Alulah Taibel (1892-1984) a remarkable ornithologist, aviculturist and zoo-biologist

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**Riassunto** - Alulah Taibel (1892-1984): un rimarchevole ornitologo, avicoltore e biologo di zoo.

Alulah Taibel è stato uno zoologo italiano di origine austriaco-yemenita. Terminata la sua carriera militare dopo la Prima Guerra Mondiale e laureatosi in Scienze Naturali a Bologna nel 1925, è stato direttore della Stazione di Pollicoltura di Rovigo e direttore scientifico del Giardino Zoologico di Torino. Mentre la sua interessante ma poco conosciuta esperienza bellica è stata oggetto di una recente monografia, la sua opera scientifica non è stata mai motivo di discussione dopo la sua scomparsa. Nel presente contributo la sua attività scientifica è sinteticamente illustrata e si presenta l'elenco completo delle sue pubblicazioni scientifiche.

**Parole chiave**: Cracidae, sistematica, consanguineità, Alessandro Ghigi.

**Abstract** - Alula Taibel has been an Italian zoologist of Austri-an-Yemenite origin. After having served the Italian Army, he graduated in Natural Sciences at Bologna University in 1925. He was later director of the Poultry Station at Rovigo and scientific director of the Turin Zoological Garden. As to our knowledge no overview of his scientific work has never been published, a synthesis is here presented together with an almost complete list of his papers. Taibel has been one of the major experts on the Galliformes of the Cracidae family and therefore his papers on them are of particular relevance for ornithologists.

**Key words**: Cracidae, systematic, inbreeding, Alessandro Ghigi.

A recently published book, *Alula Taibel, ardito e naturalista* (Bollini & Bragatto, 2019) deals with the complicated personality of Alulah Taibel (or Alula M. Taibel and also sometimes Taibell), a unique figure among the Italian ornithological world. Alula Antonio Taibel (from his official birth certificate) born in Copparo (Ferrara) on 8 January 1892 from Gondisalvo Tai-bel and Giuditta Tagliaferri. For an understanding of the etymology of his first name and the history of the Taibel family, readers are invited to see the cited book (Bollini & Bragatto, 2019). In the present contribution, the choice has been done to use Alulah because this was clearly the wish of Taibel “to agree with Yemenite wording”. Furthermore, he added a “M.” in his name that has no official support in available documents, but should means “Mohamed” and signals his acceptance of Muslim religion, as reported by some testimonies. Instead of concentrating his interest towards Italian avifauna, Alulah was influenced by his mentor Alessandro Ghigi to pursue systematic studies of the world avifauna through avicultural activities and breeding experiments (Benazzi, 1984). He resumed his studies in Natural History at Bologna University in 1923, after being one of the more decorated Italian militaries during the Italian-Turkish war in Libya (1911) and the First World War. He graduated in Natural History in 1925. Despite this later achievement (he was 33 years old then) he was a particularly productive researcher still publishing well in his eighties. Furthermore, Taibel’s skills included field expeditions and preparation and handling of both living and museum specimens, as evidenced by his Guatemala expedition in 1932. This first-class naturalist also graduated in veterinary in 1932 and became later a leading figure of the zoo world in Italy (Gippoliti & Violani, 2009). In 1924 he began working in the Experimental Poultry Station in Rovigo under Ghigi’s direction. Here he also began to breed a number of exotic birds and mammals. In 1936-1937 he was consulting zoologist at the Giardino Zoologico in Rome and in 1938-1939 was in India with the animal trader Arduino Terni. In 1939 he could not access to a chair in genetics because he lacked the membership to the fascist party. In the same year, Taibel was sent to Ethiopia, then under Italian occupation, to capture the mythical Mountain nyala *Tragelaphus buxtoni* for the Zoological Garden in Rome. As he was overtaken there by the beginning of the Second World War, he resumed his military duty as Colonel and after surviving a serious fighting with Ethiopians irregular, was captured by the English Army and made a prisoner of war in India.

As he returned to Italy in 1946, he resumed his work as director of the Rovigo Poultry Station. In
Aquarium-Reptilarium realized by architect Venturelli. He was the scientific planner of the highly appreciated zoos of Turin and Milan, both managed by the Molinar family at the time associated with Arduino Terni. He was certainly the right man in the right place (cf. Gippoliti & Kitchener, 2007). Between 1955-1958 he produced a scientific bulletin of the two zoos 'Zoo - Bollettino dei Giardini Zoologici di Milano e Torino' that still remain a unique experiment in Italy. Here he published a wealth of papers mainly dealing with cracids breeding and systematics, his preferred subject of investigation. In other papers Taibel reviewed his hybridization experiments among members of the different genera *Crax*, *Mitu*, *Pauxi* and *Penelope* and on the basis of their inter-fecundity he proposed to treat all these cracids as members of a unique genus, *Crax*, with one superspecies and four species recognized following the Biological Species Concept of Mayr (Taibel, 1954). Similar results he obtained with other genera, and although he did not departed from Mayr's orthodoxy, he noted that some cracid 'species' seemed morphologically and geographically the result of hybridization between two other species. During such experiments he studied how inbreeding could lead to the development of lethal abnormalities, such as an L-shaped tibia (Taibel, 1971), well before this issue became a top concern in zoos and wildlife conservation (Ralls & Ballou, 1983).

In Turin Zoo Taibel planned a series of aviaries in order to continue research on his preferred subject. Although some of his plans were never fully carried out, such as a research station off public view, he served as responsible of a 'Sperimental Section' until 1964 and he was the scientific planner of the highly appreciated Aquarium-Reptilariam realized by architect Venturelli in 1960. Taibel planned a series of exhibit ordinate according a biogeographic and ecological criteria (Taibel, 1962), an exhibition style that would become more common in the following years. In this period an important primatological center was established in the Zoo in 1962, directed by the Anthropologist Brunetto Chiarelli of Turin University. Although birds were his first interest, he did not forget totally mammals. Among his studies on captive mammals it is worth to remember his papers on semi-free ranging *Antilope cervicapra* at Rovigo (Taibel, 1937) and a detailed morphological and anatomical description of capybara newborns (Taibel, 1950).

Although mainly a breeder and zoo-man, Taibel was a complete naturalist and researcher well aware of the importance of natural history collections stored in public museums. His 1932 Guatemala collections were deposited at the Zoological Museum of Bologna University and six new species of arachnids were described by Di Caporiacco. Bird and mammal specimens were later moved to the nearby Laboratorio di Caccia at Ozzano Emilia (now ISPRA Zoological Museum). His scientific perseverance is amply demonstrated by the publication of the mammalogical results of the Guatemala expedition in 1977, when he was 85 years old (Taibel, 1977)! A Taibel ornithological collection was also donated to the Museo civico di Zoologia in Rome and still awaits cataloguing. Among his last works, he also published a book for children in 1979, *Leggende di Uccelli*.

Taibel's papers had limited diffusion in Italy (unsurprisingly, considering the current emphasis on local ornithological studies) but – although written in Italian – some are still cited in international literature. This is the case with a paper dealing with the phyletic relationship of the Congo peafowl (*Kimball et al.*, 1997) or with another paper dealing with some mysterious cracid taxa (*Joseph et al.*, 1999).

Being Taibel a prolific writer and researcher, it is considered worthwhile to provide here a list of all scientific papers produced by him and known to us. Often these papers have been published on journals that are not easy to find even in Italy and hopefully the present effort may be useful to foreign scientists working on the same issues that Taibel studied with such dedication for more than half a century. The full collection of Taibel’s papers is deposited in the library at the former Laboratorio di Caccia (now ISPRA Zoological Museum) at Ozzano Emilia (Bologna).

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