



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

\*\*\*\*\*

August 2006

\*\*\*\*\*

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed through the generous support of Steiner Optics 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 Optics](#).

### Table of Contents:

- [RARITY FOCUS](#)
- [RARITY-TEASINGS IN THE LRGV](#)
- [LAPWING QUANDARY](#)
- [BIRDING TRENDS: OUTDOOR INDUSTRY FOUNDATION](#)
- [HOW IMPORTANT IS "SODSAVER"?](#)
- [IBA NEWS: NORTH CAROLINA, THE HIGHLAND EMPHASIS](#)
- [MULTI-STATE CATS-AND-BIRDS REPORT](#)
- [NEW PLJV FILM](#)
- [IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER REPRIEVE: U.S. DISTRICT COURT DECISION](#)
- [ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU PARK](#)

\*\*\*\*\*

### RARITY FOCUS

On 17 July, a Black-tailed Godwit was found at the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (Plum Island) in Massachusetts. The godwit was in marsh habitat just south of parking lot 3, south of the well-known birding spot known as the Salt Pannes. Hundreds of observers had an opportunity to view the godwit until its departure on 29 July.

This large shorebird, a fairly common breeder from Iceland to Russia, is a rare, but regular, spring migrant in western Alaska, but its occurrence on the Atlantic coast of North America is far rarer. (See your National Geographic guide on page 168-169 or "big" Sibley on page 176.) There are only three previous records for Massachusetts, the first going back to 1967. More than a score of East Coast records show a cluster in the Northeastern U.S. and in Atlantic Canada, but there are also confirmed records for North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and elsewhere.

East Coast records are generally thought to pertain to the race "islandica" that breeds in Iceland; however, the different subspecies are sufficiently similar that they cannot always be distinguished with certainty. At least one experienced European observer actually expressed the opinion the Massachusetts godwit was probably of the nominate race, "limosa." In either case, photos and details from Phil Brown, who found the bird originally, can be viewed [here](#) (along with links to other photos from other photographers).

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

---

### RARITY-TEASINGS IN THE LRGV

There were also interesting developments - and some disappointments - in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) of Texas last month. On 8 July a Green-breasted Mango, a relatively large Mexican hummingbird, was observed at the home of Terry Fuller in San Benito, Cameron County. The next day the juvenile hummingbird was captured, banded, and released. Although few observers had a chance to see the bird, its occurrence was adequately documented.

This species normally ranges from eastern Mexico to northern South America. There are approximately 15 documented records of Green-breasted Mango for Texas, mostly in fall and winter. (Some readers may remember that we profiled a Green-breasted Mango in the LRGV as our Rarity of the Month in our October 2004 issue.)

This recent record is additionally interesting because it followed a report in the Fuller's backyard of a probable Amethyst-throated Hummingbird (*Lampornis amethystinus*), only a few days previously, on 4 July. That bird was photographed, and although the photographs are somewhat fuzzy and distant, they may still be adequate to document this potential first record north of Mexico.

Unfortunately, a continued vigil for additional views of both hummingbirds has been unsuccessful.

At the same time, also in the LRGV, there were two sightings, perhaps three, of a possible Mottled Owl at the Frontera Audubon property in Weslaco. The first sighting occurred on 5 July, the second on 11 July. If accepted, this would be the first record of a live Mottled Owl in North America. (The only other record was of a bird found dead in the LRGV in 1983.)

We mention these birds, not because they were seen only by a few observers - with accompanying disappointment - but because they illustrate the unknown possibilities and surprises which still await diligent field observers willing to look for birds in out of the way places during the "off" season. Indeed, it was not very long ago that visiting birders would avoid the LRGV in the summer. Everyone "knew" that there were no special birds around at that season, and, besides, it was far too hot to look for them!

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

---

## **LAPWING QUANDARY**

Also in the realm of surprises and discovery, we present the following report.

In late May, at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Florida (Wakulla County), Tom Curtis found a Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*) at Mounds Pool 3. Although this species is not on the "official list" of birds for North America, there are multiple records for the species in Florida, dating back to the late 1950s, some of which have been known escapees. The lapwing at St. Marks NWR was observed by multiple birders for at least three weeks.

Since the Southern Lapwing is native to most of South America regularly ranging northward to Colombia, Venezuela, and Trinidad, most birders dismissed the Florida report, as yet another "escaped bird." The only North American field guide that pictures the species is the Eastern Peterson (2002) on page 328-9, on a plate with other "Exotics: Introduced birds and escapes."

But could the species be a legitimate vagrant to the U.S.?

Consider the following:

\* Southern Lapwings have recently undergone a notable range expansion and are currently breeding in the southern Caribbean and as far north as Costa Rica in Central America. Out-of-range Southern Lapwings have positively been noted in Belize and Mexico.

\* The St. Marks NWR bird seemed to be of the subspecies "cayennensis" (with brownish face tones), the same form that has expanded recently into Central America and the southern Caribbean. ([photo](#))

\* Conversion of South American forests to use for livestock grazing may be promoting accompanying increases in Southern Lapwing populations and range expansion. It has also been suggested that competition with Cattle Egrets may be driving Southern Lapwings into new areas.

- \* Almost all of the previous Florida sightings of Southern Lapwing over the years have occurred during late spring or early summer.
- \* The only zoos reporting Southern Lapwings in their collections within the last five years are in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and Winnipeg. (Of course, there could also be birds in "private" collections!)

While very intriguing we may never really know the truth. End of story.

Or is it?

On 17 Jun and 725 miles north of St. Marks NWR, while working on Maryland's Breeding Bird Atlas project by boat, Mark L. Hoffman found a Southern Lapwing in marshes in Worcester County, Maryland. The bird was observed for 20 minutes and photographed.

The bird could not be found on following days. Details and images [here](#).

Same bird? Different bird? Escaped bird? True vagrant?

These are all fascinating questions, to which we can only add the advice: Stay alert out there, and always be attuned to the possibilities!

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

### **BIRDING TRENDS: OUTDOOR INDUSTRY FOUNDATION**

There was a fascinating report released in late June by the Outdoor Industry Foundation which profiled the "2005 American bird watcher" as having the following characteristics:

- \* Balanced by gender and marital status
- \* Just over a third will have children under the age of 18 living in their household
- \* Over two-thirds will be over the age of 35 with half over the age of 45 (mean age 45)
- \* Equally distributed across regions
- \* More than 8 out of 10 birders will be Caucasian (similar to findings for hunting)
- \* Hiking will be the most popular additional outdoor activity
- \* Went on bird watching excursions 12 times on average during the year
- \* Close to a one-third will limit their activity to only a single outing during the year
- \* Only 5 percent will go on 31 or more field trips a year.

Demographically, according to the foundation, the bird watching population has remained very stable over the years, but there has been a recent drop in the number of Americans birding and the number of field trips taken. (2001 had 18.3 million birders taking an average of 31 outings a year; 2005 had 15.6 million birders taking an average of 12 outings per year.)

For more details, see the [summary report](#).

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

### **HOW IMPORTANT IS "SODSAVER"?**

A new cycle of grassland conversion is making its way across the Prairie Pothole heartland of the country, converting ancient grasslands to commodity cropland. For example, of the 13.8 million acres of ancient prairie that remains in the eastern Dakotas, the Farm Service Agency reported that almost 300,000 acres, or 2.2%, were converted to cropland during 2002-2005. At this rate it won't be long before a near-endless mix

of soybeans, wheat, and canola - with accompanying patches of sorghum, corn, barley, rye, and even flaxseed - spreads across the region.

This loss of ancient grassland, of course, is a result of technological advances and federal farm support. The current commodity title of the 2002 Farm Bill provides incentives that encourage farmers to break native sod by substantially reducing the financial risks associated with such activities. This trend puts into jeopardy many ducks and shorebirds, as well as many grassland-dependent songbirds, species that are witnessing a steeper population decline than any other bird group in North America. Without a plan to halt the loss of ancient grassland, we risk losing the native prairie, accompanying wetlands, and their birds.

prairie, accompanying research, and more.

A proposed "Sodsaver" provision of the expected 2007 Farm Bill, an action that might eliminate federal subsidy support of any kind on new cropland put into production through the breaking of grassland that had no previous cropping history, could be a way to reverse this trend.

Of course, landowners could still choose to break native prairie if they so desired, but they would not be able to do it under the umbrella of a federal farm subsidy if "Sodsaver" is adopted. (It is important to realize that a "Sodbuster" program has existed since the 1985 Farm Bill, but this has only applied to land that is highly eroded, and farmers could develop a plan to circumvent its coverage. The proposed "Sodsaver" is a far more inclusive policy.)

An amendment in the upcoming Farm Bill is being promoted in order to maintain vital bird nesting habitat and would remove incentives for breaking native sod. In addition to protecting native prairie, such a provision would, by default, also protect a large percentage of what prairie wetlands still remain. . Approximately 60% of these unprotected wetlands are surrounded by native prairie.

Ducks Unlimited, along with a number of other national and regional conservation organizations, is strongly promoting this new "Sodsaver" proposal.

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

---

### **IBA NEWS: NORTH CAROLINA, THE HIGHLAND EMPHASIS**

The North Carolina Important Bird Area project is moving along, with participation from all the seven Audubon chapters in the state, working on the "Adopt an IBA program." This covers 15 IBAs and potential IBAs. Volunteers are conducting data collection, policy and conservation work, and educational programs, especially in those IBAs where a State Parks partnership provides opportunities for expanded programs.

Of particular interest is the effort in the Highlands Plateau, in the southern end of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the westernmost corner of the state. This area hosts habitat for some of North Carolina's important "northern" species, such as Blackburnian Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. The Highlands effort is intended to focus on specific monitoring of the species in the forests, mountains, and streamsides of the area with a special emphasis on building information and accompanying long-range stewardship.

[Additional Information](#)

General information on the ongoing [IBA Program](#)

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

---

### **MULTI-STATE CATS-AND-BIRDS REPORT**

The American Bird Conservancy has published a new report, the first-ever multi-state review of feral and free-ranging cats. It's a five state review, covering New York, New Jersey, Florida, California, and Hawaii.

The report analyzes the impact that cats are having on some of America's most at-risk bird species. The five-state review clarifies the disturbing threats to species and sub-species already in trouble, such as Piping Plover, "California" Clapper Rail, and Hawaiian Petrel. Sites where cats have had particular avian impact are profiled. The report reviews applicable wildlife protection laws. Perhaps most disturbingly, the report also highlights the growing trend of maintaining managed cat colonies.

You can download your own copy [here](#).

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

---

### **NEW PLJV FILM**

The Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) released a new film in late June. The 28-minute film, titled "The Playas - Reflections of Life on the Plains," illustrates the values of playas to wildlife, water, and people; threats to

the wetlands; and how people are working to conserve them. The film features sweeping aerial footage of playas, along with interviews with playa experts, biologists, landowners, and community leaders throughout the six-state playa region. The playa region covers parts of NW Texas, W. Oklahoma, E. New Mexico and Colorado, C. and W. Kansas, and NW Nebraska.

Debbie Slobe, Communications Team Leader for the PLJV, said that the message of the playa wetlands can be collectively linked to birding, hunting, and wildlife and natural resource conservation.

The film is now available on DVD or VHS. There is no charge for the film except for shipping. To obtain a copy or quantity of films, contact Debbie Slobe ([debbie.slobe@pljv.org](mailto:debbie.slobe@pljv.org)).

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

---

### **IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER REPRIEVE: U.S. DISTRICT COURT DECISION**

Late last month, U.S. District Judge, William R. Wilson, issued a temporary injunction against a \$319-million planned irrigation project in Arkansas

because it could destroy habitat for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a species that may or may not be already extinct.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began building the Grand Prairie Irrigation Project last year - less than 20 miles from where recent alleged woodpecker sightings had been reported - in an effort to draw water from the White River. The project would take 158 billion gallons from the river each year. The project was supposedly necessary because the main aquifer beneath eastern Arkansas's soybean, cotton, and rice fields is running out of water and could run dry by 2015, thus causing serious economic hardship.

Conservationists, led by the National Wildlife Federation and the Arkansas Wildlife Federation, sued the Corps, arguing that the project to build a pumping station would destroy habitat, killing trees that could support the woodpeckers, and that the noise from the station would cause any existing woodpeckers unnecessary stress.

The judge said that for the purposes of the lawsuit, one has to presume that the woodpecker exists. He further pointed out that federal agencies might have broken the nation's Endangered Species Act by not fully studying the risks of the project beforehand.

The Corps has been ordered to reinitiate consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine if the project poses a threat to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker or its habitat.

However, the ruling may not have any immediate impact on the Grand Prairie irrigation project anyway, since construction was recently halted due to lack of funding. Still, new surveys must include "nest, roost, and active forage surveys within 2.5 miles of any construction site 'footprint;' identification and inspection for nesting, roosting, or active foraging in all trees 12 inches or greater in areas that will be most affected by changes in water level; and nest, roost, and foraging surveys in the forest areas adjacent to canals and pipelines."

For a summary of the Grand Prairie project and its threat to wildlife habitat, see the National Wildlife Refuge Association report on "[Beyond the Boundaries](#)"(page 14).

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

---

### **ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU PARK**

You may have missed this important news in early July, so we present it here for your enlightenment.

Last month's launch of NASA's orbiting space shuttle "Discovery," was complicated by the discovery of some whitish splotches on the shuttle's black-colored right wing after the launch. NASA officials stated that these appeared to be "bird droppings."

If correct, this means that these bird droppings withstood (1) intense and regular Florida thunderstorms, (2) a powerful launch during which 300,000 gallons of water were sprayed at the shuttle's main engines, and (3) a thrust upward through Earth's atmosphere. (During the launch, Discovery

went from 0 to 17,500 miles per hour in under 9 minutes.)

This example offers new appreciation for the "out-of-this-world" durability of bird droppings. Apparently, despite a reentry temperature of as much as 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the bird poop made it all the way back from orbit on 17 July, albeit a bit charred!

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

---

You can access an archive of past E-bulletins on the [birding pages](#) of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website OR on the [birding pages](#) for our thoughtful corporate sponsor, Steiner Optics.

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

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