



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

December 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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www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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RARITY FOCUS

Last month, the place to be for birding was the Golden State. There were some wonderful birds to see in California, including a Black-tailed Gull (native to NE Asia) at Los Alamitos Bay in extreme SE Los Angeles County (8 November to 21 November), a "Bean Goose" (another Old World species, which could have been one of either two species, Taiga Bean-Goose or Tundra Bean-Goose) at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (9 November to the end of the month), and an on-again off-again Brown Shrike (also, from Siberia and NE Asia and probably the 10th record for North America) at McKinleyville, Humboldt County (21, 24, and 29 November).

Despite these outstanding rarities, we bestow the honors – based on our own biases and the overall response from the birding public – to the Ivory Gull discovered by Mike Stensvold on 4 November, at Pismo Beach, San Luis Obispo County. The bird, a lovely and obliging adult, remained until the morning of 7 November, often dining on one or another local seal carcass. This was only the second record of Ivory Gull for California, the first a first-cycle one-day wonder (perhaps an ill bird) in Orange County in early January 1996.

Ivory Gull is a Holarctic breeder, found mainly north of the Arctic Circle in breeding colonies ranging in size from four to a few hundred individuals. Over the past decade a number of well-established Ivory Gull colonies have declined or completely disappeared. The species is clearly in trouble. Ivory Gulls usually spend the winter on or along the edge of the pack ice, where they regularly associate with polar bears, feeding on scraps from the bears' kills and bear and seal excrement.

Curiously, at the very beginning of this year, we drew attention to an Ivory Gull in New Jersey, and we commented on some of curious behavior of the species:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/janSBC10.html#TOC02

The Pismo Beach Ivory Gull entertained many visiting birders; to see photos by Mike Stensvold and associated notes, see Chris Taylor's website:

<http://kiwifoto.com/rba/ivqu.html>

There are other fine photos of both the bird and birders taken by Brad Schram at:

www.flickr.com/photos/chaparralbrad/

Finally, to see video of the Ivory Gull taken by Brian Sullivan, see:

www.flickr.com/photos/oceanites/5157864369/

ORANGE-BILLED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH ECONOMIC IMPACT

Remember the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush that was observed in the Black Hills of South Dakota that we profiled in August? If not, you can see our story here:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/AugSBC10.html#TOC01

From 17 July to 19 August, an estimated 400 people travelled to the Black Hills to see the bird which was only the third sighting of this Mexican species in the U.S. and the first north of Texas. Obviously, all these visiting birders spent money on food, lodging, travel, and other expenses while also enjoying the bird. To collect information about this event's local economic impact, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory created a short survey for people to take who saw or attempted to see the bird. That survey can be found here:

www.rmbo.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/OBNTsurvey_v4.pdf

RMBO will report the results to area businesses and tourist agencies, land managers, and the general public. It is hoped that this collated information may be useful in the future in developing special birding programs and birding opportunities in the Black Hills.

GULF CONCERNS: STILL TIME FOR A CONSERVATION ROYALTY

The general public's concern may be waning. Specifically, we are referring to the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe on the Gulf coast and the consequences to human and animal life in its aftermath. It is seemingly difficult to shift the public's concern from the drama of wildlife rescue (with attendant oil-soaked waterbirds) and pictures of oil on the beaches to serious habitat restoration and meaningful mitigation.

Ongoing concerns in the Gulf region include:

- keeping the public - including the birding public - aware of the oil's ongoing impact, the need for continued monitoring, and new discoveries made in the aftermath of the immediate oil cleanup;
- ensuring that future federal oil and gas leasing practices strengthen environmental oversight and carefully safeguard biologically sensitive areas;
- evaluating the USDA and USFWS flooding projects that have been launched to attract southbound waterfowl and shorebirds to Gulf Coastal refuge and agricultural (e.g., rice) fields;
- investing in scientific research and monitoring of the affected habitat, especially birdlife;
- investing in development and training of appropriate personnel to prepare for effective oil-response in the future; and
- directing substantial funds from offshore oil and gas revenue to wildlife habitat.

In this last regard we have shamelessly cited the call for "full funding" for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in this E-bulletin. The oil and gas companies need to have a dedicated conservation royalty delivered for on-the-ground conservation. This is especially true in light of the BP gusher in the Gulf. See the LWCF Coalition for factsheets and background. You will no doubt recognize some grand birding locations among the profiled case studies:

www.lwcfcoalition.org/

The E-bulletin has also covered the LWCF opportunity multiple times this year. For example, see here;

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/SepSBC10.html#TOC05

In Congress this issue is now stuck in the Senate, with the House having already passed their CLEAR Act. The "lame duck" Senate could take the next step by moving on the CLEAR Act, or using some other legislative vehicle where the LWCF allocates real dollars needed for conservation. The clock is ticking on the next best chance for an effective oil-and-gas conservation royalty.

IOWA MIGHT SHOW THE WAY

Since we are describing vital conservation funding for birds, it seems instructive to view the recent Iowa experience.

Iowans just approved a state constitutional amendment to establish a Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund to pay for conservation efforts in the state, such as improving water quality, reducing soil erosion, protecting wildlife habitat, and creating parks and trails.

On Election Day last month, the proposal received more votes - 62 percent - than any other measure or candidate on the statewide ballot. Still, the fund won't have any money until the Iowa legislature approves a tax increase. Lawmakers in the future will have to approve a 1 percent sales tax increase, of which three-eighths of each penny would go toward the new conservation fund.

Alternatively, the legislature might somehow find "other fund sources" for this account, but new sources cannot substitute for current natural resources funding. Everything must be new and additional.

This Iowa funding model is based on two "gold standards" of conservation funding, the first from Missouri in 1976 and the second from Minnesota which passed a similar fund in 2008. Both of these state examples are tax-based and were passed by the voting public as ballot issues.

The effort to create the Iowa fund has been in motion for a decade, supported by over 130 conservation organizations, including bird and birding groups. So, even though there was no quick solution to addressing conservation funding issues, it was approved by ballot initiative during a time of serious economic hardship. Proponents of the campaign expect that the level of support exhibited by Iowa voters will encourage prompt action in the legislature to pass a sales tax increase and begin raising funds for conservation, wildlife, and wild places.

You can find more details here:

www.iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org/home.aspx

and here:

www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20101103/NEWS09/11030378/-1/NEWS04/Conservation-fund-draws-strong-support

IBA NEWS: HOW ABOUT TEXAS "CHICKEN-LAND"?

In a state as huge and as important as the Lone Star State, it's a bit surprising that there are only a dozen and a half Important Bird Areas (IBAs) designated in Texas. See here:

<http://iba.audubon.org/iba/stateindex.do?state=US-TX>

In comparison, little Maryland (about 7% the size of Texas) has 34 IBAs and tiny Rhode Island (about 0.6% the size of Texas) has 16, almost as many as Texas.

The rangeland of the "Rolling Plains" of the Texas Panhandle, with the majority of its shortgrass prairie overwhelmingly in private hands, presents special challenges for bird conservation. The fate of Lesser Prairie-Chicken may well depend on how this habitat in Texas is managed in the future. The area is also important for many other nesting, migrating, and wintering birds, including cranes, geese, and grassland songbirds.

A new and innovative Lesser Prairie-Chicken website created by the Dorothy Marcille Wood Foundation and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) presents information and resources to help landowners conserve this native bird whose future is linked to the future of land use, agriculture, and industry in the Texas Panhandle and Southern Great Plains. For more information, see:

www.lesserprairiechicken.org

This website includes information on the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCA), and habitat conservation incentives, programs, and cost share assistance from various state, federal, and private sources. It also features a search tool to help determine which programs might correspond best to a landowner's operations. To date, eight Texas landowners have voluntarily signed a CCA. Taken together, these eight properties comprise 111,052 acres in Gray, Donley, Hemphill, Hockley, Cochran, and Lipscomb counties. Clearly, this effort alone ought to justify IBA consideration.

You can also find more information here:

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/newsmedia/releases/?req=20100922b

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

www.audubon.org/bird/iba/

BOOK NOTES: ABC's ABCs

The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has recently published its guide to BIRD CONSERVATION (2010, University of Chicago Press) by Dan Lebbin, Mike Parr, and George Fenwick. The book focuses on species, habitats (i.e., Birdscapes), and threats to birds in the U.S. and elsewhere in the Americas. Species accounts for 212 birds on the Watch List provide useful thumbnail summaries with notes on distribution, threats, conservation concerns, and needed actions. The chapter on habitats across the U.S. is admirable, with a dozen "Birdscapes" outlined, each with a stunningly informative landscape illustrating the birds, vegetation, and threats involved, followed by a selection of representative Important Bird Areas (IBA) for each featured Birdscape. The third chapter on an array of threats to birds (e.g., mining, oil, grazing, fire management, invasive plants and mammals, glass, and fisheries) could easily have been a stand-alone book if slightly expanded. So, what the book does, it does well. The international chapter (in reality, an inter-American chapter)

provides a modest introduction to the essentials of hemispheric issues and actions, again with representative Birdscapes and IBAs as examples. The book concludes with specific strategies and actions that are highly gratifying.

One could quibble slightly with certain elements of the book (e.g., too brief and selective a conservation history section, insufficient invasive plant coverage for the U.S. or sun-coffee coverage in Latin America, underwhelming coverage of the Caribbean area, and the seeming reluctance to address the issue of mobilizing birders in the U.S.), but no publication can pack and resolve all the issues of U.S. and hemispheric bird conservation between two covers. Indeed, the volume summarizes the ABCs of U.S. bird conservation very well, and should make a real contribution to move us, in Fenwick's words, from involvement in "citizen science" closer to an era of "citizen conservation."

CAN HOG ISLAND SURVIVE?

Hog Island Audubon Camp in Maine has been a revered landmark for bird and environmental education since 1936. Its summer sessions, based on a 330-acre island in Maine's beautiful Muscongus Bay, have been conducted through the years by some of the nation's most-respected birders, naturalists, and environmental educators. But when its doors were closed in 2009, as a result of financial constraints, some folks including National Audubon's Stephen Kress resolved to start a rescue campaign. The struggle to keep Hog Island Camp operating was summarized in April of this year in DOWN EAST magazine. To read this article, see:

www.downeast.com/magazine/2010/april/saving-hog-island

A creative summer program was launched in 2010, providing Hog Island with a much-needed shot in the arm. It's unclear if the energy behind the 2010 sessions will be enough to save Hog Island, but a 2011 summer season has been boldly planned. The sessions are residential and feature field trips and presentations by some of the most well-known names in North American birding. Check the website for more a list of instructors, photos, and more information:

www.projectpuffin.org/OrnithCamps.html

LEAD ISSUE: EPA AND FISHING GEAR

And, in case you were wondering...

In September, we reported on a multi-organizational attempt to get the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ban the use of lead in lead bullets, shot, and fishing sinkers because of the pernicious impact that lead has on wildlife:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/SepSBC10.html#TOC09

And in October, we covered the denial by the EPA on the issue of lead bullets and shot:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/OctSBC10.html#TOC02

At that time, the fishing gear coverage was unresolved, but in early November the proposed ban was finally denied.

In a letter to the petitioners, EPA indicated that they had not demonstrated that the requested rule was necessary to protect against an unreasonable risk of injury to health or the environment. This is despite the evidence that the lead fishing sinkers regularly kill loons, swans, cranes, and other birds and wildlife.

"The EPA seems to have lost its will to regulate toxic substances, even in the face of overwhelming scientific information about the harm to wildlife and threats to human health," said Michael Fry, at the American Bird Conservancy.

Ironically, the EPA declared the previous week, 24-30 October, as "National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week" to raise awareness about the dangers of lead exposure to humans. While nationwide efforts to control lead in paint, gasoline, lead shot (for waterfowling), and other products have reduced lead in the environment, lead from much hunting and fishing remains a widespread secondary wildlife killer.

SPANISH NEOTROPICAL COMPANION SPREADS AS PDF

Since the first printing of the Spanish translation of John Kricher's NEOTROPICAL COMPANION in 2006, ABA's Birders' Exchange (providing birding equipment and educational materials for scientists, conservationists, and educators throughout Latin America and the Caribbean) has donated over 11,000 copies of the book to bird conservation and education organizations, universities, eco-lodges, and individuals throughout the Spanish-speaking Americas.

The book is packed with information on the birds, vegetation, habitats, and biogeography of the Neotropics.

This book - Un Compañero Neotropical - is now available free for download through the American Birding Association's website. Permission has been granted by the author and by Princeton University Press to distribute this extremely useful Spanish version pioneered by Birder's Exchange. Since the online release in October, over 5,400 copies have been downloaded. You can access the file for your own download here:

www.aba.org/aneotropicalcompanion.pdf

TIP OF THE MONTH: TAKE CARE WITH OWLS

Perhaps the one birding activity that engenders almost as much debate as the use or abuse of audio attractions in the field is what constitutes appropriate daytime owling.

Winter searches for owls - either when owls may have settled in for a seasonal roost or when they are at their most vocal, just prior to breeding - can provide exciting opportunities for birders. But these activities can also be disturbing to owls if they are conducted during daylight hours and not undertaken with discretion. After dark "owl prowls" are mostly listening events, but daytime searches for roosting owls can potentially put owls at risk.

For many birders, seeing owls during the day can be more gratifying than listening for them at night, but special care must be taken during these times for the sake of the owls. When owls are flushed from their secretive daytime roosting spots they may be mobbed by crows and jays, creating sufficient commotion to the birds that otherwise rely on their cryptic plumage to protect them from predators. Moreover, if disturbance or mobbing occurs frequently, the owls may abandon their roosting sites. Turning a small owl into a large-hawk meal isn't something that most birders wish to encourage.

Most birding listservs (see our tip for last month) actively discourage the posting of owl sites - either roosting sites or nesting sites - specifically for the benefit of the owls. Diurnal owls (e.g., wintering Snowy Owls at far-off fields or airports

or Short-eared Owls at favorite marshes) are possible exceptions. This is only common sense.

Blabbing about roosting or nesting owls may also be ill-advised, but keeping their location a total secret can also be counterproductive! Collecting data on the presence of owls may be terribly important (e.g., for a breeding bird atlas), and there are ways to share the information responsibly. One example is from Mass Audubon which collects on-line owl information as part of a breeding bird atlas effort while at the same time warning about disturbing the birds:
www.massaudubon.org/owls/

Generally, common sense should rule when seeking owls and sharing information about them. If an owl is located, back off. The owl's well-being trumps our own viewing pleasure. Keep any photography to a minimum and at a distance. Repeated visits to the same site are unnecessary. Teach by example.

BIRDS AND THE FUTURE OF REFUGES

The National Wildlife Refuge System's conservation mission puts wildlife first, but refuges are not exclusively for wildlife. More than 40 million people visit refuges each year, generating an estimated \$1.7 billion in annual sales and over 27,000 jobs. Wildlife observers (dominated by birders at all levels), photographers, and general outdoor enthusiasts find enjoyment on the system's 150 million acres, and more than half of the nation's NWRs are available to anglers and hunters.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge Association are currently leading a public engagement effort to share ideas and to shape a new vision for wildlife conservation, public appreciation, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Strengthening the system, protecting these special places for the public, defining a specific role for active bird conservation and for popular birding are all appropriate issues.

A vision document to be adopted in July 2011 at a large conference in Madison, Wisconsin, will guide the system into the next decade and beyond. In preparation for that new vision, and to participate in the discussion, see this site:
<http://americaswildlife.org/>

LAST MONTH'S WINNERS FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

Last month's National Geographic book-prize was GLOBAL BIRDING, by Les Beletsky. We had five copies to distribute.

Question for last month: Newell's Shearwater, breeding only in Hawaii's mountains, may be a separate species, but it is currently considered a subspecies of what other shearwater species?

The answer: Townsend's Shearwater

The winners (chosen at random from among all correct answers) were: Barbara Combs (Eugene OR) Patrick Gallagher (Salem OR), Don Kirker (Cotati, CA), Helen Patton (Silver Spring, MD), and Trish Pastuszak (Nantucket, MA). Congratulations to them all!

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