



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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January 2006

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We are very busy this holiday season and are sure that many of you are also. As a result we are sending out the January 2006 issue of the E-bulletin a bit earlier than usual.

The Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed as a service for 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).

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### RARITY FOCUS

This month, we had our choice of two rarities, both fascinating waterfowl: Falcated Duck in Oregon and Baikal Teal in California. We'll go with Falcated Duck for now, if only because it was found first.

A male Falcated Duck appeared on 18 November at the Premier RV Resort north of Eugene, Oregon. This is almost certainly the same bird that was seen at this same location last winter. That bird was seen from 16 January into April 2005 - (though not every day) and was recently accepted by the Oregon Rare Birds Records Committee as a bona fide vagrant.

Falcated Ducks (formerly known as Falcated Teal) normally breed in eastern Siberia southward to Mongolia and Japan. They normally winter from Japan south to Korea, less frequently westward to Iran and southward to Thailand. In North America, the species is casual in Alaska (e.g., Pribilof and Aleutian Islands), with reliable reports also in British Columbia south to central California.

The drake in Oregon frequents the wastewater ponds on the south side of the RV resort.

Visitors must check in at the RV resort office before looking for the bird. The RV managers are friendly, and they welcome responsible birders. They usually direct birders to proceed past the laundry/restroom area and continue beyond a few campsites to a parking spot next to the northern-most wastewater treatment pond.

Click [here](#) see some photos of the duck taken by Steve Matherly from 2005:

Additional photos taken by Greg Gilson may be seen [here](#).

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## **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS**

'Tis the season!

It started in 1900 when Frank Chapman introduced the concept of a Christmas Bird Count as an alternative to a Christmas Bird Shoot (also called a Side Hunt). Why not count and appreciate birds instead of hunting them indiscriminately? The effort caught on, and in a few years the pioneers of the Audubon movement institutionalized the practice as their own.

Now let us fast forward to the next century. The 106th consecutive CBC, a massive effort in citizen science effort is currently upon us. Last year there were more than 2,000 CBC circles and more than 56,000 participants, who counted and reported birds from throughout the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, Guam, and the Northern Marianas.

We encourage you to find a Christmas Bird Count near where you live and participate. This year's CBC period extends from 14 December 2005 to 5 January 2006.

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## **LONG-RANGE SAW-WHET**

The fall of 2005 witnessed a robust flight of Northern Saw-whet Owls in eastern Massachusetts. Norman Smith, veteran owl bander and director of Mass Audubon's Blue Hills Trailside Museum, banded over 300 saw-whets during October and November at just two Bay State sites. Most notably he captured a saw-whet owl bearing a band that was applied by G. Frye at a site near Choteau, Montana, of 27 September 2003! This banding recovery is thought to represent the longest confirmed west to east distance ever recorded for a migrant Northern Saw-whet Owl.

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## **AVITOURISM AND BIRDING SUMMARY**

For a summary of works on avitourism and related subjects - mostly recent Canadian and US articles, including some important pieces dating back to the late 1970s - [see the article](#) posted by Agnes Nowaczek, PhD Candidate from the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Ontario. Almost 100 works are summarized, covering a variety of National Parks, Provincial Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges, along motivational and economic background information.

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## **APPEAL FOR COLUMBIAN SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

A coalition of environmental groups indicated in late November that they will sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) over the agency's failure to respond to a year-old petition seeking federal protection for the "Columbian" race of the Sharp-tailed Grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

Previously the Forest Guardians, Sagebrush Sea Campaign and Oregon Natural Desert Association have argued that this bird is sliding toward extinction. The groups first sought federal protection for the grouse in 1995, but the USFWS declined to add the species to the Endangered Species List on the grounds that while the grouse had disappeared from much of its range, it still persisted in two large "metapopulations" in Idaho and Colorado. A 2004 petition marked the groups' second attempt to win protection for the bird. But the new petition has also languished, while the grouse continue to decline.

The "Columbian" Sharp-tailed Grouse was once so common throughout the Interior West - from eastern Oregon and Washington to Wyoming and Colorado - that early pioneers supposedly wrote of "skies darkened by flocks of thousands of birds." Today, less than 60,000 grouse are said to remain, and the bird has all but disappeared from about 90 percent of its historic range, today persisting primarily in small, isolated populations in Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

The bird has benefited from the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which protects wildlife habitat by paying farmers and ranchers to set aside environmentally sensitive lands. But the grouse has continued to decline, reportedly partly due to changes in the CRP program that allow emergency livestock grazing during

drought.

In its 2000 decision against listing the "Columbian" Sharp-tailed Grouse, the USFWS acknowledged that most of the small, isolated populations "will likely be extirpated within a decade or two," but said "the available information indicates that the subspecies' metapopulations are relatively secure."

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### **GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE TO BE CONSIDERED FOR LISTING**

While there are continuing efforts to push USFWS to list the "Columbian" Sharp-tailed Grouse, similar efforts have succeeded in convincing the Service to review the status of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse. Under a settlement with environmental groups announced in late November, the USFWS has agreed to consider the Gunnison Sage-Grouse, which is only found in Colorado and Utah, for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Service will make a decision on whether to list the species, which has been a candidate for listing since 2000, by 31 March 2006.

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### **BROWN PELICAN: SAFE YET?**

Also in the area of birds covered or not covered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), in mid-December the Endangered Species Recovery Council (ESRC), submitted a formal petition to remove (delist) the California Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis californicus*) from coverage under the federal ESA and from the list of species covered by the state's California Endangered Species Act. The case was made that this subspecies represents an ESA success story and that it should be removed entirely (delisted) from both federal and state lists (not be merely down-listed from Endangered to Threatened).

The Council indicated that "on the basis of evidence amassed during recent years, no reasonable assessment of the status of this subspecies would lead to a conclusion that it is currently in danger of extinction, or that it is likely to be in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future." California Brown Pelicans have an estimated population of 200,000 birds.

The Brown Pelican - eastern and western subspecies - had suffered devastating declines throughout its range during the 1950s and 1960s. The species was listed as endangered in October, 1970. With the banning of DDT in 1972, the tide started to turn, if only slowly. (Other species such as Bald Eagle, Osprey, and Peregrine experienced similar downturns and similar reversals, although certainly not at the same rates.) In the 1980s, other populations of Brown Pelican were delisted. Only the California subspecies and populations breeding in Louisiana and Texas are currently covered under the ESA.

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### **NEW JOINT VENTURE WEBSITE**

Yet another bird habitat Joint Venture has launched a website. The Atlantic Coast Joint Venture has a [site](#) which offers partners and the conservation community a comprehensive overview of ACJV activity. There are also links to conservation plans and initiatives, a summary of partner projects and accomplishments, information on resources, and links to the ACJV Electronic newsletter and upcoming events.

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### **STOPOVER AWARENESS**

In the most recent issue of THE AUK (October 05), David Mehlman and seven co-authors cover the issue of "Conserving Stopover Sites for Forest-dwelling Migratory Landbirds" in a thought-provoking way and in a fashion that is also fully understandable to the general birding public.

The article categorizes three types of migratory landbird stopover sites - "fire escapes," "convenience stores," and "full-service hotels." The article goes on to outline how an appreciation of these site distinctions, along with their identity and management, can actually advance modern bird-conservation planning.

The article is not currently available for free, but there is an earlier version (from 2002) of the concept available [here](#).

The published version in THE AUK is probably a bit stronger, thanks to the work of the lead authors and additional work done since 2002.

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### **BIRD FLU: VECTORS OR VICTIMS?**

As 2005 comes to a close and we start a new year, millions of wild birds have arrived at their wintering destinations across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Fortunately they have accomplished this without the

destinations across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Fortunately they have accomplished this without the widely predicted outbreaks of H5N1 bird flu that some experts feared might be associated with their migration.

"The most obvious explanation is that migrating wild birds are not spreading the disease," said Michael Rands, Director and Chief Executive of BirdLife International.

While migratory wild birds have been blamed for spreading bird flu westward from Asia, there has been no spread back eastward, nor to South Asia and Africa this autumn. Although outbreaks might have been expected to occur along regular migratory flyways for Asian birds, such as in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Australia, flu outbreaks have not been recorded. The limited outbreaks in Eastern Europe are on southerly migration routes but are just as likely to be caused by other vectors, such as the import of poultry or poultry products. "The hypothesis that wild birds are to blame is simply far from proven," said Dr Rands. "Wild birds occasionally come into contact with infected poultry and die: they are the victims not vectors of H5N1 bird flu."

Better biosecurity is key to halting the spread of bird flu. In particular, BirdLife has been urging governments and other relevant agencies to concentrate their control and detection efforts on the poultry and cage-bird trades, banning the movement of poultry and poultry products from infected areas, and restricting the international movement of captive birds.

Domestic bird waste is widely used as food and fertilizer in fish farming and in agriculture, and infected poultry are known to excrete virus particles in their feces. The use of untreated chicken feces in fish farming was recently described by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization as a "high risk production practice." Russian fish farms have begun using chicken feces as fish farm fertilizer, and this practice is also employed in Eastern Europe on agricultural land. The Government of Vietnam has warned its population against the risk of dumping tons of chicken feces into rivers and lakes as fish food. One boy in Vietnam has already died of bird flu after swimming in a river where infected chicken carcasses were discarded, and in October Mute Swans similarly died at fish farms in Croatia and Romania.

At the same time, Vietnam has reportedly begun to cull wild birds in Ho Chi Minh City. Juan Lubroth, an FAO officer in charge of infectious animal diseases, said that culling wild birds is likely to be ineffective.

In contrast, implementing measures to regulate the movement of poultry and poultry feces are proven to work. "For example," said Dr. Rands, "Malaysia and South Korea both experienced bird flu outbreaks through importing infected poultry products, but stamped the disease out and have remained disease free through improved biosecurity. In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of waterbirds have arrived to winter in South Korea, and many migrant waders have successfully passed through Malaysia."

Because the virus has the capacity to mutate, it is still essential to monitor wild bird populations to look for any evidence of new flu strains arising.

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## **CHAN ROBBINS RETIRES**

In 1945, the USFWS hired a Chandler S. Robbins as a junior biologist. The young Robbins had started birding in 1930 at the age of 12 while living in Massachusetts, and working for the Service seemed like a natural for the enthusiastic Robbins.

During his early days of research and exploration in the Service and at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, he coauthored (with Robert Stewart) a fine state bird book, *THE BIRDS OF MARYLAND AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA* (1958), setting a high standard for similar volumes elsewhere. At the same time, he was instrumental in helping to establish the Maryland Ornithological Society, then in its early years of existence.

His work at the USFWS included a 14-year stint (1961-1974) as Chief of the Migratory Nongame Bird Studies Section. From the Patuxent banding office, he conducted population studies of doves, snipe, hawks, and songbirds, particularly focusing on the impact of pesticides, especially DDT. In response to the DDT concern, he launched the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), surely one of his finest accomplishments. Since initiating the BBS, a roadside bird survey first tested in Maryland and Delaware in 1965, this program has become one of North America's most valuable and longstanding avian monitoring schemes. In 1968 approximately 500 BBS routes were run in the eastern U.S. the first year; today, over 3,000 routes are conducted.

Robbins' pioneer *GUIDE TO FIELD IDENTIFICATION: BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA* (1966), coauthored with Bertel Bruun and Herbert Zim, has been described as a "triumph of form and substance."

Chan served as a technical editor of *AUDUBON FIELD NOTES* (now *NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS*) from 1952 to 1989, and he remains, since 1948, editor of the quarterly journal, *MARYLAND BIRDLIFE*.

From albatrosses on Midway Island to wintering songbirds in Puerto Rico, Chan has made major contributions to the appreciation and understanding of birdlife. A USGS website dedicated to Chan's contribution summarizes his work: "During these 60 years, Chan, through his books and articles, his innovative methods for measuring bird population changes, his leadership in bringing together scientist and amateur, and his own meticulous field work, has embodied all the best elements of a public servant."

For more details on contributions of this living national treasure, a lifetime combining the very best of bird appreciation and bird conservation, click [here](#).

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## **A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION?**

Very soon, we'll be thinking of those usual resolutions for the New Year. We suggest a simple look back to the harsh reality of 2005 for the source of such a resolution. The source is a seven-letter word: K-A-T-R-I-N-A.

The aftermath of Katrina resulted in more than 1,000 people killed, hundreds of thousands left without homes or much of a safety-net, and the continued loss of potentially protective wetlands, wetlands which might have made a difference to thousands of people if they had been healthy and in place. With the national effort to constrain the Mississippi, beginning in earnest in the late 1920s, some 1,900 square miles of marshland - an area the size of Delaware - have been lost. Louisiana marshland the size of a football field washes away every 45 minutes.

We are describing the nursery-ground for many fishes, oysters, crabs, and shrimp, the wintering area for as many as 3 million waterfowl, the nesting area for countless egrets and herons, and a defensive zone for as many as 3 million people still remaining in jeopardy. On the human and "practical" side of the equation, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources claims that every two miles of marsh can equal almost a foot of flood protection for New Orleans.

Perhaps Katrina and the loss of wetlands can serve as an example for your New Year's resolution. Consider doing something to assist the restoration of wetlands and wildlife, as well as helping the human inhabitants of the Gulf Coast.

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