



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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January 2008

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### RARITY FOCUS

In Loveland, Colorado, on the morning of Saturday, 8 December, Connie Kogler's husband told her that "something different" was at the backyard birdfeeder. It turned out to be an oriole, and by the afternoon, Connie, was considering the possibility that the bird was a Streak-backed Oriole from western Mexico. Soon after its identity was confirmed, word of the rare visitor spread quickly through birding circles in Colorado and elsewhere.

Once considered only a rare vagrant to Arizona and California, Streak-backed Oriole has become a fairly regular Mexican visitor to the United States over the last decade (for more information check the National Geo guide, page 452-453, the "big" Sibley guide, page 518, or the Kaufman "Focus" guide, page 334-5). The species has previously been identified in New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and even Wisconsin, but this report is the first for Colorado, and is thus a real prize.

In true Holiday spirit the Koglers literally opened their doors to help visiting birders catch a glimpse of the rare visitor. By mid- December over 160 birders had visited their home, and by month's end, more than 400 people had signed their visitor logbook. The Koglers graciously permitted entry to their home through their garage most days (with some understandable near-Christmas exceptions) from 7:15am to 3:00 pm, a strategy that facilitated viewing from their kitchen and living room. Nicknamed, "Pedro," the oriole was originally thought to be a young male.

Visiting birders generously contributed to Connie Kogler's birdseed budget, and their feeding station has grown considerably. Similarly, the available bird feeder menu has been expanded to include grape jelly, oranges, mealworms, and additional offerings of suet. By the weekend before Christmas, however, the oriole had been spoiled rotten, accustomed to a diet consisting almost exclusively of mealworms with grape jelly on the side. (By the end of December, the oriole was consuming over 100 mealworms a day.)

Thanks to the generous spirit of the Koglers, hundreds of birders have been delighted with the superb views of the oriole, along with the gracious hospitality of its hosts.

Photos of the oriole, including the original photos by Connie Kogler, can be viewed this site. (Type in "Streak-backed Oriole"):

<http://www.surfbirds.com/cgi-bin/gallery/display.cgi?gallery=gallery10>

A story about the bird and the birders can also be seen in THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS of 14 December:  
<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2007/dec/14/little-bird-draws-big-crowd/>

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## **NARBA RARITIES**

If you enjoy reading our Rarity Focus, another excellent way to keep track of rare birds in North America in 2008 is to connect with the North American Rare Bird Alert (NARBA). NARBA is a project of the Houston Audubon Society, which has run the service since 1989. Only the rarest of North American birds are reported through NARBA, whether they are very local breeders (e.g., Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl or Yellow-green Vireo) or continent-wide rarities, such as this month's Streaked-backed Oriole, a Black-tailed Gull in Iowa, a Long-billed Murrelet in Pennsylvania, or an Arctic Loon in Oregon.

For more general information on NARBA:

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

NARBA is a paid subscription service (the proceeds of which are used to support the conservation programs of the Houston Audubon Society), but you can try it out for free for 60 days:

<http://www.narba.org/index.cfm/MenuItemID/103.htm>

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## **BOOK REVIEW: RARE BIRDS OF CALIFORNIA**

Finally, while on the theme of rarities, it is appropriate to mention the recent publication of RARE BIRDS OF CALIFORNIA (2007, Western Field Ornithologists). This large book of almost 600 pages is stunning in its thoroughness. The editors (Robert Hamilton, Michael Patten, and Richard Erickson) have done a remarkable job of summarizing the documentation for all the rare bird records in California through the end of 2003. The volume is an historical outline of the work of the California Bird Records Committee, beginning with its genesis in 1970. California was the first state in the Americas to establish a committee for the purpose of vetting records of rare and vagrant birds.

The treatment of each species in the book is preceded by a fine essay on trends of that species in California, along with including a more general overview of developments in California birding from 1960-2007, as well as the process of documenting and reporting records. The species treatments that constitute the very heart of the book are amazingly thorough, with maps and sketches often supplementing photographs and the core summaries of sightings.

The sheer thoroughness of the volume, however, begs the question: What is the shelf life of such a book? With every new record that is accumulated, the book will gradually show its age. While this digest of "old" records will remain invaluable, every new record established will inevitably date the volume. (As evidence, witness Appendix H, that serves to supplement the species treatments of reports collected between 2004 and 2007.)

If this elegant volume serves as a standard for other state and provincial bird record committees, it also provides an example of why similar future efforts should seriously consider Web publication as an alternative for such information, the obvious advantages being the ability to provide rolling annual updates, a searchable database, broader access, and simple economy as hardcopy publications continue to increase in price.

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## **REPAIR ACT ON NWR INVASIVES STALLED IN SENATE?**

On 22 October, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 767, the Refuge Ecology Protection, Assistance, and Immediate Response (REPAIR) Act. This piece of legislation addresses the important and often expensive issue of confronting invasive (non-native) species on National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). The bill then moved to the Senate for action.

The REPAIR Act, championed by Congressman Ron Kind (D-WI), co-chair of the House Wildlife Refuge Caucus, stated that "[R]efuges have faced an unanswered march of invasive plants and animals that have literally taken over, crowding out the very wildlife and habitat the refuges are charged with protecting."

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, two million acres of refuge lands are infested with invasive plants, and 4,471 invasive animal populations have been recorded on refuge property. The Service also estimates that over \$300 million of invasive species projects exist on wildlife refuges today, possibly the fastest growing portion of the Refuge System's current budget.

By providing funding through two different grants, the REPAIR Act could potentially help prevent new invasive species from taking hold and disrupting refuge ecosystems.

If this bill was passed in the House in late October, why raise attention to it now?

The answer is because it hasn't moved in the Senate. In fact, some animal rights advocates, focusing on defending feral cats from potential extermination on and near NWRs, are taking credit for stalling Senate movement.

For more on the passage of the H.R. 767, see the statement by the American Bird Conservancy:  
<http://www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/releases/071023.html>

For more background on some of the problems caused by invasive species on NWRs, see the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) :  
<http://www.refugenet.org/New-issues/invasives.html>

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## CONGRESSIONAL MOVES ON FARM BILL, REFUGE BUDGET, AND CLIMATE

There was still some positive news pertaining to birds and bird habitat in December, both in the Senate, and from Congress as a whole. Summarized below are a few important bird-friendly developments.

First, on the Farm Bill, we saw the Senate pass a 2007 Farm Bill mid-month, catching up to - and sometimes bettering - the House version already passed. Standard and highly beneficial programs for grasslands (Conservation Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program) and wetlands (Wetland Reserve Program) were reauthorized. Two new programs were also proposed (now in both Senate and House version): a "Sodsaver" provision that would protect the last standing native prairie remaining in the U.S. (the stronger Senate version removes landowner eligibility for federal disaster payments for an indefinite period), and "Open Fields" which would back existing state programs to reward farmers and ranchers who open their land to outdoor-related access. This last move would expand successful walk-in hunting and fishing programs in a number of states. A conference committee is expected to begin reconciling the Senate and House versions of the Farm Bill early this year.

Second, right before the Christmas Congressional recess, the Senate joined with the House in passing an omnibus-spending package for FY08. Among a number of funding issues worthy of mention to bird supporters was a Refuge System Operations and Maintenance budget that dramatically reversed the recent downward trend. (Over the past four years, NWRs have had flat or declining budgets, floating below \$400 million per year, and forcing each FWS Region to implement downsizing plans calling for a 20 percent reduction of the workforce, along with similar cuts for habitat management.) The Refuge System budget would rise accordingly to \$434 million for FY08, a major increase of \$39 million over last year. Although not as high as the recommended \$451 million suggested by the House, this is still a dramatic and much-needed funding boost. (Readers should know that merely to stand still, NWRs need an additional \$15 million annually, and that to meet fundamental wildlife conservation and public-use mandates, the NWRs would require at least \$765 million annually.)

Third, in early December the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act (S. 2191) by a vote of 11-8. Eighteen percent of revenues from the carbon permit auction established under this bill, perhaps as much as \$9.3 billion per year in the beginning, would be dedicated to natural resources adaptation. Some 35 percent of those revenues would go to state fish and wildlife agencies, channeled through the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program, for activities aimed at assisting fish and wildlife adaptation and habitat resiliency in response to climate change. (Other funds would be available go toward supporting additional programs, including cost-share landowner and international wildlife efforts.)

The implications of this approach were covered in last month's E-bulletin:  
<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/decSBC07.html#TOC05>  
and  
<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/dec07.html>

Some observers assert that the Lieberman-Warner bill does not reach far enough in setting limits for greenhouse gasses. Nonetheless, the bill has been improved with every bill version and may continue to do so as the Senate discusses it and as outside pressure continues. The good news is that the Lieberman-Warner Bill has this unprecedented wildlife component, and that S. 2191 will surely be the legislation that is adjusted and

has this unprecedented wildlife component, and that S. 2191 will surely be the legislation that is adjusted and amended as Congressional discussion continues.

In sum, 2008 may prove to be interesting, if not helpful, for birds and other wildlife.

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### **CHARLOTTE: BARRED OWLS ADAPTING TO CITY AND SUBURBAN LIFE?**

Urban and near-urban wildlife numbers have been increasing in recent decades, notably with populations of Gray Squirrels, Canada Geese, Raccoons, and White-tailed Deer. However, the appearance of significant urban and suburban populations of Barred Owls has been a surprise to many. Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, has become home to a prospering population of these owls.

The Barred Owl population in Charlotte is so robust that the city was chosen to be the site for the most extensive Barred Owl research study ever attempted, with fieldwork actually taking place in the manicured front lawns and garden-filled back yards of urban and suburban neighborhoods.

The research study, an effort sponsored by the Carolina Raptor Center, began in 2001. The study has been large in scale, with researchers monitoring about 40 nesting sites each year, and annually radio-tracking many sets of Barred Owl young as they mature.

Traditionally, Barred Owls were thought to need large stands of old-growth or bottomland forests to survive. But University of North Carolina at Charlotte ecologist and ornithologist, Rob Bierregaard, who has directed the six-year-old research study, says "Either the Barred Owls in Charlotte haven't read that book or the book is wrong, because they are really here and apparently doing quite well." Bierregaard explains that the owls need an open understory for optimal hunting, not a forest with thick undergrowth. "When you look at suburban Charlotte, what do we have? We've got giant old Willow Oak trees with plenty of holes in them and we've got mowed lawns and azalea bushes, which is a very open understory, so they [the owls] can see a long way." In addition to the open understory there are plenty of birdfeeders to attract additional prey. (Cooper's Hawks are also attracted to the birdfeeders, but the hawks in the Charlotte may not as successful when it comes to nesting.)

For more information:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/10/071016131337.htm>

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### **LOOKING UPSLOPE AT THE THREAT OF BIRD EXTINCTIONS**

As certain bird habitats shift to higher elevations driven by rising temperatures, birds depending on highland habitats and their associated vegetation are being seriously squeezed, possibly squeezed out of existence. Once a species retreats upslope far enough, as areas of once suitable habitat at lower elevations become too warm for the species, the habitable area for the bird could eventually be reduced to zero.

A Stanford University study on this subject has also asserted that many resident birds may be much more threatened from climate change than migratory birds (i.e., many sedentary mountain birds currently thought to be relatively safe may actually be at great risk).

For a summary of this unsettling report, see:

<http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2008/january9/caganone-010908.html>

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### **MORE LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN HABITAT SECURED**

Regular readers of the E-bulletin know that the Lesser Prairie-Chicken - a non-migratory resident prairie grouse - is in serious trouble. Concern for this species has been the subject of previous E-bulletin reports. For example:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/decSBC06.html#TOC06>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/dec06.html>

or

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC07.html#TOC04>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan07.html>

Lesser Prairie-Chicken has also been a candidate for protection under the Endangered Species Act, largely because it has experienced a decrease in its population, perhaps by more than 90 percent since the late 1900s.

because it has experienced a decrease in its population perhaps by more than 90 percent since the late 1800s. Reasons for this decline are primarily due to the conversion of its former grassland and rangeland habitat to cropland, unwise grazing-management practices, oil and gas development, and overall habitat fragmentation. Currently an estimated 32,000 Lesser Prairie-Chickens may still remain in the southern Great Plains, in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Colorado. Some estimates place the population as low as 10,000 birds.

For a summary of the species natural history, a range map, and ongoing conservation concerns, see the North American Grouse Partnership website:

<http://www.grousepartners.org/birds.htm#lpc>

Also see the article on fences and prairie-chicken losses:

<http://www.grousepartners.org/images2/grousenews/2006/DontFenceThemIn.pdf>

In mid-November 2007, the Nature Conservancy in Texas announced that it had purchased the 6,000-acre Fitzgerald Ranch in the High Plains of West Texas, specifically to protect habitat for Lesser Prairie-Chickens and other wildlife. Located about 40 miles southwest of Lubbock in Yoakum and Terry counties, the property represents the first land that TNC has purchased in this area of Texas.

See the summary from the Playa Lakes Joint Venture:

<http://www.pljv.org/cms/latest-news#Story2>

And also from Texas TNC:

<http://www.nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/texas/press/press3211.html>

While protecting the Fitzgerald Ranch is a very good move, the ultimate future of this species depends on cooperative management with operating ranchers willing to restore, enhance, and maintain large blocks of suitable Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat. This would mean continued encouragement from state and federal agencies, a model that is actually starting to be created.

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#### **DELAWARE: LATEST ADDITION TO BIRDING TRAILS**

Birding trails, a concept pioneered in the early 1990s in Texas, continue to spread. The latest addition is the Delaware Birding Trail, in a state nicknamed "The Small Wonder." The latest trail certainly matches the state's nickname.

With an inaugural ceremony at Bombay Hook NWR on 8 December, following a week of cumulative bird-finding at sites along the trail, the new trail was launched. Its development, accompanied by an excellent website, was made possible by a creative group of state, federal, and local partners:

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

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#### **RICE AGRICULTURE AND BIRDS IN SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA**

As regular readers of this E-bulletin know, when the rice production is properly managed it can potentially provide benefits for ducks, long-legged waders, shorebirds, and a number of other wetland birds. The significance of rice management to bird conservation was reflected by a workshop held this past fall in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Wetlands International organized the workshop that was titled "Shorebird Conservation and Rice Cultivation in Southern South America." Attending the meeting were about 40 conservation, bird, and rice experts from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and the U.S.

The intent of the workshop was to exchange information, promote international cooperation, and identify the myriad challenges involved with the promotion of "best practices" for rice cultivation.

For summary details of this important meeting, see:

<http://www.whsrn.org/news/whsrnews.html#rice>

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#### **TRACKING THE NORTHERN IRRUPTION**

In October we drew attention to "winter finch" predictions rising from Ron Pittaway's report for Ontario:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/octSBC07.html#TOC05>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/oct07.html>

Christmas Bird Count participants and feeder-watchers in many areas have already reported the presence of large numbers of these irruptive species - including non-finch species such as Red-breasted Nuthatch and

Bohemian Waxwing.. A good way to track these unfolding irruptions is through the Cornell Lab's eBird. To see a helpful summary report linked to eBird by Matt Medler from the Boreal Songbird Initiative, readers are referred to:

<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/Irruption2007Nov.html>

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#### **TIP OF THE MONTH: FEEDER FRENZY**

Considering our reports on the Colorado Streak-backed Oriole, the possible feeder-relationship between Barred Owls and feeders in North Carolina, and the winter-finch watch across the northern parts of North America, this is a good time to remind readers to re-supply your feeders at home, heap them with new and enticing delicacies, and wait for the resulting parade of hungry visitors to appear.

Indeed, the Christmas Bird Count season - just ending now - always highlights special feeder visitors from coast to coast, and next month many of our readers will be participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count:

<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>

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#### **PIGEON POOP? PIGEON CZAR!**

Finally, for this month, we have a report from New York City. Simcha Felder, a member of the City Council, claims that each of the city's pigeons can live for 15 years and can produce an estimated 25 pounds of droppings a year. (European settlers brought Rock Pigeons to North America as domesticated birds; the birds that hold sway in New York City are their semi-wild descendants.) In mid-November Felder released a report proposing legislation that would curb the city's pigeon population. The Councilman advocates a birth control strategy through OvoControl P, a system that recently received approval from the Environmental Protection Agency and that has been used in several cities to control pigeon population.

But his top recommendation is directed at humans. He has proposed legislation that would ban the feeding of pigeons on city streets. The law proposes a \$1,000 fine for feeding the urban birds. Says Felder, "If people like pigeons, let them take them into their homes and let them crap all over the place in their living rooms."

Another proposal is to create a city "Pigeon Czar" who would consolidate oversight responsibility. Right now, this responsibility is spread over several different state and city agencies overseeing public health, transportation, and the environment. Despite their reputation as disease carriers, the NYC Health Department does not consider pigeons a major danger and says that the average New Yorker is not at risk of catching any disease from the birds or their droppings.

Of 54 European cities recently surveyed, 29 have pigeon feeding bans. But these are bans that are hard to enforce given public resistance. Likewise, in Chicago there is an ordinance banning people from providing food that would attract rats and other pests, which presumably includes pigeons. Violators of these ordinances can be ticketed and fined up to \$1,000, or jailed for up to six months, or both. Currently, few tickets are issued.

Back in The Big Apple, an attempt to use Harris's Hawks against pigeons in 2003 at Manhattan's Bryant Park was discontinued after one of the hawks attacked a pet Chihuahua. (According to the experiment's lead falconer, the hawk probably mistook the little dog for a rat in the park shrubbery.)

Hearings on Councilman Felder's proposals may be held later this year.

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- Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, [paul.baicich@verizon.net](mailto:paul.baicich@verizon.net)

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