



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

April 2007

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed through the generous support of Steiner Binoculars as a service to 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 Binoculars](#).

Table of Contents:

- [RARITY FOCUS](#)
- [BARCODE SPLITS AND LUMPS](#)
- [SONORAN PYGMY-OWLS DROP](#)
- [NATURE OF LEARNING GRANTS](#)
- [NEW NORTH AMERICAN SHOREBIRD NUMBERS](#)
- [ARMED FORCES "TAKE" RULE FINALIZED](#)
- [BOOK REVIEW: A GLOBAL LOOK AT WATERBIRDS](#)
- [BOREAL SONGBIRD NETWORK EXPANDS](#)
- [BIRD STAMP SUPPORT: EAGLE OPTICS STEPS UP](#)
- [PALE MALE AND LOLA UPDATE](#)

RARITY FOCUS

On the morning of 8 March, Carl Goodrich found a strange bird at Ft. Zachary Taylor Historic State Park at the end of Key West, Florida. Goodrich saw the bird briefly, just after the park opened, and he wondered what it was. (A tityra? A becard? A kingbird?) Just after 9am he ran into Ron Hamburger, who said he'd just seen this really weird bird that he couldn't figure out. Together, the two searched the park until they both saw the bird fly up onto a high snag and then vocalize. Carl took a number of digital photos of the bird against the sky, and then they began to call other birders. At that point, Carl and Ron were convinced they had found a Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*), a first verifiable record for the U.S.

The rest, as they say, is history - at least birding history. The park soon began to be visited by many birders (at least 500 of them from over three dozen states, multiple Canadian provinces, and several foreign countries) for weeks. The bird remained through the morning of 27 March, although it did disappear for a few days in the interim.

Curiously, Loggerhead Kingbird, a species endemic to the West Indies, had been reported at least six times previously in the U.S., all since the early 1970s. Despite the fact that at least three of the previous reports were accompanied by photographs, a complete review of all records in 2000 determined that all previous reports were either misidentifications or unverifiable in some other way. The species was subsequently removed from all formal lists of birds recorded from North America north of Mexico. This explains why Loggerhead Kingbird can actually be found pictured in the older National Geographic guides (p. 300-301), but not in the most recent edition.

Based upon historic accounts summarized by Smith et al. (2000; NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS 54: 235-240), the Key West Loggerhead Kingbird most likely originated from mainland Cuba, which makes geographic sense in terms of proximity. Key West is only 90 miles from Cuba.

The crowds that gathered at Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park in Key West were rewarded with fine looks at the kingbird, and both the local Key West birding community and the park staff are to be congratulated and thanked for being such gracious hosts to both the visiting bird and the visiting birders.

You can view one of the original 8 March images taken by Carl Goodrich at:

<http://listserv.admin.usf.edu/listserv/wa.exe?A2=ind0703&L=brdbrain&O=D&F=P&P=6407>

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

BARCODE SPLITS AND LUMPS

It was announced in February that genetic testing among North American birds may have revealed as many as 15 potential new species. Revealing the Canadian-led results were scientists from the University of Guelph (the Biodiversity Institute of Ontario) and Rockefeller University, along with colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and the Royal Ontario Museum. The researchers discovered the 15 potential new species among 643 types of birds studied between Arctic Canada and Florida.

No less surprising, the study revealed that a number of birds currently classified as separate species are so genetically similar that they could actually represent varieties of the same species. The study revealed 14 pairs of birds with separate identities that were almost genetic "twins," a trio of birds representing a DNA "triplet," and eight gull taxa that were practically identical. The study determined that many of these species are actually indistinguishable to the human eye and ear.

Look-alike taxa representing 15 potential "splits" include Northern Fulmar, Solitary Sandpiper, Western Screech-Owl, Warbling Vireo, Mexican Jay, Western Scrub-Jay, Common Raven, Mountain Chickadee, Bushtit, Winter Wren, Marsh Wren, Bewick's Wren, Hermit Thrush, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Eastern Meadowlark.

The "lumps" of "virtually identical" taxa potentially include: Snow Goose and Ross's Goose; Black, Mallard and Mottled Duck; Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal; King and Common Eider; Western and Clark's Grebe; Laughing and Franklin's Gull; California, Herring, Thayer's, Iceland, Lesser Black-backed, Western, Glaucous-winged and Glaucous Gull; Red-naped and Red-breasted Sapsucker; Black-billed and Yellow-billed Magpie; American and Northwestern Crow; Townsend's and Hermit Warbler; Golden-crowned and White-crowned Sparrow; Dark-eyed and Yellow-eyed Junco; Snow and McKay's Bunting; Great-tailed and Boat-tailed Grackle; and Common and Hoary Redpoll.

DNA barcode sequences are very short, and they can apparently be obtained relatively quickly and inexpensively in the laboratory. These tests reveal what amounts to a genetic "barcode" for each bird that is similar to the black-and-white parallel lines found on food packages at supermarkets. Paul D.N. Hebert from the University of Guelph, maintains that this genetic process may prove to be a "master key for identifying species, one whose power will rise with increased taxon coverage and with faster, cheaper sequencing."

Current controversy surrounding the DNA bar-coding system derives not so much from the method itself, but from assertions that the process would supercede existing and long-standing taxonomic theories. The technique does suggest that DNA bar-coding in the future should stand alongside other traditional taxonomic tools to combine morphological, behavioral, and genetic investigations in order to more accurately determine exactly what constitutes a species. DNA bar coding will provide an additional tool for more traditional and integrative taxonomy.

Work among the researchers is continuing in an attempt to collect DNA information on the remaining 47 North American bird species, as well as several more species that are considered extinct. The goal is to finish an all-bird DNA inventory by 2011.

Curiously, next month will mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of Linnaeus (i.e., Carl von Linné), the Swedish naturalist who established the conventions for naming living organisms as well as the system of scientific classification that, with a few modifications, is still in use today. How appropriate that a 21st-century DNA bar-coding approach for birds is being discussed at this very time!

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

SONORAN PYGMY-OWLS DROP

In late February, a University of Arizona study showed that the population of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls in northern Mexico (Sonora) has declined by an estimated 26 percent over the last seven years.

This finding bolstered the arguments of environmentalists for greater protection for the owl in nearby Arizona.

The little owls are continuing to decline, despite some years with rebounds in their population. Annual surveys

...the next birds are continuing to decline, despite being 70% more abundant in their population than surveys in northern Sonora show that the bird's numbers increased in 2005 and were similar in 2006, even though the overall the trend appears to be negative.

"Should this apparent decline continue, recovery strategies that rely on pygmy-owls from northern Sonora and persistence of pygmy-owls in the Sonoran Desert could be jeopardized," the report said.

Recent data was collected from more than 100 nest sites in Sonora, all within about 45 miles of the Arizona border. A total of 255 males were detected at sites in Mexico over seven years, including 55 birds in 2000 and 33 last year, which could reflect a 40 percent decline. The overall decline was estimated at about 26 percent, based on this recent sampling.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) put the owl on the endangered species list in 1997 because of population declines in Arizona. But the agency withdrew it from the list last year after determining it was not a distinct subspecies and therefore not worthy of special protection. Developers hailed the decision, but environmental organizations fought it, eventually losing their appeal in a federal court challenge.

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls have been found recently in Arizona at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, and on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation near Tucson.

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

NATURE OF LEARNING GRANTS

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), in cooperation with the USFWS (National Wildlife Refuge System and the National Conservation Training Center) and National Wildlife Refuge Association, will be soliciting applications from organizations interested in initiating The Nature of Learning program, the community-based environmental education initiative.

Nature of Learning seeks to:

- * Use National Wildlife Refuges as outdoor classrooms to promote a greater understanding of local conservation issues.
- * Encourage an interdisciplinary approach to learning that seeks to enhance student academic achievement.
- * Utilize field experiences and student-led stewardship projects to connect classroom lessons to real world issues.
- * Involve partnerships among local schools, community groups, natural resource professionals and local businesses.

Start-up grants of up to \$10,000 will be awarded on a competitive basis to support initial expenses associated with new programs. Schools or non-profit organizations, including "Friends" groups, Cooperative and Interpretive Associations, Bird Observatories, local Audubon groups, etc., are all eligible to apply for funding. Programs must involve a partnership with a local school (or schools), community group (e.g., Refuge Friends Group), and National Wildlife Refuge.

The Nature of Learning supports one of the six major Fish and Wildlife Service's priorities: "connecting people with nature ensuring the future of conservation."

To learn more about the qualifying projects, applications, and details of Nature of Learning program, visit:

http://www.nfwf.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Browse_All_Programs&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=4615

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

NEW NORTH AMERICAN SHOREBIRD NUMBERS

An article found in the current BULLETIN of the International Wader Study Group (IWSG) revisited some fascinating population estimates for 52 shorebird species in North America. The piece, prepared by Guy Morrison of the Canadian Wildlife Service and seven co-authors, updates previous population estimates (made in 2001 and 2002). Twenty-four species have their estimated populations at higher numbers than was previously thought, while 15 are thought to have lower populations.

Species thought to have higher population numbers include Mountain Plover, American Oystercatcher, Long-billed Curlew, White-rumped Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Red Phalarope.

Among the species with lower estimates are Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, and American Woodcock.

These numbers do not necessarily mean that populations themselves have risen or dropped since 2001 and 2002, although that maybe the case, but more likely that the current population numbers simply represent revised estimates, sometimes due to better survey data, more detailed information, and new sources of data.

For a look at the IWSG and its work, see:

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<http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/wsq/>

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

ARMED FORCES "TAKE" RULE FINALIZED

At the end of February, the USFWS finalized a rule allowing the Armed Forces to "take" migratory birds in the course of military readiness activities, as directed by the 2003 National Defense Authorization Act. The Departments of the Interior and Defense worked closely together on this rule to balance the proper management of migratory birds while giving the military the ability to conduct what is considered "critical training for our men and women in uniform."

In mid-2004, the USFWS published a proposed rule for a 60-day public comment period. After analyzing comments received, the Service extended the rule's applicability to the "take" of all migratory birds, rather than just migratory bird "species of concern" as identified in the proposed rule. Under this change, the Armed Forces must confer and cooperate with the Service to develop and implement appropriate conservation measures when the Armed Forces determine that a proposed military readiness activity may result in a "significant adverse effect on a population of migratory bird species."

Note that the term "population" is used here, and not individual birds.

The finalized measure directs the Armed Forces to assess the effects of military readiness activities on migratory birds, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. It also requires the Armed Forces to take appropriate conservation measures if a proposed action may have a significant adverse effect on a migratory bird population. The rule also provides that monitoring data pertaining to migratory bird populations must be retained by the Armed Forces for five years.

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

BOOK REVIEW: A GLOBAL LOOK AT WATERBIRDS

In early March, the Dutch and UK Environment Ministers published WATERBIRDS AROUND THE WORLD. This publication, actually the proceedings of a landmark 2004 conference held in Edinburgh, is a unique resource for worldwide wetland and waterbird conservation.

This is a compilation that:

- * contains contributions from 453 authors from 59 countries;
- * comprises 264 papers and reviews relating to 614 waterbird species from 162 countries;
- * and presents new data on 170 Globally and Near Threatened species.

Habitat loss is driving the decline for many waterbird species. There are widespread drops in the size of many waterbird populations in most regions of the world caused principally by loss and degradation of important wetland habitats. This publication provides a significant overview on the status of the world's waterbirds at the start of the current millennium.

Fortunately, all the contents of the publication can be downloaded for free at:
<http://www.jncc.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=3891>

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

BOREAL SONGBIRD NETWORK EXPANDS

A transnational coalition focusing attention on the conservation of the birds of the vast North American Boreal forest has expanded its membership. The Boreal Songbird Network, established in 2002 and including American Bird Conservancy, National Audubon, Boreal Songbird Initiative, Ducks Unlimited, Defenders of Wildlife, Natural Resources Defense Council, and National Wildlife Federation, has been working to raise awareness of the importance of the boreal forest for birds, and to specifically assist in efforts to increase protections for the Canadian Boreal.

The most recent members of the Boreal Songbird Network are Bird Studies Canada, Nature Canada, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Ontario Nature, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, and Bird Life International. All members of this network are dedicated to educating and motivating the public to preserve the Boreal forest. Collectively, these organizations have pledged support for one of the most ambitious and forward-thinking conservation plans - the Boreal Forest Conservation Framework. A primary goal of the coalition is to work toward protecting half of Canada's Boreal eco-region. You can find more details at:

<http://www.borealbirds.org/network.html>

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

BIRD STAMP SUPPORT: EAGLE OPTICS STEPS UP

In January, we mentioned the efforts of the Georgia Ornithological Society to promote the Migratory Bird

Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly called the "Duck Stamp":

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC07.html#TOC07>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan07.html>

Late last month, Eagle Optics, a mail-order optics giant for binoculars and spotting scopes, took this effort one step further. Eagle Optics has introduced a stamp-holder and accompanying information on the Stamp that will soon be distributed with all of their optics sales. Through this endeavor, birders will be able to readily display a Stamp on their binocular-straps or on other equipment. You can see a sample of their innovative efforts here: http://www.eagleoptics.com/pdf/duckstamp_pocket_flyer2.pdf

And you can find more details here:

<http://www.eagleoptics.com/index.asp?pid=4943>

It is hoped that other businesses and conservation organizations will follow the G.O.S. and Eagle Optics lead, especially since 98 percent of Stamp proceeds go directly to secure National Wildlife Refuge System wetlands and grassland habitat.

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

PALE MALE AND LOLA UPDATE

And for those readers who might be wondering: Pale Male and Lola, the most famous Red-tailed Hawks-ever, are back housekeeping a 927 Fifth Avenue in New York City.

For some spectacular recent photos, be sure to visit Lincoln Karim's web site:

<http://www.palemale.com/>

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

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If you have friends or co-workers who want to get onto the monthly E-bulletin mailing list, have them contact either:

- Wayne R. Peterson, Director, Massachusetts Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program, Mass Audubon, 718/534-2046, wpetersen@massaudubon.org OR
- Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, paul.baicich@verizon.net

If you DON'T wish to receive these E-bulletins, contact either of us, and we will take you off our mailing list IMMEDIATELY.