



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

April 2011

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed 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 the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA):
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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RARITY FOCUS

On the afternoon of 7 March, Chris Takacs and Rob Fanning located a Pink-footed Goose on Schlegel Lake in Bergen County, New Jersey. The bird was initially discovered by a local birder who wished to remain anonymous. To view a couple photos taken by Chris Takacs, see here:
www.flickr.com/photos/96567639@N00/5507284629/

Pink-footed Geese are very rare anywhere in North America. The species normally breeds in Greenland, Iceland, and Svalbard and traditionally spend the winter in the British Isles and northwestern Europe. Pink-footed Geese have been reported over two dozen times in eastern Canada and the northeastern U.S., including in Newfoundland, Quebec, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.

Populations of this species in Greenland and Iceland have increased dramatically over the past two decades, from about 10,000 breeding pairs to currently over 130,000. This increase may be contributing to the increased sightings in North America over the past 20 years.

For more information about Pink-footed Geese, check any European bird guide, the National Geographic Guide (fifth edition, pp. 20-21), or the new Stokes guide (p.6).

We covered 2009 observations of Pink-footed Geese (in Maine and New York) in the E-bulletin here:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/decSBC09.html#TOC01

Many observers from the Greater New York City area and beyond traveled to see the goose in northeastern New Jersey. The bird usually accompanied a roaming flock of Canada Geese. The only minor problem was that its most frequent haunts were at Schlegel Lake (commonly referred to as Washington Lake), a 28-acre artificial body of water privately owned and managed by the Washington Lake Association. Fortunately, some local residents (including Carl and Kathy Bergquist) made birders feel quite welcome. The same could not be said for the management at the nearby Cedar Park Cemetery, however, where the Pink-footed Goose would sometimes graze with accompanying Canadas. Birders were excluded from the cemetery. Similarly, security at the local Westwood High School south of Schlegel Lake, also raised concerns over viewing the goose from there. Best viewing was from a grassy field across from the Washington Township Library, just to the west of the lake. We mention these circumstances because the issue of birder access is becoming increasingly troublesome in some areas and is an ongoing concern with many birders.

Generally, early morning visits to the accessible locations made finding the bird easier. The goose was observed almost daily through the morning of 17 March.

Birders should be aware of increasing reports of Pink-footed Geese in North America. On 29 March, Raymond Belhumeur found a Pink-footed Goose in a large flock of about 7,000 Canada Geese and 2,000 Snow Geese at Chambly, southeast of Montreal. Last March he had found a Pink-footed Goose in the same area. Finally, as this E-bulletin was being readied for distribution, another Pink-footed Goose report came in from New Hampshire, where Taj Schottland and Don Clark found a Pink-footed Goose in the town of Walpole. Both the Quebec goose and New Hampshire goose seemed to be one-day wonders.

OUR OLDEST BIRD: AN ALBATROSS ON MIDWAY

In February, John Klavitter, deputy manager of Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, spotted and photographed a Laysan Albatross that has been determined to be the oldest known U.S. wild bird. This female Laysan Albatross – given the name Wisdom – was first banded in 1956 by Chandler Robbins. Wisdom was incubating an egg at the time and was assumed to be at least five years old, which would make her over 60 years old today. She has sported and worn out five bird bands since 1956.

Remarkably, Chan Robbins returned to Midway in February 2002 to replace old, worn bands on previously banded albatrosses before the bands become unreadable. Fortunately, one of the birds he rebanded was Wisdom.

In February, Wisdom was spotted with a chick, making her a very experienced mom. In fact, Wisdom has likely raised 30 to 35 chicks during her lifetime. "To know that she can still successfully raise young at age 60-plus, that is beyond words," commented Bruce Peterjohn, the chief of the North American Bird Banding Program at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland.

Although albatrosses are known to mate for life, it is unknown if Wisdom has had the same partner all these years.

This fascinating story was picked up by news bureaus and media around the world and was a story heightened by the drama of the Pacific-based tsunami last month.

IMPACT OF TSUNAMI ON MIDWAY NWR

For most of March, the world has been watching the results of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. The consequences, especially at the nuclear plant at Fukushima, are still being measured, and the devastation and human suffering has been both frightening and heartbreaking.

The impact of the tsunami was felt across the Pacific, including at the very same Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in our story above about the oldest albatross.

Midway Atoll is comprised of three islands within an outer reef of approximately 5 miles in diameter. The three islands - Sand (1,117 acres), Eastern (366 acres), and Spit (15 acres) - were hammered by four successive waves around midnight 10-11 March. The highest wave was almost 5 feet. The tsunami completely washed over little Spit Island, covered about 60 percent of Eastern Island, and about 20 percent of Sand Island.

Surveys of the NWR reveal that over 110,000 Laysan and Black-footed Albatross chicks – an estimated 22 percent of this year's albatross production – were lost as a result of the tsunami and two severe winter storms in January and February. At least 2,000 adults were also killed. Fortunately, Wisdom, the senior-aged Laysan Albatross that had recently hatched a chick, did not have her nest overwashed. For a time, Wisdom was not located, but her survival was later confirmed, as was that of her chick.

The status of the other NWR superstars, a pair of Short-tailed Albatrosses also raising a chick, is unknown. The chick was washed approximately 100 feet away from its nest, later to be physically returned. But the chick's parents have not been relocated. Since the chick is incapable of fending for itself, the Service is carefully considering whether hand-rearing this bird is appropriate. It is believed that the parents are at sea, gathering food for their chick and will be returning. You can see our January story about the Short-tailed Albatross rarity here: www.refugeassociation.org/birding/JanSBC11.html#TOC02

Thousands of Bonin Petrels were also lost at Midway, but the locations and exact number are not known since these petrels nest in burrows underground.

Refuge biologists are confident that the albatross populations can rebound from this natural event, but Barry Stieglitz, project leader for the Hawaiian and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex said, "We remain concerned about the compounding effect of this tsunami on the existing stresses of invasive species, global climate change, incidental mortality from longline fishing, and other threats to albatross and other wildlife populations."

If there is any good news to report, it is that only four species of seabirds were nesting at the time of the tsunami: Bonin Petrel, Laysan Albatross (482,909 pair), Black-footed Albatross (28,581 pair), and the single pair of Short-tailed Albatross.

You can view photos from Midway NWR and obtain more details here:

www.fws.gov/midway/tsunami.html

www.flickr.com/photos/usfwspacific/sets/72157626265154692/with/5527952752/

<http://peteatmidway.blogspot.com/>

NEW STORM-PETREL FOUND IN CHILEAN WATERS

In 1983, author, artist, pelagic bird enthusiast, and bird conservationist, Peter Harrison, saw a strange storm-petrel at sea off northern Chile. The author of the classic SEABIRDS: AN IDENTIFICATION GUIDE (1983) thought the bird was a subspecies of the Wilson's Storm-Petrel. But recently, however, after examining intriguing photographs taken by a team of pelagic birders (two Americans from Oregon, Jeff Gilligan and Gerard Lillie, and four Irish friends), Harrison assembled his own team to pursue conclusive proof of the existence of a new species of storm-petrel. The effort included two New Zealanders with specially designed net-guns that shoot fine netting into the air to capture the birds.

The capturing effort was successful, uncovering what is probably the first new storm-petrel species discovered in about 90 years and the first new seabird in over a half century. The expedition captured and released about a dozen of the storm-petrels. The discovery, confirmed in February, was near the coastal community of Puerto Montt, in the northern fjord region of Chile. The storm-petrels were encountered in numbers in the waters of Reloncavi Sound, immediately south of Puerto Montt. When new species are discovered, said Harrison, "they are usually in some obscure part of the rainforest, so it's really unusual that we found this bird in plain sight in a populated area."

After taking photographs, feather samples and blood tests, the group felt certain that the bird was a unique species, rather than a subspecies of a known species. One of the birds was accidentally killed, and will become the "type specimen." Harrison said that in fact, "we don't actually need it," since there are photographs, measurements, and feather and blood samples that can serve as an alternative to "the Victorian approach" of collecting the bird as a specimen.

"Once the DNA work is completed, the next step will be to try to find out more about these birds, where they breed and if they migrate away from the area during the winter or remain resident," said Michel Sallaberry, team member and Chilean ornithologist at the Department of Ecological Science, Faculty of Science at the University of Chile (Santiago).

The unnamed storm-petrel is apparently in the genus "Oceanites."

For more details, including a photograph of the bird in flight see here:

www.zeco.com/blog/2011/02/expedition-team-finds-new-species-storm-petrel-chile

and

www.peninsuladailynews.com/article/20110309/NEWS/303099984/peninsula-man-discovers-new-species-of-seabird

MBCC INVESTMENTS MADE IN MARCH

The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission (MBCC) met on 9 March and approved more than \$3.5 million in land acquisitions at three National Wildlife Refuges. The projects are supported by the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which includes proceeds from the sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, otherwise known as the Federal Duck Stamp. These approvals will add an estimated 1,300 acres to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar commented at the meeting that, "these additions to the National Wildlife Refuge System will help keep our wetlands safe and provide Americans astounding wildlife viewing opportunities."

The expanded properties were at the Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge in Tennessee (625 acres), the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon (32 acres), and the Tulare Basin Wildlife Management Area in California (656 acres of perpetual easements).

The Commission also approved more than \$29 million in North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants to protect, restore, and enhance more than 85,000 acres of wetlands and associated habitats across the United States (26 projects in 17 states) and Mexico (9 projects).

Curiously, the NAWCA funds were basically provisional, pending Congressional funding for FY2011. This was perhaps the first time that NAWCA funding was "awarded" without having the funds actually available.

CONGRESS SLICES MORE CONSERVATION AND BIRD SPENDING

On 17 March the Senate passed a sixth FY 2011 stopgap spending bill, called a Continuing Resolution (CR). Even though it was St. Patrick's Day, the CR wasn't particularly "green." The three-week government funding bill, due to expire after 8 April, cut an additional \$6 billion from the Fiscal Year 2011 budget, bringing to \$10 billion the amount of total cuts that lawmakers have eliminated since the spending showdown moved into high gear in March.

Last month we covered the list of initial targets in a number of conservation and bird issues that had been proposed in the original H.R. 1, the Full Year Continuing Resolution for 2011:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/marsbc11.html#TOC05

While the CR of 17 March was not as severe as the original proposals in H.R. 1, a number of natural resource-related programs, nonetheless, suffered.

programs, non-renewable, etc.

Some slices were big; some less so. Here are a few examples of items eliminated:

- Over \$73 million in land acquisition (e.g., \$22 million for NWRs, \$3 million BLM, \$17 million National Parks, \$30 million National Forests)
- About \$2 million for Endangered Species (e.g., Greater Sage-Grouse [Idaho population], Whooping Crane, and both Steller's and Spectacled Eiders)
- \$17.5 million in Brownfields Redevelopment (HUD)
- \$10.5 million for a Climate Change Network (USGS)
- At least \$25 million in various EPA programs
- \$37 million in conservation operations for the Natural Resources Conservation Service

Admittedly, some of these were reductions in the President's proposed budget, but that hardly makes them less painful.

As an example, consider a couple of items for the National Wildlife Refuges: the construction and land acquisition cuts. The construction account will be reduced from the Fiscal Year 2010 level by 28 percent and the land acquisition account will see a 26 percent cut. Land acquisition is particularly disappointing, given the recent hope of appropriating more of the offshore oil and gas revenue – the Land and Water Conservation Fund – to match current needs.

The distressing CR situation also continues, including more expected drastic cuts and the ongoing threat of a government shutdown.

The budget year for 2011 actually ends on 30 September. As this year's budget process grinds forward with a series of frustrating Continuing Resolutions, Congress will have less time in which act before FY 2012 begins on 1 October.

IBA NEWS: ENERGY DEVELOPMENT AND PAWNEE NATIONAL GRASSLANDS

There are 20 publicly owned National Grasslands in the U.S., totaling almost four million acres and located from the Great Plains to west of the Rockies. They are administered by the USDA Forest Service and were originally created in the 1930s to purchase and restore damaged lands and to resettle Depression-ravaged destitute families.

One of these is the 193,060-acre Pawnee National Grassland in northeastern Colorado. This shortgrass prairie habitat is an IBA of global significance. It is a favorite of birders and bird conservationists alike, a home for classic western grassland birds such as Mountain Plover, Burrowing Owl, Lark Bunting, and Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs, among other species. The ownership pattern on the Pawnee Grassland is checkered by being both private and public. The public land is managed under the U.S. Forest Service's "multiple-use" approach; the surrounding private lands are grazed or farmed. Habitat fragmentation from roads and structures, weed introduction, and predator impact on nesting birds continue to be of concern on the grasslands.

If the Forest Service allows it, energy development could start anew on the Pawnee Grasslands. There are already 57 oil and gas-producing wells on the grasslands, but recently four additional companies were approved to do exploratory thumper-sensor work, a predecessor to any drilling. Three companies have already started their tests.

If these companies make the decision to drill for energy, they will then have to make application and engage in an environmental assessment process, at which point Forest Service biologists would weigh in and public comments would be considered.

The larger region, covering the Niobrara shale and extending from Colorado into northwest Kansas, southwest Nebraska, and southeast Wyoming, has experienced a recent explosion of energy development.

Oil and gas are not the only energy sources on the Pawnee grasslands, however. Wind developers are also giving the area the once-over. Developers of the 274-turbine Cedar Creek wind farm which borders the grassland have also expressed interest in placing new units inside the grassland boundaries.

Although prospects may be encouraging to local officials looking for income and energy developers aiming to address a demand for domestic energy, the possibilities are giving land and wildlife champions serious concern. Grasslands are generally regarded as one of the most threatened bird habitats in North America, and shortgrass prairie ecosystems are especially under critical duress.

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

www.audubon.org/bird/iba/

TIP OF THE MONTH: TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

The ability to lead a field trip or lead a tour is a feature that can make or break a birding event. It's not being an expert birder that's always most essential. It's the ability to deal with unforeseen circumstances, to handle basic logistics, to be flexible, and to manage people who have varying experience and expectations.

If you're a field trip leader, don't simply think about checking off every bird possible for the day; think about trying to leave the participants with a quality experience. Remember, people skills are just about as important as birding ID skills.

If you're a field trip participant, you can watch, learn, and take note of opportunities to add to the experience. There are even times when you might help. (Help doesn't always mean identifying the birds, either. Help can mean assisting in logistics, crowd control, and providing for the overall comfort level of the participants.)

What can turn a good trip into a great trip is often the leader's ability to have fun, share birds, and convey a sense of wonder with the group. That's what really makes a birding trip memorable.

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THE GULF BLOWOUT: APPROACHING THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

The 20 April 2010 explosion at the Deepwater Horizon killed 11 men working on the oil platform and injured 17 others. The ensuing oil gusher continued for three months, causing extensive damage to marine and wildlife habitats as well as the Gulf's fishing and tourism industries. It held the attention of the public, and it was covered in the E-bulletin multiple times, including an overall disaster assessment last month:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/febsbc11.html#TOC03

Readers should undoubtedly expect a number of articles on the subject in the next few weeks. This early one, from the National Wildlife Federation, is particularly good:

www.nwf.org/en/News-and-Magazines/National-Wildlife/Animals/Archives/2011/Gulf-Coast-Revival-After-Oil-Spill.aspx

BOOK NOTES: BACKYARD GUIDE

There has been an increasing trend to take bird field guides and slice, dice, and recycle them into multiple volumes. Sometimes this works; sometimes it doesn't. One that we feel works is the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BACKYARD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA (2011) by Jonathan Alderfer and Paul Hess. Taking the images, the range maps, and

some of the text from the standard National Geographic guide, this volume adds enough new material and new features to make it a valuable stand-alone book covering 150 species that may be seen at backyard feeders, nesting in dooryards, or simply migrating through the property.

The introductory backyard basics include just enough information about selecting feeders, bird baths, nest boxes, and landscaping ideas to pique the interests of readers, but not so much that it seriously competes with entire volumes dedicated to those subjects.

And that's fine, because the heart of the book is its species accounts. These one-page-per-species summaries are informative, well-organized, and pleasing to the eye. They cover such issues as feeding and nesting, along with the expected ID information and range description. Occasional sidebars distributed throughout the text also address important or unusual facts.

We can hardly think of a better book to help transition the curious backyard birder into a more exploratory field birder. It's a great way to help grow out of the backyard scene.

RARE BIRD ALERT AND STEVE MARTIN: WHO KNEW?

On 17 March, the actor, comedian, musician and composer, Steve Martin, appeared on ABC TV's "The View." He spoke about his music group's new recording collection, "Rare Bird Alert." He explained: "'Rare Bird Alert' is the title of one of the songs in the album. Last summer I did a film in Canada with Owen Wilson and Jack Black. And the movie is called 'The Big Year,' and it's about competitive bird watching. [Laughs...] Kinda makes you wanna see it, right? [Laughs] And I got into the world of, you know, I got immersed into the world of bird watching. And there's a thing in bird watching that's called a Rare Bird Alert [, getting a notice of rarities when they appear]... People spend fortunes - or not - to get on planes, and hotels, and cars to get to this spot, to see these birds. And so, I called one of the songs Rare Bird Alert, because I was in that world."

Here is the segment from that show:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vmt1nWah4I

More on the bluegrass collection by Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers can be found here:

www.steepcanyon.com/news.asp

and, see especially on page 7 of the liner notes:

<http://www.stevemartin.com/stevemartin/music.html>

You can see our discussion last September about the production of "The Big Year" movie here:

<http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/SepSBC10.html#TOC13>

THE QUIZ FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

Here's our quick-and-easy quiz where you have a chance to win a fine National Geographic publication. Each monthly quiz question will either relate to one of our news items for the previous month or so, or it will pertain to an event or experience that is scheduled to occur during the current or coming month.

For more on NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC bird books, see:

www.shopng.com/birdbooks

This month, we will give away three books to E-bulletin readers whose names are picked at random from among those submitting correct answers. Due to shipping constraints, only folks residing in the U.S. or Canada are eligible to win.

Last month's question: Who designed and invented the now-common tube bird feeder?

The answer for last month: Peter Kilham (who launched Droll Yankee) invented the feeder in the late 1960s.

Last month's three copies of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BACKYARD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA were won by Ron Freed (Carlisle, Pennsylvania), Melanie Feddersen (Littleton, Colorado), and Paulette Scherr (Ping, North

Dakota). Congratulations to these winners!

The prize for April will be a copy of ILLUSTRATED BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA (the folio edition of the National Geographic guide). We will give away three copies of the book.

For more on this lovely book, see the news item in the December 2009 E-bulletin. It can be found here:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/febSBC10.html#TOC09

Also, see:

<http://shop.nationalgeographic.com/ngs/browse/productDetail.jsp?productId=6200525>

This month's question is linked to early spring migration: What long-billed, cryptic, and early-migrant Eastern shorebird, somewhat secretive and nocturnal, is experiencing declining population due to presumed habitat loss?

Please send your answer by 15 April to:

birdingbulletin1@verizon.net

Make the subject line "QUIZ! " and please include your full name and mailing address along with your answer so that we can mail you a book should you be a fortunate winner. We will also provide the correct answer next month.

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You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

If you wish to distribute all or parts of any of the monthly Birding Community E-bulletins, we simply request that you mention the source of any material used. (Include a URL for the E-bulletin archives, if possible.)

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

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