



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

December 2006

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RARITY FOCUS

On Friday afternoon, 17 November, Guy McCaskie, reigning godfather of modern California birding, was at the boat-launching site at Red Hill, near the southeast end of the Salton Sea in California. Immediately in front of him, in the wet mud north of the boat launch channel was a completely unexpected Ross's Gull catching flies. McCaskie then called other birders to the site, where the gull was later photographed and where it remained within 100 feet of the spot, actively catching flies for the rest of the day.

The Ross's Gull is a high-Arctic species, rare almost anywhere south of the pack ice. The Salton Sea Ross's Gull is the first record of this species for California. Equally shocking, it was not at any anticipated northern California coastal location, but inland at almost as far south in the state as one can go. (And, at 226.4 feet below sea level, we would add!)

By dawn on 18 November, at least 50 birders were on site, many of who had driven all night long to see this grand lifer. By the end of the day, at least 150 birders had arrived in the area of the boat launch. The small gull calmly fed along the mud and shore, even working its way to within a dozen feet of waiting photographers.

On the morning of the 19th, the Ross's Gull was again at Red Hill. The birders present at dawn that day saw the bird take off, fly east along the shoreline and then disappear, never to be seen again.

For pictures of birders looking at the Ross's Gull on 18 November, see images from Terry Hunefeld at: <http://thunefeld.smugmug.com/gallery/2146956/1>

For multiple images of the bird by Doug Aguillard and Henry Detwiler see:

<http://sdbirds.basiclink.com/ross.htm>

and

http://www.southwestbirders.com/rogu_ss111806.htm

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IBA NEWS: SALTON SEA FUTURE IN DOUBT

Since our monthly rarity is the Ross's Gull at the Salton Sea, it is appropriate to mention the ongoing discussion over the future of the sea itself, an Important Bird Area (IBA) of global significance.

The health of the Salton Sea faces a constant threat from the decrease in the amount of untainted water that annually flows into it. Each year - given evaporation, irrigation runoff from Imperial Valley agricultural fields, and decreasing acceptable water coming into the sea - salt, selenium, phosphates, and other nutrients concentrate in the shrinking sea. Since the sea lacks an outlet, these contaminants get concentrated, thereby stressing the fish and invertebrates that live there, and ultimately impacting the birds.

About a century ago, a flood caused the Colorado River to shift, re-filling the Salton Trough with sea of water amounting to approximately 360 square miles. The result, for birders at least, is an outstanding birding locale - a stinky-hot sea, and an over-abundance of salt and contaminants that all too often literally results in a dead-end for many fish and birds alike. Salton City, Red Hill Marina, and the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, all regularly host some amazing and unexpected birds.

For some background on the Salton Sea you might want to check the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuges site and its associated links:

<http://www.fws.gov/saltonsea/>

The state of California is now tasked with coming up with a plan to restore the sea, and unless a viable renewal plan is implemented, the demise of this unique area is inevitable. Unfortunately, none of the proposed alternatives include keeping the sea as it is now, primarily because of a lack of suitable water. A combination of some of the existing proposals might help, however.

You can review this issue at the site of the Salton Sea Coalition, supported by the Desert Protective Council, National Audubon Society, California Waterfowl Association, Defenders of Wildlife, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, United Anglers, and others:

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

The public review period for this issue and its multiple options will end 17 January 2007.

For more information on IBA sites in California see:

<http://www.audubon-ca.org/IBA.htm>

For additional general information about the ongoing IBA program in the United States, see:

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

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CONTROVERSIAL GOLDEN-PLOVER RECORD CONCLUDED

When the Delaware Bird Records Committee met first met, fully 11 years ago, the first record before the committee was a European Golden-Plover reported seen 25-27 June 1989 at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge. At the time, the committee had received 15 written descriptions and a two-minute video as supporting evidence.

The Delaware Bird Records Committee met most recently in mid-September, has finally voted to reject the bird as a European Golden-Plover, and now accepts the identification as a Pacific Golden-Plover. Since the bird is so controversial, and to better explain the reason for its action, the Records Committee has recently placed an analysis of the documentation and the committee's "Vote and Comment" forms on the Delmarva Ornithological Society's website. If you are interested, you can now see what the Delaware Bird Records Committee members thought about this bird and read a detailed account of the evaluation process:

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

and

<http://www.dosbirds.org/committees/records/Reports/GoldenPlover.htm>

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DELAWARE MORATORIUM ON HORSESHOE CRAB HARVESTING

Also from Delaware is more news for those concerned about Red Knots. As you will recall, Red Knots may be in

serious trouble. We recently covered this species in the E-Bulletin, along with its relationship with Horseshoe Crabs, and the efforts to get the shorebird listed under the Endangered Species Act in the October 2006 E-bulletin:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/octSBC06.html#TOC06>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/oct06.html>

During their spring migration, Red Knots time their arrival at the Delaware Bay to coincide with normal Horseshoe Crab spawning. An abundance of Horseshoe Crab eggs on the bay shore beaches is essential for the

shorebirds' to gain sufficient weight to successfully complete their journey to Arctic breeding grounds. The steep decline of the Red Knot, however, mirrors the over harvesting of the Horseshoe Crab in Delaware Bay and elsewhere.

In late November, Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) ordered a two-year moratorium on the harvesting of Horseshoe Crabs in Delaware waters, effective 11 December 2006, as a protective measure for the Horseshoe Crab population and the associated migratory bird populations that depend on the resource for food.

DNREC Secretary, John A. Hughes, acknowledged that Red Knots are at risk, and in his decision he emphasized the importance of establishing an alternative to using Horseshoe Crabs as bait for eel and conch fisheries. He noted the department's financial support for the University of Delaware's College of Marine and Earth Studies' three-year effort to establish an alternative attractant as bait for conchs and eels, an effort joined and supported by DuPont Chemical Solutions Enterprise. Continuation of the collaborative effort was pledged.

The DNREC statement is available here:

<http://www.dnrec.state.de.us/dnrec2000/admin/press/story1.asp?PRID=2295>

New Jersey has wisely imposed its own moratorium, meaning that no crabs are to be taken in that state and that both sides of the Delaware Bay are currently protected.

Of course, the plight of the Red Knot is not restricted to Delaware Bay, and other contending options for determining this shorebird's fate still exist.

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NATIONAL BIRD EDUCATION CONFERENCE

The Council for Environmental Education and Flying WILD have announced an upcoming conference, "Bird Conservation through Education: A National Gathering for Bird Education." The intent is to provide a forum for discussion, network building, and planning to further the reach of bird education efforts in North America.

The event is scheduled to be held in Austin, Texas 5-8 February 2007.

The goals of the conference are to:

- * Initiate the development of a national bird education network.
- * Highlight the most critical messages to be communicated through bird education efforts.
- * Share success stories in bird conservation education through case studies and interactive discussions.
- * Examine outreach to diverse audiences as a priority goal within bird conservation education and share successful methods for outreach to diverse audiences.

For more details:

<http://www.flyingwild.org/documents/RegistrationPacket-Web.pdf>

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PRAIRIE GROUSE PLAN AFOOT

There are a dozen species of grouse that occur in North America, in habitats as diverse as forest, prairie, shrub-steppe, and tundra. While the North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) has developed a North American Grouse Management Strategy to highlight these species and to generate support and cooperation for their management, planning concerns persist. Although some of the dozen species, such as the two sage-grouse species and the ruffed grouse, are already the focus of comprehensive conservation planning efforts, still others, such as several species of prairie grouse that are in trouble, have not received such specific consideration.

That situation is now changing, with a developing plan for three species of grouse - Greater Prairie-Chicken, Lesser Prairie-Chicken and Sharp-tailed Grouse. Such a plan will address specific threats to, and conservation actions for, each of these three grouse species.

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Prairie grouse can be viewed as charismatic species of the Great Plains. These three species require expansive and often complex habitat, thus making them excellent indicators of ecosystem integrity at a landscape level. This is particularly significant since grassland habitat - at least in terms of extent and quality - has declined dramatically from historic conditions on the Great Plains due to multiple causes (e.g., conversion to cropland, encroachment by woody plants, energy development, and urban sprawl).

Moreover, these three prairie grouse serve as flagship species for demonstrating the need for preservation as well as for evaluating proposed amounts and distributions for current management and potential restoration of prairie ecosystems. As such, the evolving prairie grouse plan can also benefit a host of other native species that depend on healthy grasslands.

The proposed Prairie Grouse Management Plan will regionalize grassland conservation goals according to Bird Conservation Regions (BCR) identified by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). The effort's steering committee aims to have a draft Prairie Grouse Management Plan completed in March 2007, with a final plan hopefully approved in the fall.

You can find more details from the Ecosystem Management Research Institute:

<http://www.emri.org/Projects/PrairieGrousePlan.htm>

or from the Nebraska Partnership for All-bird Conservation:

<http://www.nebraskabirds.org/steercom/steercom.htm>

(Click "North American Grouse Partnership: Prairie Grouse Management Plan" near the bottom of the page.)

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NEW-WORLD DICLOFENAC WORRIES?

In a past issue of this publication, you have read about the link between the drastic decline of vultures in the Indian subcontinent and the use of the diclofenac as a veterinary anti-inflammatory drug. See our recent coverage here:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/octSBC06.html#TOC15>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/oct06.html>

Basically, diclofenac's widespread use in the Indian subcontinent as a livestock painkiller has threatened vultures as they scavenge dead farm animals that retain significant amounts of the drug in their dead bodies. Rapid renal failure in the vultures eating such contaminated carcasses results, eventually followed by their death.

We have been told that diclofenac won't impact "our" birds, because "it isn't used here."

While it is true that U.S. vets don't administer diclofenac to United States farm animals, diclofenac is licensed and used in South America as a veterinary drug. The potential impact of this on New World vultures (particularly the Andean Condor, but also the Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, and King Vulture) is unknown, as are the repercussions for other avian scavengers.

This certainly justifies some further watching, and a recent article in BIOLOGY LETTERS suggests as much. That piece is summarized here:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2006.0554>

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MADAGASCAR POCHARD RE-DISCOVERED

Biologists for The Peregrine Fund (World Center for Birds of Prey) announced last month the sighting of Madagascar Pochard (*Aythya innotata*), a medium-sized diving duck of Madagascar that was feared extinct.

National Director for The Peregrine Fund's Madagascar Project, Lily-Arison Rene de Roland, and field biologist, Thé Seing Sam, discovered the rare duck while conducting avian surveys in a remote part of northern Madagascar. They observed nine adults and four young that appeared to be nearly two weeks old.

The last confirmed sighting of the species was more than a decade and a half ago, a single male at Lake Alaotra on the Central Plateau of Madagascar. The last certain record of multiple birds (approximately 20) was on Lake Alaotra in June 1960.

At the time of the find, the team from The Peregrine Fund was doing research on the Madagascar Harrier.

"Discovering the Madagascar Pochard while scouting for a threatened bird of prey, the Madagascar Harrier, illustrates how conservation of charismatic raptors can benefit species that share the same ecosystem," said J. Peter Jenny, Acting President of The Peregrine Fund.

For more details, including photos and video:

http://www.peregrinefund.org/press_full.asp?id=110&category=Madagascar%20Project

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BOOK REVIEW: BLACK & BROWN FACES

Dudley Edmondson, bird-and-wildlife photographer believes that it is crucial for people of color to get involved with nature, the outdoors, and natural resource protection. He sought out 19 other African Americans, all with abiding connections to nature and asked them about their personal stories: how they came to value nature, who served as their heroes and mentors, and why African Americans are under-represented in our parks, refuges, and conservation efforts? The result was **BLACK & BROWN FACES IN AMERICA'S WILD PLACES** (Adventure Publications, in cooperation with Watchable Wildlife, Inc.). This is a candid and fascinating book, and one that raises as many questions as it answers. The 20 profiles provide valuable insight into the past, present, and future of our pastime and our concerns.

Look here for some background on the book, including audio samples:

<http://www.raptorworks.com/book.htm>

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COFFEE AND BIRDS: THREE QUICK NOTES

We regularly visit the shade-coffee issue in the E-bulletin, and we end this December issue with three short notes on coffee:

1. The worldwide surge in demand for coffee has resulted in a shift from traditional, sustainable coffee growing methods (with the plants grown in the shade of a diverse and bird-compatible understory) to intense monocultures requiring large amounts of fertilizer and pesticides. "Coffee and Conservation" is a thoughtful website that provides information on the importance of shade-grown, organic, and fair trade coffee to the protection of biodiversity, and especially birds. It deserves a serious look by those who want to combine social responsibility, support for biodiversity, creative bird conservation, and quality coffee:

<http://www.coffeehabitat.com/>

2. In next month's E-bulletin, we expect to highlight the plight of the Cerulean Warbler, a species that has been found to have a special relationship to shade-grown coffee plantings in the northern Andes. (The warbler prefers broken-canopy wintering habitat, 8-10 meters high, in an altitude of 800-1,600 meters, a situation corresponding to many traditional shade-coffee locations in the northern Andes.) Moreover, it appears that there may be multiple ways to support the conservation of Cerulean Warblers, ways we will visit next month. (In June we reviewed the issue of mountaintop-removal in Appalachia, and its impact on Cerulean Warbler: <http://www.refugenet.org/birding/junSBC06.html#TOC08>)

3. Finally, in this Holiday season we will remind you that gift-giving of an avian nature can go a very long way. Besides the field guide, feeder, binoculars, or "Duck Stamp" that might find its way to a relative or friend, wrapped up in a bow or put in a stocking, we suggest considering a small supply of bird-compatible shade-grown coffee as a wrapped gift or seasonal party offering. This is the perfect way to start a serious bird conversation, as well as a way to enjoy a good brew.

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Have a great Holiday season!

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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.

