



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

December 2005

The Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed as a service for 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 the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA).

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RARITY FOCUS

On 18 October, Julie Hart of Chester, Vermont stopped by Charlotte Town Beach on Lake Champlain, south of Burlington, to make a cell-phone call. She knew that the locale was one of the few places in the area where she could get decent reception. Taking the opportunity to scan the lake for possible loons, scoters, geese, grebes, and other migrating waterbirds, she noticed a cluster of a dozen or so gulls a couple hundred feet off the beach. One was obviously darker-mantled than the others with a red-tipped bill. Seeking backup, Julie contacted local birders Matt Medler and Ted Murin in sequence, and the rest is history.

The mystery gull that was associating with Ring-billed Gulls proved to be a Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*), a species normally found in northeast Asia (breeding e. China, Korea, Siberia, Japan, wintering southward to Taiwan). There are now more than two dozen North American records, mostly since the 1980s, about half from Alaska, but with an increasing number from the Atlantic Coast of North America. (There are over a dozen records ranging from Newfoundland to Virginia.)

Word of the Vermont bird's discovery spread rapidly through Internet communications and mainstream print and broadcast media. As visitors increasingly gathered from afar (including other New England states, Tennessee, Florida, and British Columbia) all the gulls in the area became increasingly habituated to humans. When birders first started coming, the gulls were very wary; by November, however, most of the gulls in the area, including the Black-tailed Gull, would readily approach birders, or even fly in from a distance to "investigate" visitors. Key to this change in behavior was the introduction of cheese puffs, popcorn, bread, hamburgers, cheese crackers, hot dogs, donut-bread, and a variety of other gull-treats!

The gull stayed on the lake until at least until 7 November. Visit [here](#) to see photos of the bird.

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IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER GUIDELINES

There are now birding guidelines for Ivory-billed Woodpecker searchers at Cache River National Wildlife Refuge, Arkansas. Access is being allowed to 5,000 acres in Managed Access Areas (MAAs) of the 63,000-acre refuge. The guidelines for five specific MAAs include required daily permits, available on a first-come, first-serve basis, for consumptive (angler/hunter) and non- consumptive (birder/photographer) users. Each of the five managed units will maintain a carrying capacity of as few as six and as many as 20 users per day, divided equally between consumptive and non-consumptive users. Hopefully this permit-plan will provide a fine start in getting the public to behave properly in habitat that may be home to the rarest bird in all of North America. More guidelines will probably have to be put in place at Cache River and White River NWRs to responsibly integrate crowd control with reliable citizen science.

A one-page color map of the five MAAs is available free of charge by calling or writing Central Arkansas Refuges, Cache River NWR, 26320 HW 33 South, Augusta, Arkansas 72006; 870/347- 2614.

You can find more details on the access guidelines [here](#).

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ANOTHER WOODPECKER RARITY

The media, of course, has been abuzz this year with the story of the rediscovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas. While we await further news from that area, an intriguing and, in some ways, parallel account arrived from Mexico. The Imperial Woodpecker, a species closely related to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, is known as the largest woodpecker species in the world. The bird, which was known to inhabit mature mountain pine forests, is also presumed extinct by many. The last convincing sighting of an Imperial Woodpecker was in 1956. Most ornithologists have given up on the existence of the Imperial Woodpecker because of wholesale forest destruction in western Mexico.

In early November, however, two professors from the biology department of the University of California at Riverside reported seeing an Imperial Woodpecker near Divisadero on the north rim of Copper Canyon (Baranca del Cobre) in Mexico. They saw the bird clinging to the trunk about 30 feet up in a pine tree, from a distance of about 50 to 60 feet in good light. They observed the bird for about two minutes, during which time the woodpecker, reportedly a female, turned its head, showing its distinctive crest from several angles. Eventually the woodpecker flew off with slow heavy wingbeats (described as raven-like). No sounds were heard.

While this report is clearly tantalizing, it is also short of conclusive. Needless to say, other observers have been visiting the area since, so hopefully more news and information will soon be forthcoming from that region.

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LAYSAN DUCKS DOING WELL ON MIDWAY

For yet another amazing back-from-the-brink story, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) recently reported that Laysan Ducks are doing well at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

Fearing that a single event like a typhoon might wipe out this species, in October 2004 biologists transferred 20 of the ducks from Laysan Island in the Hawaiian Islands NWR to Midway Atoll NWR. Although one duck died, five of the six original females successfully nested. A number of ducklings survived, and a second translocation of 22 more birds to two different locations at the Midway Atoll NWR - an additional "insurance" against extinction - took place in October of this year. This year's translocation effort - run by the USFWS and the USGS - included assistance from the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust in the UK, the State of Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife, and numerous volunteers from both the public and private sectors.

The Laysan Duck was once widespread in the Hawaiian Islands (bones have been found on Moloka`i, O`ahu, Kaua`i, Maui, and Hawai`i), as well as in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands. It survived only on Laysan Island by the 1800s. On Laysan Island the species was hunted for sport and for food in the 1890s. Also, the introduction of rabbits by humans devastated the island's vegetation, reducing the duck population to 11 by 1911.

As the story goes, a biologist who visited Laysan Island in 1930 found only one pair of ducks. He was then shocked to discover that the male of the pair had disappeared and that all the eggs in the female's nest had been punctured by a Bristle-thighed Curlew. It looked like the biological end of the road for the species. Astonishingly, the female duck had sufficient semen stored in her oviduct to produce another fertile clutch, and it is from this single female and her eggs that the world's population of Laysan Duck is now reportedly descended.

Numbering about 300 individuals today, this Endangered species is still at high risk of extinction due to severe weather, disease, accidental introductions, and/or habitat degradation. Fortunately, there are also hundreds of Laysan Ducks in captive-breeding facilities in various parts of the world, thus providing a potential back-up source population.

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SUPERBOWL III IS COMING

The third annual "Superbowl of Birding" will be held on 28 January 2006 in Essex County, Massachusetts, and Rockingham County, New Hampshire. This team competition is designed to showcase the avian wonders of the New England winter, while providing a great time for participants of all ages.

A birding competition in New England in January: Are they crazy?

Most current birding contests revolve around mini-Big-Days, simply trying to amass a large day- total of birds seen. The Superbowl of Birding is designed to award points for each species observed, based on the perceived rarity of the species and the degree of difficulty of finding it. Results from the first two Superbowls produced a total of 125 species, with a sample of point values including Dovekie (5 points), King Eider (4 points), Glaucous Gull (3 points), Harlequin Duck (2 points), and Black-capped Chickadee (1 point). The grand prize, "The Joppa Cup," is awarded to the team recording the greatest number of points. Scouting, strategy, and luck are important factors in winning, and antifreeze, hot drinks, and woolies are important for everyone.

The Superbowl of Birding is run by Mass Audubon's Joppa Flats Education Center, Newburyport, MA. For the past two years Swarovski Optik of North America has sponsored the event. More information, including registration forms, rules, checklist, and prize list, are located on [this website](#).

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ARCTIC REFUGE UPDATE

In November, the U.S. House of Representatives removed from the overall budget damaging provisions to drill for oil and gas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and sent the Budget Reconciliation Bill to a conference committee to hammer out the differences between the Senate and House bills. Instrumental in this effort was the position of key moderate Republicans who told their party leaders that they would not support final passage of a budget that included any provisions to open the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas drilling.

Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, said that "while we scored a huge victory by getting the drilling provision removed from the House bill, the Senate's version still contains the provision - so it's not over yet! Now key members from the House and Senate will sit down. We'll be working very hard to make sure the Arctic drilling provision is removed in conference - but powerful Senators are promising to keep it in."

Perhaps unknown to some is that already about 95 percent of Alaska's coastal plain is open to potential oil and gas development. The Arctic NWR, an area that supports a marvelous diversity of wildlife, including Musk Ox, Polar Bear, Caribou, and approximately 135 species of birds - shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, terns, and songbirds - represents the remaining 5 percent, and is the only place on Alaska's North Slope that remains closed to exploration and development.

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WILMA WAIFS

Your two editors, Wayne and Paul, have a special interest in Chimney Swifts, and from time to time that species has actually found its way into the E-bulletin. We never thought, however, that we would ever have a Chimney Swift report like the one that follows.

Hurricane Wilma passed well to the east of Nova Scotia in the last days of October, but once its eye disintegrated, it dropped large numbers of birds along the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia, with lesser numbers to the northeast in Newfoundland and in southern New Brunswick to the west, with some birds even reaching Prince Edward Island. That's understandable enough, and a fairly common occurrence where hurricanes are concerned.

As the remnants of Hurricane Wilma whirled past northeastern North America, however, it also deposited a surprising number of North American vagrants, including ducks, gulls, swallows, and shorebirds, on the other

side of the Atlantic Ocean, first in the Azores. (The Azores is a property of Portugal, located about two-thirds of the way across the Atlantic to Europe.) Among the many birds displaced by the storm were dozens of Chimney Swifts. Indeed, there may easily have been more than 30 birds - given multiple counts on consecutive days - on the Azores.

Chimney Swifts only occur as very rare vagrants in Western Europe. In the UK and Ireland, for instance the first record of Chimney Swift was an individual in 1982 (Cornwall). Through last year, there were about a dozen additional records, mostly from the southwest UK. In 1999 alone, there was a surprising total of 14 birds reported in different locations in the UK and Ireland. That surprising number from 1999 was only surpassed this year, with at least 16 Chimney Swifts in the UK and Ireland last month. Multiple trios appeared, along with single birds here and there, all probably waifs from Hurricane Wilma.

Reportedly, there were even some sightings of Chimney Swifts in France.

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OTHER HURRICANE WAIFS

When three Hurricanes - Katrina, Rita, and Wilma - hammered the American Gulf Coast, major damage was inflicted on multiple National Wildlife Refuges. The USFWS reported a tab of \$163.0 million for "restoration and repair costs" from Hurricane Katrina (\$93 million), Hurricane Rita (\$59 million), and Hurricane Wilma (\$11 million).

These figures represent mainly equipment and facilities costs and do not include habitat costs, which for Rita alone were estimated initially at \$75 million. (An especially dramatic example of habitat loss is Breton National Wildlife Refuge, a globally important IBA for colonial nesting birds off the Louisiana coast which, according to USFWS testimony before the U.S. Senate, lost 50 to 70 percent of its land mass due to the effects of Hurricane Katrina.)

This tally also does not include an additional \$24 million spent on assistance in search and rescue efforts, involving boats, heavy equipment, and manpower. The USFWS participated in rescuing more than 4,500 people during Katrina, and their operations base at Big Branch NWR in Louisiana provided more than 25,000 meals for the displaced.

In response to this burden, the Administration is only requesting funds to cover restoration and repair costs, of \$61.0 million. The disappointing figure of \$61 million will obviously put a strain on the entire Refuge System. If that figure isn't increased, every refuge in the country will be hurting when it comes to maintaining appropriate habitat and wildlife management and adequate visitor services, at least in the immediate future.

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TWO DECADES OF CRP

The 20th anniversary of the signing of the Food Security Act (Farm Bill) of 1985 will be 23 December 2005. This legislation contained the original Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) language, language that initially focused on reducing soil erosion and excess commodity production. By the second (1990) and third (1996) reauthorization of the act, the CRP segments of the Farm Bill were developing so that wildlife objectives were made co-equal with soil and water-quality goals. By the 2002 reauthorization, CRP sign-ups (administered by the Farm Service Agency [FSA]) had expanded to include a ceiling-total of 39.2 million acres. As a result of these gradual improvements in the Farm Bill, waterfowl and gamebirds have greatly benefitted, along with harriers, shrikes, sparrows, meadowlarks, bobolinks, and other birds that utilize the mix of grasses, shrubs, and trees that are grown and subsidized through CRP. For example, in productive Midwestern CRP habitat, nearly 100 species of birds have been recorded on some CRP landscapes.

Be aware that the momentum building for the 2007 Farm Bill is tempered by a complex interplay of issues, mixing compliance with international trade agreements, support for corporate agriculture, the call for expanded conservation elements, and a troublesome budget climate.

We will continue to report on the conservation elements of the Farm Bill as the legislation develops.

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NORTHERN BOBWHITE RESTORATION EFFORTS AND A NEW WEBSITE

Implementation of a Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) is moving ahead, despite enormous and intricate obstacles. Fortunately, many of the state wildlife agencies are committed to making progress in this area. A number of non-governmental organizations have also dedicated time, energy, and resources to this goal. The potential for increased Farm Bill benefits to Northern Bobwhite (and related songbirds) is also encouraging as the Farm Bill discussion escalates.

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) estimates that about a third of the 250,000 acres allocated to the new Continuous Conservation Reserve Program practice, CP33 Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds, has already been

committed. Enrollments are expected to increase.

Unfortunately, the status of Northern Bobwhite and songbird population-monitoring required for CP33 by the FSA remains in a Privacy-Act limbo. While two dozen wildlife agencies, in collaboration with technical assistance from Mississippi State University, are prepared to begin monitoring quail in the spring of 2006, legal barriers within FSA are holding up the ability to locate CP33 contracts on the ground. Since it is essential to make personal contact with landowners in order to gain permission to enter their properties for censusing, without the FSA assisting with that entree, the monitoring required by FSA simply cannot be conducted.

For more details and for more on the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, see the [new website](#).

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WETLANDS LOAN ACT: RE-INTRODUCING A SUCCESS

Last month, a "Wetlands Loan Act" was introduced, H.R. 4315, an effort that would use an advance on funds from the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp to pay for conservation of wetlands used by waterfowl and many other bird species.

The original WLA was a novel idea, first launched in the 1960s, to help stop the rate of wetland losses, and now it is a concept reborn.

Cong. Mark Kennedy (R-MN) has introduced this new bill with Cong. Mike Thompson (D-CA); the legislation would borrow \$400 million against future Stamp proceeds to secure land now at current prices. All acquisitions and easements made possible through Stamp proceeds are managed by the USFWS as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

There are now prime opportunities for wetland and grassland habitat protection that may disappear unless action is taken soon. For example, in the Dakotas alone, there are now almost 700 landowners on waiting lists for grassland easements to be purchased with Stamp dollars - standing by with 190,000 acres of grassland and 37,000 acres of associated wetlands.

A new WLA can also provide opportunities to work on creative ways to sell the Stamp to a broader conservation constituency.

We touched on the possibilities - and some potential drawbacks - of this legislation in the [September 2005](#) and [October 2005](#) issues of this E-bulletin.

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RESIDENT CANADA GEESE TARGETED

In early November, the USFWS released its final Environmental Impact Statement outlining alternatives to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada Goose populations and reduce damages caused by these feral geese. The Service's proposed action would allow state wildlife agencies, landowners, and airports increased "flexibility in controlling resident Canada Goose populations."

During this past decade alone, the resident Canada Goose population in the Atlantic Flyway has increased an average of one percent per year so that currently the region supports more than a million birds. The Mississippi Flyway has seen a growth of five percent per year to produce a current estimate of 1.6 million birds.

For the most part, resident Canada Geese tend to remain in the same area year-round or migrate only short distances. There is little evidence that resident Canada Geese will breed with migratory Canada Geese that nest in northern Canada and Alaska. The swift rise of resident Canada Geese populations is attributed to a number of factors (e.g., most resident Canada Geese live in temperate climates, tolerate human and other disturbances, have a relative abundance of suitable habitat, and fly relatively short distances for winter.) The virtual absence of waterfowl hunting and natural predators in many urban and suburban areas provides additional protection to these resident populations.

The USFWS outlined management alternatives in response to widespread concern about overabundant populations of resident Canada Geese, which can damage property, agriculture, and natural resources in parks and other open areas near water.

"Resident Canada Goose populations have increased dramatically over the past 15 years," said USFWS Director H. Dale Hall. "These high population levels have been shown to cause problems for natural and economic resources, and we believe increased local management with National oversight is the best approach to reduce conflicts and bring the population under control."

"Resident Canada Goose management is particularly challenging because of the diversity of society's perspectives regarding the year-round presence of these birds, but the growth of these resident populations causes problems that compel population management," said John Cooper, President of the International

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The preferred alternative consists of three main program components. The first component creates specific control-and-depredation orders for airports, landowners, agricultural producers and public health officials. These new orders will permit the "take" of resident Canada Geese without a federal permit, provided local agencies fulfill certain reporting and monitoring requirements. The second component consists of expanded hunting methods and opportunities (e.g., expanded shooting hours and use of electronic calls and unplugged shotguns). The third component would allow the States to authorize a harvest of resident Canada Geese during August, since migratory Canada Geese will not have arrived from the breeding grounds at that time.

Only State wildlife agencies and Tribal entities in the Atlantic, Central, and Mississippi Flyway can implement these components for resident Canada Geese. The Pacific Flyway representatives requested that their states not be included because they have fewer issues with resident Canada Geese. For agricultural issues, states in the Pacific Flyway will continue to apply for federal permits.

Expansion of existing annual hunting season and the issuance of control permits have all been recently used to reduce resident goose numbers with varying degrees of success. While these approaches have provided relief in some areas, they have not completely addressed the issues. It is also expected that these recommendations will be challenged through the courts.

For good background about resident Canada Goose populations, see [this source](#).

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REFUGE PHOTO CONTEST DEADLINE APPROACHES

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and Swarovski Optik of North America (SONA) will be closing their 2005 Refuge Photo Contest on 15 December. The digital photo contest is designed to showcase America's National Wildlife Refuge System. Submitted images (no more than 10 per contestant) can be of birds, mammals, insects, fish, other animals, plants, people, or simply refuge scenery from a National Wildlife Refuge.

There are Swarovski products and other prizes as awards. Winners will be announced in March, in conjunction with the 103rd anniversary of the Refuge System. See the [Contest Home Page](#) for more information on all the prizes, as well as on procedures, rules, and other details.

If you have some good refuge photos, now's the time to send them in!

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