



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

February 2009

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RARITY FOCUS

An Empidonax flycatcher - originally found on 13 December in Choke Canyon State Park in McMullen County, Texas - was fairly certainly identified as a Pine Flycatcher, a species from Mexico on 3 January. This was after prolonged study, many photographs examined, and responses to taped playback observed (allowed by park staff). Although this is a species that has long been expected as a vagrant in the U.S., if accepted, this would be a first record for the country.

Shortly after its appearance was made public, the word spread and birders began to gather. The bird and birders appeared on TV and in the press, and by 9 January, birders from at least 26 states had already come to see the bird. Visitors were thoughtful and courteous, and all remained quietly on the trail frequented by the bird.

This does not mean that the bird did not create some serious controversy. Flycatchers in the genus Empidonax are notorious for their identification complexity, and there were other Empids in the area that added to the confusion and the debate.

The flycatcher in question had tones of yellow-green below, a tear-drop-shaped eye-ring, an inflected "whit" call, and a peaked crown. These marks tended to point toward a Pine Flycatcher, but other features, including its short wing-length, short tail, and somewhat blunt bill in addition to the presence of two or three additional Empidonax flycatchers in the area, tended to complicate matters. Specifically, some of the photographs taken at the park closely resembled a Least Flycatcher, another Empid that was on site.

This flycatcher scenario is a perfect lesson to keep in mind when considering the identification of a difficult species. Birders are reminded that they should always keep an open mind, and that notes, photos, videos, and audio recordings should be carefully contributed to the proper rare-bird record committees for ultimate evaluation.

A collection of notes, photos, audio clips, and other valuable material on this Empid has been collected by Martin Reid, and can be found on his website at:

<http://www.martinreid.com/Main%20website/empidchoke.html>

And there is a collection of Empid spectrograms, assembled by Chris Benesh, here:

http://chrisbenesh.com/Chris_Benesh_Site/Choke_Canyon_Flycatcher.html

As of the end of January, the bird was still present, and its identity – Pine Flycatcher or not – remains a mystery.

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RARITY BACK-UP: IVORY GULL

If you're not fully satisfied with the possible Pine Flycatcher described above as our rarity-of-the-month, we suggest a flashy alternate possibility: Ivory Gull. This gull is a rare Arctic visitor, usually spending the entire year at or near pack ice.

On 17 January Jeremiah Trimble found a stunning adult Ivory Gull on the Dog Bar jetty at Eastern Point, East Gloucester, Massachusetts. Initially the gull was very accommodating, alternately perching atop the Dog Bar jetty and foraging in flight over the cove adjacent to the parking lot. On subsequent days it was reported at other locations around Gloucester, including the Jodrey Fish Pier in inner Gloucester Harbor.

It has been over 20 years since the last Ivory Gull (an immature bird) was found in Massachusetts. Hundreds of birders from many states made the pilgrimage to Gloucester to see the gull.

For more details and photos of the Gloucester Ivory Gull taken by Phil Brown, see:

<http://www.nebirdsplus.org/IvoryGull.htm>

The Ivory Gull in Gloucester was last seen on 22 January; however, amazingly on 20 January another adult Ivory Gull was found in Plymouth (Massachusetts) Harbor by Barry Burden.

The Plymouth Ivory Gull continued to be seen until 30 January, where it was abundantly photographed and pleased countless observers from far and wide. For photos taken by Shawn Carey, see:

<http://shawncarey.zenfolio.com/p925380799>

There were additional reports of Ivory Gulls elsewhere in January, including Atlantic Canada, where up to 17 birds were counted in Newfoundland and others were sighted in Nova Scotia.

As previously noted in the E-bulletin, the Ivory Gull is a species in considerable trouble. Among other things, it is listed as a species of special concern under the Canadian Species at Risk Act (SARA). We drew attention to this situation in the March 2007 E-bulletin:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC05>

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U.S. AIRCRAFT-BIRD STRIKES: COMMON BUT RARELY DEADLY

After a US Airways jet made an extraordinary emergency landing in the Hudson River on 15 January, there was much discussion over the role that birds may play in such incidents. Engine ingestion of Canada Geese was apparently responsible for this most recent dramatic NYC incident. (The reported "discovery" of feather and organic material, called "snarge," from Canada Geese was premature, but a bird strike with the geese is still assumed to be the cause of the event.)

Bird strikes are not uncommon and cost the airline industry millions of dollars a year, but a dual engine flameout, as experienced over NYC, is very unusual.

Between 1990 and 2007, civilian pilots reported 79,972 bird strikes to the Federal Aviation Administration. About 85% of these came from commercial airlines and the rest involved business, private, or government aircraft. Strikes are most common between July and October. Almost 14% of these strikes involve engines. Eight strikes resulted in a total of 11 deaths. Globally, bird strikes have reportedly killed more than 220 people and destroyed more than 200 aircraft since 1988.

The collisions often occur at low altitude during takeoffs, climbs, and landings. For example, on 29 November 2007, a Western Grebe struck the No. 2 engine of a Boeing 757-200 as it climbed to 1,000 feet after takeoff from Los Angeles International Airport. The plane returned to LAX and made an emergency landing. The bird damaged 13 fan blades, which cost more than \$1 million to repair. In another case, in December 2006, a Great Blue Heron was drawn into the engine of a Boeing 767 jet shortly after takeoff at JFK Airport in New York. The

...and then was drawn into the engine of a Boeing 707 jet shortly after takeoff. After a short flight, the plane returned to the airport.

NYC airspace, however, seems to be known for its flocks of Canada Geese. There have been at least eight major strikes between geese and planes departing or landing at New York area airports since 1995.

The primary bird threats near airports can come from waterfowl, gulls, crows, pigeons, and starlings (in flocks), depending on the habitat and species present. Some of the common individual strikes still tend to involve smaller birds, such as Mourning Doves or Horned Larks.

Final thought on the issue: Did the geese hit the U.S. Airways plane (the usual and understandable media approach), or did the plane hit the geese?

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DARWIN BICENTENNIAL

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth - 12 February 1809.

Darwin is famous for describing in rigorous detail that species change from common ancestors over time through the process of natural selection. Natural selection came to be widely seen as the primary - although not exclusive - explanation of biological evolution and forms the basis of modern evolutionary theory today.

The Darwin bicentennial will be recognized across the globe. Those of us interested in birds should note that Darwin dealt with birds many times throughout his scientific career, from early and amateur inquiries into Rock Pigeons to the puzzle of Galapagos finches. November of this year will also mark the 150th anniversary of Darwin's seminal publication, THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES.

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BOOK NOTES: STREET PIGEONS

Last month, we drew your attention to a serious and scientific compendium of information on the birdlife of the Aleutians. This month, we spotlight a very different sort of bird book - a well-written, short, and breezy volume on the life of Rock Pigeons and their lives with us. Courtney Humphries, author of SUPERDOVE (Smithsonian Books, 2008), traces the interaction of pigeons and humans dating back to when Rock Pigeons were domesticated (sometime around 3000 B.C.), through the species' incorporation in European manor and village living, their arrival in the Americas, and their spread around the world. We learn about Darwin's interest in the species, the original reasons for domestication (i.e., show, meat, and performance), and most importantly, how humans have shaped the species and have responded to the ubiquitous "street pigeon," both favorably and unfavorably through the years. It is an enjoyable and thoughtfully done read. Humphries is a young author who should surely be watched.

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TIP OF THE MONTH: DRINK UP!

When you go afield with binoculars, field guide, spotting scope, and camera you may often use a daypack and bring along all sorts of additional items, ranging from extra warm gloves to sunscreen, depending on conditions and the season. But don't forget water!

Whether birding in hot or cold conditions, try to drink at least six to eight glasses of water a day, or even more when hiking or birding in harsh environments. Without adequate water your body gradually loses its ability to function properly; it becomes unable to cool down when conditions cause its temperature to rise, and it becomes unable to generate heat when conditions cause its temperature to drop.

Most fluids can quench thirst, but coffee, although a wonderful beverage (especially when shade-grown!), is also a mild diuretic, prompting frequent urination. Be ready to replenish your body's water.

Drink up!

But while you're at it, also consider addressing the bottled water habit. Your two E-bulletin editors are old enough to remember when people commonly carried canteens and thermoses instead of pre-bottled water. Today, when it comes to water, consider going with a "do-it-yourself" kit - a refillable and reusable steel (not plastic) bottle and the use of the spigot at your kitchen sink. Rediscovering tap water is a lot cheaper and a lot better for the environment than manufacturing, shipping, and discarding all those plastic single-use bottles. (For example, according to one estimate, the recent annual production of plastic bottles for water in the U.S. required the energy equivalent of over 17 million barrels of oil.)

For five good reasons to break the bottled water habit, whether birding or not, see here:
<http://www.newdream.org/water/reasons.php>

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IBA NEWS: WILDERNESS ADVANCE; IZEMBEK LOSS

In early January, the Senate passed a sweeping public lands bill, including many new Wilderness designations, called the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act. This was a mega-package containing 160 proposals in all. It set aside more than 2 million acres as protected Wilderness in nine states, the largest expansion of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 15 years. It is designed to safeguard over 270,000 acres along more than 1,000 miles of rivers in Oregon, California, Idaho, Arizona, Wyoming, and Massachusetts along with adding 2,800 miles of new trails to the federal system. This single element gives legal permanence to the first new system of conservation lands in the United States in more than 50 years under the National Landscape Conservation System Act.

The bipartisan legislation was much-praised, and it passed 73-21 in the Senate. Comparable approval is expected shortly in the House of Representatives.

Among the lands affected were a number of Important Bird Areas (IBAs), such as portions of Mount Hood in Oregon, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California, Rocky Mountain Park in Colorado, Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, and Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. With each example, the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act will deepen and enhance the protection of these IBAs.

Alongside this wilderness protection, however, was a highly disappointing provision. This provision would allow the state of Alaska to build an airport access road through a wilderness section of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, an IBA and also a RAMSAR site on the Alaska Peninsula. The construction of this road could adversely affect internationally significant wetlands and vital habitat for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds, particularly Emperor Geese and "Pacific Black" Brant (which gorge on the eel grass each fall before continuing their lengthy migrations). In exchange for the road, the state and other landowners would transfer more than 61,000 acres to the federal government, including about 43,000 acres that would be designated as wilderness.

The land swap would give the state a seven-mile easement through the refuge. The easement would let the state complete a 25-mile gravel road linking King Cove, with a population of 800, to Cold Bay, population 80, where there is an all-weather airport.

The airport access road "won't work as advertised and won't save lives. The only way it makes any sense at all is if you tie it to oil and gas development," said Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The Izembek refuge abuts the North Aleutian Basin, one of the nation's largest untapped petroleum reserves, raising questions about the actual motives behind building this road.

We have covered "The Road to Nowhere" before, most recently in October 2008:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/octSBC08.html#TOC10>

For more on the Senate Bill, see the statement by the Wilderness Society:

<http://wilderness.org/content/us-senate-passes-huge-public-lands-bill>

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs, and those 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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DISORIENTED BROWN PELICANS IN CALIFORNIA AND BEYOND

Brown Pelicans along the West Coast have recently been found on highways, runways, farm fields, and in suburban backyards. The birds share symptoms of disorientation, extreme fatigue, and even bruising inside their mouths. The phenomenon - starting in California, but reported south to Baja California and north to Washington State - is confounding volunteer rehabilitators and experts alike.

It is not that uncommon at this time of year to have a die-off of some young Brown Pelicans. What is being reported, however, is a larger than normal die-off of adults.

One of the most common conditions being observed is disorientation - birds landing inland, being found in neighborhoods, on roads, runways, etc. This disorientation implies that something is neurologically wrong with the birds. In fact, a few of the pelicans have tested for the presence of domoic acid. Domoic acid results from an extreme proliferation, or bloom, of marine algae. It can affect the brain, causing seizures in flight where the birds literally fall from the sky. Due to the broad distribution of ailing pelicans, and the fact that most of the pelicans are thin, it is unlikely that this event is caused by domoic acid. When affected by domoic acid, birds are usually of sound body weight, and it is therefore likely that domoic acid is playing only a secondary role to what is probably a larger problem.

The enigma continues.

For more information, see:

<http://www3.signonsandiego.com/stories/2009/jan/08/1m8pelicans23939-rescue-operation/?zIndex=33646>

and

http://www.ibrrc.org/pdfs/pr_01_06_2009.pdf

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CONDOR CHICKS IN CALIFORNIA

Seven wild California Condor chicks left their nests in California in 2008, an event which marked a successful breeding season. We neglected to mention this achievement in our report last month on breeding success for condors in the Grand Canyon:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC09.html#TOC02>

The addition of these seven young California Condors brings the number in California to more than 80 free-flying birds in the wild. For more information on these California Condor developments, see:

<http://www.fws.gov/news/NewsReleases/showNews.cfm?newsId=47108004-F5F1-6A82-E0E70AF5FF07D0E2>

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ESA EXPERT CONSULTATION

As mentioned last month, the Bush Administration in its closing months of office announced a final rule change that weakens implementation of the Endangered Species Act. At issue were Section 7 consultations with endangered species experts at the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. We pointed out that the incoming Obama Administration had indicated that it would move to reverse the rule, although it might take time to undo the change:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC09.html#TOC04>

Indeed, in the very first full day of the Obama Administration, a number of environmental moves attempted by the outgoing Bush Administration were blocked. Still, the new administration couldn't stop rules that first were published in the Federal Register and that had cleared a statutory waiting period before taking effect, such as the rule that allows federal agencies to forgo expert advice on whether proposed projects would affect endangered species.

The Obama Administration could launch a new rule-making process to eventually supplant any of the Bush Administration rules, but that might take months or years to complete. Congress could also be asked to exercise a little-used law that would allow it to overturn any of the late Bush decisions or to prohibit federal agencies from spending money to implement those rules. Or, the new Administration could drop its opposition to several environmentalist lawsuits challenging the Bush rules, signaling that the rules won't stand for long.

Options are open, but the direction and intention is clear.

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OSPREY TRAVELS, OSPREY PROBLEMS

Among the many radio-tracked birds that we can follow on the Internet have been 22 Ospreys tagged and monitored since 2004 by Rob Bierregaard and his colleagues. Originating in the northeastern U.S., these birds have been followed up and down the East Coast, across the Caribbean, and into the Orinoco basin of Venezuela and beyond.

Unfortunately, some Ospreys never make it back to the U.S. One, "Meadow" by name, was recently shot (almost certainly) at a farm one mile west of Higüey, Dominican Republic. This makes four birds lost out of four that tried to overwinter in the D.R.

For details on the researchers and program, see here:

<http://www.bioweb.uncc.edu/bierregaard/ospreys.htm>

Fortunately four birds are still transmitting, two from this year and two from the class of '07. For a link to the fascinating Osprey satellite tracking maps, see:

<http://www.bioweb.uncc.edu/bierregaard>

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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.