



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

January 2009

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RARITY FOCUS

Several Mexican rarities found in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas attracted attention in December. Among them were a Blue Bunting and a Crimson-collared Grosbeak, both females and both found at the Frontera Audubon thicket in Weslaco. These vagrants were present for most of the month starting from 9 December and 14 December, respectively.

Our rarity of the month choice, however, is a different species discovered in South Texas.

Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) often unearth local rarities, sometimes at locations not regularly covered on routine birding routes. The La Sal Vieja CBC in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas provided just such a surprise species. This count is held in the Valley Salt Lake area around the Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge. Much of the count area is made up of a combination of Federal and private lands consisting of grassland, salt lakes, and arid brush country comprised of sandy soils and extensive ranch land.

On 14 December, during the La Sal Vieja CBC five Masked Ducks were discovered on ponds located on private property near the East Lake unit of the Lower Rio Grande NWR, but visible from an adjacent public road.

Masked Ducks are small tropical, stiff-tailed ducks that are closely related to Ruddy Ducks. They are something of an enigma in the U.S., appearing and even breeding irregularly in Texas and very rarely appearing elsewhere in the U.S. Somewhat shy and difficult to see, Masked Ducks often remain hidden in dense aquatic vegetation during the daytime. Masked Ducks appearing in Texas probably originate in Mexico, and they are most likely to

be found during especially wet years. What amounts to small invasions have occurred in the 1930s, the late 1960s, the early 1970s, and the 1990s.

After the 14 December CBC, birders found different numbers of the secretive Masked Ducks through the rest of the month: for example, four on 20 and 21 December, six on 22 December, two on 24 December, four on 29 December, and three on 31 December.

For photos by Dan Jones see here (and search for the post for 21 December):

http://antshrike.blogspot.com/2008_12_01_archive.html

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GRAND CANYON CALIFORNIA CONDOR CHICKS FLEDGE

Two California Condor chicks that hatched in May fledged from their nests in the Grand Canyon in December. This brings the world's population of California Condors now flying free in the wild to 169. This includes 67 in Arizona, 83 in California, and 19 in Mexico.

This is a significant milestone since it is the first year in the condor recovery program where there are more condors flying free than there are in captivity. The goal for the condor recovery plan is to produce at least 150 members in each of the U.S. populations, including at least 15 breeding pairs

December's fledglings also make a total of nine wild chicks hatched in the Grand Canyon since 1996. Eight of these birds are still alive, and all of these birds are part of an "experimental population" under the Endangered Species Act - section 10(j).

The most serious challenge continuing to face all free-flying California Condors is lead poisoning from the remains of unretrieved animals shot with lead ammunition. On-site researchers in the vicinity of the Grand Canyon, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, and local hunting groups have cooperated on a campaign that has produced an increase in the number of hunters who have voluntarily switched to copper bullets or other non-lead alternatives when hunting in condor country. This campaign has resulted in a corresponding drop in condor deaths ascribed to lead poisoning.

"We are grateful to all the hunters who are valued partners in restoring California Condors to their historic range," Bill Heinrich of The Peregrine Fund said. But he warned that "until we significantly reduce the amount of lead they are exposed to, we will never have a self-sustaining population of condors."

We recently reported on related condor developments in California in the [June](#), [August](#), and [September](#) 2008 E-bulletins.

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RED KNOT ASSESSMENT

In mid-December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released the list of candidate species awaiting listing decisions under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Red Knot - specifically, the Western Atlantic "rufa" subspecies - was among them.

In a Federal Register Notice, the Service upgraded the priority of the Red Knot, but the agency is still refusing to list the species as Threatened or Endangered. Conservation groups have to date filed four petitions to have the Service list the Red Knot on an emergency basis, but so far all petitions have been rejected.

The Service ranks species in categories ranging from 1 through 12, based on the magnitude and immediacy of threats, with rankings 1 through 3 indicating immediate danger. The Service's current priority upgrade for Red Knot from 6 to 3 was based on the continued decline in the population (i.e., a 15% decline since last year and almost a 75% decline from 1985 to 2007). A priority number of 3 is the highest a subspecific population can attain.

Shorebird researchers blame the decline in Red Knot numbers on a shortage of horseshoe crab eggs, due in large part to overharvesting during previous seasons.

In its current review, the Service acknowledges that the threats to the "rufa" subspecies, are "severe enough that it puts the viability of the knot at substantial risk and is therefore of a high magnitude."

Yet, all the candidate species with a priority of a 1 or a 2 would have to be listed before a 3 would be considered, putting the Red Knot in a classic "Catch 22" situation. The bird is admittedly in serious trouble, but the Service won't act because the bird's subspecific status will not allow it to get a higher rating and the attention it deserves.

You can see the Federal Register Notice here: <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2008/pdf/E8-28986.pdf>

You can also find a very good summary of the recent history of Red Knot conservation from the New Jersey

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PARTING SHOT AT ESA

Also in the area of the Endangered Species Act, Secretary of the Interior, Dirk Kempthorne, announced last month a final rule change that weakens implementation of the Endangered Species Act.

At issue are Section 7 consultations with endangered species experts at the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. There have traditionally been mandatory consultations for any federal agency where actions (e.g., dams, towers, mining, logging, and road-building) may affect endangered species, even if no negative impacts are likely.

The new Bush Administration rule will allow agencies to determine on their own (i.e., without consultation with outside experts) what effect their actions will have on endangered species. This could potentially create huge holes in the safety net that currently protects birds and other animals and plants in danger of extinction.

The Bush Administration's last minute rulemaking has drawn heavy criticism from the public, lawmakers, conservation groups, and newspaper editorialists from across the country. Indeed, over 250,000 comments opposing the rule changes - including comments from respected scientific and professional organizations - were submitted to the Interior Department in the 60-day comment period prior to the announced changes. Regrettably the weighty public stir seems not to have generated any positive response from the Bush Administration.

Both President-elect Obama and key Congressional leaders have signaled that they will oppose the ESA rule change. In addition, a number of conservation organizations intend to take legal action to stop these regulations, and at least four lawsuits have already been filed, including one from the state of California.

It is possible that a federal district court could issue an injunction against implementation of the new regulation on the basis that no environmental impact statement was prepared. A new Administration might opt not to appeal the proposed regulatory changes, which could result in the new rule dying a quiet death. Alternatively, a new Administration may still have to restart the lengthy rule-making process to undo the change. As the script unfolds, expect press releases (pro and con) and fund-raising to continue apace.

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BOOK NOTES: ALEUTIAN BIRDS

For many E-bulletin readers, the Aleutian Islands no doubt represent little more than barren islands distantly adjacent to the coast of western Alaska. For others, the Aleutians symbolize a birding Mecca accessible to none but the hardest of birders, where rare Siberian vagrants and myriads of seabirds annually occur in foggy isolation. Regardless, with the release of *BIRDS OF THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA* by D. D. Gibson and G. V. Byrd, all readers for the first time have a marvelous and scientifically produced compendium of information about this remarkable island chain.

The extensive collective experience of the authors makes them uniquely qualified to have written this outstanding ornithological contribution - a precise, detailed history and taxonomic review of the birds of this remarkable and relatively unknown region. Though perhaps not for the lay birder, for anyone with a serious interest in North American ornithology and an affection for far away and remote areas, this is a book to read. Belated congratulations to the Nuttall Ornithological Club and the American Ornithologists' Union for publishing this outstanding and useful volume in 2007.

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MORE KEY SCIENTISTS SUPPORT THE BOREAL

In case you missed this in late November, an interdisciplinary combination of 14 of North America's top

scientists have volunteered to form an advisory body to work with the Pew Environment Group's campaign to protect Canada's Boreal forest.

This region is one of the largest, intact forest/wetland ecosystems left on the planet and is home to billions of nesting and migratory birds - waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and songbirds.

Although many conservation initiatives currently focus on relatively small "hotspots" of species diversity or heavily impacted habitats where endangered birds and other species cling to existence, unfortunately these efforts often overlook the equally important need to preserve the healthiest remaining extensive regions of biodiversity, like Canada's Boreal. The scientists engaged in this campaign believe that a comprehensive approach to conserving the entire Boreal ecosystem as outlined in the Boreal Framework is the most appropriate way to preserve Canada's Boreal region.

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For more information on the efforts, visit:

<http://www.interboreal.org/resources/pressrelease-sciencepanel.doc>

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TAR SANDS IN CANADA CONTINUE TO THREATEN BIRDS

Also from Canada comes a new report by the Boreal Songbird Initiative, Natural Resources Defense Council, and The Pembina Institute that considers how birds are affected by the Alberta Tar Sands. These tar sands are a mixture of soil and bituminous oil now being extracted in open pits and upgraded in Alberta and elsewhere.

The report projects a cumulative impact over the next 30 to 50 years ranging from a low of about 6 million birds lost to as many as 166 million birds lost as a result of this extractive system.

More information, including the full 33-page report with related maps and graphics, can be found by visiting the Boreal Songbird Initiative website:

<http://www.borealbirds.org/birdstarsands.shtml>

Also, you can revisit our [June 2008 E-bulletin](#) report on birds and tar sands in Alberta.

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COG & WHEEL REPORT RELEASED

Nine organizations - including the Aldo Leopold Foundation, American Bird Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and Trust for Public Land - released a report in December on reforming and improving the National Wildlife Refuge System. For more than a year, the involved organizations were in consultation to develop the report.

The report, titled "Keeping Every Cog and Wheel," presents an assessment of the state of the Refuge System and a vision and recommendations for improvements about what should and can be done.

This isn't a traditional "transition" report for a new Administration. This report is intended to have a much longer shelf-life than typical transition reports, which sometimes only include a hopeful 100-day agenda.

There are some significant sections in Cog & Wheel on funding, on increased habitat protection, on climate change, on encouraging appreciation and education (with birding a key element), on science-based decision

making, and on mineral extraction. We highly recommend this thoughtful report.

You can download the 28-page report [here](#)(pdf).

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ANOTHER PLUS FOR BIRD-COMPATIBLE COFFEE

Our regular readers understand how important shade-grown, bird-compatible coffee can be for birds in the Neotropics. Now there is an additional way to look at coffee.

Researchers at the University of Nevada have uncovered a potential coffee-based fuel. Spent coffee grounds contain between 11% and 20% oil by weight (about as much as canola, palm, and soybean oil).

The investigators collected the grounds from a multinational coffeehouse chain. They then separated the oil from the grounds, and using an inexpensive method, converted it into biodiesel fuel. (Of course biodiesel fuel can also be made from a variety of plant oils, animal fat, and cooking oils recycled from restaurant deep-fryers.) Even after this coffee-ground oil-extraction process, the remaining coffee residue can be used for compost or even fuel pellets.

While initial results are promising and the process inexpensive, a large-volume source for coffee grounds will be necessary to make this process practical. In any case, bird advocates have another reason to promote responsible coffee growing, drinking, and, now, disposal!

More details on the study can be found here:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081210171900.htm>

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SPRUCE GROUSE PLAN RELEASED

After more than three years of cooperative work, a Continental Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse has been

published. The plan emerged from the joint efforts of Spruce Grouse researchers and managers, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (i.e., Resident Game Bird Working Group), the Wildlife Management Institute, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Spruce Grouse occupy short-needled conifer forests from Alaska to Labrador and south into New England, the Upper Great Lakes states, and the northern tier of states of the western U.S.

Although widely distributed and secure throughout much of its range, the species is declining or is already rare in most of the southern parts of its range, particularly in the East. The bird's exact status varies from place to place; it is a game bird in some areas but is a "listed species" in others.

The Continental Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse can be found here: <http://www.foolhen.org>

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TIP OF THE MONTH: MAKE TWO NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

It's time for those classic New Year's resolutions: We will exercise more. We will eat less, or else in a more healthy way. We will be nicer to that annoying neighbor despite his ability to get under our skin. And we will try to phone Aunt Louise and Cousin Fred more frequently this year. These are all perfectly good ideas.

In addition, let us suggest a pair of resolutions you might also wish to consider:

1. I will try to enjoy birds more this year by engaging in relaxing, healthy, outdoor appreciation with others.
2. I will regularly engage in activity to save birds, specifically by making a difference, locally or regionally, with others of like mind.

Although these suggestions sound simple enough, they may require occasional reminders as the year goes by. We pledge to provide some of those reminders from time to time!

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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.