -- little was known for certain about calegüinas. In fact, except for fragmentary qualitative studies by Bulovic, Balbón, Laurencena and others -- works plagued by whimsical, unsubstantiated claims -- before *Stelzvögel*, the scientific community lacked a reliable basis on which to base further research. In his work, Dr. Boitus starts from the -- perhaps debatable -- premise that calegüinas' main character trait is its very strong personality (using the term *personality* in the sense established by Fox and his school). This personality is so potent that simply being in the presence of a calegüinas is enough to induce strongly calegüinas-like behaviour in other animals.

The calegüinas are found exclusively in the Huayllén-Naquén lagoon. There, they flourish -- some estimates put the population as high as one million -- helped both by local by-laws, which make hunting them illegal, and by the fact that their flesh is inedible and their feathers have no industrial use. In common with other long-legged birds, they feed on fish, Batrachia and the larvæ of mosquitos and other insects. Although they possess well-developed wings, they rarely fly, and when they do, they never go beyond the limits of the lagoon. They are of a similar size to storks, though their beaks are slightly larger and they do not migrate. Their back and wings are a blueish-black; their head, chest and belly, a yellowish-white. Their legs are pale yellow. Their *habitat*, the Huayllén-Naquén lagoon, is shallow but wide. Since there are no bridges across it -- in spite of many representations to that end -- the locals are obliged to make a long detour in order to get to the opposite side. This has had the effect of making complaints to the local newspaper almost continuous but communication between the shores of the lagoon rather scarce. To the uninformed observer it would appear that residents could cross the lagoon quickly and easily by using stilts and even without them, at its deepest point, the water would barely reach the waist of a man of average height. However, the locals know -- although perhaps in a intuitive way only -- the assimilative power of the calegüinas, and the fact is that they prefer not to attempt the crossing, choosing instead -- as already stated -- to go around the lagoon, which is encircled by an excellent asphalt road.

All this has not stopped the hiring of stilts to tourists becoming the single most important part of the Huayllén-Naquén economy, a circumstance that is perhaps justifiable in view of the scarcity of basic resources in the region. The absence of serious competition and the lack of official pricing has made the hiring of stilts a very costly business indeed; inflating prices to outrageous levels is the only way tradesmen can recoup their inevitable losses. In fact, there is a rather limited Huayllén-Naquén by-law stipulating that shops hiring stilts should display a sign,

positioned in open view and written in bold lettering, warning that the use of stilts may lead to fairly serious psychological alterations. As a rule, tourists tend not to heed these warnings and, for the most part, treat them as a joke. It should be noted that it is simply not possible to make sure that the notices are read by every single tourist even when, as is undeniably the case, the shopkeepers comply with the by-law punctiliously and place the signs in highly conspicuous places. The authorities are notoriously inflexible on this point. It is true that inspections are not very frequent and are always preceded by a warning sent a few minutes beforehand -- but the inspectors are known to perform their duties conscientiously and it can only be coincidence that there is no recorded case of a shopkeeper being sanctioned under the by-law.

Once in possession of their stilts, the tourists, either by themselves or in cheerful, chattering groups of two, three, five or ten go into the Huayllén-Naquén lagoon with the aim of reaching the opposite shore where they can buy, at very reasonable prices, tins of exquisite fish -- a product that provides the main source of income for the population on that side of the lagoon. For the first two or three hundred metres, the tourists advance happily; laughing, shouting, playing practical jokes and frightening the calegüinas, which, like all long-legged birds, are extremely nervous creatures. Gradually, as they penetrate deeper and deeper into the lagoon, the tourists become more subdued while, meter-by-meter, the density of calegüinas increases. Soon the birds are so numerous that progress becomes extremely difficult for the tourists. The calegüinas no longer run or fly away nervously -- as their numbers rise, they appear to grow in confidence, although their behaviour could also be explained by the fact that, by then, most movement is physically impossible. Whatever the reason, there comes a moment when shouting is no longer enough and it becomes necessary to use sticks and hands to shoo the calegüinas out of the way. Even then they concede very little ground. This is generally the moment when the tourists fall silent and the joking and laughing comes to an end. Then -- and only then -- they notice a dense humming emanating from the throats of the thousands of calegüinas, filling the entire lagoon. In its timbre, this humming is not very different from that of doves -- it is, however, considerably more intense. It enters the ears of the tourists and resonates inside their heads, it fills their minds so completely that, gradually, they too begin to hum. To start with, this humming is a poor imitation of the birds, but soon it becomes impossible to distinguish between the humming of the humans and that of the calegüinas. At this point, the tourists often start to experience a choking sensation, they can detect nothing but calegüinas for as far as the eye can see and soon lose the ability to differentiate between land and the water of the lagoon. In front and behind, left and right they see an endlessly repeating, monotonous desert of black and white made up of wings, beaks and feathers. There is usually one tourist -- especially if there is a large group of them on the lagoon -- who perceives the wisdom and convenience of returning to Huayllén-Naquén and sacrificing their prospective purchase of exquisite fish at very reasonable prices from the opposite shore.

But where is the opposite shore? How can they go back if they have lost all notion of the direction they came from? How can they go back if there are no longer any points of reference, if everything is black and white, an endlessly repeating landscape of wings, beaks and feathers? And eyes: two million blinking, expressionless eyes. In spite of all the evidence that returning is no longer an option, the tourist who is most lucid -- or rather, least delirious -- addresses his companions with some pathetic exhortation: 'Friends, let us go back the way we came!' But his companions cannot understand his strident croaks, so different are they from the gentle

humming they are now accustomed to. At this point, even though they themselves answer with the same unintelligible croaks, deep down they are still conscious of the fact that they are human. Fear, however, has unhinged them and they all begin to croak simultaneously. Unfortunately, this chorus of croaks has no meaningful content and, even if they wanted to, the tourists would be unable to communicate their final coherent thought: that they are all calegüinas. It is then that the elders of the calegüinas community, who up to this point have kept knowingly silent, begin to croak with all their might. It is a triumphant croak, a cry of victory that starts from that inner circle and spreads quickly and tumultuously through the length and breadth of the Huayllén-Naquén lagoon and beyond its limits to the remotest houses of the nearby town. The locals put their fingers in their ears and smile. Happily, the noise lasts barely five minutes, and only after it has completely stopped do the tradesmen get back to making as many pairs of stilts as tourists have entered the lagoon.