



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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April 2009

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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](#)
- [WHOOPIING CRANES LEAVING TEXAS IN REDUCED NUMBERS](#)
- [NIGHTJAR QUESTIONS, NIGHTJAR SURVEY](#)
- [STARTING TO REVERSE THE ESA CHANGE](#)
- [NEW "BIRDS OF CONSERVATION CONCERN" AVAILABLE](#)
- [U.S. STATE OF THE BIRDS REPORT RELEASED](#)
- [IBA NEWS: LAND BILL BOUNCES AROUND CONGRESS BEFORE PASSAGE](#)
- [BIRD PHENOLOGY REVIVAL](#)
- [TIP OF THE MONTH: TIME NOT TO PLAN A LAWN](#)
- [BOOK NOTES: COLLOSSAL FRAUD](#)
- [NEARLY \\$12 MILLION FROM STAMPS FOR REFUGE AQUISITION](#)
- [BIRD EDUCATION GATHERING PRESENTATIONS](#)

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### RARITY FOCUS

There were not many accessible or lingering rarities for the month of March. There were, however, several one- or two-day wonders including a Baikal Teal in Washington State, a Rufous-backed Robin in Arizona, a Garganey in Louisiana, and a Western Spindalis in Florida. One bird that did stay for a few days and entertained a lucky group of birders during its stay was a Common Crane in Nebraska.

March, as many readers probably know, is the time for the great crane phenomenon along the Platte River in Nebraska. Hundreds of thousands of Sandhill Cranes, along with thousands of bird watchers, annually assemble between Grand Island and Kearney, Nebraska, to witness the spectacular early spring crane migration. This year, about 180 miles westward and upriver from Nebraska's "crane central," a Common Crane appeared on 18 March.

Gail Bleidt first observed the Common Crane in a field on the 45-acre Crane Valley Ranch that she and her husband, Pete, own near the North Platte River just outside of Lewellen, Nebraska. The Bleidts often have over a thousand Sandhill Cranes using their lower fields in spring. The Common Crane was present for several hours on 18 March, and was re-found on the mornings of 20 and 21 March. Interestingly, some Colorado birders actually spotted a Common Crane in the same area two years ago.

The Common Crane is an Old World species, a vagrant to Canada and the United States. In North America the species is usually found with migrating Sandhill Cranes. (See page 152 of the latest National Geographic Guide for more details.) There have been approximately 17 previous reports of this species in North America (some

almost certainly representing multiple sightings of the same individual), most having occurred in September-October or March-April. It is assumed that some of these birds have become "attached" to Sandhill Crane groups originating in Siberia and following them during their migrations. There are more sightings of this species in the lower-48 states in Nebraska than in any other state.

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

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### **WHOOPING CRANES LEAVING TEXAS IN REDUCED NUMBERS**

As March ended, we learned at the last hour about the drop in numbers of Endangered wintering Whooping Cranes on the Texas Coast. Apparently, 2008-2009 was the worst winter on record for these regal birds. Total winter mortality in the vicinity of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, the primary wintering area for this species, is estimated at six adults and 15 chicks, a loss of almost 8 percent of the wild flock – a flock that contained a record 270 birds in the fall.

The remaining cranes are now on their return northward journey to Wood Buffalo National Park on the border of northern Alberta and the southern Northwest Territories of Canada where they nest.

We hope to have more details in May.

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

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### **NIGHTJAR QUESTIONS, NIGHTJAR SURVEY**

Is it the decline of juicy insects? Is it the loss of nesting habitat? Is it the spread of fire-ants in some locations? For whatever the reason, nightjars – or goatsuckers – seem to be in a steep decline in North America.

The U.S. Nightjar Survey Network was initiated in the southeast U.S. in 2007 and then expanded in 2008. The survey program utilizes standardized counts conducted along census routes at night. Observers count all

nightjars seen or heard for a six-minute period at each of 10 stops along a designated route. The surveys, which are run between 31 May and 15 July, depending on location hardly take more than an hour to complete, and each survey only needs to be conducted once a year.

More details can be obtained from the Center for Conservation Biology located at the College of William & Mary in Virginia:

<http://www.ccb-wm.org/nightjars.htm>

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

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### **STARTING TO REVERSE THE ESA CHANGE**

In January we reported on the changes to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) brought about by the departing Bush Administration, specifically concerning what are called Section 7 consultations. The Bush Administration ESA rule allowed "action agencies" to determine when they needed to consult with experts in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and/or the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) regarding the potential impact of their proposed actions or decisions on endangered species. See:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC09.html#TOC04>

Currently, however, the Obama Administration is requesting that the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce review the Bush Administration regulation (issued on 16 December 2008) to determine if new rulemaking procedures will promote the purposes of the ESA. Until such a review is completed, the heads of all agencies have been asked "to exercise their discretion, under the new regulation, to follow the prior longstanding consultation and concurrence practices involving the FWS and NMFS."

In other words, all relevant agencies are being asked to behave as if the recent Bush Administration consultation rule does not exist. In the meantime, the door is open to begin the long process to alter this rule.

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

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### **NEW "BIRDS OF CONSERVATION CONCERN" AVAILABLE**

In March, the USFWS Division of Migratory Bird Management announced the availability of its publication, "Birds of Conservation Concern 2008."

This 91-page publication identifies species, subspecies, and populations of migratory and non-migratory birds which are most in need of additional conservation actions.

This list was created because Congress, when it enacted 1988 amendments to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, directed the USFWS to: "identify species, subspecies, and populations of all migratory nongame birds that, without additional conservation actions, are likely to become candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973"

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The first list was published in 1995 and the next in 2002.

This most recent and highly useful document can be viewed and downloaded at:  
<http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/reports/BCC2008/BCC2008m.pdf>

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

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## **U.S. STATE OF THE BIRDS REPORT RELEASED**

Related to the "Birds of Conservation Concern 2008" was the release in mid-March of a nearly simultaneous report entitled, "U.S. State of the Birds."

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar released this first-ever comprehensive national report on bird populations in the U.S., showing that nearly a third of the nation's 800 bird species are either endangered or threatened, or else are in significant decline due to habitat loss, invasive species, and a variety of other threats. The "U.S. State of the Birds" report synthesizes data gathered by thousands of citizen scientists and professional biologists from three long-running national bird censuses.

Salazar said, "From shorebirds in New England to warblers in Michigan to songbirds in Hawaii, we are seeing disturbing downward population trends that should set off environmental alarm bells." There are also signs of hope in this report, highlighting examples where habitat restoration and conservation efforts have reversed previous declines.

The report can be accessed here:

<http://www.stateofthebirds.org>

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

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## **IBA NEWS: LAND BILL BOUNCES AROUND CONGRESS BEFORE PASSAGE**

Two months ago, we reported on the Senate passage of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act. This Act contained nearly 160 proposals, and it set aside more than 2 million acres as protected Wilderness in nine states. It also included deepened and enhanced protection for a number of Important Bird Areas (IBAs). You can read our report here:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/febSBC09.html#TOC07>

After passage by the Senate in January, the bill failed in the House in a closely contested vote. Consequently supporters in the Senate had to reintroduce an adjusted bill in an effort to expedite a successful House passage. This was successfully accomplished in late March, after both houses had essentially considered the package twice.

President Obama signed the bill on 30 March.

Alongside an impressive roster of land protections, some of which actually strengthen existing IBAs, there was a disappointing and controversial provision that remained in the package, specifically one that would allow the state of Alaska to build an airport access road through a wilderness section of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. Izembek NWR is an IBA and a RAMSAR site of global significance located on the Alaska Peninsula. Especially prominent is the number of Emperor Geese and "Pacific Black" Brant that use the Izembek NWR as a staging area each fall before continuing their southward migration. The Secretary of the Interior still has the power to veto the road if he feels it would cause excessive environmental damage.

On the whole, the lands package was lauded by environmentalists, land preservationists, and traditional conservationists.

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs, and those across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:

<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/>

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

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## **BIRD PHENOLOGY REVIVAL**

The North American Bird Phenology Program contains a unique and neglected collection of six million Migration Observer Cards that illuminate the migration patterns and population status of birds throughout North America. These handwritten cards contain much of what was known about bird status in this country from the early 1880s to WWII. Some cards were collected as recently as the early 1970s. The bulk of the cards represent the efforts of a network of observers who recorded migration arrival dates in the spring and fall. In its heyday the program involved as many as 3,000 participants.

This project revival is intended to connect past patterns with current trends, thus providing valuable comparisons over a long span of time. For more details, see:

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bpp/>

and here:

<http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=2164>

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

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#### **TIP OF THE MONTH: TIME NOT TO PLAN A LAWN**

Spring is in the air – time for more outdoor activities, including more time birding. It's wonderful!

It's also time for backyard and gardening opportunities. As most bird enthusiasts know, backyard stewardship means creating places for birds and other wildlife to feed, hide, nest, and find water. Removing invasive plants and planting native vegetation in the yard is especially vital.

And so is removing the lawn. Cookie-cutter-styled yards with manicured lawns of bluegrass and fescue don't provide much in the way of useful bird habitat.

So here's our tip of the month: Now is the best time to reduce your lawn to a minimum size, eliminate the use of chemicals, and even save some money! Plan to use that extra lawn space for planting a variety of species and types of plants, flowers, vines, shrubs, and bushes that are attractive to birds. Swap a monoculture of grass with a diversity of bird-attracting plant species. Minimize lawn size; maximize plant diversity.

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

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#### **BOOK NOTES: COLLOSSAL FRAUD**

Richard Meinertzhagen (1878-1967) had an exciting life in the British Army, in diplomacy, in exploration, and in ornithology. Apparently, however, his engagement in these activities and events were not exciting enough. Much of what he alleged did was simply made up! Because so much of Meinertzhagen's public life was fanciful fiction, Brian Garfield, author of *THE MEINERTZHAGEN MYSTERY: THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF A COLLOSSAL FRAUD* (2007 Potomac Books) had his hands full separating the real from fake. Garfield – fortunately, both a historian and a mystery author – does a good job of separating fact from fiction in this finely-documented work.

The well-connected Meinertzhagen apparently misrepresented himself in myriad ways, ways that have found themselves into legitimate histories and narratives of battles, exploration, secret and public diplomacy, and much more. Among the "more" are frauds, expanded boasts, and claims that in retrospect clutter ornithological history. From misrepresented bird events that were described to ornithologically-connected family and friends, to stolen, mislabeled, and recycled bird specimens that today litter the museum landscape, Meinertzhagen's crimes against science are astounding. For example, his donation of 20,000+ bird specimens to the British Museum has been estimated to be nearly one fifth fraudulent – a fact that obviously taints the legitimacy of his entire collection. Meinertzhagen's intensive field work in, for example, East Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian sub-continent could have been truly significant had it not been grossly tainted by specimen thefts, bold re-submissions, and other misrepresentations.

This is a fascinating story about a colossal fraud, though ultimately a sad book to read.

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

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#### **NEARLY \$12 MILLION FROM STAMPS FOR REFUGE ACQUISITION**

In early March, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission approved the purchase of wetland and grassland habitat that will be added to seven units of the National Wildlife Refuge System to secure breeding, resting and feeding habitat. These acquisitions are funded mostly with proceeds from sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, otherwise known as the Duck Stamps. The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission oversees the use of Stamp funds for the purchase and lease of these wetland and grassland habitats for the Refuge System.

The commission includes Senators Thad Cochran of Mississippi and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, Representative John Dingell of Michigan and Rob Wittman of Virginia, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson.

These recent Refuge System acquisitions include:

- Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Camden, Gates and Pasquotank Counties, North Carolina - acquisition of 51 acres.
- San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge, Brazoria and Matagorda Counties, Texas - acquisition of 1,454 acres.
- Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge, Pondicherry Divisions, Coos County, New Hampshire - acquisition of 80 acres.
- Grand Cote National Wildlife Refuge, Avoyelles and Iberia Parishes, Louisiana - acquisition of 265 acres.

- Grand Cote National Wildlife Refuge, Avoyelles and Rapides Parishes, Louisiana - acquisition of 265 acres.
- Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge, Wapato Lake Unit, Washington and Yamhill Counties, Oregon - acquisition of 225 acres.
- North Central Valley Wildlife Management Area, Colusa County, California - acquisition of 388 acres.
- Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, Merced County, California - a permanent easement of 1,077 acres.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the 1934 amendment to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act that created what we know today as the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp.

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

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## **BIRD EDUCATION GATHERING PRESENTATIONS**

The Bird Education Network (BEN) website now includes presentations made by many of the speakers from plenary and concurrent sessions at the Second National Gathering for bird educators that took place in late February at Jekyll Island, Georgia.

The presentations can now be viewed and downloaded - along with other materials from this meeting from this page:

<http://www.birdeducation.org/jekyllislandpresentations.htm>

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

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- Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, [paul.baicich@verizon.net](mailto:paul.baicich@verizon.net)

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