



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

February 2011

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.

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

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RARITY FOCUS

On 13 December, a Black-vented Oriole was observed during the regularly scheduled morning bird walk at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park in South Texas. Javier de Leon reported that the oriole was found in close association with other orioles in the revegetation area near the park headquarters. Later that day, the oriole was seen crossing the canal that borders the park headed into the park.

From 13 December until New Year's Day, the bird was seen only a few times, mostly near the headquarters. After that, the bird was relocated outside the State Park and just up the road at the Bentsen Palms Village RV Resort. The Black-vented Oriole was then observed almost every day throughout the month at the RV Resort, most often in the morning when it came to a coral bean tree near the club house.

Black-vented Oriole is a resident species ranging from southern Nuevo León and central Sonora in Mexico south to northern Nicaragua. It is accidental in Texas, with only about three reports dating back to the late 1960s. The species has also been recorded once in southeast Arizona in 1991.

Clearly, this Mexican oriole is a very rare bird in the U.S. If you are unfamiliar with it, consult a Mexican field guide, or see page 452-453 of the 5th edition of the National Geographic guide.

The management at Bentsen Palms Village was accommodating to birders, many of whom traveled from far away to see the Black-vented Oriole. Access to the RV resort was allowed whenever the office was open, from 8am for walk-in birders checking in until closing at 5pm. The resort manager made maps available to locations where birders were allowed (including the circle with the club house) and printed instructions on proper behavior. The location could have been completely shut down to birders; instead, guidelines were established to make for better birder access.

Birders are encouraged to take note of these kinds of model arrangements, since similar practices could be copied elsewhere.

To view photos of the oriole (taken in early January) by Erik Breden and Bruce Sherman, see:
www.otterside.com/winter2011/oriole_black-vented-1014.jpg
and
www.pbase.com/image/131628440

SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS: BLESSED EVENT

Last month, we reported on the first U.S. Pacific nesting of Short-tailed Albatross, with a nest of questionable viability on Kure Atoll, and another more likely productive nest on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge:
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/JanSBC11.html#TOC02

The great news is that the Midway egg hatched in mid-January. You can read the announcement here:
www.fws.gov/pacific/news/news.cfm?id=2144374679

There are also photos. The Midway chick is sometimes difficult to see, but is visible directly under the male parent:
www.fws.gov/pacific/t/?id=320

Unfortunately, the Kure Atoll eggs failed, but this was not a surprise, since they were thought to be the product of a suspected female-female pair:
www.acap.org/latest-news/the-short-tailed-albatross-nest-fails-on-kure-atoll-hawaii

OIL COMMISSION: COMPANIES BLAMED, RECOMMENDATIONS MADE

Last month, the 380-page "National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling" blamed the Gulf of Mexico blowout last April on "missteps and oversights" by oil giant BP, rig owner Transocean, and contractor Halliburton.

The Commission concluded that the disaster, which resulted in putting over 170 million gallons of oil into Gulf of Mexico waters, was not inevitable, but rather was "rooted in systemic failures" that could happen again. William K. Reilly, co-chairman of the commission and former head of the EPA under President George H.W. Bush, said the disaster reflected "a more pervasive problem" within the oil industry.

The Commission reviewed the circumstances of the disaster and presented ways to guard against accidents associated with offshore drilling in the future, including recommended improvements to federal laws, regulations, and industry practices.

The regulation and inspection requirements run by the U.S. government, specifically through the Minerals Management Service (MMS), appeared feeble at best - our words, not theirs.

The recommendations were fine as far as they went, especially the creation of an independent safety agency in the Department of the Interior, the effort to enhance environmental protection and improve funding for key regulatory agencies, the creation of regulatory fees on new and existing leases, the implementation of better coordination between Interior, NOAA, and the Coast Guard, and the increased liability cap and financial responsibility under the Oil Pollution Act.

However, the elements pertaining to region-wide restoration and coastal habitat protections were disappointing, to say the least. Insofar as the Commission's recommendations were mostly a "safety-and-regulation report," one could not expect much more. Nonetheless, the Commission recommended that Congress should "dedicate 80 percent of any Clean Water Act penalties... to region-wide restoration of the Gulf of Mexico." Ideally the report could have gone much further to secure bird and wildlife habitat at sea as well as along the coast itself.

The Commission could have even gone as far as the CLEAR Act - passed by the House in July, but neglected by the Senate - that would have:
...fully funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund (a real "conservation royalty") at \$900 million a year without being subject to annual appropriations,
...given National Wildlife Refuges the ability to collect and keep funds for damages resulting from oil spills and other criminal acts,
...and provided \$1.2 billion to fund a "Gulf Coast Restoration Program" and a Task Force to create a regional restoration plan.

We have previously covered the impact and meaning of the "spill" in the E-bulletin, especially in June, September, and December:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/juneSBC10.html#TOC03
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/SepSBC10.html#TOC03
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/DecSBC10.html#TOC03

To access the complete National Commission report, see:
www.oilspillcommission.gov/

IBA NEWS: EVERGLADES HEADWATER NWR PLANNED

Last month Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, announced that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would work with private landowners, conservation groups, and state and local agencies to create a new National Wildlife Refuge and a broader "Conservation Area" for the headwaters of the Everglades. This would, according to Salazar, "preserve the community's ranching heritage and conserve the headwaters and fish and wildlife of the Everglades."

The area would be located north and slightly west of Lake Okeechobee, itself a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) in Florida.

Under a \$70- million proposal, the government would purchase about 50,000 acres for a new National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and protect another 100,000 acres through agreements with willing landowners.

In addition to improving water quality, the proposed Conservation Area and NWR would protect habitat for 88 federal and Florida species listed as threatened or endangered. Lake Okeechobee, a source of Everglades waters, has historically been one of the most critical sites in Florida for Snail Kites, and under conditions of changing water levels, is an area used abundantly by wading birds, waterfowl, and shorebirds.

Just as significantly, the proposed Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area would touch five counties, and abut or include a number of already identified Florida IBAs beyond Lake Okeechobee itself. The final product could be a showcase of buffers and corridors for valuable habitat, birds, and wildlife.

The associated IBAs include Highland Hammock State Park, Avon Park AF Range, Lake Istokpoga, Lake Kissimmee, and the Lake Kissimmee Prairie Preserve among others. It is estimated that the proposal may link to about 690,000 acres of partner-conserved lands.

A final plan for the Everglades Headwaters proposal is expected by the end of this year. More details here: www.fws.gov/southeast/greatereverglades/

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/

FOUR SHOREBIRDS PROTECTED IN MEXICO

In mid-December, the Mexican Federal Government announced the inclusion of four shorebirds (species and subspecies) on its own Endangered Species List as either Endangered or Threatened, under federal protection. The two Endangered taxa were the "frazari" subspecies of American Oystercatcher and the "roselaari" subspecies of Red Knot and the two listed as Threatened were the "nivosus" subspecies of Snowy Plover and the Black Oystercatcher.

To read more about the effort to secure protection and the partnerships involved, see the following: www.whsrn.org/news/article/four-shorebird-species-receive-federal-protection-mexico

SONGDO OPPORTUNITY

A massive development project has already filled most of the Songdo Tidal Flats in South Korea and now threatens what remains. A number of gulls and shorebirds depend on the area, and the highly endangered Black-faced Spoonbill nests nearby. (Some of the impacted shorebirds include some species which breed in western Alaska and Siberia such as Black-bellied Plover, Bat-tailed Godwit, Red-necked Stint, and Dunlin.) The expansive project presents itself as "modern and green" and includes a planned international "Joint University Campus." Unfortunately, the plans also include potential risks to approximately 1,000 hectares of remaining tidal flats (known as "Section 11").

SAVE (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo), based at the University of California at Berkeley, has presented an alternate plan for Songdo that blends conservation and ecotourism, especially in Section 11, and aims to reverse the current development drive.

We previously covered this story in August 2009: www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augSBC09.html#TOC09

About a dozen prestigious American universities are being courted that may be able to provide significant leverage over the fate of the remaining 1,000 hectares. Accordingly, SAVE is calling for appropriate pressure from birders and other conservationists who have connections with those universities. (SAVE would also appreciate copies of any communications.) Details can be found here:

<http://saveinternational.org/saveinaction/song-do-tidal-flats/>

and

<http://saveinternational.org/news-room/>

(See the selection of article at the bottom of the page under "Newsroom")

TIP OF THE MONTH: FEEDING TIME!

It's backyard bird-feeding time again. Established in 1994, February has been National Bird-Feeding Month. It's the month when bird-feeding is front-and-center. This national event was created to promote the feeding and watching of wild birds in the backyard. Each February, there is a new and unique theme based on feeding. This year's theme is "Most Wanted - America's Top Ten Backyard Birds" (with an eastern and a western version of the top ten list). Here is a link to more information from the National Bird-Feeding Society: www.birdfeeding.org/nbfm.html

February is also the month for the Great Backyard Bird Count (GGBW). This will take place on 18-21 February and is led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, along with Canadian partner, Bird Studies Canada, and sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited. This annual four-day event aims to engage bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a snapshot of where the birds are across our continent. Anyone can participate, from beginning birders to

birds to create a snapshot of where the birds are across our continent. Anyone can participate, from beginning birders to skilled experts. It can take as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. You can find more details here:

www.birdsource.org/qbbc/

The February concurrence of National Bird-Feeding Month and the Great Backyard Bird Count is a great opportunity to blend the two events, promote the enjoyment of backyard birds, and contribute information through a citizen science portal.

BOOK NOTES: FEATHERS!

The colorful guide, *BIRD FEATHERS*, by David Scott and Casey McFarland (Stackpole Books, 2010) describes the feather ID for almost 400 species of North American birds, all in fine photographic detail. The vital information for each species includes measurements of primaries, secondaries, tail feathers, and additional details on assorted body feathers (e.g., breast, belly, nape, throat, etc.). The first section of the book – packed into 39 essential pages, introduces readers to feather origins and morphology.

It's a handy and inviting book, and might serve as a fine companion to *MOLT IN NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS* (S.N.G. Howell, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010) that we covered in August:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/AugSBC10.html#TOC06

And, yes, for those concerned about the appropriate and legal behavior afield, the Scott and McFarland book at the outset covers the issue of holding proper federal and state permits pertaining to the possession of feathers of migratory birds.

TENNESSEE CRANE-HUNTING CONTROVERSY

On 21 January, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Commission (TWRC) voted on whether or not Tennessee should initiate a hunting season on Sandhill Cranes during the winter of 2011-2012. Citing insufficient data for establishing such a season, the TWRC decided to delay its decision at least for two years while more studies could be conducted.

Sandhill Cranes had practically disappeared in the Southeastern U.S., going back at least to the 1930s, but they have been steadily increasing over the last two decades. Still, there are disagreements over the exact number of cranes which migrate in the East, and the slow reproduction rate of Sandhill Cranes (breeding after 5-7 years and only one in three nests producing a chick that survives to fall migration) raised concerns over a replacement rate within the context of a possible hunting season in Tennessee. High levels of response to the proposal (72 percent opposed and 28 percent in favor) and commission meetings packed with citizens marked the controversy. But so did courteous and reasoned discussion.

Most birders, such as those represented by the Tennessee Ornithological Society (TOS), did not support making the Sandhill Crane a game species and initiating a hunting season on this species in the state. TOS took the position that "the fall arrival and over-wintering of tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes in Tennessee should be celebrated as a wildlife spectacle and a Watchable Wildlife viewing opportunity."

Indeed, the state's largest bird-viewing event is the 20-year-old annual Crane Viewing Days festival, which draws thousands of people to watch the migrating birds in mid-January. (A total of 11,000 cranes were counted during the first week of January.) Curiously, Sandhill Cranes have been attracted to key crane sties in the state because of the corn planted by TWRA to accommodate waterfowl.

At the same time, hunters were not of one mind on the issue. In a TWRA survey, about 55 percent of Tennessee hunters favored a season on the cranes, while 22 percent said they did not and 23 percent had no opinion. (Some pro-hunting elements also called for limiting hours for the hunt, not permitting it during the festival, and not permitting it when Whooping Cranes of the experimental population were present.)

In any case, the decision has been delayed for two years, during which time there can be more studies. Melinda Welton, TOS Conservation Policy Chair, added, "The real question isn't whether Sandhill Cranes in the eastern U.S. can sustain a hunt at this time, but rather, how do we want to manage this new-found resource?"

Here are two reports on the decision to delay from two Tennessee newspapers:

www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/jan/23/holding-pattern/

and

www.tennessean.com/article/20110121/NEWS01/101210355/Sandhill-cranes-hunting-proposal-may-deferred

BIRDS AND REFUGES: TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

In December we drew attention to a National Wildlife Refuge System planning document to be adopted in July at a large public conference in Madison, Wisconsin. This is intended to guide the NWRs into the next decade and beyond. Bird conservationists and birders should be an essential part of these plans. The website for the effort in the past month has been totally revamped, and input from the public on a variety of issues is being sought. You can join the online community, engage in the dialogue, and access the revised website through our previous coverage and description at:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/DecSBC10.html#TOC11

BILL THOMPSON, JR: 9 AUGUST 1932 – 25 JANUARY 2011

William H. Thompson Jr. (also known as Bill Jr.) passed away last month at the age of 78. To the American birding community, Bill Jr. was best known as one of the founders, along with his wife Elsa, of the popular BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST magazine.

They launched the little magazine - initially a collection of reprints - in September 1978 when they sent out 35,000 copies. They originally got about a 7 or 8 percent return, or 2,500 to 2,800 subscribers. By the next year, that number reached about 6,000. During its first crucial five years this entire entrepreneurial effort was located in the Thompson home in Marietta, Ohio. By 1994, subscriptions grew to over 80,000.

Over the years, the BWD experience was able to combine the backyard bird scene with important outdoor birding skills, engaging bird stories, and bird conservation. The combination has been highly successful, and the entire family has been involved in the enterprise, including Bill Jr. and Elsa's children. (Bill III has become the editor, Andy the publisher, and Laura the circulation director.)

In the early 1990s, Bill Jr. officially retired from the magazine, but he always remained engaged.

When he was asked a few years ago about re-doing the BWD experience if he ever had the opportunity, he answered affirmatively, adding: "Once you become aware of one aspect of nature or the environment, it can't help but lead you on to others. If you begin to learn about, say, birds, you start thinking about bird habitat—what birds need, what harms them, and what you can do about it. And this awareness leads you into other areas of the natural world. You begin to understand that everything is connected and that our actions have a direct effect on the world around us and the creatures we share it with. Being able to educate and interest people in the environment, as well as to entertain them, isn't something I'd be willing to give up. BWD has been a wonderful experience."

BIRDS FALLING OUT OF SKY AND INTO THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Here are some final thoughts for this issue of the E-bulletin, ideas which actually relate to Bill Thompson Jr's comments above.

If there were two bird stories that captured the attention of the public last month, they were the story of Red-winged Blackbirds falling out of the skies in Arkansas and elsewhere and the story of an immature Cooper's Hawk spending a week in the reading room at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

We won't fill up this page with links to these two stories, since both achieved national coverage on TV and in newspapers. You can find the stories yourself through your own web-browser.

The important thing to remember about these stories is that there are dozens of bird-interest stories about birds that occur every month. And each is not simply "lightweight" news. Each story actually has many potentially significant things to reveal about birds, bird migration, bird behavior, bird conservation, and how birds and mankind interact.

Finding the stories can be easy. Conveying the lessons to a potentially curious public is more difficult, however. Whether you're a casual birder, an ornithologist, a natural resource employee, a hunter, a teacher, or a nature photographer, there are bird lessons to learn and messages to convey with every story.

The takeaway message is to encourage the public's interest so that it may hopefully draw at least some correct conclusions about birds and humans in our daily lives.

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You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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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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