



**SWAROVSKI BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN SWAROVSKI BIRDING
COMMUNITY**

Information, communication, and inspiration on birds, wildlife, and nature

August 2005

This E-bulletin is distributed as a joint effort between Swarovski Optik of North America (SONA) and the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). You can access [an archive of past E-bulletins](#) on the NWRA site.

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RARITY FOCUS

This month's feature rarity is a wonder-wader, a bird that's delighted many viewers through the month of July.

A long-legged wading bird first seen in mid-June at Stephenville Crossing, southeastern Newfoundland, was initially identified as a Little Blue Heron. Eventually, however, Newfoundland birders took a closer look and determined that the bird was actually a Western Reef-Heron, a species that has only occurred once before in North America, on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, in 1983. That bird remained from late April to mid-September, where it was studied and photographed by hundreds of observers.

The normal range of the Western Reef-Heron's nominate race is western Africa from Mauritania to Nigeria, casually north to the Azores, Cape Verde Islands, and Spain. A second population occurs from the Persian Gulf to western India. Interestingly enough, however, this species is also appearing with increasing frequency in the Caribbean and if not already breeding there, may soon do so. In many respects, Western Reef-Heron appears to be shadowing the vagrancy pattern exhibited by Little Egret, a species which some authorities consider to be conspecific.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the bird was associating with a Little Egret, another Old World rarity. By late June, both birds were frequenting a salt marsh and island in the vicinity of nesting terns and gulls near the crossing, the same area where Black-headed Gulls first nested in North America in 1977.

This Western Reef-Heron is approximately the same size as the Little Egret. The overall color of the heron is slate-bluish-gray, except for a white throat and chin. The bill is dark, and perhaps slightly longer than that of a Little Egret. The feet are yellow, the legs dark. (The species is not illustrated in any North American field guide. For a picture of the Newfoundland Western Reef-Heron in the company of the Little Egret, [see the image](#) provided by our friends at NARBA, the North American Rare Bird Alert.

Both the reef-heron and the Little Egret were still present at least into the last days of July. They were reported most easily seen at low tide in the morning when they come close to the road to feed. If these two rarities weren't enough, another bonus bird appeared in the area, creating a veritable birding rarity trifecta. This was a Bar-tailed Godwit, another Eurasian species. It continued in the area until at least 22 July.

[Late-breaking News: We just found out about a mega-rarity, a Hornby's Storm-Petrel seen off Southern California on 2 August. This would be a first North American record. More details next month, in our news for August. In the meantime, you may want to refer to [Debi Shearwater's site](#).]

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NEOTROP ACT MOVEMENT

There were hearings in late June on the reauthorization of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, with movement in both the Senate and the House.

Thanks in part to the active support of many bird organizations, the slightly renamed Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act, S. 1410, was unanimously approved by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee at a committee session in mid-July. Introduced by Senators Chafee (R-RI), Clinton (D-NY), Crapo (R-ID), Jeffords (I-VT), Lautenberg (D-NJ), and Voinovich (R-OH), the bill is very similar to its House counterpart, H.R. 518. (The Senate version has some minor improvements, however.) The Senate bill now awaits consideration by the full Senate.

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HIGHEST NUMBER OF KIRTLAND'S WARBLERS EVER RECORDED

In last month's E-bulletin, we mentioned the partial returns for the annual Kirtland's Warbler census, along with a couple birds with surprising longevity records.

Now the full census is complete. In mid-July, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources announced the annual survey results indicating that the state's population of the federally Endangered Kirtland's Warbler is increasing.

Biologists, researchers, and volunteers counted as many as 1,415 singing males during the 2005 official census period. This count exceeds the 1,348 males observed in 2004, and it represents the largest number of Kirtland's Warblers recorded since this monitoring program began. The census was started in 1951 and has been conducted annually since 1971. The lowest numbers of warblers were recorded in 1974 and 1987, when only 167 singing males were found.

In addition, three singing males were discovered in Wisconsin this year.

Cooperation between the Michigan DNR, U.S. Forest Service, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Michigan Department of Military Affairs in attempting to restore the warblers' nesting habitat has been heartening.

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AGAIN: WHERE ARE THE CHASE LAKE PELICANS?

For the second year in a row the USFWS is investigating the deaths of thousands of young American White Pelicans at Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge in central North Dakota. You may remember that thousands of adult pelicans abruptly left the same location in 2004.

The pelican colony at the 4,385-acre Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge has been the largest in North America, peaking at 35,466 birds in 2000.

It has been reported that at least 8,000 chicks may have died over the past few months, said Ken Torkelson, a

It has been reported that at least 8,000 chicks may have died over the past few months, said Kent Peterson, a spokesperson for the refuge. "The difference is, last year the adults left first," he said. "This year, the young have died and the adults have no reason to stick around."

Severe storms or a disease outbreak may have caused the mass die-off, said Marsha Sovada, a biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey's Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown.

The USFWS said an inspection of the refuge in mid-July indicated that only about 500 chicks were left from a nesting period that could have produced as many as 9,000. All but about 2,000 adults abandoned the colony, from a population estimated at 18,850 at the end of May.

Wildlife officials had hoped the refuge would return to normal after nearly 30,000 adult American White Pelicans took off last year, leaving their young and eggs behind. Normally, the pelicans will stay at the Chase Lake NWR through September.

Officials still can't determine what caused last year's mass departure. Some remains from this year's disaster have been sent to the USGS lab at Madison, Wisconsin; results are pending.

Refuge officials said large die-offs of pelican chicks have also been reported in July at Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge in northeast Montana and near Waubay National Wildlife Refuge in northeast South Dakota.

It is thought that West Nile virus may be to blame for the chick deaths in Montana and perhaps in South Dakota, but that may have no relation to what has happened at Chase Lake.

In late July, Congress included language in the passage of Interior Appropriations raising concerns about the pelicans at Chase Lake. This requires the USFWS to report back to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations by 1 October 2005, on the causes of nest abandonment and deaths.

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SEABIRD QUANDARY OFF OUR SHORES

Last year, there was a major collapse among nesting seabirds in the North Sea, with many colonies in Scotland, for instance, failing to breed. This breeding failure was attributed to an insufficient supply of food in the form of small bait fish. This year, a North Sea fishing ban on Sand Launce (Sand Eel, *Ammodytes* sp.), a small and slender bait fish, was initiated. A benefit of this ban would be to hopefully offset a repeat of 2004's worst breeding season on record for such species as Northern Fulmar, Atlantic Puffin, and Arctic Tern. (The ban is also intended to promote the recovery of precious Cod and Haddock stocks, fish species that feed heavily on Sand Eels.) The North Sea ban this year may be too late to help the seabirds, however. (Some North Sea Atlantic Puffin colonies, for example, have experienced similar collapse this year.) Climate change has caused North Sea temperatures to rise by two degrees Celsius since the 1970s. This is thought to have reduced survival rates for newly hatched Sand Eels by reducing the plankton upon which they feed. This in turn, has had an impact on nesting seabirds.

A parallel phenomenon may now be occurring off our shores. This year, in the Pacific, from California to Alaska there have been some ominous signs. Record numbers of dead seabirds have been washing up on beaches, at least from Central California to British Columbia, and marine biologists are concerned over the possibility that rising ocean temperatures may be responsible for dwindling plankton populations.

The coastal ocean temperatures are 2 to 5 degrees above normal, which could be related to reduced upwelling, the seasonal movement of cold, nutrient-rich offshore water into areas closer to the surface and closer to shore.

This cold water sustains huge quantities of phytoplankton and zooplankton, the base of the marine food web. During periods of active upwelling and resulting plankton "blooms," everything from Pacific salmon to Blue Whales can fatten up and thrive on the continental shelf off the West Coast. The larger fish and baleen whales eat mostly krill, for example. Krill are free-floating, shrimp-like crustaceans ranging from one to two inches in length that represent the upper size limit among the zooplankton. When the water is cold, krill swarm off the Northern California coast by the tens of thousands of tons. Now, however, they are largely absent, and fisheries and other marine wildlife species are feeling the effects, seabirds among them.

On Washington beaches, bird surveyors in May typically find an average of one dead Brandt's Cormorant for every 34 miles of beach surveyed. This year, the deaths averaged one every eight-tenths of a mile, according to data gathered by volunteers with the Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team. This is somewhere between five and 10 times the highest number of bird deaths the survey has ever previously witnessed.

Off the coast of Oregon, abnormally warm marine water continued unabated in July, affecting both local birds and salmon. A major die-off of Double-crested Cormorants recently occurred in Oregon, and juvenile salmon numbers have dropped precipitously. These events are also thought to be due to warmer than normal water temperatures. The water temperature off Oregon in late June would normally have been 10 degrees Celsius (about 50 Fahrenheit), and this year it was 16 degrees (about 61 Fahrenheit). The upper layer of warm water is normally 15 meters thick, yet this year it was 30 meters thick. Krill numbers are significantly lower than usual, and the plankton species present this year are unusual, including many warm-water species more normally found off San Diego or Monterey.

Concurrently, ornithologists have reported more or less total breeding failure of seabirds nesting on Triangle Island off the north Coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and elsewhere in the province.

Perhaps the most dire development is that seabird nesting has dropped significantly on the Farallon Islands off San Francisco, the largest Pacific Coast seabird rookery south of Alaska. Bill Sydeman, the director of marine ecology for the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, said that the crash of the Farallon nesting season is unprecedented in the three decades that the observatory has monitored the islands. Cassin's Auklets have been particularly hard hit, Sydeman said. Normally Cassin's Auklets will breed in March, but they got started late this year. By May they had virtually disappeared. Sydeman explains that zero nesting success - or close to it - is expected this year for the auklets. He adds that other seabirds are also showing the effects of the reduced marine productivity. "We have little or no nesting of Pelagic Cormorants (at the Farallones), and Brandt's Cormorants are nesting at reduced numbers," he said. "Double-crested Cormorant nesting is down by 50 percent (in the Bay Area)."

Sydeman is not definite over the exact cause. (Upwelling cessation is typically caused by El Niño events, warm water intrusions from the equatorial Pacific. But apparently what is happening off the coast right now is not a true El Niño.) Typical El Niños can be tracked as they progress from the equator to temperate waters, something that hasn't occurred in the current case. "Some are calling it an El Niño Norte; others think it's some sort of anomalous intrusion of warm offshore blue water onto the continental shelf," Sydeman said.

Of greatest concern is the fact that the phenomenon may be long term, and could be linked to a global warming trend. In mid-July, Fisheries and Oceans Canada - the federal agency dealing with Canada's marine and inland waters - released a report saying that the 2004 spring and summer ocean surface temperatures in the Gulf of Alaska and off British Columbia were the warmest in 50 years. The study concluded that the record high temperatures were caused by abnormally warm weather in Alaska and western Canada, as well as "general warming of global lands and oceans."

Meanwhile, near San Francisco, salmon have switched from eating krill to bait fish, and they appear to be holding their own, with salmon filling up on anchovies and sardines instead of krill. However, the bait fish are generally too big for auklets to eat, and even for other species like Common Murres, observes Roger Thomas, the president of the Golden Gate Fishermen's Association.

Researchers claim that krill are the keystone forage species for almost everything that swims off that part of the coast. "It's the krill that drive the food web dynamics off this coast," said Ellie Cohen, the Executive Director of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. "Their absence has tremendous implications for everything out there, right up to the Humpback and Blue Whales. We don't know if this is a result of global warming or some natural cycling, but without the krill, you could be looking at a food web collapse."

Simultaneously, on our Atlantic shores, wildlife officials have been investigating the mysterious deaths of hundreds of seabirds washed up on beaches along the Atlantic coast since mid-June. Most of the birds have been Greater Shearwaters, a species rarely seen by beachgoers because the birds typically stay miles offshore where they feed on small fish and squid. (In one case, at the Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia Beach, about 25 to 30 dead and dying Greater Shearwaters have been found along the shore. Most were juveniles, and most were emaciated.) In fact, more than 600 dead seabirds have been reported from Maryland to Florida since mid-June.

Wildlife pathologists are examining the carcasses for exposure to toxins, pollutants such as heavy metals, and infections that might indicate a broader environmental concern. Tests on a couple of the birds ruled out toxins found in red tide, a type of dinoflagellate bloom that biologists initially suspected as the culprit. A number of Greater Shearwaters have also had their stomachs examined; the birds' stomachs were empty, but they had varying levels of fat reserves, suggesting that they did not die of starvation. They were below normal weight, "but that's normal when they're in migration," observed Will Post, ornithologist and curator at The Charleston Museum in South Carolina.

Whatever the problems at sea - Pacific or Atlantic - they are becoming increasingly obvious.

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BIRD-TRANSPORTED POLLUTION

And speaking of seabirds, a recent study from Arctic Canada illustrates the degree to which even remote, sea-foraging birds can accumulate mercury and pesticide residue that eventually shows up near nesting colonies.

On Devon Island, 640 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, Northern Fulmars nesting on rocky cliffs bring in most of their food from the seas between Ellesmere Island and Greenland, 400 kilometers away. Below the high nesting-cliffs of Devon Island, the Northern Fulmars deposit quantities of guano. With 10,000 pairs of nesting Northern Fulmars, the accumulated guano can be considerable, with the downpour of nitrogen-rich guano seasonally nourishing the algae in nearby ponds and the mosses on rocks below the nest ledges. Ponds on the island closest to the colony, where more of the fulmars' guano and debris fall, have much higher concentrations of pollutants than do ponds situated farther from the colony. So says Jules Blais of the University of Ottawa in Ontario. Blais and his colleagues report that three of these ponds contain so much mercury that they neared or surpassed Canada's limit for wildlife safety.

In their study, the researchers tested sediments in 11 ponds on the island at various distances from the colony. Contamination in the sediment increased 10-fold for the pesticide hexachlorobenzene and 25-fold for mercury. Although DDT is banned in much of the world, concentrations of that pesticide increased 60-fold across the ponds. Apparently, there was a similar pattern for PCBs.

The fulmars are "acting as a funnel," unintentionally collecting contaminants by eating fish in the broad area where they forage and concentrating them at their breeding colony, says Blais.

"This is important from a subsistence standpoint," adds Deborah Rocque of the USFWS in Anchorage. People living, hunting, and fishing near bird colonies might also benefit from this disturbing finding about bird-transported pollution.

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LWCF AFTERMATH

Last month we outlined the difficulties this year confronting the Land and Water Conservation Fund, with the House slashing the fund to a little over \$40 million and the Senate providing some small respite with a number of \$192 million for federal and stateside funding combined. (That Senate number was still \$66 million less than last year's total LWCF, a 26 percent cut.)

We speculated that if both houses "split the difference" the number would be \$117.6 million, or a 54 percent cut from FY 05 and still \$12 million less than President Bush recommended for FY06.

Well, the conference number in late July moved up to almost \$143 million, about \$10 million more than the President requested, but still about \$115 million less than last year. Unfortunately, the stateside portion plummeted: it was \$92.5 million in FY05; it's only \$28.4 for FY06.

One item of good news on the federal side: the \$809,000 worth of possible Ivory-billed Woodpecker habitat at the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas was included in the final bill.

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REFUGE PHOTO CONTEST UNDERWAY

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and Swarovski Optik of North America (SONA) launched the 2005 Refuge Photo Contest last month. This digital photo contest is designed to showcase America's National Wildlife Refuge System.

Submitted images can be of birds, mammals, insects, fish, other animals, plants, people, or simply refuge scenery, in short, almost any sight at a National Wildlife Refuge can be offered in this contest. The contest ends in December.

There are Swarovski products and other prizes as awards. See the [Contest web page](#) for more information on all the prizes, as well as on procedures, rules, and other details.

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WILDERNESS DESIGNATION PASSES SENATE

In late July, four wilderness conservation measures were passed by the U.S. Senate; the legislation would protect wild lands in California, New Mexico, Washington, and Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican inclusion covers part of the Caribbean National Forest, which would protect tropical rainforest habitat for the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot, the endemic Elfin Woods Warbler, and other birds and wildlife located in Puerto Rico's "El Yunque" forest. The Caribbean National Forest Act (S.272 and H.R.539) would designate 10,000 acres of forest in Puerto Rico as the "El Toro Wilderness," the first tropical forest wilderness covered by the Wilderness Act. (We introduced this subject in our June 2005 E-bulletin.) The legislation for the Puerto Rican wilderness has yet to pass the House of Representatives in this Congress. Click [here](#) for more details.

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USDA ANNOUNCES \$5 MILLION FOR SAGE-GROUSE

As we reported in this E-bulletin, at the beginning of this year, the USFWS completed a status review of the Greater Sage-Grouse and determined that the species did not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). At the same time, federal and state authorities have recognized that a failure to protect and enhance the species' habitat could modify the bird's status and bring about ESA reconsideration, listing, and associated land-use restrictions.

Once fairly common in the pioneer West, the Greater Sage-Grouse has experienced a dramatic population decline during the past several decades. It is the loss of sagebrush habitat that is perceived as the major culprit. Moreover, it is private lands that currently comprise almost 30 percent (about 40 million acres) of the remaining Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

On 13 July, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) designated \$5 million for special projects to protect and enhance habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse on private lands in 11 western states (California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming).

The USDA funds will be made available through three voluntary conservation programs: \$2.7 million from the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP); \$1 million from the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); and \$1.3 million from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

This approach in funding is in line with the Bush Administration's executive order and pledge of "Cooperative Conservation" for special projects on private lands.

For additional information about the USDA voluntary conservation programs and sage-grouse:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs> and

<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/plants/pmpubs/sagegrouse.html>

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SIX STEPS FOR BACKYARD FEEDING

The Wild Bird Feeding Industry (WBFI) and its member companies have sponsored the development of a new website, with information on the "six steps" designed to assist bird-feeding enthusiasts in their efforts to attract a variety of birds to their property, as well as a guide to providing a healthy environment.

These steps, promoted by the industry, were produced in cooperation with a number of organizations, including the American Bird Conservancy, Massachusetts Audubon, The Wildlife Society, and others. For more details, go to the [new site](#).

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READY FOR A SWIFT NIGHT OUT?

You can join in a continent-wide effort to raise awareness about and encourage interest in Chimney Swifts and Vaux's Swifts. It's called "A Swift Night Out."

Post-nesting communal roosts of swifts form as summer draws to a close. Some of these roosts may consist of an extended family group of a half a dozen birds, but larger sites can actually host hundreds or even thousands of birds.

If you locate roosts at dusk right now, you'll be in a position to join in the counts. (Look for a tall shaft, chimney, or similar structure to locate where Chimney Swifts - central-states to east coast- or Vaux's Swift - Pacific coast- go to roost in your area.)

On one night over the weekend of 12, 13, 14 August, and/or 9, 10, 11 September, you can observe the roost starting about 30 minutes before dusk and estimate the number of swifts that enter. When you have finished your count, you can submit your results on- line.

Find more details [here](#).

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JIM CLEMENTS (1927-2005)

Dr. James Franklin Clements, author of BIRDS OF THE WORLD, A CHECK LIST, passed away in June from complications associated with acute myeloid leukemia.

Jim received his Ph.D. from California Western University in 1975 when he was almost 50 years of age. His thesis became the first edition of his checklist, which has since been published in five editions, designed to classify each of the 9,800+ birds of the world.

After retiring in 1988, Jim Clements founded Ibis Publishing Company, and he subsequently produced a number of books.

Jim's checklist was an ambitious effort, and for many people it became the standard for listing the world's birds. It started humbly and amid criticism, but with every edition the list became more authoritative, especially since it was updated regularly in order to reflect our understanding of the world's birds. Jim's book reached its fifth edition in 2000, and he published regular supplements on his webpage.

Recently he received the honor of having a species named after him, the Iquitos Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila clementsi*).

His contributions and enthusiasm will long be remembered.

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STAMP REMINDER

Last month, we mentioned the July release of the new 2005-2006 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp. It may not always be easy to find - check your refuge offices and larger post offices, for starters - but it's worth the investment in migratory bird and refuge support. And most importantly, remember, it's not

"just for ducks."

For more information on birder priorities and the stamp program, click [here](#).

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You can also get other excellent bird-oriented "All about birds" information through an Internet project between Swarovski and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology here: <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

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Wayne Petersen 781/293-9730, wayne.petersen@swarovskibirding.com

OR Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, paul.baicich@swarovskibirding.com

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