



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

August 2008

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](#)
- [PROOF THAT ALMOST ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE](#)
- [ANOTHER EVERGLADES STORY](#)
- [ONTARIO PROTECTION FOR BOREAL FORESTS](#)
- [CRP: ONE BULLET DODGED](#)
- [CALIFORNIA CONFLAGRATION AND CONDORS](#)
- [ANOTHER SWIFT NIGHT](#)
- [AUGUST 2008 - SMALL WETLANDS ANNIVERSARY](#)
- [BOOK REVIEW: SMITHSONIAN GUIDE TO BIRDS](#)
- [RTP CENTENNIAL](#)
- [IBA NEWS: CHASE LAKE NWR](#)
- [SAGE-GROUSE: THE ONGOING SAGA](#)
- [TIP OF THE MONTH: RE-LEARN ALL THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA](#)
- [WONDERFUL WETLANDS](#)

RARITY FOCUS

Our rarity of the month is a hummingbird, the Green Violet-Ear.

Over the 4th of July weekend, a Green Violet-Ear visited the hummingbird feeder of John and Cindy Hust in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. This remarkable Neotropical hummingbird was Michigan's third record for the species, and some lucky birders and bird-photographers arrived in time to see the bird before it disappeared.

Also, beginning 15 July, a Green Violet-Ear began coming to a hummingbird feeder at the home of Jane Tillman and Mark Lyon in Austin, Texas. It came to the feeder - off and on - at least until 21 July, entertaining a few lucky birding visitors during its stay. A photo of the bird, accompanied by a full story in the AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN (for 22 July) can be seen at:

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/07/22/0722hummingbirds.html>

Green Violet-Ear is a large hummingbird found from northeastern Mexico to South America. The species was first recorded in the U.S. at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in mid-July 1961. Since then, there have been approximately 60 North American records, with about 40 in Texas alone.

Other North American locations where this wide-wandering hummer have appeared include Arkansas, New

Mexico, Mississippi, Kentucky, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Ohio, New Jersey, Iowa, Ontario, and Alberta. Not surprisingly most of these visitors have been seen at feeders. (To see an illustration, consult your National Geographic guide page 272-3, the "large" Sibley page 293, or the Kaufman "Focus" guide, page 218-19).

We previously highlighted a feeder-visiting Green Violet-Ear in Iowa in the October 2006 E-bulletin and it increasingly appears that this species may be developing into an annual visitor to locations north of Mexico.

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

PROOF THAT ALMOST ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

We now mention a bird that didn't quite rate monthly "Rarity Focus" status, mainly because it was a single-observer sighting of a bird that didn't stick around. Nonetheless, it deserves special attention. On 6 July Helmut Grunberg in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, reported that he had seen and photographed an Oriental Turtle-Dove on 30 June. The bird only briefly appeared in his yard, but fortunately stayed long enough for him to obtain two quick photos through the window. The bird has not been seen since.

You can find Grunberg's photograph here:

https://docs.google.com/File?id=dczkb8bw_3fdrqbqc8_b

The species breeds across much of Siberia to southern Asia. There are about six previous reports for Alaska in the Bering Sea area (May-July), one report for British Columbia (1992), and two for California (1988 and 2002).

See your National Geographic guide, page 244-5, for a description of this species.

An Oriental Turtle-Dove in the Yukon Territory is surprising, if not totally astounding. This report is proof that almost anything is possible in the bird world. After all, birds do have wings!

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

ANOTHER EVERGLADES STORY

Last month we reported on exciting news of the pending sale of about 300 square miles of U.S. Sugar Corporation property located in the northern Everglades, to the state of Florida. This move is intended to help restore the natural flow of water into the Everglades:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/julSBC08.html#TOC02>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/july08.html>

This month, however, we have to report some troublesome news about one of the Everglades' signature bird species - the Snail Kite.

Recent counts of this species in Florida are now estimated at 700 to 800 birds, down from 1,200 present last year, and about a third of the population in 2000. This is the lowest number in decades. Some observers think the species is in "free fall," the victim of back-to-back droughts in the region, along with possible impacts created by high-water retention in parts of the Everglades to benefit management efforts on behalf of the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow (an endangered race of the Seaside Sparrow) in areas south of the Tamiami Trail.

Today, the kites have largely abandoned their historic haunts in the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee area. Most Snail Kites now live in a chain of central Florida lakes 100 miles north of Lake Okeechobee, although this year a surprising four nests were found at Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, west of Delray Beach.

A decade ago, the Snail Kite - a member of the federal endangered species class of 1967 - was one of the great endangered species success stories in this country. The species' population in the 1960s had dropped to a few dozen individuals as wetlands disappeared as a result of development pressure and an injurious cycle of flooding and draining. By 1999, however, nearly 3,600 were counted scattered from the St. Johns River south into Everglades National Park. After the 2000-2001 drought, however, this number dropped by about half. Today, these numbers continue to be impacted by drought and the population appears to have been further reduced by about half.

Apple snails, practically the sole food of the highly specialized Snail Kite, are apparently victims of changing water levels that are either too high or too low. The kite's future is apparently tied closely to that of the apple snail.

With federal agencies aiming to finally break ground on a project that would improve water flow through the Tamiami Trail - an essential long-delayed Everglades restoration project - hopefully conditions may improve for the kite, the sparrow, and the snail.

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

ONTARIO PROTECTION FOR BOREAL FORESTS

In mid-July, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty announced a remarkable commitment to protect 225,000 square kilometers of Boreal Forest in the northern area of the province, by means of a Far North Planning initiative. The area - about 55 million acres - is slightly larger than the entire state of Idaho.

The plan will prohibit mining and forestry across this vast area, which is roughly half of Ontario's Boreal Forest. The area will specifically be designated for tourism and traditional Native use. The remaining half of Ontario's Boreal Forest will be subject to forthcoming changes in its antiquated Mining Act.

The Boreal Forest in northern Ontario represents 43 percent of the province's land mass, and is part of one of the world's largest intact ecosystems. The Boreal Forest is home to millions of nesting birds, including songbirds such as Gray Jays, Boreal Chickadees, Dark-eyed Juncos, Tennessee Warblers, Swainson's Thrushes, and White-throated Sparrows, along with a rich diversity of waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors.

This action by the Ontario government is one of the most significant recent conservation commitments in the hemisphere, and it stands as an outstanding example of significant land protection, not just for Canada, but for the world! Marie-Eve Marchand, executive director of the Quebec chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wildlife Society, remarked that more needs to be done for the Boreal Forest across the country: "We are still way behind. We need to do way more, and the Ontario announcement shows us where we should go."

Birds are not the only beneficiaries of this legislation, of course. Permanently protecting these forests also addresses the issue of climate change, since the Boreal Forest is a globally significant carbon sink. One of the reasons for protecting this region is that it is part of the Ontario government's plan to challenge climate change.

For more information, see the Boreal Songbird Initiative:

<http://www.borealbirds.org>

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

CRP: ONE BULLET DODGED

The Farm Bill's \$1.8-billion-a-year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has evolved over the years into a major gain for conservation and a boon to birdlife. Much of the CRP-enrolled acreage has traditionally been planted - under 10- and 15-year contracts - with perennial grasses or been restored to wetlands.

Over the past month there was much speculation that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) would actually allow penalty-free, early-withdrawal of CRP lands from the conservation roster.

Both hunter-conservationists and "green-oriented" environmentalists resisted the concept. See, for example, organizational letters to Agriculture Secretary Ed Shafer from these two parallel communities:

<http://www.pheasantsforever.org/page/1/PressReleaseViewer.jsp?pressReleaseId=10804>

and

<http://www.edf.org/pressrelease.cfm?contentID=8048>

Toward the end of July, and despite several weeks of speculation to the contrary, the USDA announced that penalties would not be lifted for farmers who wish to pull their conservation lands from the CRP program.

This is good for the birds, wildlife, and water and soil conservation that has benefited from CRP. It's also good for the American taxpayers who have paid farmers for these conservation actions.

Still, agricultural interests point to the corn-based ethanol boom, record-high prices for many other agricultural commodities, international food shortages, widespread regional flooding, regional drought, and high prices for feed crops as having seriously altered the agricultural economic landscape. Farming interests are looking for assistance, and release from CRP presents just such an opportunity.

Currently 34.7 million acres across the country are enrolled in CRP; approximately 32 million acres will be the limit allowed under the new Farm Bill. Moreover, about 2.2 million acres of farmland conservation "rentals" under CRP expire this year, to be followed by an estimated 4.5 million in 2009, 4.7 million in 2010, 4.4 million in 2011, and 5.6 million in 2012.

All astute conservationists expect CRP renewals to drop substantially over the next few years.

Thankfully, one bullet has been dodged (a penalty-free withdrawal incentive), but another awaits (a drop in CRP renewals). Birds and habitat will clearly suffer.

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

CALIFORNIA CONFLAGRATION AND CONDORS

California Condor researchers recently mourned the loss of a 2-month-old condor chick that was thought to have perished when a Big-Sur-based fire swept through a wilderness gorge, scorching a 1,000-year-old

redwood where the condor was nesting, 200-feet up in the tree. The grieving may have been premature, since the parents of the young have been recorded revisiting the nesting site multiple times since the conflagration.

The lightning-induced fires started from at least four strikes on 21 June, and eventually spread to encompass almost 163,000 acres in central-coastal California.

Fortunately, two other nestling chicks, both about 3 months old, were apparently spared. They were on nests in caves closer to the coast where they were partially protected by cool coastal fog.

Researchers, with help from the U.S. Coast Guard, were able to save seven captive one-year-old condors and an older mentor bird at the Condor Sanctuary run by the Ventana Wildlife Society. The facility itself was severely damaged; the large condor pens and a trailer were destroyed. A nearby cabin used by staff was miraculously undamaged.

Almost half the California Condors in California have been reintroduced into the wild as a result of efforts on the part of the Ventana Wildlife Society. Fortunately, 41 of the 43 free-flying condors in Central California, each wearing a radio transmitter, have been accounted for since the fire. The survivors apparently flew out of the smoky areas toward the coast. The two currently missing birds are a three-year-old female and a six-year-old male.

As the impact of the fire continues to be assessed, the condor conservation effort will also continue. For more information, see the site for the Ventana Wildlife Society:

<http://www.ventanaws.org/>

and the San Diego Zoo:

http://www.sandiegozoo.org/zoo/condor_fire_relief/

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

ANOTHER SWIFT NIGHT

For the eighth year, volunteers from coast to coast will be participating in "A Swift Night Out."

As summer draws to an end and North American swifts finish raising their young, the birds will begin congregating in communal roosts prior to initiating their fall migration. Some swift roosts may only consist of an extended family group of a half a dozen birds, but the larger sites can host hundreds or even thousands of swifts. We encourage you to join in recording this spectacle.

Here is how it works: Watch for areas at dusk where swifts are feeding. Look for a tall shaft, chimney, or similar structure in the vicinity to locate where Chimney Swifts (central to east coast) or Vaux's Swift (Pacific coast) go

to roost for the night in your area.

On one evening between 8-9-10 August and/or 12-13-14 September, observe the roost starting about 30 minutes before dusk and estimate the number of swifts that enter. Once you have completed your count, contact the Driftwood Wildlife Association with your results:

<http://www.chimneyswifts.org/>

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

AUGUST 2008 - SMALL WETLANDS ANNIVERSARY

Fifty years ago, Congress amended the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act of 1934 (commonly called the Duck Stamp Act) to authorize the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to acquire Waterfowl Production Areas, small and valuable wetland habitat. These properties were incorporated into the Refuge System in 1966, and by 1989 large swaths of grassland habitat were included on the "shopping list" of the Small Wetlands Program. Nearly 95 percent of Waterfowl Production Areas secured over a half century ago are today located in the prairie wetlands or "potholes" of the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Montana.

During the program's history, the Service has secured more than 36,000 separate fee-title (standard ownership) and permanent easement tracts that make up these lands. They now include more than 29,000 permanent easements, covering 2.1 million acres, and approximately 7,000 fee-title tracts, totaling more than 677,000 acres.

The entire program, although a half-century old, is little known to the American public. This is unfortunate, since not only are breeding waterfowl the beneficiaries of the program, but so are many grassland birds of the northern Great Plains, such as Sprague's Pipit, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Baird's Sparrow, LeConte's Sparrow, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Grassland bird species are in trouble generally, some in significant decline, threatened by habitat loss, predation pressure, changing farming and ranching practices, and fire suppression.

This month, the Small Wetlands Program is celebrating a half century of successfully conserving wetlands and grasslands, and nurturing and sustaining waterfowl and other migratory birds, wildlife, and natural resources.

Birders can help make this celebration a success by buying a Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp, since so much of the Stamp income goes to secure these vital bird habitats for the Refuge System.

For more information on the Small Wetlands Program see this site from the USFWS:

<http://www.fws.gov/refuges/smallwetlands/>

or this recent article on the program from BIRDER'S WORLD:

<http://www.birdersworld.com/brd/default.aspx?c=a&id=1145>

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

BOOK REVIEW: SMITHSONIAN GUIDE TO BIRDS

The new SMITHSONIAN FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA by Ted Floyd (Collins, 2008) is the latest entry in a seemingly endless parade of photographic bird guides. The photographic field guide genre began in earnest with the The National Audubon Society's Field Guide to North American Birds (Eastern and Western Region) and Master Guide to Birding (3 volumes), and continued with the Stokes Field Guide to Birds (Eastern and Western Region) the Kaufman Focus Guide to Birds of North America, and the recent National

Wildlife Federation's Field Guide to Birds of North America. While the newest member of the parade has much to be admired, it is nonetheless fraught with some of the inevitable deficiencies that seem to shadow practically all photo field guides.

Although the quality and reproduction of the photo images in the new Smithsonian field guide are arguably the best we have seen in any North American photo guide, we remain personally unconvinced that any of the existing photo-guides are overall as useful in the field as those containing carefully drawn illustrations created by the likes of master field guide illustrators, such as Peterson, Sibley, and Alderfer, for example.

The range maps in the new guide are very good; and the specifics on molt strategies, plumage variations, and other additional details are truly masterful. Of appeal to a growing techno-generation of birders is an accompanying DVD with 587 MP3 audio files for 138 species that can be played in a variety of portable formats.

This new field guide has much to offer, and readers are encouraged to have a look for themselves.

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

RTP CENTENNIAL

And while we are on the subject of field guides, try to remember when you reach for your favorite guide to North American birds (whatever it is), whether it be a National Geographic Guide, a Sibley, a Kaufman, a Stokes, a Smithsonian/Floyd guide (reviewed above), a Brinkley/NWF, whatever, that none of them would have been possible without the singular vision of Roger Tory Peterson.

This 28 August will mark the centennial of RTP's birth.

In 1934 at the tender young age of 26, Peterson's breakthrough book, A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS, was first published. Birding, and for that matter nature study, has not been the same since. No American in the 20th century did more to promote a popular interest in birds and other living creatures than Roger Tory Peterson. He was a prolific writer, photographer, artist, educator, and "speaker for birds," if not for the natural world in general.

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of his birth in Jamestown, New York, the Roger Tory Peterson Institute (RTPI) has a number of events scheduled to highlight the centennial of his birth:

<http://www.rtpi.org/?p=443>

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

IBA NEWS: CHASE LAKE NWR

While on the subject of centennials, mention should be made of Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

The North American population of American White Pelicans was at an extremely low level when President Theodore Roosevelt established, by executive order, the Chase Lake NWR in August 1908.

This month, Chase Lake NWR in central North Dakota is celebrating its 100th anniversary. We don't point out each and every refuge anniversary, but this one is special. This refuge, one of two wilderness refuges in North Dakota, is also a designated Important Bird Area (IBA).

Chase Lake often boasts the largest or second-largest (depending on the year) nesting colony of American White Pelicans in North America.

The refuge received considerable publicity in 2004 and 2005 when the USFWS investigated the mysterious

deaths of thousands of young American White Pelicans at this critical IBA. Chase Lake NWR recovered the following year, supporting almost 35,000 birds. An aerial survey in late May of this year showed more than 23,000 nesting pelicans. But last month, another die-off was reported, with a loss of more than half the colony's young. The probable cause this year was cold, wet weather.

You can read more on the Chase Lake NWR centennial here:
http://www.fws.gov/arrowwood/chaselake_nwr/history.html

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/>

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

SAGE-GROUSE: THE ONGOING SAGA

Some issues just don't seem to go away, and protection of sage-grouse, both Greater Sage-Grouse and Gunnison Sage-Grouse, is one of those issues. Astute observers describe the situation as "deeply troubling"; others use more colorful descriptions, such as "a train-wreck in the making." While, there are many ongoing developments on the sage-grouse front, two of them merit specific attention this month.

First, about a month ago two conservation groups, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) and the North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP), asked the federal government to impose new restrictions on oil and gas development in the West in order to protect the Greater Sage-Grouse. They made "petition for rulemaking" requests to encourage the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to use the best available science available to protect sage-grouse.

Researchers contend that sage-grouse breeding areas are suffering as a result of rapid oil and gas exploration in the West, especially in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, and Utah. Other elements, such as the West Nile virus, drought, and residential development may also be taking a toll on sage-grouse.

About half of the remaining sagebrush habitat in the West is on BLM-managed lands, so that this agency's ability to help - or hinder - sage-grouse conservation is unprecedented. Current measures being used by the BLM to manage sage-grouse populations during energy development are inadequate. "A pile of current, peer-reviewed science is being ignored, and it's costing us our grouse," said Rollin Sparrowe of Wyoming, a TRCP board member and former president of both the Wildlife Management Institute and The Wildlife Society.

TRCP and NAGP proposed that all BLM Field Offices review the appropriateness of existing regulatory measures, updating those that are found to be inadequate, and encouraging investigators to use the best scientific and commercial data available in making future decisions. Perhaps most significant of the proposed changes is the one that states that the required buffer between any oil and gas drilling and sage-grouse leks should be extended from a quarter mile to two miles.

You can read the entire petition from TRCP and NAGP here:
http://www.trcp.org/documents/sage_grouse_petition2.pdf

An attorney for the two groups said the government was obligated to consider the petition, but not adopt it, so a decision could take several months.

The two organizations maintain that unless drilling is curtailed, sage-grouse could end up listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), shutting down public hunting and creating restrictions on drilling, residential development, and agriculture.

This ESA consideration is a second sage-grouse development worthy of note here. In late June, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service closed the comment period for sage-grouse inclusion under the ESA. The USFWS says it will decide by December whether to put the bird on the endangered species list. The agency refused to do so in 2005. However, a judge in December ordered the USFWS to reevaluate that decision after determining that it was tainted by political interference from a Bush administration official who resigned in 2007.

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

TIP OF THE MONTH: RE-LEARN ALL THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA

We've mentioned a number of field guides in this month's E-bulletin. If you're an experienced birder, you may not always pull out your favorite field guide on your outings.

So, for those particularly skilled readers who find themselves in that position, we recommend a challenge. Indeed, even for those who are beginners and intermediate birders who regularly rely on field guides, we offer a similar suggestion for this tip of the month.

If you use Kenn Kaufman's *GUIA DE CAMPO A LAS AVES DE NORTEAMERICA* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005) in the field, you can actually learn - or re-learn - all the birds and their field marks... in Spanish!

Can you say "wing bars" in Spanish? Can you describe an American Robin in Spanish?

Well, using the book you can find out! Why not give it a try?

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

WONDERFUL WETLANDS

We end this month's E-bulletin with an upbeat study about the tremendous value of coastal wetlands, those mega-important bird habitats that most E-bulletin readers probably already appreciate.

In a study published in mid-July in *AMBIO*, a journal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, U.S. coastal wetlands were found to provide more than \$23 billion in annual storm protection services to cities and regions most vulnerable to hurricane and tropical storm surges.

The Gund Institute for Ecological Economics at the University of Vermont prepared the study, which finds that "coastal wetlands provide 'horizontal levees' that are maintained by nature and are far more cost-effective than constructed levees." (Our aside: "Do the words 'Louisiana' and 'Katrina' resonate here?")

The researchers added, "If the frequency and intensity of hurricanes increases in the future, as some are predicting as a result of climate change, the value of coastal wetlands for protection of these storms will also increase."

The researchers drew their findings from modeling done for 34 major U.S. hurricanes dating back to 1980, including 2005's record-breaking year for both the number of storms making landfall in the U.S. and their devastating economic impacts.

The study concludes that the preservation and restoration of coastal wetlands is an extremely cost-effective strategy for society.

You can find the full study here:

<http://www.allenpress.com/pdf/AMBI-37-4-241.pdf>

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

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 Binoculars.

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 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.