



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

February 2008

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RARITY FOCUS

This seems to have been a slow month for profiling a single rare bird sighting, but that doesn't mean that a particular species was not worthy of special notice. In fact, Slaty-backed Gull, a bird normally found in coastal northeast Asia (and increasingly in western Alaska in summer) has been found in relatively remarkable numbers and in extraordinary locations across the northern tier of the lower 48-states and in southern Canada this winter. (If you are unfamiliar with this species, check the National Geo guide, page 212-213; the "big" Sibley guide, page 222; or the Kaufman "Focus" guide, page 72-73.)

Over the past two or so months, there have been at least two dozen reports of individuals of this essentially northeast Asian species in North America, including (roughly from west to east) British Columbia, Washington, northern California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Ontario, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Newfoundland. Tom Johnson in New York has collected as many reports and photos as he could locate and added them to a highly instructive Google map [here](#).

One particularly nice collection of photos (by Phil Brown and Rick Heil) and descriptions of two birds at Goschester, Massachusetts, can be found here: http://www.nebirdsplus.org/Slaty_backed_Gull.htm

This is clearly an exceptional year for Slaty-backed Gulls, particularly in the northeastern U.S.; seasoned observers are using terms like "mini-invasion." And, it's probably not over yet!

This of course raises the important question of what is happening to Slaty-backed Gulls in northeast Asia. Information recently obtained from Japanese ornithologist, Hiroyoshi Higuchi, suggests that this species is

indeed increasing, at least in Japan, where it now even nests on urban rooftops, much the way Herring and Ring-billed Gulls do in certain urban habitats in North America.

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CRP LOSSES - A LOOK AT THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

Increasingly, important elements of the Farm Bill, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), are having a hard time competing for real space with today's high commodity prices, especially with the increasing focus on corn-based ethanol.

Specifically, more than 2 million acres of land previously enrolled in CRP were converted to cropland in 2007, according to a recent analysis of federal figures. The losses, which carry serious implications for wildlife species dependent on that land, were most dramatic in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Those three states combined lost about 800,000 acres of CRP last year.

As a reminder to readers, CRP encourages farmers to convert highly erodible cropland, or other environmentally sensitive acreage, to grass. The annual rental payments are based on the agricultural rental value of the land, and are paid to the landowner under 10-to-15 year contracts. We have previously covered this issue in the E-bulletin, including last month when we reported on Farm Bill passage in the Senate and expectations for a Senate-House conference:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC08.html#TOC05>

and at: <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan08.html>

Some trends are particularly disturbing. For example, in North Dakota, new federal figures have shown that about 420,000 acres of CRP were converted back to cropland in 2007. That adds up to more than 12 percent of all CRP acres in the state. As summarized by Ducks Unlimited (DU) staff in Bismarck, "It's as if someone plowed up a three-mile swath of wildlife habitat across North Dakota, from its southern border to Canada."

Extensive losses for 2007 were expected, but the released total is about double the acreage that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA) had originally predicted.

With CRP unable to compete with what producers can get by farming the land themselves or by renting the land for cropping, Jim Ringelman, DU's director of conservation programs in the Prairie Pothole Region, said that the country's new energy policy could wipe out billions of federal dollars invested in natural resources:

"Conservation is in for a long swim against a strong current when trying to fight the tide of land rolling out of CRP."

The number of CRP acres going back into crop production is also a warning, supporting a strong "Sodsaver" provision in the Farm Bill. The loss of CRP acreage is an assault on waterfowl and grassland birds, and should be resisted by all bird conservationists. In addition, the next line of vulnerable land to lure exploitation is existing native prairie that simply cannot be replaced. A strong "Sodsaver" would help to save some of what 10,000-year-old native prairies still exist.

For more details, see: <http://www.ducks.org/news/1456/DUsaysCRPlossesastou.html>

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CANADIAN LOONS FACE PROBLEMS

The carcasses of hundreds of dead Common Loons have been found on the shores of the Great Lakes in recent months. The healthy-looking loons have congested organs and half-digested fish in their stomachs, leading biologists to believe that the loons succumbed to an epidemic that has killed 75,000 birds, including 9,000 loons, in the Great Lakes since 1999.

The loons, iconic symbols of the Canadian wilderness, died from eating fish contaminated by Type E botulism. The birds, which were actually found dead on both sides of the border, are particularly poignant for Canadians.

"Rather than sporadic outbreaks, which have occurred for years and years, now it is becoming much more generalized over the Great Lakes. It's becoming more widespread," said Kate Welch, a diagnostician with the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre (CCWHC), who performed necropsies on the birds. The CCWHC is an organization encompassing Canadian veterinary colleges.

In recent years, observers have encountered shorelines littered with dead loons, geese, ducks, gulls and cormorants. The biological source surfaced in the western end of Lake Erie in 1999 and spread quickly to lakes Huron and Ontario. The worst year was 2002, when 25,000 dead birds were counted in Lake Erie alone.

"The loons, which are very emblematic for Canadians, are very long-lived birds," Dr. Welch said. "They live up to 20 years or more, and if we're losing a substantial number of those birds in their prime reproductive years, it may be 10 to 15 years before we see what that is going to do to the population as a whole."

There are an estimated 545,000 loons that nest each summer in Canada. While researchers do not think that the Canadian birds are in any immediate danger of being wiped out by Type E botulism, such potent outbreaks could quickly reduce their numbers.

The deadly chain reaction started in the 1980s when two invasive species, zebra mussels and small fish, called

gobies, hitchhiked into the Great Lakes in the ballast tanks of ocean freighters coming from the Caspian Sea. (The bacteria are picked up by zebra mussels, which are consumed by fish, which are ultimately consumed by loons.)

"It's a bit of a wake-up call that invasive species have long-term repercussions," Dr. Welch said. "They have substantially altered the ecosystem of the Great Lakes to the point where now we are seeing much more botulism." Type E botulism results from a naturally occurring toxin, so conservation officials can do little to prevent the deaths. Nonetheless, scientists are working to somehow interrupt this pernicious link in the food chain.

For more information, see: <http://newsdaily.com/Science/UPI-1-20071229-16340500-bc-canada-loons.xml>

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IBA NEWS: ALASKA EMPHASIS

An entry in the blog run by BIRDER'S WORLD magazine early last month highlighted a recent announcement that petroleum leases in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska's northwest coast will go on sale on 6 February.

This move has the potential to affect many Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in that part of Alaska. This informative blog uses the Alaska IBA database to spotlight which birds and which specific IBAs might be at risk (including the Teshekpuk Lake area which we have previously discussed in this E-bulletin). To read the summary, visit: http://bwfov.typepad.com/birders_world_field_of_vi/2008/01/alaskas-importa.html

For more information about National Audubon's Important Bird Area Program, visit:

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

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BOOK REVIEW: PIGEONS?

Yes, PIGEONS (Grove Press) is our featured title this month. This thoughtful and unusual book by Andrew Blechman is captured by the subtitle: "The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird." Although it's been in print since 2006, your E-bulletin editors can't read everything all at once!

We wanted to give this book a brief recommendation, especially in light of our last month's report on the call to ban pigeon-feeding in New York City (which, by the way has gone nowhere):

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC08.html#TOC13>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan08.html>

If you want to learn about the role of pigeons in war, pigeons on city statues, pigeons in races, and pigeons on dinner plates, you can do no better than this work. The book is not just about pigeons, but also about the people involved with them, subcultures supported by concern and by obsession. In either case, you will probably finish this book with an appreciation for Rock Pigeons that you may not have had when you began reading.

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MORE COPIES OF NEOTROPICAL COMPANION AVAILABLE IN SPANISH

Yet another run of A NEOTROPICAL COMPANION (an "Introduction to the Animals, Plants and Ecosystems of the New World Tropics" by John Kricher) in its special Spanish-language version has just rolled off the presses.

Thousands of copies are available again, since the previous supply of 5,000 has already been distributed throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. See the past coverage of this effort here:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/novSBC06.html#TOC14>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/nov06.html>

Birders' Exchange, a project of the American Birding Association, plans to continue distributing these books at no cost to individuals and organizations throughout the Neotropics. Volunteer couriers from the U.S. can deliver copies of the book. If you or a colleague are traveling to Latin America or the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and

could serve as a hands-on courier, please contact Betty Petersen (bpetersen@aba.org) or Elissa LaVoie (elavoie@aba.org).

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INTER-AMERICAN SHOREBIRD RESEARCH SITE

The Shorebird Research Group of the Americas (SRGA), a consortium of researchers from academia, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the public interested in the biology and conservation of shorebirds in the Americas, recently launched a new Website:

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

The purpose of the website is to encourage involved working groups, provide communication, and be a clearing-house for emerging ideas and issues related to shorebirds. (A Spanish-language SRGA "mirror site" is currently under development.)

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NAVY BACKS OFF FROM BASE PLANS NEAR NWR

For the past five years, the U.S. Navy has actively sought to build a landing field to practice jet take-offs and landings at a location that is a mere 3.5 miles from Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in eastern North Carolina. The potentially harmful effects caused by Navy jets could have been highly disruptive to local birds such as the 100,000 migrating and wintering Snow Geese, Tundra Swans, and other waterfowl that regularly use the refuge. (Bird disturbance was one issue, while the potential threats to pilots, risking impact with such large waterfowl, was another.) Fortunately, the Navy is now considering two alternative sites in North Carolina.

See more details from the National Wildlife Refuge Association:

<http://www.refugenet.org/new-pdf-files/1.23.08%20Pocosin%20Lakes%20PR.pdf>

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FAVORITE BIRDING BLINDS IN THE EAST?

Do you have a favorite birding or photography blind on a refuge, preserve, park, or forest east of the Mississippi?

To meet the growing demands for birding and nature photography services, Deborah Richie Oberbillig is working with the Virginia Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries to expand, "A Guide To Wildlife Viewing and Photography Blinds," a resource that primarily features blinds from the western United States. The Colorado Division of Wildlife Information provides information and support for this topic at:

<http://wildlife.state.co.us/Viewing/PartnerResources/>

The current guide emphasizes 20 viewing or photography blinds located in the West, with an eye to assisting those in other areas that are interested in the wildlife-viewing and interpretive fields who are seeking ideas and guidance on the planning, construction, and placement of such viewing enhancements. The new edition will add 20 examples from the East, plus two blinds described in a special case-study section.

If you manage or regularly visit an area with a birding blind in the East, especially one that could potentially offer lessons for others to copy, please contact Deborah (deborahw.richie@gmail.com).

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MORE ON MARINE DEBRIS AND SEABIRDS

The issue of marine debris has been previously discussed in the E-bulletin:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/novSBC04.html#TOC05>

The problem continues to be a major hazard for island, marine, and coastal environments and species. (While there is more information on turtles and marine mammals, it still has bird information.)

A web site (announced by Chris Woolaway of NOAA) is packed with information about marine debris that can be highly instructive for conservation organizations, coastal resource managers, educators (see, especially, "Marine Debris 101"), and the general public needing information on this subject, whether they are from the U.S. or beyond: <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/>

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A DRAFT BIRD EDUCATION STRATEGY CIRCULATING

Exactly a year ago, there was a highly successful "National Gathering" of bird educators in Austin, Texas, a conference called by the Council for Environmental Education (CEE). We've previously reported on related developments since the February 2007 meeting:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/augSBC07.html#TOC04>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/aug07.html>

As an outgrowth of that conference, the Bird Education Network (BEN) Committee of CEE crafted a draft "National Education Strategy." The strategy identifies five priority bird conservation issues confronting the U.S. and beyond: habitat loss, modern industrial life, insufficient public awareness, insufficient funding, and inter-American concerns. According to the draft strategy, these issues embrace biological and non-biological dimensions alike, and addressing them is seen as essential to effective bird education and conservation.

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The draft national strategy can be accessed here:
<http://www.birdeducation.org/strategy.htm>

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TIP OF THE MONTH: USE YOUR LITTLE DIGITAL CAMERA

With the spectacular advances in the digital image revolution have come amazing opportunities to capture bird images with relatively "simple" equipment. We are talking about taking documentation photos of birds in the field, images that were often impossible to capture just a few short years ago. Much of this has been possible by digiscoping - the capturing of images with a digital point-&-shoot camera by shooting through the eyepiece of a spotting scope. With practice, this can even be done through binoculars! (Hints, equipment reviews, and techniques abound on the Internet, and many optic and camera companies offer great details, so we will not make any specific recommendations here.)

While many of the readers of this E-bulletin may be familiar with the process of digiscoping, we wish only to emphasize the ease with which the needed equipment can be carried into the field. After all, a small digital camera may weigh a mere 9 ounces. (In comparison, even the "little" Sibley guide will weigh over 18 ounces.) We know of at least two experienced birders who recently found a Slaty-backed Gull (this month's focal rarity) at a remote location. The bird was positively identified through scopes, but no "quality camera" and lens was available to document the observation, a potential "first" for the state. Had just a little lightweight point-&-shoot digital camera been at hand, an image captured through a quality scope would probably have sufficed to photo-document the sighting.

You might never know when you'll need a little point-&-shoot digital camera in the field... until, of course, you realize that you've left yours at home or back in the car!

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If you wish to distribute all or parts of any of the E-bulletins, we request that you mention the source of any material used. (Include the URL for the E-Bulletin archives if possible).

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.