

Condolences, Stories, and Tributes in memory of César Castillo

Hundreds of memories and gestures of love and sorrow have been expressed in the days since César's death, and will continue to be. These are just a sampling.

Love and peace to the wonderful César at rest, and to the Castillo family in loving remembrance.

-anonymous

César was an inspiring and encouraging presence in the lab and in the field, with encyclopedic knowledge and impeccable awareness, good humor, and soothing presence, and I am sorry to hear of his passing.

-Ar Kornreich

The world was a better place with César here with us.

-Andrew Richards

Some years back when Cesar's first child was about a year old - I had asked him how she was doing - and he responded that - "she's getting wise".

It was a simple statement - but with depth.

I've thought about that comment many times over the years as it applies to children, college students, everyone

Wisdom is so much a philosophy of being - and it is indeed what Cesar has given us.

-Esther Muehlbauer

I am deeply saddened by Cesar's passing, a fine man taken far too young. I had the pleasure of working with him for twenty years. He was unfailingly gracious and responsible, carrying out his many duties with intelligence and enthusiasm. He will be missed.

-John Waldman

I remember your fascination with frogs and your help with some of my biology courses. We love you and will remember you always. Bye primo.

-Monica Castillo

César was always so warm and generous. I got to know him, especially when I was sitting in for Dr. Sperling's class. He was always so friendly, kind, generous and so thoughtful to me as well as others. Wendy I also got to know during my time at the lab, she is a beautiful soul.

My deepest sympathies to Wendy and the kids. I know words can do little to help at this time but please give my condolences to Wendy. She will be in my thoughts and prayers, sending her courage and peace at this time.

-Sheila Gogineni

Cesar was a wonderful colleague and friend. He was always humble and kind, offering encouraging words and a listening ear. I will greatly miss the chats that we had and will remember him whenever I hear the chirping of birds around campus.

-Albert Kim

I used to work with Cesar at Queens College. We used to go birding at all the same places and compare notes. He always saw--and took exceptional pics of--a lot more than I ever did. He was an amazing human being and I'm gonna miss him a lot.

-Coby Klein

Hi Cesar, we saw and heard many warblers together in Forest Park. And you showed me a creature in the waterhole I had never heard of before, fairy shrimp! May your love of nature live on in your children.

-Karlo and Alison Mirth

César was one of the best of the bio department and honestly my favorite. He taught me for a lab back in 2020 when I met him. Then I had him last semester for Dr. Sperling's Field Bio course and I have César this current semester for ornithology. My head is spinning right now and I am so heartbroken. I last saw him Thursday for class. He is an amazing teacher and may I say friend. Please extend my condolences to his family.

-Dilin Budhu

One field trip that we definitely remember Cesar attending was run by the Queens County Bird Club - multiple days in the Adirondacks. Of course, Cesar was super-helpful to anyone who had trouble spotting a bird, as we did. And he especially enjoyed the unique bog habitats with fellow botanist Mike Feder. One highlight of the trip was a long hike through Massawepie Mire. But at the end of the day, we were attacked by swarms of mosquitos, and we ran the last mile to our vehicles as fast as we could!

-Nancy and Lou Tognan

He was always so willing to bestow his knowledge, and I am grateful for all the help he gave me on iNat. Everyone I met who knew him always held him in the highest regard. His presence in the birding community will be sorely missed.

- Jacqueline Liang

Thank you for giving me the Lord of the Rings collection. My love for the series will never end. Love you, primo.

-Katherine Castillo

It was November 11, 2012, and a bunch of us were looking for a tiny bird from the west called the Virginia's warbler. It had shown up in Alley Pond Park, just a few days after Hurricane Sandy. About twenty of us were lined up along a trail in the middle of the park, looking down into very thick brush. The bird was deep in the brush, and was very active. And this tall guy next to me kept pointing out where it was as it moved. I had been reading Cesar's eBird reports, but this was the first time I had met him face to face. After that we would see each other regularly in the field. The last time I saw him was in the fall. I had gone to Flushing Meadows just to take a look at what was going on around Meadow Lake. I saw in the distance a bunch of people, and it looked like a school group— maybe a college group. Not till we got back to the parking lot did I realize that it was Cesar and students. He was showing them things in the lake and then found a bird's nest. Everyone was very happy, and he was happy. I could tell from watching him with his students what a good teacher he was.

-Donna Schulman

Cesar was one of the kindest people I knew, and his gentle spirit will always be remembered.

-Jean Loscalzo

I remember Cesar helping me get acquainted with Queens College, and over many years after, I became part of that family. I will miss him and his grace, and I will look to him for support always.

-James Carpino

Cesar was a jewel. There was a warmth about him that was striking. I am so shocked he is gone so young.

-Uldis Roze

Be like César!!
-Jeff Freilich

My fondest memory is the simple joy of saying hi, and seeing his gentle smile, which brought warmth into my heart when I felt cold. He was always very easy-going, and had a natural knack for making those around him smile.
-anonymous

We had been working closely together during the past few weeks and yet he never mentioned his suffering. He was indeed thoughtful, friendly and humble. His family will be in my prayers.
-Saima Cheema

Cesar was an amazing person and helped me learn so much about ornithology.
-Michael Bermudez

Up until the pandemic César was the leader of my Queens CBC sector. He was a great birder and great company. I can only imagine how awful this must be for his family!
- Carrie Laben

Of Cesar and Wendy's life together, it is hard, almost impossible to talk about one of them without including the other. They were a truly made-in-heaven couple, ironically breaking apart by heaven itself.
-Xenia Freilich

I will miss Cesar. He was such a good, kind, and thoughtful person. I admired him for who he was as a person and a biologist. The world is definitely lacking now that he's gone from it and he will be missed by so many people. I remember going out on field trips in Doc Sperling's classes. Cesar was always there in the thick of things helping everyone and sharing his deep knowledge of the natural world, even when he was a student with the rest of us.
-Corinna Singleman

The cedar waxwing was his favorite bird. A Great Teacher!
-Chris Galarraga

I'm saddened to hear of the passing of Mr. César Castillo. He was a great professor. My deepest sympathy and condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. My thoughts and prayers for the family at this difficult time.

-Christelle Nemb

Cesar we will miss you forever and remember you always. We love you.

-Mary Ureña

Thank you for being my partner in my sweet 15. I didn't tell you how much that meant to me and I will always cherish that memory with you. Sorry for having such a potty mouth. I love you. Your favorite prima,

-Lorena Castillo

César was truly a good man. I felt fortunate to have him as a classmate, colleague, and friend. I will miss him. Godspeed, César!

-Katie Paccione

He was one of the finest gentlemen I've met in life. Always been kind and patient to me.

-Daisy Cheung

Cesar you will be sorely missed. Don't fret, your family will always be taken care of. You were loved by all. xoxo

-anonymous

Cesar was a good friend, a wonderful person and a fantastic birder. He will be missed by all the birding community. We are praying for the family as they go through this very difficult time. May God comfort them and provide for them.

-Colleen Veltri

I share the sadness of knowing that Cesar has passed much too soon. For me, Cesar always had a ready smile and a can-do spirit. Anything I needed for the lab was provided quickly and graciously. He was a consummate professional. He will be missed, but always fondly remembered as a kind and talented member of our QC

Biology Department.

-Joe Emmett

César never made a fuss about himself. He was always a supporter of others. But he deserves this and so much more. I hope I get the chance to honor him in different ways for the rest of my life.

-Travis David

Cesar was my first lab instructor at Queens College. He was very passionate about Biology and one of the kindest people I know. He was extremely hardworking, he always had our lab set up to perfection. He will be missed.

-Anna Li

I'm the president of NYC Audubon, and I've known Cesar since 2018 when he joined our Board of Directors. We share the devastation and heartbreak. Cesar was an incredible naturalist, an incredible birder. But he also really cared about sharing the natural world with other people. He sat on our diversity, equity, and inclusion committee—the work that committee does is to share nature widely in the five boroughs with others. That was the committee that moved Cesar the most, the work that was of the most worth to him on our board. And that is the work that we will continue to do in his honor.

He was super proud of his iNaturalist list. If you find yourself missing him, I encourage you to go on iNaturalist, and search his name, and up will pop some of the most beautiful photographs and things that Cesar saw that mattered to him. Imagine him just being in the world will all those beautiful things, whether fungi or birds or moths. It's a beautiful image to keep in your heart, and it's a beautiful thing to keep striving towards reaching others so they will love nature too.

-Karen Benfield

This is my 4th semester at QC. I took a class with Dr. Sperling for the three prior semesters and so was lucky enough to get to spend a good deal of time with César. I have low vision and so while I have an appreciation for birds as organisms, they have always frustrated me because I have such a hard time seeing them. César was always so incredibly patient and helpful when pointing out birds to me. One of the more magical memories I have of him regards hummingbirds. I have always known hummingbirds were around. People have tried to point them out to me, but I had never actually seen one. It was César who helped me see hummingbirds for the first time as they were feeding in a patch of jewelweed. To my eyes, they looked like flickering shadows, but I noticed they hovered at a very distinct angle. So while they didn't look like birds, I now know that a flickering shadow of a certain size and shape and at a certain angle denotes a hummingbird. After I learned this, I remember working amongst the jewelweed and cardinal flower at the arboretum where I volunteer and seeing hummingbirds all over!!! They had been there flying around me all along, but now I could see them.

-Megan Marchica

My interactions with César regarding birds were very special to me. I study birds in my own lab, and Wendy is doing a Master's degree on work that César helped her do in Hawaii, one of their favorite places to go. It so happened that the species we were working on in our lab also exists in Hawaii. My closest interaction with César regarding birds was when Dr. Jon Sperling took a sabbatical and I taught ornithology. And César asked if he could tag along. And he kept using that term throughout the semester— he was glad to “tag along”. But this was not at all an accurate description of his role in that class. If anything, I was the one tagging along in the field with him, learning from him. He knew when and where to find any bird we wanted to see. We would look at the checklist, which we set up together, and I'd say “we haven't seen a black scoter yet” and he'd say something like “in a week and a half, you should be able to go to [such and such] beach, and find them there”. And then we'd work it into the plan. And sure enough, we'd show up and there it was. He was like this consistently throughout the term. For another example, we'd be sitting in a spot and I would tell the class: "Listen to all the bird sounds going on around you— we've gone through all the species you're likely to hear right now. See how many species you can identify just by ear." Then we'd compare our lists— we'd have the lists of what the students identified, and then I'd have maybe two or three more, and then we'd have this longer list of what César heard. And in case anyone thought that he was exaggerating, he would very often be able to make good on the less common species by following the sounds he heard until we all saw it. We talk a lot about his birding ability, but he had this level of interest and love and understanding for all sorts of things in nature. Moths and other insects, herbaceous and woody plants, herps, and fish, for instance. I'll always remember César especially for his noble character and gentle spirit— but I'll never forget him as a supreme naturalist.

-David Lahti

Remembrances by Rose Chin-Hong:

Cesar (cesarcastillo) is Numero Uno(!) in most observed bird species for New York State (351) and New York City/Queens (275) in iNaturalist.org.

He would drive all over New York State from Staten Island to Watertown to capture magnificent pictures of that elusive bird. He was legend amongst the birders! and I must say, rather brag, to other birders every chance I get that Cesar is my friend.

Cesar also took up urban mothing in their apartment during the pandemic lockdown and he got quite good at it until Wendy and the kids were getting bitten by mosquitoes too! Talk about collateral damage! So he donated his UV bulb to me...and now, I'm hooked.

Here's a (rude) joke that I set up Cesar:

While we were trying to identify moths, I said some moths would eat woolen clothes and old people love to use mothballs; then I asked him if he ever smelled mothballs and he said "yes" and I asked, "how did you get their little legs apart?" Cesar actually spat out his water!

There are so many more stories of Cesar and Wendy and eventually family that I have been privileged to have been part of their lives. I told Cesar when he married Wendy, her mother and I are part of the package!

Cesar,

You and Wendy and family are the rock of support for me. I am so honored to have been your friend and family, and I thought it was so funny when you said "I'm sorry I'm your friend" (inside joke), which I will explain to Wendy and the kids again. But I will not let others persuade us not to be friends.

Now you are in Heaven as a supernaturalist, not just a naturalist!

A remembrance by Prof. Andrew Greller:

His death is a hard blow to science on Long Island. He co-authored a few papers with me on paleobotany and local flora. His knowledge of fossil leaves cannot be replaced. Our last joint publication was a checklist of the Queens County flora!

I can't believe that Cesar passed! I am so sorry for Wendy and their children.

I feel I have lost a friend, a son, and a colleague. He can never be replaced in my life. His death is a double tragedy for me, as I was planning research with him for the rest of my working life. How cruel of fate to take so young and productive a scientist away from us all.

I was close to Cesar and his family, over at least 20 years. He was a lab tech in Biology at QC when I noticed his interest in plants (He was growing Bat-flowers in the prep room!). I guided him to a MA degree in paleobotany. Thanks to Eric Lamont and the LIBS Newsletter, many of our joint researches were published, as well as the Queens County plant checklist. His knowledge of Cretaceous leaf architecture is irreplaceable.

His death is a triple blow: to me, to the QC Biology Dept, and to Science on LI. What a terrible loss!

I feel like I lost a son!

A remembrance by Prof. Peter Chabora:

Cesar Castillo , CLT, TA, and Colleague at QC

Cesar and I were housed in Colwin Hall, first floor, so from his arrival at QC we were in contact quite often - with Cesar being responsible for the Bio 11 labs, which were then offered in Colwin. In 2009 I wrote a letter on his behalf for reappointment with tenure and promotion. To that time, my interactions with Cesar had been as colleagues rather than as instructor-CLT course preparation relationship because he was assigned as a teaching adjunct for my Biology 107 labs (2008), a task that he repeated numerous times in Biology 106 labs until my retirement. He was a pleasure to have on that teaching staff, always prompt, always congenial and always helpful. He also happened to be a very knowledgeable and really fine instructor. Cesar assumed the CLT responsibility and took care of ordering teaching materials, preparations of the labs and field trip for the summer courses I taught in ecology and limnology (these courses were offered alternate summers). I could not have had a more cooperative, truly helpful, and efficient CLT. Cesar accompanied the class on our field trips, both local and all-day bus excursions. He was a most knowledgeable field person - something very helpful both to the students and me. He knew his natural history – he'd name all the birds, identified trees and weeds, showed familiarity with insects and other inverts (he and his family were very close to Dr. Dave Alsop and visited him often at his retirement home in North Carolina). In fact, Cesar and Wendy were hoping to purchase Dave's home when it would become available - until the market became too overheated. This is a photo taken by Cesar on August 12, 2016 at the driveway at Dave's place. It would be just four days later that Dave would suffer his ultimately fatal fall.



Cesar was kind, a fine colleague, a gentle person, and someone always willing to assist. Yes, it is an understatement that he will be missed. His loss weighs heavily.

Remembrances by Prof. Jon Sperling:

Most of us know that a 'keystone species' is...one whose presence in small numbers greatly enriches the biodiversity of its environment, and the many factors that attend that environment.

Cesar was a 'keystone person', one who greatly enriches the social environment he shares with others... not loud, not posturing, not directing.

The last lines of an Edwin Arlington Robinson poem "Flammonde" come to mind:

"We cannot know how much we learn
From those who never will return
Until a flash of unforeseen
Remembrance falls on what has been.
We've each a darkening hill to climb,
And this is why from time to time,
In Tilbury town we look beyond
Horizons for the man Flammonde."

He will be in our memories. Cesar Castillo was the 'real thing'.

.....

He was a wonderful colleague, my friend, and as I've told many people ...the best birder I ever met., a wingman without fail. Heartbroken sounds melodramatic, but I am. I will greatly miss him as will all those who knew him.

If there are angels with wings he will be out spotting them.

From Wendy:

To my beautiful husband. Yesterday the man that I loved passed. I'm left empty. My cheerleader, love of my life, the person that I literally would have done anything on the face of the planet for is gone. The amount of pain I feel is so overwhelming I just don't know how I will function. He was simple, so brilliant, clever and understood me. He didn't care if I wore make up, that I hated washing dishes. He just loved me. Recently he revisited his childhood love: legos and the kids loved building with him. Every week they would get a package. He would sit with them and they would just build. I'm so sorry César. I love you. There were so many things I still wanted to do with you.