

Carmen Soto

A True Jewel of the Andes

OF ALL THE amazing cast of characters in the orchid world, there may be none as memorable and beloved as Carmen Soto. I am proud to call her a dear friend, and it literally viscerally pains me to convey the news of her passing from COVID-19 on February 10, 2021. When her brother, Gerardo, a chemist working on orchid fragrances, contracted the virus, Carmen went daily to the hospital to care for him, and contracted it herself, perishing only a few days later. All her thousands of friends in Peru and around the world are truly devastated by this untimely and unexpected loss. Indeed, she had many ambitious plans she was working toward, and personally, I was looking forward to many new orchid adventures with her well into the future.

As the chief biologist at Inkaterra, one of the premier ecotourism destinations in the world, Carmen, in her sweet-voiced, soft-spoken way, reached out one-by-one to a great multitude of people in the orchid world and passionately advocated for the protection and conservation of Andean flora and fauna. A graduate of University of San Antonio Abad in Cuzco, Carmen was recruited by visionary entrepreneur and philanthropist Jose Koechlin to create an education and conservation program within his incredible properties and resources at Inkaterra. Totally committed to utilizing the spectacular Peruvian native species as well as cultivating native talent, Carmen was given the reins to create what is possibly the greatest native orchid garden on planet Earth. In achieving this, she developed an encyclopedic knowledge of all the incredible biodiversity at Inkaterra, including the 372 orchids native to the region. She freely shared this knowledge and inspired commitment with her young staff of biologists and gardeners as well as tens of thousands of visitors and scientists from around the world that have worked with her to describe myriad newly discovered species in the region around Macchu Pichu. One of which, an incredibly rare and lovely *Brachionidium*, was named in her honor.



the orchid world in general, but because



I was honored to work with Carmen in 2015 when she came to the Smithsonian Institution to develop a strategy at the National Zoo for the conservation of the Andean bear, and spent time with me in the orchid collection. How wonderful it was to have someone so full of knowledge

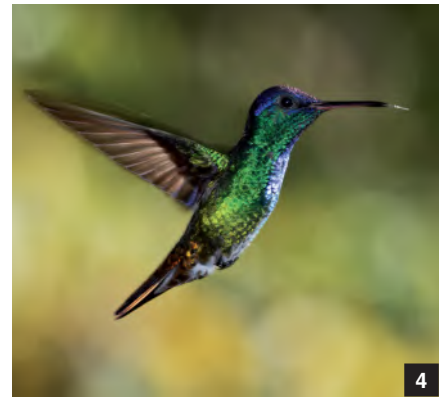
and experience and yet humble enough to work with me at the potting bench for hours each day. I am grateful that I got the opportunity to present jointly with Carmen at the Andean Orchid Conference in Medellín, Colombia about circa situm orchid conservation (conservation and

cultivation of orchids in gardens and reserves within a species' natural range), using the orchid gardens of Inkaterra as a successful and viable model for other conservation organizations around the world. She provided a mind-blowing array of images of newly discovered orchids that she had a hand in describing with her many taxonomist friends.

Although her physical presence will certainly be mourned and missed by so many of us, especially the young local children she taught about their native heritage with special programs she developed, with friends such as Angela Mirro, and new orchid specialists she has mentored such as Daxs Herson Coayala, she will never be gone or forgotten. I suspect that she will always be a part of Inkaterra, not just because of her massive contributions to that place and the orchid world in general, but because her spirit is now free to roam the magical Andes mountains about which she was so passionate. I envision her embodied in one of the tiny but spectacularly beautiful hummingbirds she was always so thrilled to see, no longer restricted by physical limitations of the human body, but rather,



nimbly gliding and hovering through steep, unscalable mountains, pollinating the rarest and still undiscovered orchids on her daily journeys through the vast wilderness, ensuring they survive well into the future. Godspeed Carmen, I hope to join you there one day in that noble endeavor.



- [1] Carmen Soto at Inkaterra.
- [2] Carmen along with Angela Mirro (right) during a workshop held for children.
- [3] One of the hundreds of species of hummingbirds known to frequent Inkaterra.
- [4] Carl Luer named this *Brachionidium carmeniae* to honor Carmen Soto.

— Tom Mirenda has been working professionally with orchids for over three decades and is the past chair of the AOS Conservation Committee. He is an AOS accredited judge in the Hawaii Center (email: biophilial@gmail.com).

