



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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December 2007

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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](#).

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### RARITY FOCUS

On 2 November, a golfer with an interest in birding found a curious bird on the back nine at the Dave White Municipal Golf Course in Casa Grande, southeast of Phoenix, Arizona. He was without binoculars or field guide, but the description - "about the size of an avocet, all black with rust wings coverts, grayish-green legs, light yellow straight bill, wading around the edge of the pond"- seemed to fit a Northern Jacana. By the next day, the bird's identity had been confirmed and a string of birders began to visit, all hoping to see this rare visitor from Mexico.

Problems of access soon arose, however: birders and photographers were not allowed on the grass or pathways of the golf course, even if there were no golfers present. Those interested in seeing the Northern Jacana had to do so only from a dirt-coated construction area just outside the golf course and its ponds. Brush near the northern edge of the pond often made the bird difficult to see, but with patience the jacana could usually be seen around the edges of the pond. Curiously, the Northern Jacana seemed to particularly enjoy walking on synthetic lily pads, made of Styrofoam and located in the pond.

There have been three prior records of Northern Jacana in Arizona accepted by the Arizona Birds Committee: Kino Springs and Guevavi Ranch, Nogales, 7 June 1985 - 3 January 1986; Mittry Lake, near Yuma, 6-30 June 1986; and Arivaca Lake, 15-23 October 1998. (For identification details of this unique wetland-bird, see the National Geographic guide, page 160-1, the Kaufman "Focus" guide, pages 182-3, or the "big" Sibley, page 160.)

According to another golfer who carried a birding field guide in her golf bag, the Northern Jacana has been on the golf course for at least one, and perhaps two, previous years! A birder who talked with a course groundskeeper relayed the information that the bird may even have been around for up to three years.

By the end of November, the bird was still on site, birders were still arriving to see it, and managers of the golf course were satisfied that there had been no negative golfer-birder interaction,

For photos of this unusual visitor taken by Brendon Grice, Richard Ditch, Chris Benesh, and Oliver Niehuis, see: <http://azfo.org/gallery/noja.html>

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### **IBA NEWS: SAN FRANCISCO BAY OIL-SPILL**

Readers of the E-bulletin are undoubtedly aware of some of the impacts of the container-ship accident that took place in San Francisco Bay on 7 November. The tanker, "Cosco Busan," hit the Bay Bridge and dumped 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel oil into the bay. Toxic bunker fuel oil is the dregs left from refining crude oil into gasoline, diesel, and jet fuel. It is heavy-duty oil that breaks down very slowly.

Following the spill, oil has tarred thousands of birds and dozens of marine mammals, closed fishing, and threatened crucial habitat. One of the things that make this spill especially unfortunate is the threat it has created to nearby Important Bird Areas (IBAs) that represent critical habitat for a number of species of bird and sites that are recognized as key components for bird conservation.

There are about 15 Important Bird Areas in the San Francisco Bay area, at least four of which were directly impacted by this initial spill (Richardson Bay, Brooks Island, East Shore Wetlands, and Bolinas Lagoon). See the map from Audubon California:

[http://www.sfbayjv.org/110807OilSpill/OilSpill\\_SFBay\\_Nov9.pdf](http://www.sfbayjv.org/110807OilSpill/OilSpill_SFBay_Nov9.pdf)

As for potential damage to the area, "San Francisco Bay just dwarfs all the other estuaries on the Pacific Coast," said Dave Shuford, a wetlands biologist at PRBO Conservation Science (originally called Point Reyes Bird Observatory). "The estuary size, the diversity of the habitat, the flow of fresh water and the mild climate all come together to support large numbers of birds," he said.

The general public has undoubtedly seen some of the dramatic images of oiled birds resulting from this spill. At the start of the assessment, more than half of the oiled birds appear to have been ducks - often scoters and scaup - which would dive in clear water but would then come up in water covered with oil. Other affected species included Common Murres, Rhinoceros Auklets, Western Gulls, Western and Eared Grebes, Brown Pelicans, and multiple species of shorebirds.

There are additional repercussions that that some people may be unaware of. If significant numbers of local birds are oiled, there could be long-range impacts on the total regional populations of some species, principally because recovery rates from rehabilitation are low and reproduction may ultimately be compromised. Additionally, if bunker fuel oil permeates area wetlands, it is likely to persist in the environment for decades, often producing pernicious long-term impacts.

For continuing background, check PRBO:

<http://www.prbo.org/cms/452>

a summary of links on the spill from the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture:

[http://www.sfbayjv.org/news\\_110807OilSpill.html](http://www.sfbayjv.org/news_110807OilSpill.html)

and a blog recommended by birders in California:

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

For additional information about IBA programs across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:

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

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### **SCAUP DIE-OFF INCREASES CONCERN**

Last month, we discussed the scaup-tracking efforts of the Long Point Waterfowl & Wetlands Research Fund (LPWRRF), an ongoing study coordinated by Bird Studies Canada, designed to follow migrating Greater and Lesser Scaup. At that point, scaup were concentrating around a number of locations, including southern Manitoba and the Great Lakes:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/novSBC07.html#TOC03>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/nov07.html>

Unfortunately, it appears that some of these ducks' brethren may not have made it much farther south.

Unfortunately, it appears that some of these ducks' brethren may not have made it back to their former haunts.

In early November, an estimated 3,000 Lesser Scaup and several hundred American Coots were found dead on Minnesota's Lake Winnibigoshish. Initial reports suggest that the birds died as a result of an exotic trematode, a small intestinal parasitic fluke. When waterfowl consume infected snails, the trematodes attack the birds' lower intestines, which eventually cause ulcers and hemorrhaging. The birds can be infected in less than a day and die within the next week.

The die-off is another indication of vexing problems recently facing scaup populations. During the 1970s and early 1980s average scaup breeding populations were in excess of six million, but for most of the last decade numbers declined to less than four million.

"There is no single cause implicated in the decline," says Dale Humburg, Chief Biologist for Ducks Unlimited. Wetland losses and degradation, lower hen survival and nest success, the impact of contaminants and parasites, poor body condition during migration, and harvest impacts all have been studied. Wetland preservation efforts include "key breeding areas such as the western Boreal Forest, important migration areas such as the Great Lakes, and southern wintering areas including the Gulf Coast." Humburg says that comprehensive solutions are required to reverse the downward trend in scaup numbers.

For the Associated Press story on the initial die-off check:

<http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5gOuDW626JIURx9k7dq8ae-B2HTZwD8SODTUG0>

For more on "The Great Scaup Mystery," see the DU story in their November/December magazine:

[http://www.ducks.org/DU\\_Magazine/DUMagazineNovemberDecember2007/3446/TheGreatScaupMystery.html?from=newsrelease](http://www.ducks.org/DU_Magazine/DUMagazineNovemberDecember2007/3446/TheGreatScaupMystery.html?from=newsrelease)

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## **MAJOR LAND CONSERVATION INITIATIVE IN CANADA'S NW TERRITORIES**

In late November, the Government of Canada announced one of the biggest land conservation agreements on the North American continent since the ANILCA settlement of 1980, which effected Alaska conservation.

The Canadian announcement will secure over 25.5 million acres of land in the Northwest Territories. During a 21 November celebration at the Canadian Museum of Nature, Environment Minister John Baird and Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl announced plans to create a new national wildlife area along the Mackenzie River (3.7 million acres), a new national park on the East Arm of Great Slave Lake (8.3 million acres, of which 6.5 million is actually new protection), and the Akaitcho Settlement Lands, ecologically and culturally important lands to Native people (15.3 million acres to be conserved and managed under tribal direction for environmental protection and sustainable development).

While plans and agreements are finalized, the lands are protected from diamond and uranium companies doing any mining in these areas. Official designations for each area are expected within five years.

More details are available from the Environment Canada website:

<http://www.ec.gc.ca/default.asp?lang=En&n=714D9AAE-1&news=73BDC06C-DA04-4E53-9FE2-A42C7D887EF1>

and the website of the Boreal Songbird Initiative:

<http://www.borealbirds.org/landnov07/>

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## **WILDLIFE FUNDING IN CLIMATE-CHANGE LEGISLATION**

There continues to be movement on wildlife funding as part of climate-change legislation. This important issue was covered in the March E-bulletin:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC06>

and

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

At least seven of the proposed Congressional bills on climate-change include a specific dedicated source of funding (through a portion of cap-and-trade credits) for wildlife conservation in the states. (The important vehicle for these bills would be the existing Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program Account of 2000 that would cover wildlife education and appreciation, as well as conservation.) A few other bills address in more general terms funding for wildlife needs.

These proposed bills also address differences in the amount of targeted CO2 reductions, the amount of funding that might go to wildlife mitigation, and any state-based matches that might be required. In any case, bills designed to reduce CO2 emissions, in combination with wildlife funding to the states, merit careful consideration from bird education-and-conservation advocates.

Recent leading proposals, particularly in the Senate in the last month or so, deserve special attention, especially

recent leading proposals, particularly in the Senate in the last month or so, deserve special attention, especially since they consider much needed wildlife education and wildlife appreciation components.

For more information about these multiple opportunities, visit:  
<http://www.teaming.com/funding/climate.html>

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## **"BANKING ON NATURE" 2006 RELEASED**

Since 1997, the USFWS has released "Banking on Nature" reports that attempt to estimate the economic benefits to local communities that result from National Wildlife Refuge visitation.

The latest report, the fourth in this series and a study approaching almost 400 pages, was released in the last days of November. (The study only reflects figures for the lower-48 states and for refuges with more than 1,500 annual visitors.) This most recent "Banking on Nature" report announced that recreational use on National Wildlife Refuges generated almost \$1.7 billion in total economic activity during fiscal year 2006. As a result of this spending, almost 27,000 private sector jobs were sustained and \$542.8 million in employment income was generated.

The report also revealed that recreational spending on refuges generated nearly \$185.3 million in tax revenue at the local, county, state and federal level. In addition, it demonstrated that about 87 percent of refuge visitors traveled from outside their local area to visit refuges.

About 82 percent of total expenditures came from non-consumptive recreation (activities other than hunting and fishing) on National Wildlife Refuges. Fishing accounted for 12 percent of total expenditures, while hunting accounted for 6 percent. For the first time, birding as an activity, both for area residents and non-residents, was separated out in the "Banking on Nature" report for at least 66 of the 80 sample refuges that received specific examination.

Due to a lack of specific birding data for all refuges, birding impacts were not extrapolated nationwide. One would hope that this initial look into birding in "Banking on Nature" would be expanded and examined more closely in future studies in the series.

Still, in an overview on the role of birding (p. 352-4), the newly released study charted sample high-volume birding visitation (i.e., refuges with more than 50,000 birding visitors per year) and high-expenditure birding NWRs (i.e., refuges with local birding expenditures of over \$1 million per year). The study also pointed out that "quality birding is an outgrowth of the Refuge System's national and international role in conserving quality habitat. In fact, one-third of all Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the United States are located on National Wildlife Refuges... illustrating the key role that refuges play in attracting both birds and bird enthusiasts."

For a copy of the full report, see:  
[http://www.fws.gov/refuges/pdfs/BankingonNature2006\\_1123.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/pdfs/BankingonNature2006_1123.pdf)

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## **SO, HOW DOES THAT BIRDSONG MAKE YOU FEEL?**

In a study costing over \$410,000, researchers from the Department of Anthropology at Aberdeen University, Scotland, will spend two years investigating how bird songs, calls and cries become a part of people's lives

Dr Andrew Whitehouse, the project's lead researcher, said, "We are interested in understanding how people come to focus on particular sounds and how they develop the skill of identifying songs and calls.... We also intend to explore how bird sounds evoke time, place and season and how people experience and draw upon bird sounds in science, art, music and their everyday lives."

"Listening to birds: an anthropological approach to bird sounds" has received substantial funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The team is interested in hearing from anyone interested in birds from across Britain and throughout the world. For more details, including how to participate:  
<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/>

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## **BOOK REVIEW: RTP BIO**

Douglas Carlson's new book, ROGER TORY PETERSON: A BIOGRAPHY (University of Texas Press, 2007) is more than simply a look into the life of a giant. Instead, the book reveals the flesh-and-blood character of an icon that changed the face of birding forever. From Peterson's unremarkable beginnings, followed by his lifetime of collegial birding adventures and the publication of his historic A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS in 1934 (at the tender age of 26). we trace the life history and the development of a master.

Carlson effectively separates Peterson's literary abilities from his practical shorthand for field guides and instruction. Similarly he distinguishes between his field-guide art and from his more "painterly" work, artfully portraying the tension existing between illustrator and creative painter.

Readers can trace Peterson's life as an independent writer, artist, photographer, and lecturer, along with appreciating his self-doubt and uncertainties over the very value of his works, both as an artist and as a writer. One can also track Peterson's self-identity as a conservationist and teacher, beginning as early as the mid-1930s.

The volume is worth a thoughtful read for anyone wishing to gain insight into Roger Tory Peterson the man, his times, his influence. Not insignificantly, 2008 will witness the centennial year of his birth.

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## **WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH WINTER WHEAT?**

Winter wheat, planted in the fall and harvested the following July, is beginning to draw attention from bird-observers, simply because it's beginning to draw attention from the birds. Increasingly, there is evidence that winter wheat, especially in the American Great Plains and the Canadian Prairie Provinces, may be improving things for certain bird species. Ducks and Ring-necked Pheasants seem to be doing well nesting in winter wheat fields, and Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits, and Willets have also increasingly been found in wheat fields at nesting season. Even certain grassland songbirds seem to be taking to winter wheat cultivation.

When the nesting-season starts for many species, winter wheat has already had a head start growing, and is ready to provide nesting cover for grassland birds early in the season. By the time winter wheat harvest begins, in mid-July in the Dakotas, for example, young birds nesting in the wheat fields are either developed enough to avoid harvest combines, or else have already fledged from the fields. In contrast, alfalfa, which reaches harvest height in May, is typically cut within the first 10 days of June - a dismal predicament for nesting birds and young in areas like the Dakotas. Marbled Godwits have also recently been found nesting in other crops, such as several other varieties of cereal grain crops, flax, and stubble fields of these same crops; however, the winter wheat appears to be the most promising.

U.S. farmers annually plant about 40 million acres in winter wheat. Across Canada, more than 1.2 million acres of winter wheat is grown. Is this great for birds? No, it's a monoculture. Nevertheless, it is a somewhat attractive crop, and one that usually reaches a suitable height at the right time of year to benefit breeding birds. It is a crop that won't be harvested until most nesting birds safely fledged their young. Winter wheat will never be a substitute for idled grassland, like CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) land, but if cropland goes into a rotation with winter wheat, there may actually be some benefits for certain ground-nesting birds. (It should also be noted that farmers usually don't plant winter wheat in the same field in consecutive years.)

Right now it's unclear whether winter wheat is truly a win-win crop for both agriculture and bird conservation, but indications appear to be positive. Further evaluation is certainly warranted.

For a Ducks Unlimited Canada summary of Long-billed Curlews nesting in winter wheat in Canada last spring, see:

<http://www.ducks.ca/aboutduc/news/archives/2007/070619.html>

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## **AND NOW FOR 2008...**

We are clearing the decks for your upcoming issues of the E-bulletin for 2008. We will hit our fourth anniversary of writing and distributing the E-bulletin this coming April. In anticipation of this anniversary, we invite you to let us know how we're doing and what additional features you might like to see in future E-bulletins. () Are you looking for more news of birding discoveries in the field? More - or less - bird conservation information? No book reviews? More book reviews? Longer E-bulletins? Shorter? Whatever! Please send both of us any thoughts or ideas that you might have.

And don't be surprised if the January issue is a bit shorter than most; the holiday season (including Christmas Bird Counts and travel) will keep us busy for most of December!

We wish all of our readers the very best for this coming 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:*

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- *Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, [paul.baicich@verizon.net](mailto:paul.baicich@verizon.net)*

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