



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

April 2006

The Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed as a service for active and concerned birders, those dedicated to the joys of birding and the protection of birds and their habitats. You can access an archive of past E-bulletins on [on the birding pages of the National Wildlife Refuge Association \(NWRA\) website](#) OR on [the birding webpages for Steiner Optics](#).

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Table of Contents:

- [RARITY FOCUS](#)
- [SEARCHING FOR ELVIS?](#)
- [PEREGRINE NIGHTTIME HUNTING IN NYC](#)
- [HOW ARE THOSE MOTTLED DUCKS?](#)
- [SCAUP POPULATIONS RAISE CONCERN](#)
- [IMBD](#)
- [MBCC MEETS AND SECURES REFUGE LANDS](#)
- [WLA AND STAMP EFFORTS](#)
- [CHECKING IN ON BRETON NWR](#)
- [HORICON UPDATE](#)
- [BCFC NUMBERS](#)
- [NEOTROP ACT MOVEMENT](#)
- [AVIAN FLU INFORMATION](#)
- [MORE BOBOLINKS](#)
- [ANOTHER JOINT VENTURE WEBSITE](#)
- [PALE MALE AND LOLA ARE BACK AND EXPECTING](#)

RARITY FOCUS

In this section we typically write about a rare bird that has attracted the attention of lots of birders during the previous month. The rarity for March is a bit of an exception, since to date it has not been seen by many observers. However, it's sufficiently interesting that we want to present what we know at the time of writing.

The rarity in question is a Piratic Flycatcher that was reported from Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park in

The rarity in question is a Piratic Flycatcher that was reported from Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park in Texas on 20 March. Since its initial discovery, the flycatcher has been playing hide-and-seek with a number of hopeful visiting birders.

Bentsen, much like the Laguna Atascosa, Santa Ana, and Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuges, is one of those habitat jewels located in the Rio Grande Valley that provides habitat for a number of plants and wildlife species that are more characteristic of Mexico than they are of the United States. These properties, along with varied county, city, and private landholdings collectively represent one of most important natural areas - and wildlife corridors - in the United States.

The Piratic Flycatcher was first seen on the west side of the old trailer loop at Bentsen, near the paved path that connects the pavilion/boat ramp area with the loop road. The stubby-billed little flycatcher was initially observed for less than a minute, while it called continuously. It then flew west over the trees toward the pavilion/boat ramp area where it continued calling for a while. Thereafter, the bird was heard most mornings through 25 March, and was also reported in the evening of that day. There have been a few other tantalizing reports, but they have not offered much satisfaction to visiting birders.

Searching birders are still compensated by dramatic hawk-flights overhead (mostly Broad-winged Hawks), Hook-billed Kite sightings, cooperative Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, reports of two pairs of Clay-colored Robins seemingly establishing territories, along with the usual Rio Grande avian specialties.

There are fewer than six Piratic Flycatcher records north of Mexico, all from scattered sites in Texas, New Mexico, and Florida. The species breeds from northeastern Mexico to northern Argentina, with the northern populations migrating south to southern Middle and northern South America during the northern winter. The southern population migrates north to Amazonia during the austral winter (our spring and summer). There is also a large and supposedly sedentary population in South America that undergoes movements that are still poorly understood.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

SEARCHING FOR ELVIS?

You can view some fairly new [web-pages](#), put out by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), designed to give advice for seekers of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas.

These pages include links to maps, report-forms, and observation protocol standards for Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, White River National Wildlife Refuge, Dagmar Wildlife Management Area, and other local sites. The information is an elaboration of details we previously reported on in these pages, most recently in the December 2005 E-bulletin ([here](#) or [here](#)).

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

PEREGRINE NIGHTTIME HUNTING IN NYC

Last month we reported on the Toronto, Ontario, City Council resolution to try and protect migratory birds from colliding with glass windows, as well as the partnership known as "Lights Out Toronto."

But there seems to be a flip-side to this issue. Although the lights associated with urban skyscrapers are believed to disorient migrating birds and result in innumerable bird-collisions each year, Peregrine Falcons are apparently able to take advantage of this situation.

Robert DeCandido and Deborah Allen report in the current WILSON JOURNAL OF ORNITHOLOGY on nocturnal hunting by Peregrine Falcons at the Empire State Building in New York City. During fall migration in 2004 Peregrine Falcons were observed making hunting attempts on 41 of 77 nights during which observations were made. . These hunting forays began an average of two hours after sunset with the falcons making 111 hunting efforts and capturing 37 birds (33% success).

The article stated that the tall buildings provided hunting perches at altitudes flown by at least some nocturnal migrants, and that disorientation caused by the lights sometimes resulted in migrating birds circling the building and possibly becoming even more vulnerable to predation by falcons.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

HOW ARE THOSE MOTTLED DUCKS?

The only non-migrating dabbling ducks in the continental United States are Mottled Ducks. These ducks live in coastal wetlands and marshes in the Southeast. Along the Gulf coast of Texas the species has been experiencing difficulties.

Coastal marshes in Louisiana extend 40-50 miles inland, and the Mottled Duck population seems to be doing well there, although any long-term impacts from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are currently unknown. Next door, however, in Texas, the desirable marsh extends less than 25 miles inland at its widest point. The Texas populations of Mottled Ducks have been steadily declining for nearly 20 years.

To 1996, biologists at McFadden and Archibald National Wildlife Refuges in Texas counted 22 pairs of Mottled

In 1986, biologists at McAden and Anahuac National Wildlife Refuges in Texas counted 23 pairs of Mottled Ducks per square mile. In 2005, that number was down to fewer than four pairs per square mile.

Moving inland, property previously used for rice production in southeast Texas was once fine Mottled Duck habitat. Today, much of that land has been taken over either by other (dry) agriculture, suburban development, or else is giving way to Chinese Tallow, an exotic tree originally brought to the United States for candle wax production.

In addition, saltwater in the marshes was once ameliorated by the many small fresh-water rivers running through the region. As these rivers were straightened over the years to "improve drainage," their fresh water drained rapidly without mixing with the tidal saltwater. Eventually the marshes became too salty for the ducks. In 2005 these problems were exacerbated by drought.

To assure that hunting will not magnify the problem, state officials in Texas are limiting the take to one "dusky duck" per day, covering Mottled, American Black and "Mexican" Ducks. Finally, deadly lead shot, although now banned nationwide in waterfowling, is still to be found at the bottom of ponds and in the gizzards of ducks.

For more details, see [REFUGE UPDATE \(Jan-Feb 2006\)](#), page 18.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

SCAUP POPULATIONS RAISE CONCERN

Another waterfowl issue pertains to the populations of Greater and Lesser Scaup. Both these species seem to be in serious trouble, declining from estimates of 5-to-7+ million birds in the 1970s to a record low of 3.39 million birds in 2005. The 2005 estimate is 46% below the goal of 6.3 million scaup set in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP).

In North America's western Boreal Forest, where 70% of the breeding-season scaup are counted during traditional waterfowl surveys, scaup have experienced the fastest rate of decline of all the waterfowl, about 94,000 birds per year between 1978 and 2005.

A workshop held in late January in North Dakota was aimed at collecting information and evaluating theories concerning population declines, along with recommending research and management techniques.

Among the factors considered as possible causes for declines in scaup populations was the changing character of the western Boreal Forest. These changes include rapid industrialization, oil-and-gas expansion, and the warming of northern regions.

Collection of data continues, which is critical to slowing, halting, or, hopefully, reversing declines in scaup populations.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

IMBD

The Boreal Forest stretching in North America from interior Alaska across Canada, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, forms one of the largest intact ecosystems remaining on earth. With billions of breeding birds nesting in the region, it is important to realize that the future of the Boreal Forest ecosystem will be determined over the next several years. There is a great opportunity ahead for large-scale conservation involving cooperative efforts between countries, corporations, and the public.

With that opportunity in mind, North America's Boreal Forest will be this year's theme for International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD), 13 May. (While the IMBD is 13 May, it may be celebrated at any time, depending on the local migratory bird schedule.) All around the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Central and South America - at zoos, schools, parks, refuges, and more - you will find events focusing on the Boreal Forest and the billions of migratory birds that breed there.

Boreal bird habitat is being destroyed - at the rate of half a million acres a year - to make facial tissues, toilet paper, paper towels and other disposable paper products. Bird enthusiasts can help address this issue, and make the Boreal Forest safe for birds, by becoming more informed on this issue, making smart shopping decisions, and participating in IMBD.

For more information see these two sites: <http://www.birdday.org/> and <http://www.borealbirds.org/events.html>.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

MBCC MEETS AND SECURES REFUGE LANDS

The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission meets three times a year. At its first meeting in 2006, on 8 March, the Commission approved the use of more than \$3 million to acquire 2,169 acres of wetlands and associated upland habitats for the National Wildlife Refuge System in Vermont, New Jersey, Louisiana, Texas, and California. Funding for these acquisitions comes primarily from the purchase of Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation (Duck) Stamp by hunters and other conservationists.

Conservation [Duck] Stamps by hunters and other conservationists.

The new National Wildlife Refuge System acquisitions, all previously approved by the respective states, include:

- California - Purchase of easements on of 316 acres in the North Central Valley Wildlife Management Area across 11 counties to protect, restore and maintain wetlands for waterfowl and other migratory bird populations.
- Texas - Acquisition of 1,802 acres to provide habitat for waterfowl and other waterbirds at the San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge.
- New Jersey - Acquisition of 31 acres at the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge for migratory bird resting habitat.
- New Jersey - Acquisition of 19.69 acres to protect wintering and nesting waterfowl habitat, especially American Black Ducks, at Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.
- Vermont - Acquisition of 10.1 acres for Missisquoi National Wildlife refuge to provide resting and feeding habitat for several waterfowl species as well as marsh birds and many species of songbirds.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

WLA AND STAMP EFFORTS

Last month, we mentioned the late February meeting to work on promotion of the Wetlands Loan Act (WLA) and the expansion of sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp ([here](#) or [here](#)).

Since then, there have been Migratory Bird Joint Venture resolutions, Partners in Flight decisions, and other discussions on the WLA and related Stamp growth. Indeed, the discussion on the Stamp - focusing on promotion and appreciation - has been particularly heartening.

If you want to join the Stamp Listserv side of on this particular dialogue, send a request and your e-mail address to [Debbie Harwood](#).

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

CHECKING IN ON BRETON NWR

We made reference to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on Breton National Wildlife Refuge in our December 2005 E-bulletin ([here](#) or [here](#)).

Breton NWR is the second-oldest refuge in the Refuge System, having been established by decree by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904. All of the federally owned Chandeleur Islands, off the coast of Louisiana, are part of this NWR, and all, except for North Breton Island, are also part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. (North Breton Island was excluded from the Wilderness System because of an oil facility, owned by Kerr-McGee and constructed there over 100 years ago.)

The refuge is now fast-disappearing. In November of last year, the head of the USFWS, Dale Hall, in testimony to the Senate reported that "Southeastern Louisiana, and especially Breton National Wildlife Refuge, is globally important for colonial nesting birds. Up to 15 percent of the world's Brown Pelicans and up to 30 percent of the world's Sandwich Terns nest in this area. Breton, which is part of the Chandeleur Islands and celebrated its centennial last year, lost 50 to 70 percent of its land mass due the effects of Hurricane Katrina."

This is particularly dramatic since the refuge previously had the largest tern colony in the U.S., at one time ranging upward of 90,000 terns (mostly Sandwich and Royal) in the mid-1990s. By 2005 the colony had declined to about 25,000, even before Katrina.

More than 12,000 Brown Pelicans were found in the island chain as recently as 2002, but by the middle of 2005 numbers were reduced by half. Other nesting birds of interest in the islands include Reddish Egret, American Oystercatcher, and Snowy Plover. The islands are also an important location for wintering Piping Plovers and serve as a stopover site for songbirds in spring - at least where they are vegetated. It is no accident that the islands have been designated as a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA).

What are the current nesting implications for 2006? While it is still too early to tell, the loss of habitat after Hurricane Katrina certainly isn't going to help.

The island refuge has been mentioned in numerous magazine and newspaper reports and TV summaries on the environmental consequences of Hurricane Katrina. Most reports provided stark "before" and "after" shots of sample islands. [See example](#).

Of course, the barrier islands that make up Breton NWR are dynamic - their size and shape regularly being altered by storms and tide - but the acceleration of habitat loss has been particularly visible recently, particularly following Hurricane Katrina. President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Evan Hirsche, told the House Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife, and Oceans in mid-March that "the acceleration of habitat loss has been dramatic over the past few decades, with Katrina dealing a near fatal blow. We must act quickly if we are to salvage this critical bird refuge."

Dale Hall, head of the USFWS, told the same House Subcommittee that the Service wanted \$2 million for beach re-nourishment at Breton NWR available through emergency supplemental Hurricane funding. For some past

efforts to protect and restore Breton NWR, see [this page](#).

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

HORICON UPDATE

Most conservation-oriented people are initially supportive when it comes to wind power. But the consensus quickly breaks down when the debate shifts to putting such wind-installation in "the wrong places." The proposed location near Horicon Marsh (covering Horicon National Wildlife Refuge and the Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Management Area in Wisconsin) is one place where efforts towards push-back have been obvious.

Supporters celebrate the benefits of green energy through wind-power; while critics claim that there is not enough known about the impact of wind-turbines on birds to justify placing the units near the marsh.

The most recent developments in Wisconsin have swung back and forth.

On the one hand, a case on 23 March before the Dodge County Circuit Court affirmed the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin's approval for construction by Forward Wind Energy of the wind installation units as close as two miles from Horicon Marsh. Opponents, mostly around the Horicon Marsh System Advocates, were dissatisfied that a three-year in-depth study of the impact of the turbines on birds was rejected.

On the other hand, and from a completely different quarter, there were indications that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) would not approve the project due to concerns about how the wind turbines might affect the FAA radar nearby. Apparently, the Air Force uses the radar for surveillance, and the turbines' blades can register as "false targets."

FAA officials are awaiting the results of a Department of Defense study, and there may be some decisions reached by June.

Stand by for further developments near Horicon Marsh, and look for our report on the Cape Wind Energy project in Nantucket Sound, Massachusetts, in next month's E-bulletin.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

BCFC NUMBERS

A coalition of conservation organizations that began in 2003 in Washington DC, assembled around what is called the Bird Conservation Funding Coalition (BCFC), have agreed on seven top funding priorities focused on bird conservation (in millions = m) for the FY 07 Federal budget:

1	Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act Grants Program	\$5 m
2	Migratory Bird Joint Ventures	\$15.1 m
3	Science Support - USFWS Migratory Bird Management	\$28.35 m
4	North American Wetlands Conservation Act	\$75 m
5	State Wildlife Grants	\$85 m
6	International Programs USFWS Wildlife Without Borders	\$4.8 m
7	International Programs USDA Forest Service	\$8.0 m

Obviously there are many other vital appropriation possibilities for bird conservation, from the National Wildlife Refuge System budget, to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, to a number of specific and valuable USGS bird-oriented tasks. Still, these seven core priorities were agreed upon as the most immediate to share with fellow bird-conservationists - and, most importantly, with decision-makers in Washington DC.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

NEOTROP ACT MOVEMENT

Since the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act is one of the seven priorities of the BCFC, it's encouraging to know that the Act may have just received a new lease on life.

The House Resources Committee on 29 March unanimously passed the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act (HR 518). The original Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 2000 needs reauthorization, and this recent move is an essential step forward in the continuation of a vehicle that provides the only significant federal funding source for Neotropical migratory birds. (The companion bill in the Senate is S.1410.)

The new bills would increase funding from the previous top level of \$5 million by \$1 million each year, to reach a maximum of \$8 million by 2010. Further improvements include a reduction in the ratio of matching money that recipients must raise from 3-to-1 down to 1-to-1, making the funds far more accessible. The new bills also make Canadian-based projects eligible for funding.

It is important to understand three additional things: movement through the House Resources Committee does not guarantee final passage, bird conservationists had originally hoped to have the reauthorization go as high

as \$15 million, and although a final bill might be "authorized" at the now-proposed \$8 million by 2010, future Congresses would still have to appropriate that amount.

Stay tuned for more news.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

AVIAN FLU INFORMATION

It seems like everyone is still talking about the potential dangers of the spread of Avian Flu. For almost daily updates, we recommend [this site](#), with information from the National Wildlife Health Center/USGS.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

MORE BOBOLINKS

Last month we reported the discovery of large flocks of wintering Bobolinks in Bolivia. Rosalind Renfrew from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) and a team of researchers at work in eastern Bolivia discovered the largest winter concentrations of Bobolinks ever. Their roost consisted of about 60,000 birds; they have since found a second roost within a mile of the first, and at last word the count for the two roosts added up to over 110,000 birds.

Such discoveries may help to answer why there have been disturbing population declines for Bobolinks, especially since potential threats on the Neotropical wintering grounds have yet to be investigated. These Bobolink roosts occur in tall moist grasses or in inundated rice fields, illustrating once again the importance of rice-habitat research and future management potential.

Our original report from March can be found [here](#) or [here](#)

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

ANOTHER JOINT VENTURE WEBSITE

It seems like each month another Migratory Bird Joint Venture unveils a new website. This month's entry is from the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture.

Geographically small, but biologically significant, the area covered by the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture is also socially significant, existing close to urban and suburban centers. Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, industrial properties, and even active agriculture and cattle grazing, are all found in the area.

For people who are interested in issues surrounding San Francisco Bay and who are curious about the organizations working on restoration efforts, [this website](#) seems to be an excellent way to keep up to date on the issues.

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

PALE MALE AND LOLA ARE BACK AND EXPECTING

Surely, you remember back in late 2004 when Pale Male and Lola, the two Red-tailed Hawks in New York City, made headlines after the human residents of a Fifth Avenue co-op had the hawks' nest removed from their building.

Last year, the hawks did not have any offspring, but Pale Male hasn't had much trouble in the past. He's fathered about two dozen young from four different females since 1993.

Today, Lola and Pale Male are sitting on eggs, and their chicks should be hatched this month, at which point the parents will take on lengthy housekeeping and chick-rearing duties before adoring fans viewing from the far end of the Sailboat Pond in Central Park.

To keep abreast of ongoing and blessed events, we recommend [this site](#).

[\(return to table of contents\)](#)

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