



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

February 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 the [Wild Bird Centers of America](#) and the [National Bird-Feeding Society](#). You can access an archive of past E-bulletins in our newsletter [archives](#).

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RARITY FOCUS

Late in the afternoon of 24 January, Alan Wormington and Robert Epstein found and photographed a female Amazon Kingfisher in Laredo, Texas. This species normally ranges from Mexico (no closer than southern Tamaulipas) to Argentina and Uruguay. Amazon Kingfisher is the largest "green" kingfisher in the Americas.

In April 1999, ABA's BIRDING magazine ran an article on the "next birds" that might be seen in North America, with Amazon Kingfisher featured, not among the half-dozen core predictions to appear as Texas and U.S. first occurrences, but as the first alternate "honorable mention" species. It took a little over a decade, but the prediction was accurate.

Wormington and Epstein saw the kingfisher at the mouth of Zacate Creek, then along the creek itself. Zacate Creek is downstream from Las Palmas Park along the Rio Grande, specifically located within the Laredo city limits. Alan Wormington said of the experience, "It is a bit ironic that we were constantly complaining that we had not seen a single kingfisher anywhere during our week-long trip; then we saw FOUR kingfisher species at Zacate Creek!"

The two original observers are currently submitting photos and other details for eventual publication. This would be the first record of an Amazon Kingfisher for North America north of Mexico.

To see two photos taken on site on 25 January by Dan Jones and Stuart Healy, respectively, see:

<http://i48.tinypic.com/33aasjs.jpg>

<http://www.aztrogon.com/images/birds/Kingfishers/AMKI20100125TX-f2.jpg>

As of the end of January, the Amazon Kingfisher was still present at Zacate Creek, and many birders from far and wide were beating a path to Laredo. In fact, the City of Laredo has made a special effort to welcome birders - from local clean-up and cordial police attention, to bringing in portable toilets! The city and the local Monte Mucho Audubon Society also cooperated in putting up bright yellow crowd-control tape to keep birders from inadvertently entering areas too close to the Amazon Kingfisher's favorite perches.

ANOTHER MULTI-MONTH "MAJOR CONTENDER"

Once again, we have a species that we passed over as the rarity of the month for two consecutive months, bested both times by Texas mega-rarities - Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and Amazon Kingfisher.

Nonetheless, this bird and its generous hosts deserve special mention.

Since 3 December, Harvey and Brenda Schmidt have hosted a Rustic Bunting at their bird feeder in Creighton, Saskatchewan. The small mining town of Creighton is located near the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border, about 540 miles NNW of Winnipeg and at a latitude roughly the same as the southern end of the Alaska panhandle.

The backyard location in north-central Canada is simply amazing for a Rustic Bunting, a species that might normally spend the winter in eastern China.

Rustic Bunting, a species that breeds from Scandinavia to eastern Siberia and winters mainly in eastern China, Korea, and Japan, is considered rare to uncommon in North America as a migrant through the western Aleutians and Bering Sea areas. It is considered an accidental migrant and winter visitor from southern Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California. There are three previous Canadian records, all from coastal British Columbia. In essence, this is a very rare bird for anywhere in interior North America. (You can find the species described in the National Geographic guide on pages 434-435 and in the "large" Sibley on page 503.)

The Rustic Bunting visited the Schmidt feeder through the end of January. Birders who braved the cold and drove the distance to see the bunting were generally treated to excellent looks. Most of these travelers were Canadians, with a few from the U.S.

For details, including photos and a video by Harvey Schmidt, visit Brenda Schmidt's informative blog: <http://birdschmidt.blogspot.com/2009/12/arriving-with-four-juncos-yesterday.html>

FEBRUARY: NATIONAL BIRD FEEDING MONTH AND GBBC

Our report on the Rustic Bunting at the home of Harvey and Brenda Schmidt is an appropriate prelude to February feeder activities for a number of reasons.

In January 1994, Congressman John Porter (R-IL) read a resolution into the Congressional Record declaring February "National Bird-Feeding Month." Since then, February has become the month most associated with wild bird feeding promotions and activities, all focused on backyard birds. February has become an ideal month for promoting and enjoying this wholesome, home-based, nature-oriented activity.

For example, to see what Mass Audubon has been doing in this regard, see: www.massaudubon.org/Birds_and_Birding/FoF/participate.php

This year's theme for National Bird-Feeding Month is "Hatching Out - An Introduction to the Wild Bird Feeding Hobby," being promoted by the National Bird-Feeding Society (NBFS). You can find more details, including a link to a helpful NBFS "Guide to Better Bird Feeding" and associated poster at: www.birdfeeding.org/nbfm.html

Also, in 1997 the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, along with a number of bird-feeding retailers, launched the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) in an effort to learn more about late-winter bird distributions. The next GBBC will be held between 12 and 15 February. Anyone can take part, from novice bird watchers to experts. Participants count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the count period and report their sightings online. You can find all the details on this citizen's science effort here: www.birdsource.org/gbbc/

Another seasonal reminder is appropriate. Some readers may not already be participating in Project FeederWatch, another effort of the Cornell Lab, in this case with Bird Studies Canada as a partner. The project's reporting season runs through 6 April. If you are not already involved in Project FeederWatch, be sure to consider getting on board, if only next winter season. You can find more details here: www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/

Appropriately, Harvey and Brenda Schmidt, the hosts of the previously mentioned Rustic Bunting, have been participants in Project FeederWatch since 2006. In addition, two other Rustic Buntings were reported by a participating Feeder-Watcher in Ketchikan, Alaska, last fall.

TEXAS COAST WHOOPING CRANES UP SLIGHTLY

Last May we reported that the previous winter was the worst on record for the Texas coast Whooping Crane flock. Between 21 and 23 cranes died due to food shortages and the associated drought: www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maySBC09.html#TOC15

Now that the arrival of virtually all the cranes expected along the Texas coast has occurred, it appears that there are about 264 birds present. This is nearly 20 more birds than left Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and nearby areas last spring. Accordingly, the increase just about replaces the individuals lost last winter. For the most recent crane counts, see Tom Stehn's reports: www.birdrockport.com/tom_stehn_whooping_crane_report.htm

Unfortunately there is concern that another die-off could occur this winter, owing to a lack of blue crabs in the area and the continuing squeeze on crane habitat from local development and fresh-water use. See this Associated Press story for more information:

www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/ap/tx/6837243.html

TWO WATERFOWL COUNTERS PERISH IN PLANE CRASH

On 17 January, two USFWS biologists died in a small Cessna aircraft crash while returning from a day of surveying waterfowl in Oregon and Washington. Ray Bentley and Dave Pitkin were highly experienced counters in the Service's mid-winter waterfowl surveys, often flying low and slow, counting ducks, geese, and swans. They were part of an unblemished 54-year history of conducting aerial bird surveys until the fatal crash last month. These surveys take place during both winter and summer and cover over 80,000 air miles each year. Select teams of pilot-biologists and observers conduct the surveys.

Ray Bentley had recently flown Chesapeake Bay surveys and was soon scheduled to fly to the Arctic to do surveys there. Dave Pitkin, who left the Service in 2007, was doing surveys on a contractual basis and was an accomplished photographer, according to Roy Lowe, project leader for the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Lowe said Pitkin was "a great conservationist."

You can read more details in a USFWS release at:

www.fws.gov/news/NewsReleases/showNews.cfm?newsId=47C3737C-B35D-099F-611B5E1E5B517371

and a local story:

www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/article_38546af0-0587-11df-81cf-001cc4c002e0.html

SQUEEZING THE LIFE OUT OF SUSTAINABLE COFFEE?

Last month we brought your attention to a fine report on marketing bird-compatible coffee, a report by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/janSBC10.html#TOC06

This month, we bring you some sobering trends in coffee economics, trends which put the future of sustainable coffee (shade, organic, fair-traded), and therefore birds, in some jeopardy.

A decade ago, with coffee prices at an all-time low, many growers in Latin America and the Caribbean switched to organic for the premium price they might receive. Some growers had a three-year waiting period to certify a pesticide- and chemical-free landscape, but for a time this wait was considered worthwhile. Once certified, the organic producers did well. Now the premium price is disappearing, and an estimated 10 percent of organic farmers from Mexico to Costa Rica have stopped organic production over the past three to four years.

Similarly, fair-traded coffee was seen as a way to get coffee co-ops a better price for their coffee and to guarantee some social programs for coffee families. Today, while the fair-trade price per pound may be slightly more than the overall market price, it is no longer enough for coffee communities to stay much above subsistence.

With Americans drinking one-fifth of the world's coffee, this is a trend to watch. While some major retailers are driving down the prices of coffee, this is not necessarily good for people in coffee communities in the hemisphere, nor can it be good for shade-coffee-seeking birds.

If demand for shade, organic, and fair-traded coffees in the U.S. grows, producers in Latin America and the Caribbean may have the incentive to continue with or return to sustainable coffee production.

For two recent summaries on these trends (from TIME magazine and THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR) see here:

www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1926007-2,00.html

www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2010/0103/Organic-coffee-Why-Latin-America-s-farmers-are-abandoning-it

CORN VS BIRDS IN PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION: A NEW REPORT ON ETHANOL

Government incentives boosting corn-based ethanol are accelerating the destruction of North America's Prairie Pothole region, a region where millions of birds find nesting habitat and shelter in the shallow wetlands and grasslands of the Northern Great Plains. This is according to a new study released by the National Wildlife Federation, with data gathered by University of Michigan researchers.

The Northern Great Plains unique topography was formed 10,000 years ago when ice-age glaciers scouring the terrain left behind large indentations, today known as "prairie potholes." The Prairie Pothole study covers mainly Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas, but the region actually extends as far west as northern Montana and also includes portions

of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

More than 3.2 million acres of prairie potholes and associated grasslands were plowed under across parts of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota between 2005 and 2007 in order to make space for corn. Much of that corn was grown to meet U.S. thirst for ethanol, a fuel which can create cleaner combustion, and curb auto tailpipe emissions when blended with gasoline.

But the conversion of prairie pothole habitat to corn also comes at a very high cost to birds and other wildlife. In some areas, species loss has been as high as 30 percent, including declines among local populations of Upland Sandpipers, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Western Meadowlarks.

If the demand for biofuel remains steady, farmers could plant an additional 10.6 million acres of corn in the next year to meet ethanol mandates. Moreover, the connection "between ethanol incentives and habitat destruction is fairly clear,"

states the report released last month. The USDA provides corn-growing incentives, such as crop insurance, that virtually guarantee farmers a profit regardless of the crop yield.

This ethanol/habitat study is one of the first to narrow the focus to the Prairie Pothole region, an area identified by multiple conservation groups as one of the most threatened zones in North America as a result of the conversion of wetlands and grasslands to agricultural row crops.

"Grassland birds were already in steep decline, making this additional habitat loss quite alarming," said Gary Botzek, executive director at the Minnesota Conservation Federation.

The study puts forth several solid recommendations, including reconsidering financial support for corn ethanol, special protections for grassland and wetland habitats, and strengthening of the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

The full 24-page study can be found here:

www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/Media-Center/News-by-Topic/Wildlife/2010/~media/PDFs/Reports/Wildlife/01-13-10-Corn-Ethanol-Wildlife.ashx

And it is summarized by NWF here:

www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/Media-Center/Reports/Archive/2010/~media/PDFs/Wildlife/01-13-10-Corn-Ethanol-Wildlife.ashx

IBA NEWS: CANADIAN WEBSITE LAUNCH

Co-partners Bird Studies Canada and Nature Canada have launched an informative new website for the Canadian Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program. The effort has also gained critical support from a number of regional organizations, including BC Nature, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, Nature Saskatchewan, and Nature Quebec, as well as hundreds of volunteers nationwide. TransCanada Corporation and the U.S. Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act grant provided funding for the new website.

This new, fully bilingual website provides information, tools, and mapping features to help IBA partners and volunteers more effectively monitor birds and assess conditions at key bird conservation areas. These volunteers, part of the IBA Caretaker Network, are connected to individual IBAs, assigned a lead volunteer, and assisted by other citizen scientists and helpers.

There are nearly 600 Canadian IBAs, many of which are not legally or formally protected. To learn more or get involved, visit the new IBA Canada website at:

www.ibacanada.ca

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:

www.audubon.org/bird/iba

BOOK NOTES: HUGE NATIONAL GEO

Do you cherish your National Geographic bird guide? Do you carry your old 3rd edition into the field while leaving your crisp, newer 5th edition at home? Do you relish the 5th edition's thumb-marks for fast access to family groups? Do you look for the new name-changes and "splits" with every National Geographic edition?

If you answered "Yes." to any one of these questions, you may be a certified National Geo fan, and a birder who might be interested in the ILLUSTRATED BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA (Jon L. Dunn and Jonathan Alderfer, editors), a large, folio version of the 5th edition of the popular field guide. It was published late last year, and it is nothing short of delicious. At 9.5 inches x 12 inches, it has all the maps, text, and illustrations of the original field guide, only it is much larger. The illustrations, of course, are the real treat, especially because all are beautifully presented only on the right pages.

Our only quibble with the presentation of this wonderful book is that the book's 20 original artists who, understandably, had their names placed at the very end of the regular guide, also received the same treatment in this large format version. Given the size of the book and the prominence of the artists' work, it is unfortunate that these talented individuals couldn't receive conspicuous acknowledgment for their accomplishments on the pages where their artwork appears.

TIP OF THE MONTH: RADIO USE WHILE BIRDING

Cell phones are great, but they have three drawbacks for active birders: 1) under most circumstances they are limited to two-way conversations, 2) some prime birding locations may have poor cell-coverage, and 3) their use is dangerous while driving.

On the last point, at least six states (i.e., California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Oregon and Washington) and the District of Columbia prohibit drivers from talking on handheld cell phones while driving. In Canada, it is illegal to use a handheld cell phone while driving in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Quebec. Other states and provinces are also considering similar legislation. (Texting while driving is another, but related, issue.)

Alternatively, the use of popular FRS/GMRS radios, either for birding caravans or at locations where there is much field activity, can be very useful. All it takes is two or more inexpensive radios and a common channel and local birders can be off and running.

In Minnesota, for example, many birders with these handy FRS/GMRS radios use channel 6 with sub-code 6, thus allowing both FRS and GMRS users to communicate. In Iowa, the statewide birding recommendation is channel 5 with sub-code 0 as the first choice, only using channel 6 with sub-code 0 as a backup. The American Birding Association (ABA) suggested the use of FRS channel 11 and sub-code 22 a number of years ago, but that initial suggestion predates the popular spread of GMRS frequencies.

For your consideration (in order of preference) we suggest that birders use radio channels/sub-codes: 6/0, 6/6, 5/0, and 11/22.

You can find an informative Minnesota birding page by Bob Ekblad packed with radio information here:
www.birding-minnesota.com/Radio.htm

HAITI: AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Our sympathy and concern go out to the survivors of last month's devastating earthquake in Haiti. There will need to be both immediate and ongoing disaster recovery, along with long-term rebuilding work in this beleaguered country.

If you haven't already done so, we encourage you to consider giving to an organization that is currently doing serious recovery work in Haiti. There are many groups working on addressing key relief issues such as providing food and clean water, medical care, and shelter for families.

There are also bird-related and natural resource field projects that will need massive future support. When the time is right and our bird education and bird conservation colleagues in Haiti are able to resume something that resembles normal life, there will be many appropriate ways to help them. These will include replacing lost field equipment and lab supplies, collecting and distributing educational and research materials, and various other ways to help Haitians rebuild a foundation that will revive bird education and conservation in Haiti.

Not surprisingly there are projects already being discussed among members of the bird conservation community who have been previously engaged in conservation and education initiatives in Haiti. Let us hope we can all cooperate to help put an effective plan in place that will help our counterparts in Haiti. We intend to provide more information in the future about how you can help to restore important Haitian bird conservation and education programs when the time comes.

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You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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

If you have any friends or co-workers who want to get onto the monthly E-bulletin mailing list, have them contact either:

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