



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

December 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](#).

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RARITY FOCUS

On November 13, at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico, Sally King observed and photographed what turned out to be a female Sungrebe (*Heliornis fulica*), a species that normally only ranges from northeast Mexico to Ecuador and southeast Brazil. Furthermore, it is ordinarily a sedentary bird that inhabits slow-moving rivers, streams, and lakes, most often in humid forests.

While the identity of this bird is not in question, its origins certainly are.

The birding world has been abuzz with the question of whether the Bosque del Apache NWR bird was a wild, naturally-occurring Sungrebe, or an escape from captivity. A naturally-occurring Sungrebe would be amazing given the distance that such an individual would have to have traveled to arrive at Bosque del Apache. On the other hand, an escapee from captivity seems equally unlikely.

Indeed, the zoo community was also abuzz over this bird. Sungrebe is not a species that is typically - if ever - held in zoo collections. No one on any of the zoo listservs knew of any institutions having Sungrebes, much less having lost such a bird. At this point, indications are that the Bosque del Apache Sungrebe probably was a wild bird that lost its way.

If deemed to be a naturally-occurring Sungrebe, this bird would constitute a first North American record. The bird, originally found on the popular Marsh Loop auto route south of the Marsh Deck on the refuge, was relocated on the morning of 18 November by Audio Stop #8 on the eastern side of the same Marsh Loop.

Birders failed to find the Songrebe on 19 November, and it was not encountered during any of the following days which included the "Festival of the Cranes" centered at Bosque del Apache NWR.

You can find a photo and more details about the Songrebe here:

<http://adventurebirding.blogspot.com/2008/11/bosque-del-apache-nm-sungrebe.html>

and here:

<http://sites.google.com/site/oldenettelspage/Home/sungrebe---notes>

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RUSTY BLACKBIRD BLITZ

We have previously discussed the plight of Rusty Blackbirds at:

<http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julSBC06.html#TOC03>

Rusty Blackbird has been a species in serious decline over the past four decades. Some estimates put the drop at over 80 percent during this period, but the precise figure is not known. Neither are the causes for decline known, although winter habitat loss and degradation are likely candidates. These blackbirds are becoming scarce and patchy in their winter distribution, making it difficult to focus the research and management efforts needed to save them.

Volunteers are being sought to help locate wintering concentrations of Rusty Blackbirds in order to hopefully get more accurate population numbers. The intent is to have an all out "blitz" to locate Rusty Blackbirds and in order to create a map of wintering Rusty Blackbird "hot spots" that will help focus future research, monitoring, and conservation attention.

During a nine-day period in February, volunteers are being asked to search in any locations and habitats deemed as potentially suitable for wintering Rusty Blackbirds, particularly for sizable flocks or concentrations of birds (i.e., dozens or even hundreds of birds).

Areas of note will be revisited in the future to determine if they are indeed Rusty Blackbird hot spots. Search efforts will be concentrated in the east-central United States, from eastern Nebraska to eastern Texas, and from southern New Jersey to Florida.

The dates for these searches are to be February 7 -15 -, the period when Rusty Blackbirds are expected to be easiest to find (i.e., males are singing) and the population is relatively sedentary.

The search effort is being led by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center along with assistance from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, all of which will be using eBird as the vehicle for data collection.

Instructions and information on the identification, habitat preferences, range map, and general protocols for the Rusty Blackbird count can be found here:

http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Research/Rusty_Blackbird/

and

<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/bird-watchers-urgently-needed-to-track-rusty>

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SAGE GROUSE BLM MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES CHANGE IN WYOMING

In August, we drew attention to a case calling for the alteration of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) standards on oil and gas development in the West in order to protect the Greater Sage-Grouse:

<http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augSBC08.html#TOC12>

A recent decision by the Buffalo, Wyoming, office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will expand protection around Greater Sage-Grouse leks (mating areas), extending protection to three miles from drilling/mining activities. The Buffalo Field Office manages 780,291 acres of public lands and 4,731,140 acres of mineral estate within Campbell, Johnson, and Sheridan counties in north-central Wyoming.

This decision should significantly contribute to the conservation of this species - a species currently being considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The BLM regional decision was challenged by energy companies claiming that the protections are unwarranted and not based on science. Recent studies, however, have indicated that buffers from human activities within two miles of leks are inadequate to protect sage-grouse and other prairie grouse species.

The North American Prairie Grouse (NAPG) Executive Director, Ralph Rogers, commented that "although these new guidelines apply only to lands administered by the Buffalo office [of the BLM], the... ruling has broader applicability to all grouse habitat. We hope that all BLM and Forest Service offices will adopt better protective actions for grouse species found on our federal public lands."

...ions for grass species found on our federal public lands.

For more details, see this joint release from NAGP and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership:
<http://www.trcp.org/newsroom/pressreleases/17-pressreleases/287-pr2008-11-03.html>

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NEW TEXAS PARK: LATEST LINK IN WORLD BIRDING CENTER CHAIN

The newest state park in Texas, and the eighth link in the World Birding Center chain along the breadth of the Rio Grande Valley, will have its opening in Brownsville on 6 December. ,.

The Rasaca de la Palma State Park, with its 1,200 acres, is the largest of the nine sites that currently comprise the World Birding Center. South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, the final wing of the WBC, is under construction and slated to open in spring of 2009. The other World Birding Center sites are: Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park (WBC headquarters), Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, Estero Llano Grande State Park (Weslaco), Harlingen's Arroyo Colorado, Old Hidalgo Pump House, Quinta Mazatlan (McAllen), and Roma Bluffs.

Not a state park in the traditional sense, Resaca de la Palma will specifically cater to bird watchers, butterfly enthusiasts, and other nature lovers who seek up-close views of wildlife in a natural setting that includes a restored resaca (an old river oxbow), marshes, dense thorn-scrub, and mature palm and ebony forests. Resaca de la Palma's most significant habitat is a six-mile resaca that winds through the park.

The opening of the new state park results in part from increased funding provided by the Texas Legislature in 2007. For 2008, the state's newest wing of the WBC received an \$82,000 budget increase. Rio Grande Valley Bird "specialties" at the park include Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Least Grebe, Groove-billed Ani, Green Jay, Olive Sparrow, and Altamira Oriole.

For more information on the new Park, see:
<http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org/sites/brownsville/>

For more on all the World Birding Center sites, see:
<http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org/>

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INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT ON MIGRATING WATERBIRDS

An international resolution pledging to protect migratory waterbirds was agreed upon at the "Tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar)." The wetlands meeting, held in Korea at the end of October and early November, was attended by 2,000 people from 165 nations.

The participants agreed that different countries must co-operate to protect migratory waterbirds and their habitats. The "Ramsar Resolution on Flyways," as the new agreement was named, called for the protection of habitats such as tidal flats where birds come to winter or spend the summer, and for efforts to monitor the state of different populations.

The resolution acknowledges that conserving the world's waterbirds is an international challenge and that only by working together along flyways can migratory birds be saved. "No country can act alone to protect migratory waterbirds. If we don't collaborate internationally we will push more and more migratory waterbirds to the brink of extinction," said Alison Russell-French, president of Birds Australia.

Click here for the full text of the resolution:
http://www.ramsar.org/cop10/cop10_dr22_e.htm

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IBA NEWS: ALMOST HALF OF CARIBBEAN IBAs LACK PROTECTION

There are now 283 internationally designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the Caribbean - sites that are key for the conservation of birds and biodiversity, and that are the building blocks for conservation planning.

This Caribbean network of key sites faces a large number of threats, however. Most disturbingly, 43 percent of these IBAs are wholly outside formally protected areas. "Not only do almost half the sites lack any kind of protection, but a number of areas described as parks have no proper infrastructure or staff, and many lack management plans", said David Wege, BirdLife International's Caribbean Program Manager.

Ideally, the IBA network can be used as a tool to review existing national protected areas systems, identify gaps in coverage, and identify candidate sites for expansion or designation of protected areas to address these gaps.

The number of IBAs in the Caribbean identified per territory varies from one each in Bermuda, Navassa, and Saba, to 39 in the Bahamas. They range in size from Bayfield Pond and East Point Pond in Barbados - both one hectare - to the 530,695 hectare Ciénaga de Zapata in Cuba.

Fifty-one of the Caribbean's threatened species (11 Critically Endangered, 18 Endangered and 22 Vulnerable) are represented within the Caribbean IBA network. Ten threatened species (all national endemics) are each thought to occur in just a single IBA.

Under the best of circumstances, the network should assist national governments and donors to meet their commitments under international agreements (including the new Ramsar agreement outlined in the previous news item), a fact that is particularly important for the 43 percent of IBAs in the Caribbean which lack protection.

Information on Caribbean IBAs can be accessed from this page, where you can select a location from the island/country list:

<http://www.birdlife.org/regional/caribbean/factsheet.html>

You can find more information about IBAs in the U.S. through the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area website:

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

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BOOK NOTES: BIRD ART, BIRD SCIENCE

The adjectives "beautiful, unique, and thoughtful" probably best describe HUMANS, NATURE, AND BIRDS by Darryl Wheye and Donald Kennedy (Yale Univ. Press 2008). This book is beautiful because it presents spectacular bird art in an elegant fashion; it is unique because it introduces the reader into a virtual "gallery" contained in two separate "floors," each containing thematic presentations for individual "rooms"; and it is thoughtful because it is "science art," telling the reader something about the natural world, how it works, and how we humans fit in.

The artwork is mindboggling in variety, ranging from cave paintings to French rococo, and from Audubon to Norman Rockwell and American minimal realism. For those interested in a chronology of bird art, technology, and bird study, a 23 page appendix more than suffices - it also delights.

For anyone looking for a "different" kind of book for that special birder, artist, or conservationist this holiday season, you need not look any further.

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TIP OF THE MONTH: CBC ENJOYMENT

'Tis the season! It's almost time to participate in a Christmas Bird Count (CBC), an annual seasonal event that's been running since 1900. Not only does the CBC contribute to the role played by "citizen scientists" through the collection of long-term winter bird population data, but it is also a great way to have fun by participating in a community birding event. The CBC period extends from 14 December 2008 to 4 January 2009. For more details on the 109th Christmas Bird Count - including how to get involved - see:

<http://www.audubon.org/Bird/cbc/>

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MINNESOTA MONEY FOR WILDLIFE AND WILD PLACES

While the country was watching votes for the fate of Presidential tickets and Congressional seats, birds and wildlife was winning big in the state of Minnesota.

For at least a decade, wildlife supporters in that state had been talking about getting a portion of the state's sales tax used to support wildlife. This year, after the blending of a very broad coalition of conservation, environmental, and arts groups, a state constitutional amendment was offered to the voters of Minnesota. The proposed clean water, land, and legacy constitutional amendment would hike the state's sales tax by 3/8 of 1 percent for 25 years, distributing an estimated \$240 million to \$300 million a year among four areas: clean water, wildlife habitat, arts and culture, and parks and trails.

Despite opposition from a number of groups, including the state's Chamber of Commerce, the Minnesota Farm Bureau, and the National Taxpayers Union, 56 percent of Minnesota voters backed the clean water, land and legacy amendment.

Each of four separate funds will likely use a governance model that calls for a council of citizens, state employees, and elected officials with demonstrated expertise to choose between proposed projects for funding. The Minnesota legislature will make final funding decisions on the proposed projects.

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In addition, the funds are to be divided four ways: 33 percent to clean water, 33 percent to wildlife habitat, 19.75 percent to cultural heritage and 14.25 percent to parks and trails.

Minnesota now joins a small group of states - e.g., Missouri and Arkansas - where a portion of the state sales tax will go to wildlife. What's best about the Minnesota model is that because the measure was on the ballot and is now an amendment to the Minnesota Constitution, the state legislature cannot overturn it. (The current state sales tax in Minnesota is 6.5 percent, to which an additional 3/8 percent will now be added.).

Bird and wildlife supporters hail the amendment as a way to meet critical needs after years of chronic underfunding.

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EVERGLADES DEAL BEING READJUSTED

In July, we described an impending deal where the U.S. Sugar Corporation, the nation's largest producer of cane sugar, would sell to the state of Florida 187,000 acres of property (or about 300 square miles) in the northern Everglades for \$1.75 billion:

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

Last month it was announced that the company has slimmed down the deal, intending to sell 181,000 acres of farmland to the state, now for \$1.34 billion. U.S. Sugar would retain its mill, citrus processing facilities, and other physical assets. Despite this cutback, this deal would still help restore an enormous part of the northern Everglades, while allowing the company to stay in business.

U.S. Sugar would lease its former land from the state for the next seven crop cycles, paying a total of about \$60 million.

The revised agreement would grant the South Florida Water Management District, the state's overseer of the purchase, the right to take large chunks of the property over that time, with most of the company's land continuing to be farmed until the state needed it to reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.

Needless to say, this restoration is vital for Florida's waterbirds.

The next big step will be to raise the \$1.34 billion, primarily with bonds, amid a financial crisis. Upon approval from the district's governing board at its meeting this month - the final hurdle to state approval - the real planning process will begin. A two-year planning period to determine what's best for the Everglades is now anticipated.

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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

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