



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

August 2007

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RARITY FOCUS

Our rarity of the month is Western Reef-Heron. The normal range of this species' 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. Curiously, this species is also appearing with increasing frequency in the Caribbean (e.g., St. Lucia, Barbados, Trinidad, Tobago, St. Vincent and the Grenadines) and if not already breeding there, may soon do so. The first record of Western Reef-Heron in North America was on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts from 26 April to 13 September 1983. Previously in the E-bulletin we reported on the second North American record, an individual seen in mid-June 2005 at Stephenville Crossing, southeastern Newfoundland, that remained through July of that year.

Then in late June last summer, a Western Reef-Heron, North America's 3rd record, was discovered at Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. In early August the bird disappeared, but later in the month an adult dark-morph Western Reef-Heron was discovered in southern Maine and nearby New Hampshire. That bird remained for over a month on the Maine-New Hampshire coast

on the Maine-New Hampshire coast.

Were these recent annual summer reports all the same bird summering in the northeastern U.S. and Atlantic Canada? That's certainly a real possibility.

So it was perhaps no surprise when a Western Reef-Heron was discovered on 8 July in Brooklyn, New York. The bird was at Calvert Vaux Park, a site formerly known as Drier-Offerman Park. This bird frequented the tidal edges of the flats on the east side of the park, and also nearby channels and an abandoned grass-covered barge.

For weeks, this rare wader was found at the Brooklyn site, but sometimes it went missing for days. It was, however, also infrequently seen at other locations in the greater New York Harbor area, including reports from Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and South Beach, Staten Island, New York. The bird remained in the area through the afternoon of 25 August. Birders looking for the bird carefully tracked its whereabouts, and its occurrence was featured multiple times in the greater New York media.

Local conservationists hoped that the reef-heron sighting might encourage New York City to re-examine its plans to create a nearby marine waste transfer station - part of a controversial citywide compromise approved by the City Council last summer, but one still requiring a state permit approval.

For photos of the Brooklyn Western Reef-Heron by Lloyd Spitalnik, see:
http://www.lloydspitalnikphotos.com/v/Wading_Birds/Western+Reef-Heron/

For other photos of the bird taken by Alex Wilson, see:
<http://www.digitalmediatree.com/arboretum/heron/>

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FRIGATEBIRD CONTENDER

A major contender for rarity honors this month was the probable female Lesser Frigatebird observed in northern California (Humboldt Co.) by half a dozen birders on 15 July. This species is restricted to the southwest tropical Pacific and a portion of the tropical Atlantic; it has appeared just three times before in mainland North America: Maine, Michigan, and Wyoming. For details and photographs of this one-day wonder, see:

<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/Frigatebird.html>

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MORE IVORY GULL PROBLEMS

In the March issue of the E-bulletin we reported on the negative impact of the loss of ice and snow-cover in the high arctic on Ivory Gulls:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC05>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/march07.html>

Population counts done in Canada during the early 1980s could account for about 2,400 birds, while a survey done from 2002 to 2006 by the Canadian Wildlife Service could only account for several hundred birds - a drop of 80 per cent.

There is now increasing evidence that mercury is an additional culprit in the decline of Ivory Gulls. Indeed, the Ivory Gull may have more mercury in its eggs than any other seabird in the Arctic, according to Birgit Braune, a research scientist with Environment Canada who studies toxic chemicals in Arctic wildlife, and who specializes in seabirds. Upon examination of Ivory Gull eggs from Seymour Island, a tiny island just north of Bathurst Island, in 1976, 1987, and 2004, she ran tests for persistent pollutants, such as PCBs and DDT. Most tests revealed few surprises, until she tested for mercury.

Some gull eggs contained enough mercury to prevent certain other bird species from normally reproducing. Such high mercury levels were also thought to possibly impact the behavior of the birds, especially during the crucial nestling period. Just how these high mercury levels may affect Ivory Gulls is unknown, just as are the origins of mercury in the high Arctic. (Ivory Gulls are scavengers, however, and are high on the food chain, where chemicals such as mercury, regardless of its source, would accumulate.)

Last year, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada listed the Ivory Gull as an endangered species.

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BIRD EDUCATION NETWORK STARTS TO MOVE

There was a highly successful "Bird Conservation Through Education National Gathering" that took place in Austin, Texas, in February. At the end of the conference, the 150+ attendees resolved to continue support for

Austin, Texas, in February. At the end of the conference, the 150+ attendees resolved to continue support for broad-based bird education and to begin developing a comprehensive strategy for education on birds and their conservation.

To that end, a follow-up Bird Education Working Group meeting took place last month in Denver, Colorado, that was charged with following up on tasks created during the Austin bird-education gathering.

The major questions raised were: 1) what should be included in the content of a strategic plan for bird education that would contain a solid conservation emphasis, and 2) what is the best way for a bird education

network to proceed organizationally? The beginnings of a much needed and long-overdue bird education strategy were outlined, and the group agreed that a coordinator would be necessary to effectively move this project forward.

The Working Group continues to be supported by the Council for Environmental Education: www.councilforee.org/ <<http://www.councilforee.org/>>

To remain connected to this important activity, join the bird-education listserv. Those interested can send a blank e-mail along with the word "subscribe" on the Subject line to: birdedlist-subscribe@flyingwild.org

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MORE REVEALING BIRDING TRENDS

Last month, we described some of the preliminary findings of the USFWS survey, "2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation," where "wildlife watching" (with birding the lion's share) reflected an upward trend.

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/julSBC07.html#TOC07>

or

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/july07.html>

Some people have also recently had an advance look at the preliminary numbers for the popular Forest-Service's National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE), so now we can share these figures with you as well. Again, an upward trend in watching birds is maintained.

The new NSRE numbers put bird watching in the U.S. at 81.4 million participants (2006). The survey asked whether a person did or did not participate in any bird watching activity, and whether it was their primary activity, or was associated with some other activity. (If the interviewee did any loosely associated birding whatsoever, it was counted. The degree of birding "avidity" was not measured.) The NSRE researchers also tracked birding days, with the most recent number standing at an astounding 8.2 billion annual birding days!

Current and previous figures are as follows:

Years	Participants	Days
1994-1995	54.4 million	4.8 billion days
1999-2000	70.9 million	5.8 billion days
2001-2003	69.6 million	6.5 billion days
2004-2006	81.4 million	8.2 billion days

While one can certainly quibble with the estimates, the overall trends are convincing.

For more information (where these numbers should be posted soon), see:

<http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/index.html>

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BIRD-ORIENTED QUOTATIONS ON NABCI SITE

Are you looking for that perfect birding and bird-conservation quotation for your next flyer, birding festival, IMBD, or bird-talk?

Have a look at a new collection of such phrases found on the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) website. It currently has approximately 75 pithy, bird-oriented quotes and quips, wise words taken from famous and not-so-famous women and men, and ranging from poets to presidents:

<http://www.nabci-us.org/quotes.htm>

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CERULEAN WARBLER SUMMIT SUMMARY

We have previously written about concern for the future of the Cerulean Warbler, in June 2006 and January

2007:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC07.html#TOC03>

and

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

In mid-February of this year, a "second summit" on the plight of the Cerulean Warbler was held at the USFWS National Conservation Training Center (NCTC). The draft proceedings of the event are now available on line. The content may be overly technical for some readers, but for those intimately concerned about the future of this handsome warbler, the presentation summaries are very meaningful:

http://www.fws.gov/midwest/eco_serv/soc/birds/cerw/cerw_summit2.html

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MID-CONTINENT DUCK NUMBERS SHOW SLIGHT INCREASE

In early July, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released its preliminary report on mid-continent breeding ducks and habitats, a report based on nesting surveys conducted in May of this year. Overall, duck populations for the ten surveyed species increased 14 percent since last year, with an estimated 41.2 million breeding ducks registered in the area surveyed. Only Northern Pintail numbers were shown as slipping (down 2 percent from last year and 19 percent long-term). As a result of winter snowfall and good precipitation in late 2006 and early 2007, habitat conditions are similar or slightly improved compared to breeding conditions in 2006.

For more details see:

<http://www.fws.gov/news/NewsReleases/showNews.cfm?newsId=BFF1C2E5-08D7-793F-AE61EF990EE17CB6>

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BIG SIT: BIRDING'S MOST SEDENTARY EVENT

On Sunday, October 14, 2007, the annual "Big Sit" will take place. In 1992, the New Haven (Connecticut) Bird Club started The Big Sit, and it is now annually hosted by BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST and sponsored by a number of other organizations as well. (The event's official name: "The Big Sit!")

This is much like a Big Day or a bird-a-thon where the object is to tally as many bird species as can be seen or heard within 24 hours. The difference lies in the area limitation - observers must remain inside a 17-foot diameter circle while they are tallying birds.

Sometimes likened to a "tailgate party for birders," The Big Sit! is often done just for fun, sometimes as an education effort in a popularly visited site, or sometimes as a fund-raiser for a bird club or specific conservation effort. This year, a special effort will be made to engage National Wildlife Refuges in their growing birding and "children and nature" efforts.

For details on The Big Sit! this year, or to plan your very own event, see:

<http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com/site/funbirds/bigsit/bigsit.aspx>

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PLIGHT OF THE AMERICAN KESTREL

Next month, at the joint meeting of the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA) and the Raptor Research Foundation, at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania, there will be a special symposium on the status of the American Kestrel. Once considered one of North America's most common diurnal raptors, the species is experiencing a significant recent decline.

Four hypotheses raised to account for the species' drop include environmental contamination, loss of open and semi-open habitats, increased predation (e.g., Cooper's Hawk), and West Nile Virus. For a summary of the case, see the article by Ernesto Ruelas, as published in HMANA's Spring 2007 journal:

<http://www.hmana.org/documents/AMKE.pdf>

For details on the meeting and the special symposium organized by Dr. David Bird, see:

<http://hawkmountain.org/media/booklet.pdf>

For details on the biology of the American Kestrel and the opportunities for nest-box stewardship, see the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary publication on the subject:

<http://hawkmountain.org/media/kestrelnestbox.pdf>

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IBA NEWS: A NEW STATE IBA BOOK

The Important Bird Area (IBA) efforts seem to be moving along well. and it's often difficult to keep up to date

on all the IBA activities across North America. The release of at least one new state IBA book certainly deserves mention, however.

This is from Wisconsin, a book of 240 pages with details on 86 sites:

<http://www.wisconsinbirds.org/IBA/IBA-book.htm>

For more information about National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program, please visit:

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

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BIRD-SAFE BUILDING GUIDELINES

NYC Audubon has announced the publication of their "Bird-Safe Building Guidelines," written by Hillary Brown and Steven Caputo. This manual which is targeted for architects, landscape designers, engineers, glass technicians, developers, building managers, city, state, and federal officials, and the general public reveals the magnitude of bird-collisions with glass and buildings and describes guidelines and strategies that complement the well-known LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) used in the Green Building Rating system. Most important, perhaps, is that the document describes ways to retrofit existing buildings.

To download a pdf containing the guidelines, visit:

<http://www.nycaudubon.org/home/BirdSafeBuildingGuidelines.pdf>

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MEGA FARM BILL PASSES HOUSE, AWAITS SENATE ACTION

A five-year, \$286-billion, Farm Bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives in the last week of July. It included conservation to help farmers - estimated at over \$20 billion by some observers - to improve watersheds, provide bird-and-wildlife habitat, and similar measures. The House-passed version of the Farm Bill has several important features that deserve watching, including:

Conservation Reserve Program: This crucial element in the bill was not increased in the House, but was maintained at 39.2 million acres, a good starting point.

Wetlands Reserve Program: The House Farm Bill restores funding for WRP at a new cap of 3.6 million acres (\$1.6 billion). There is an extension of WRP to include riparian areas, a change that could have enormous benefits for habitat conservation efforts in the arid Southwest.

Grasslands Reserve Program: The House Farm Bill restores funding for GRP at 1 million acres, action which would provide incentives to protect native grasslands. Still, it is funded below needed levels.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP): This effort is also maintained, but funded below urgently needed levels.

Sodsaver: This provision creates minimal protection for native old prairie and adds safeguards for what might be America's most ignored and fragile ecosystem. It is a limited version of what was originally intended, now disallowing benefits (crop insurance and disaster payment) only for four years after native prairie is converted to cropland. For background on the original Sodsaver intent see our E-bulletin for August 2006:

<http://www.refuqenet.org/birding/auqSBC06.html#TOC05>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/auq06.html>

The action on the 2007 Farm Bill will now move to the Senate's Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, where efforts are underway to draft a parallel version. Conservation may actually do better on the Senate side, but only if pressure is maintained.

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MASSACHUSETTS FISH HATCHERY SLAMMED

Now and then, we hear of birds being thoughtlessly shot or otherwise killed by landowners or vandals. But a case recently resolved in Massachusetts seemed particularly egregious.

The owner of a the Mohawk Fish Hatchery in Sunderland, MA, Michael Zak, was ordered to serve six months in a federal halfway house and pay a \$65,000 fine for killing hundreds of protected fish-eating birds on his property in the last several years. U.S. District Judge, Michael A. Ponsor, also ordered Zak to serve five years' probation and have no contact with firearms. A second defendant, hatchery worker Timothy Lloyd, was given two years' probation and a \$1,500 fine by Judge Ponsor. Zak was found guilty of violating the Golden and Bald Eagle Protection Act for shooting a Bald Eagle feeding at his uncovered fish hatchery in 2005. Zak and Lloyd separately pleaded guilty to shooting approximately 200 fish-eating birds, including Great Blue Herons and other federally protected birds on the same property.

Judge Ponsor said that he was baffled that Zak never installed netting over the fish runs, a tactic typically used by most other hatcheries. The bird-killings were "dramatic" and crimes that could have been easily avoided,

Ponsor said. " He's killed hundreds of birds rather than do something that is not all that hard and not all that expensive," the judge said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Nadine Pellegrini, who specializes in wildlife cases, said that the sheer volume of the slaughter called for prison time. "If not for 200 birds, then how many?" she asked.

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ANOTHER SWIFT NIGHT OUT

With swifts having finished raising their young this year, our birds begin to congregate in communal roosts prior to their migration in the fall. Some roosts can host hundreds or even thousands of swifts.

In response, once again the Driftwood Wildlife Association will be hosting "A Swift Night Out" wherever congregating swifts can be found.

Upon locating where Chimney Swifts (central to east coast) or Vaux's Swift (Pacific coast) go to roost in your area, take close notice of a roost-site starting about 30 minutes before dusk. Estimate or count the number of swifts that enter on one evening over the weekend of August 11, 12, 13, and/or September 8, 9, 10. When you have finished your tabulations, send in your results. For more details, see:

<http://www.concentric.net/~dwa/page56.html>

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NEW ENGLAND ALBATROSS: RIP

In June we described a story of a near-shore Yellow-nosed Albatross and the saga of a captured individual that was initially released on Cape Cod, Massachusetts:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/junSBC07.html#TOC02>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/june07.html>

Unfortunately, after a second release in offshore waters, this radio-tracked bird was subsequently found dead on a beach at Barnstable Harbor, Massachusetts. The ultimate cause of death remains uncertain.

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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.