



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

August 2010

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed to active and concerned birders, those dedicated to the joys of birding and the protection of birds and their habitats.

This issue is sponsored by NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC and the wonderful bird and birding books they make available:
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You can access an archive of past E-bulletins on the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA):
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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RARITY FOCUS

Some vagrants that appear in North America are almost unbelievable. Take the Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush, a bird which normally ranges (largely as a non-migratory resident) from northern Mexico (southern Chihuahua and southern Tamaulipas) south to northern South America. There are only two records for the United States. The first was a bird caught at a bird banding station at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in April 1996, and the other individual was found as a window-kill at Edinburg (University of Texas-Pan American) in late May 2004. That's it.

To see a picture of this rarity, check a Mexican field guide or the Accidental appendix in the National Geographic Guide (fifth edition, page 478).

With this in mind imagine the surprise experienced by Eric Ripma on 10 July when he found a strange thrush that he ultimately identified as an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush while he was doing surveys for the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory in South Dakota.

Eric was nowhere near Mexico or the Texas border. He was in Spearfish Canyon in western South Dakota, not very far from the Wyoming border. This is about 1,300 miles north of the two locations in south Texas where the species has previously occurred only as an accidental vagrant.

On July 16 he was able to obtain some photos of the thrush which he posted on his blog and distributed to friends and experts on Neotropical bird species. By the next day, at least 10 other birders got to see the bird, and more photographs

were secured to further confirm its identity. The bird was generally most visible and heard singing in the mornings along the same stretch of trail where Rimpa originally found it. The bird stayed in the same general area for the remainder of the month, delighting visiting birders.

You can see some of Eric's original photos of the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush here:
<http://nuttysbirders.blogspot.com/2010/07/orange-billed-nightingale-thrush.html>

Additional photos taken by Doug Backlund are at:
www.wildphotosphotography.com/WildPhotos/thrush/thrush.htm

SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER STILL DOING VERY POORLY

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper, a highly-threatened and practically iconic shorebird species appears to be in serious trouble. The species breeds locally in coastal northeastern Siberia and winters mostly in the delta region of northern Vietnam, peninsular Thailand, Myanmar (i.e., Burma), and occasionally in coastal Bangladesh.

The shorebird is extremely rare in North America, with only a handful of records in Alaska and a couple from Canada. We wrote about the problems facing this species most recently in May 2009:
www.refugenet.org/birding/maySBC09.html#TOC03

A decade ago, the world population was estimated at 2,500 birds. By 2002, the number had slipped to 2,000 birds, and last year some observers estimated that as few as 240 to 440 birds remained.

While no major problems were obvious in the species' tundra breeding area, troubling evidence pointed to the wintering range. For example, in both 2009 and 2010 about 200 of the sandpipers were found wintering in the Bay of Martaban, Myanmar, where there was also extensive evidence of hunting and trapping at the sites visited. The majority of local hunters and trappers surveyed were familiar with Spoon-billed Sandpipers and probably caught them every year. It is thought that this sort of activity in the wintering area may be a major cause for the species' decline.

Dr. Nigel Clark, from the British Trust for Ornithology and a key participant on recent Spoon-billed Sandpiper expeditions, said, "Urgent action is needed to find ways to give the local hunters economic alternatives to hunting. An awareness campaign will also help to persuade hunters to release Spoon-billed Sandpipers they catch." Christoph Zockler, lead author of two recent articles on the species, added: "There is some hope. Local people in Myanmar hunting waders for food are keen to cooperate with the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team and find alternatives. This will help to halt the current state of rapid decline."

Action will have to be swift. Concerted conservation and international cooperation is essential if this remarkable shorebird is to avoid extinction.

For more information about Spoon-billed Sandpipers see:
www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/spoonbilled-sandpiper.html
and
www.birdlife.org/news/news/2010/06/spoon-billed-sandpiper-paper-BCI.html

And for a fine video of this species' breeding display, a video taken in Chukotka in the Russian Far East in mid-June by David Erterius of Sweden, see here:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmEaCj60mF8

CONTINUING NEWS FROM THE GULF COAST: THE NUMBERS AND THE PROBLEMS

The good news for July was that by mid-month British Petroleum (BP) robots had successfully attached a tight-fitting cap on top of the Gulf of Mexico oil leak. This raised hopes that crude oil could be kept from polluting the Gulf waters for the first time in almost three months.

The bad news was that the BP blow-out had already released as much as 185 million gallons of oil (or even 226 million gallons of oil) into the Gulf, with considerable oil already reaching Gulf beaches and wetlands. In comparison, the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound in Alaska in 1989 involved a minimum of 11 million gallons of oil (with some estimates as high as 35 million gallons). The difference between these two horrendous events is staggering.

The Gulf gusher – really not a "spill" as some still call it – is now tragically one of the worst environmental disasters in American history. As we reported previously, there have been a number of efforts to assess the impact of the gusher on wildlife, birds, and the human residents of the Gulf region.

One assessment that particularly deserves consideration is a 12-page report released in late July by the American Bird Conservancy, "Gulf Oil Spill: Field Survey Report and Recommendations." Parts of this report describe how some of BP's oil cleanup efforts may actually be counterproductive.

The specific bird-related recommendations contained in the report address:

1. The use of more effective oil booms to protect bird colonies.
2. The employment of better fencing and other measures to protect sensitive beach nesting areas and to reduce disturbance to birds.
3. The deployment of adequately-sized and adequately-equipped oil skimmers close to the coast with real-time oil location reports to help eliminate oil before it reaches the beaches and marshlands.
4. The creation of adequate staging and recovery areas close to the coast for heavily oiled birds.
5. The restoration of eroded island habitat for nesting birds.

You can find the full report here:
www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/ABC_Gulf_Oil_Spill_Report.pdf

A NEW DECISION IMPACTING MIGRATORY BIRDS

A federal court decision over dead birds in Kansas oil fields has redefined the coverage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. As a result of this decision violators no longer need to intentionally kill the birds to be convicted. The MBTA makes it illegal to hunt, capture, or kill protected migratory birds. Violators can currently be subject to a maximum penalty of \$15,000 and six months in prison for a misdemeanor conviction.

Apollo Energies, Inc., and Dale Walker were accused of violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act after bird remains were found in both companies' heater-treaters. These devices are used to distill oil pumped from wells.

Both companies had appealed convictions for the deaths of a few birds, including Northern Flicker and Common Grackle.

Apollo Energies was fined \$1,500 and Walker \$500. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in late July affirmed these two convictions, one against Apollo and another against Walker. The court ruled that the potential violators could be held responsible even if they didn't intentionally kill any birds.

In upholding the conviction against Apollo Energies, the appeals court emphasized that the company acknowledged that it failed to cover some potentially dangerous exhaust pipes as wildlife regulators had suggested following a 2005 inspection.

REACHING YOUTH: A COMMON PROBLEM

The July-August issue of Ducks Unlimited magazine had an article by Scott Yaich, director of conservation operations at DU, titled "Passing on the Tradition." The subject was recruiting youth, the next generation of waterfowl hunters and conservationists.

You can just as easily replace word "hunter," with "birder" or "wildlife photographer" or "naturalist," to appreciate that Yaich's observations, figures, and recommendations are not unique to the waterfowling community. There are common problems here.

Some key issues (e.g., unstructured exploration, the need for mentors, the need for more frequent trips, and just plain fun in the field) are certainly common problems, especially posed in light of the reduced time and opportunity devoted to these things, as well as family income issues these days.

One point raised by Yaich, and sometimes equally obvious among birders, is that "perhaps most unfortunately, many adult hunters expressed the feeling that the inconvenience and effort necessary to introduce youths and novices to hunting takes away from their own enjoyment of the sport." Again, this may not be unique to waterfowlers.

This article is posted on the DU website for your consideration:

www.ducks.org/DU_Magazine/JulyAug2010/4983/PassingontheTradition.html?poe=JulyAug10Mag

BOOK NOTES: MOLT REVEALED

At least once or twice a year, birds replace their feathers, often changing their coloration and pattern at the same time. Given the number of bird species in the world, it is not surprising that molt has many variations and may take many forms. Not only is molt of significance to birds themselves, but it also has numerous implications for birders and bird-banders as well. In the newest Peterson Reference Guide, Steve N. G. Howell has given readers a marvelous overview of the molt process, its many variations, and its numerous applications to anyone looking at birds in the field. Using high-quality photographs and readily understood text descriptions, the author artfully describes the molt strategy of every North American bird family. While perhaps not for the rank beginning birder, there is sufficient information in this thorough compendium that anyone can thoughtfully apply information from its contents to any bird observed in the field. Readers will find that *MOLT IN NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010) will reveal far more about a bird than simply how and when it replaces its feathers. This book is a valuable contribution to anyone wishing to know more about birds than simply their name.

We highly recommend it.

IBA NEWS: U.N. RECOGNITION

For the first time the newly published "2010 UN Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) report profiles Important Bird Areas (IBAs) among the key indicators for development. The report presents an annual assessment of global progress towards development goals, including indicators like the proportion of children who are under-nourished, the incidence of malaria, the level of women's rights, universal primary education, and access to clean drinking water.

Goal 7 is to ensure environmental sustainability, and the MDG report uses IBAs to measure the degree to which key habitats for threatened species are adequately protected. In the report, it states that key habitats for threatened species (including birds) are at risk. The report adds that while some overall progress has been made, it is clearly uneven. The report specifically points to areas where accelerated efforts are needed to meet MDGs by 2015.

It recognizes that IBAs are critical sites for the conservation of the world's birds and other biodiversity, and that protecting these areas would significantly contribute to the Convention on Biological Diversity's target to safeguard areas of biological importance. However, it makes clear that "at present, more than two thirds of these sites are unprotected or only partially protected. In addition, while certain areas may be officially protected, this does not mean that they are adequately managed or that the coverage provided is sufficient to effectively conserve critical habitats and species."

You can find a summary of the MDG inclusion of IBAs here:

www.birdlife.org/news/news/2010/06/millennium-development-goals-ibas.html

You can also access the entire summary report here:

http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2010/MDG_Report_2010_En_low%20res.pdf

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs and those across the U.S. check the National Audubon

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs, and those across the US, check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:
www.audubon.org/bird/iba/

A FINE SET OF U.S. MAPS

What is probably the most detailed national vegetation U.S. land-cover map to date for the continental U.S. was released in mid-June by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The map will enable conservationists to identify places in the Lower-48 States with sufficient habitat to support wildlife, including birds. Produced by the USGS Gap Analysis Program (GAP), the maps can be viewed online and even downloaded – in six parts – for free at:
www.gap.uidaho.edu/landcoverviewer.html

BICKNELL'S THRUSH PLAN RELEASED

The International Bicknell's Thrush Conservation Group (IBTCG), an alliance of scientists, conservationists and governments, has released a plan to protect one of our rarest songbirds – the Endangered Bicknell's Thrush – across its entire range from Canada to the Caribbean.

You can read more and download a copy of the plan here:
www.bicknellsthrush.org/

HUMMINGBIRD MIGRANT WONDER

Last month we described the new Western Hummingbird Partnership (WHP), and the WHP action plan to build an effective and sustainable hummingbird conservation program:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julSBC10.html#TOC02

What follows is a related hummingbird story.

On 13 January Fred Dietrich of Tallahassee, Florida, banded a female Rufous Hummingbird at a yard near his home. The hummingbird was apparently hatched in the summer of 2009.

Dietrich had been helping others band hummingbirds for about 10 years, but he has only been banding on his own in Tallahassee for the past year or so. He was well aware that Rufous Hummingbirds, western breeders, typically spend the winter in Mexico, although they are increasingly being found wintering in the southeastern U.S. and occasionally in southern California. Accordingly, it was notable that he had banded this hummingbird, but not extraordinary. He had banded Rufous Hummingbirds before.

What was extraordinary was the news he recently received. The female Rufous Hummingbird that Dietrich banded on 13 January 2010 in Tallahassee was recaptured by Kate McLaughlin on 28 June 2010 in Chenega Bay, Alaska! That's about 3,530 miles away "as the hummingbird flies" – and it's hardly likely that the migration route was in a straight line.

This record is the longest migration for any hummingbird that has ever been documented. The bird was released alive and well in Alaska, and, with luck, it could be preparing to head back to Florida again this winter.

The previous long-distance record was a was held by a Rufous Hummingbird banded in Louisiana and found dead on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, a distance of at least 2,200 miles.

While it has long been believed that Rufous Hummingbirds that winter in the southeastern U.S. may come from as far away as Alaska, this is the first time that bird-banders have been able to document the fact on both ends of the migration route. Without banding much of our knowledge about hummingbird migration would be mere speculation.

Fred Dietrich has posted some photos of this record-holding hummingbird that he took when he banded the bird in January:
www.pbase.com/fdietrich/alaska

OPEN FIELDS OPEN UP

Although the delay by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in releasing regulations and funding for the Open Fields portion of the 2008 Farm Bill has been disappointing, the wait is now over.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced in early July that the USDA is now releasing funding for Open Fields (Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program), a new effort to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest lands to provide public access to their lands for wildlife-dependent activities.

Open Fields provides states \$50 million in federal funds to create or enhance voluntary public-access programs on private lands and encourages landowners who enroll their properties to employ best-management practices for fish and wildlife. Landowners can also receive a financial incentive in exchange for opening lands to the public for outdoor recreation.

Open Fields has been driven mainly by the hunting and fishing communities, but the benefits to birders, wildlife photographers, and hikers is obvious.

The conservation title of the Farm Bill is the nation's single-largest source of federal funding for private-lands conservation programs, with billions of dollars over the years having already been directed toward landowner activities to sustain wildlife habitat and populations. The Open Fields element of the Farm Bill is the first federal landowner incentive program of its kind to enhance access for wildlife-dependent recreation.

You can find frequently asked questions about Open Fields from the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP):
www.trcp.org/issues/access/275.html

We have previously discussed Open Fields multiple times in the E-bulletin, most recently in May:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maySBC10.html#TOC03

TIP OF THE MONTH: SHOREBIRD-TIME

Probably the best thing about the last part of the summer is that it marks the time when most migratory shorebirds are winging their way toward what will become their "wintering" quarters. They can be seen in large numbers and in great variety at this time of year. If you live within ready driving distance of most any coastal shoreline or large body of water, this is often the best time of year to work on your shorebird ID skills.

We stressed this birding opportunity last July:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julSBC09.html#TOC06

And we'll stress it again.

Don't let the opportunity pass you by, and don't be discouraged from experiencing what you might consider to be a confusing groups of birds. Shorebirds are wonderful, even if you can't name every one that you see!

Get out there and have a look!

THIS MONTH'S QUIZ FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

To celebrate National Geographic's connection with the E-bulletin, we have some fine National Geographic books to distribute to E-bulletin readers. Readers who choose to enter our quick-and-easy contest have the chance to win one of these books. Each of our quiz questions will either relate to one of our news items for the previous month, or it will relate to some event or experience that is due to occur during the current month.

For more on the excellent NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC books, see:
www.shopng.com/birdbooks

There will undoubtedly be multiple readers who answer our monthly question correctly, so we will only be able to distribute five copies of our prize book to readers whose names are picked at random from among those submitting correct answers. Because of shipping constraints, only folks residing in the U.S. or Canada are eligible.

The prize this month will be a copy of BIRD COLORATION by Geoffrey E. Hill. This 256-page book, explores the spectacle and the science of bird coloration with just the right mix of wonderful photos and artwork that you have come to expect from a National Geographic publication on birds. For more on this book, see here:
<http://shop.nationalgeographic.com/ngs/browse/productDetail.jsp?productId=6200571&code=MR20380>

Question for this month:
What Alaskan-breeding shorebird holds the record for a non-stop migratory flight?

Please send your answer by 15 August to:
birdingbulletin1@verizon.net

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

Last month we asked: After whom was the Bonaparte's Gull named?

The answer: Charles Lucien Bonaparte (a French naturalist and ornithologist, who happened to be a nephew of Emperor Napoleon and who spent a few years in the U.S. where he studied birds and updated Alexander Wilson's AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY).

Last month's winners: Walter J. Berry (Narragansett, RI), Bradley Cernohorsky (Baltimore, MD), Richard Kaiser (Phoenix, AZ), Tom Kastner (Nantucket, MA), and Mike Rippey (Napa, CA)

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

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