



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

July 2006

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RARITY FOCUS

We had a hard time picking the rarity of the month for June. We considered the stunning report of a Common Swift off Newfoundland on French territory at Saint-Pierre et Miquelon between 31 May and 3 June. Few birders, however, were able to "chase" the bird! There are fewer than five North American records for this species. (Check your National Geographic field guide on pages 262-263.)

We finally chose a Yellow Grosbeak in Arizona, a species that normally ranges from western Mexico (north to central Sonora) to Guatemala. (If you don't have a Mexican bird-guide, check out a National Geographic field guide on page 427-428.)

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But, wait a minute. Wasn't this the rarity of the month earlier this year? Indeed, it was. A different Yellow Grosbeak was seen for months in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and was highlighted in our February issue ([here](#) or [here](#)).

Long-time readers might also remember that we highlighted a Yellow Grosbeak in the June 2004 E-bulletin - a bird seen in May of that year on the property of the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum.

This past month's record proves that as with certain other rare species, even very rare species, sometimes rarities begin to show up with increasing regularity. In Arizona Yellow Grosbeak is currently very rare, with fewer than 20 accepted records, most of which have occurred in June.

This June's Yellow Grosbeak was a male first seen at Sycamore Canyon, near Nogales, Arizona on 11 June. It was later spotted by other birders until at least 13 June, after which time it seemed to have slipped away.

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STAND BY FOR GROUSE SPLIT

For those of you who pay particular attention to "splits and lumps" in North American bird taxonomy, you ought to stand by for a likely change in Blue Grouse. For decades, the Blue Grouse was divided into two groups, the coastal "Sooty" and the interior "Dusky" forms, officially separated into two full species in the fourth edition of the AOU Check-list (1931). This species-split stood for more than a decade, until the publication of the Check-list's 19th Supplement (1944). Since then it's simply been "Blue Grouse."

Now it's time fore re-splitting. We should shortly have the coastal Sooty Grouse (darker with yellow air sac in the male) and the interior Dusky Grouse (paler with reddish-purple air sac in the male). There are also differences in vocalization (Dusky Grouse less vocal than Sooty Grouse). Most field guides illustrate these differences.

The Dusky Grouse is found in the four-corners states (UT, CO, AZ, NM) plus Nevada and south-central Wyoming. (Colorado and Utah may be the states with the most abundant habitat for the Dusky Grouse.) The Sooty Grouse ranges through the rest of the eleven western states, western Canada, and southeastern Alaska.

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RUSTY CONCERNS

Eighty years ago, the Rusty Blackbird was viewed as a common to abundant species in most field accounts pertaining to habitats and seasons in eastern North America where the species regularly occurred. Since 1950, however, data collected from the Christmas Bird Counts and Birding Bird Surveys have shown disturbing trends in the other direction. Some figures collected since the 1960s suggest an 85 to 95 percent decline. Other figures simply suggest a rapid freefall. There does not appear to be a smoking gun here, however. Possible causes for decline include the loss of forested boreal wetland breeding habitat, the elimination of bottomland hardwood forests as wintering habitat, acid rain, mercury accumulation, and the excessive use of pesticides.

An International Rusty Blackbird Technical Working Group is engaged in research and conservation for this beleaguered species. You can contribute to the effort by sending your sightings of Rusty Blackbirds to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [eBird](#).

The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center is also collecting sightings from birders and feather samples from banders. [For more information](#).

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IBA NEWS: CALIFORNIA TRICOLORED BLACKBIRDS

While we are on the subject of blackbirds, here is recent news on another troubled blackbird in western North America.

We begin this story with an IBA question: What happens when a vital Important Bird Area, a site crucial for a species (in this case another blackbird species) is on private property?

The world's total population of Tricolored Blackbirds has been estimated at 250,000-300,000 birds, with almost all of these occurring in California. The southern California population, which may be genetically distinct, has dwindled to perhaps as few as 12,000 birds.

A third of these, 4,000 birds, nested this year in a single wheat field in Riverside County. Fortunately, Audubon California and the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society recently reached an agreement with the farmer in whose field are nesting southern California's largest colony of Tricolored Blackbirds.

The owner is being paid \$13,000 to delay the harvest of 13 acres of wheat where the birds are nesting. The delay in harvesting will provide enough time for the young blackbirds to mature and leave their nests. The nutritional value of the wheat, and hence its market value, drops when the harvest is delayed, so an equitable solution to compensate the farmer had to be found.

For more information on this interesting situation see [here](#) or [here](#). For additional general information about the existing IBA programs in the United States, see [here](#).

ongoing IBA program in the United States, see [nere](#).

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MAPMUSE: BIRDING CLUBS AND HOTSPOTS

Related to IBAs is an online effort to list "birding hotspots" on MapMuse.com. This site has already assembled a nationwide map and directory of Birding Clubs, and Hotspots is a new addition. The Birding Clubs map has over 275 clubs located already, but can be enhanced by visitors to the site.

The new Birding Hotspots Map has few submissions so far, but MapMuse has provided the structure for birders to identify and add their favorite hotspots to a growing body of information.

The idea is for birders to build upon what has already been started by others by adding information about their clubs and their favorite hotspots. Through this kind of community effort, MapMuse hopes to compile comprehensive and descriptive series of maps for birder use. (Site visitors can also add descriptive information as well as photos directly to the profiles.)

Following, are links to the pages for the two birding topics - [Birding Clubs](#) and [Birding Hotspots](#).

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RED KNOTS THIS YEAR

Last month we reported on the continuing plight facing Red Knots, particularly those in stopover mode on the Delaware Bay ([here](#) or [here](#)).

The North American subspecies of this shorebird has declined precipitously over the last decade, and many biologists blame the shortage of Horseshoe Crab eggs due to over-harvesting.

Since our last report, there have been two developments.

Most importantly, Red Knot counts on both sides of the Delaware Bay in late May and early June seemed to have dropped below 2005's slight increase, a total in the 12,000 - 13,000 range, which is closer to the low experienced in 2004. These counts were made on Delaware Bay beaches where Horseshoe Crabs lay their eggs, even though up to 4,000 Red Knots apparently split off to feed on shellfish around Stone Harbor, New Jersey. While commercial Horseshoe Crab fishermen say that these Stone Harbor birds illustrate that Red Knots can adapt to shifting food conditions, New Jersey state biologists respond that the birds may not be able to build up enough fat reserves by feeding on shellfish to ensure that they will be able to migrate to the Arctic and breed successfully.

A second development occurred in the middle of June when a coalition of conservation groups, including the American Bird Conservancy, the American Littoral Society, Defenders of Wildlife, National Audubon Society, and New Jersey Audubon Society, filed suit in U.S. District Court against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Interior, alleging that the government has failed to take critical steps to protect the Red Knot.

The groups accuse the Service of denying recent emergency petitions based on speculative assessments about steps that should be taken to protect the Red Knot, many of which have not come to pass. Additionally they maintain that the Service has improperly reviewed or ignored key data about the species' decline.

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WINDPOWER DOWNDRAFT

Last month, we reported on the continuing controversy over the placement of a wind farm near Horicon National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin ([here](#) or [here](#)).

A March directive from the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security maintained that "any establishment of windmill farms within radar line of sight of the National Air Defense and Homeland Security Radars" would be contested.

This has nothing to do with birds or bats; instead, it has to do with the possibility of tall turbine structures with large blades interfering with radar by producing "false targets" or "false images."

We said that such wind-farm projects were on hold in Wisconsin, but the situation actually covers the entire country. Currently, the wind power industry is especially worried about a dozen projects, not only in Wisconsin, but also in Illinois, North Dakota, and South Dakota. These projects received notices of "Presumed Hazard" from the FAA, and currently they are unable to get financing or go forward with construction. This issue awaits further study.

We will provide more information in the future.

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TOWERS, LIGHTS, AND BIRD-IMPACT

Related to large wind-power units is the issue of towers, lights, and their impact on birds. There are, of course, all sorts of towers being built across the continent which can present potential hazards to birds (and bats) depending upon their location, height, unit-support, time of day, and lighting.

In the last category, there seems to be some optimistic information coming from current on going studies. A study in Michigan of 24 towers over two and a half years has shown a 56-67 percent reduction in nighttime bird losses simply from having removed steady-burning lights. The best results have been obtained by extinguishing steady burning red lights on towers of about 475 feet in height (with guy wires), and leaving only flashing red strobe-like lights. There is additional support for the position that these red flashing lights do not attract night migrants, or at least that they are not strongly attractive. These involve 17 recent studies conducted at wind-turbines. (As for alternatively using white strobe-like lights, neither the public nor the FAA generally likes their use.)

Despite previous concerns that flashing red lights might attract birds, these current studies suggest otherwise. Papers on these subjects by Joelle Gehring, Wally Erickson, Paul Kerlinger, Al Manville, and others are currently in progress. Related work by Gehring et al. is also revealing the differences between towers in the 475-foot vs. 1,000-foot range, as well as differences between guyed and self-supported towers in the 475-foot category. (Not surprisingly, the shorter and less supported a tower is, the safer it is for the birds.)

Most of the suggested lighting changes should not cause the communications and power industries, or their users, to balk, so long as meaningful lines of dialogue can be maintained between all concerned parties.

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USEFUL IDEAS IN ROAD AND BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

A friend of ours who tracks the issue of federal transportation dollars and wildlife mortality brought our attention to a fine website called "[Keeping It Simple](#)." This site illustrates wildlife-friendly, low-cost ways, to help keep wildlife safer along highways, roads, and bridges. These highway alterations and adjustments are often "easy" to apply, if there is the interest and the will to do it.

Some activities are performed routinely; others are new innovations, "best practices," or state-of-the-art strategies. Some activities - for example, modifying mowing cycles and installing bluebird boxes - are activities common to a large number of states and counties. Others may represent simple solutions to troublesome site-specific environmental challenges.

To read a fascinating story about protecting nesting Cliff Swallows on bridges at two locations in Ohio, see [here](#).

The solution in this situation does raise two questions, however:

1. If the Department of Transportation in Ohio can specify the dates in project bidding for a specific project to protect these Cliff Swallows, why can't it be a standard statewide policy for ALL similar projects during nesting season?
2. Wouldn't these site guidelines be good ideas to incorporate into Birding Trails, especially in the intervals between designated birding stops?

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BOBOLINKS: GOT MILK?

Timing in bridge construction to protect nesting birds is one thing; farming is another. We already mentioned an encouraging solution for Tricolored Blackbird management at one Southern California location by delaying the harvest of wheat.

The case of another blackbird species in trouble, the Bobolink, raises parallel problems. In previous E-bulletins we discussed the recent discovery of large wintering Bobolink roosts in Bolivia ([here](#) or [here](#)).

Currently there are serious dangers facing Bobolinks as their young attempt to fledge across North America.

At one time, farmers left their field edges unplowed, but this practice is gradually disappearing. The further modernization of dairy farms and the mowing of hay/alfalfa three or four times per year can make life difficult, if not impossible, for Bobolinks and other grassland birds to successfully fledge their young. New alfalfa varieties planted by farmers will permit earlier and more frequent mowing. Studies have shown that fewer than 10 percent of Bobolink nestlings survive in early-cut alfalfa fields. (In one set of classic studies in New York, hay cropping caused the loss of 94 percent of Bobolink nests; while in undisturbed fields, 80 percent of Bobolink nestlings survived.)

It's not simply nests that are at risk; it's also newly fledged nestlings that are threatened. Since the "safe-cut dates" will vary from region to region, the wisest approach for Bobolink conservation might simply be to let the Bobolinks "set their own safe cut date." In other words, protect the "home field" until the Bobolinks have naturally dispersed. Of course, the date on which the Bobolinks may leave a field can vary depending on several factors - nesting delays, food availability, rain, shelter and mini-habitats inside the field, timing of second nesting, alternate habitat availability, etc.

Although it is unrealistic to expect dairy farmers and commercial alfalfa growers to stop mowing, it is not

Although it is unrealistic to expect dairy farmers and commercial alfalfa growers to stop mowing, it is not impossible to imagine ways to alter the pattern and schedule of haying and to devise a system of compensation. One would hope that these types of considerations would enter into the future ongoing dialogue for the renewal of the Farm Bill in 2007. Until these problems are taken seriously, these hayfield-deathtraps will continue to function.

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STATE WILDLIFE GRANTS: ACCOMPLISHMENT REPORT

A "five-year accomplishment report" for State Wildlife Grants was released in June. The program has become an essential core effort to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered and is a critical source of federal funds for state wildlife diversity programs. Every state has now completed a "wildlife action plan," and these plans outline those species that are in need of help and the practical actions that are being taken to assist them.

For readers of this E-bulletin, the bird-oriented programs in the report will be the most compelling, such as Swallow-tailed Kite management in a number of southern states and Burrowing Owl concerns in western states, to grassland songbird problems and shorebird management issues from coast to coast. You can [download](#) your own copy of the accomplishment report from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

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INTERMOUNTAIN WEST WATERBIRD PLAN READY

An Intermountain West regional waterbird plan has now become available for download. This plan is intended to fill knowledge gaps and facilitate coordinated waterbird conservation efforts among the many public and private partners associated with all-bird conservation in the 11-state Intermountain West Region. Included are descriptions of waterbird populations, a review of threats and management issues, population and habitat objectives for priority species, monitoring and research recommendations, and conservation strategies for management, monitoring, and outreach. Authored mainly by Gary Ivey and Caroline Herziger (with special involvement of Region 1, USFWS), the plan represents an extensive partnership effort between federal, state, and local agencies and non-governmental organizations.

This plan should guide those in the Intermountain West in delivering waterbird conservation. It can be [downloaded](#) from the Waterbird Conservation for the Americas website.

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ANOTHER BOOK TO CONSIDER

As we've said before, we usually don't review books; our E-bulletin could become too long. Nonetheless, we have another spectacular book to recommend. This book is ARCTIC WINGS: BIRDS OF THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (Mountaineers Books, 2006).

Brainchild of Stephen Brown of the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, the volume is a tribute to the birds of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The book includes a foreword by former President Jimmy Carter, and 200 color images by nature photographers including Subhankar Banerjee, Steven Kazlowski, Michio Hoshino, Arthur Morris, Mark Wilson, and Hugh Rose. The book's chapters cover the life histories of the refuge's birds: loons, waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, gulls, terns, owls, and songbirds.

The importance of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for bird populations is highlighted through profiles by multiple award-winning authors. (In the interest of full disclosure, one of your co-editors, Wayne Petersen, had a hand in writing some of the species accounts in this volume.) The book even comes with a 60-minute CD of birdsongs.

It is highly recommended. [More details.](#)

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TESHEKPUK OPPORTUNITY

Also on the subject of arctic habitat in Alaska, we have an additional news item. We've reported on the threats to the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area in Alaska (currently under jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, the BLM) multiple times in the E-bulletin (most recently [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Special Area had been set aside within the BLM's Northeast Planning Area of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A) as a zone where drilling would be banned. Recent reversal of this policy puts into jeopardy this site of valuable shorebird, duck, and goose habitat in Western Alaska. In January, the Bush administration decided to open up the entire area to oil and gas leases.

The oil and gas lease sale is now set for late September. To stay up to date on this situation and to register your own opinion, see [this site](#).

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CRANE SUCCESS AT NECEDAH NWR

Late last month, a pair of Whooping Cranes (known as adults 211 and 217) hatched two chicks at their nest in central Wisconsin. This marks the first young of the species to be hatched in the wild from the experimental flock at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. The successful natural nesting was the second attempt by this adult pair this year; they had abandoned their first nest and then re-nested.

There will now be about two dozen young cranes added to the crane population this year in the encouraging effort to establish a second migratory flock of these birds in North America.

Operation Migration, the group coordinating the ambitious project, has more information, including photos [here](#) (see, especially, the 23 June entry).

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PACIFIC MONUMENT AND BIRDS

We end this E-bulletin with two items that you may have already heard about.

First, the White House announcement in mid-June about the creation of a 140,000-square-mile protected marine Federal Monument embracing the northwestern Hawaiian islands was nothing short of spectacular. This zone will be equal to an area nearly the size of Montana and will become the largest protected marine area in the world, poised to reinforce strict conservation measures for fish and wildlife dependent on the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, the monument's centerpiece.

We have little to add to this story, except to offer the following three observations:

1. In this single move, millions of seabirds, including albatrosses, frigatebirds, terns, petrels, and a variety of other species will receive special protection.
2. Congress ought to follow up the President's initiative with a commitment of funds for the purpose of providing oversight and maintenance of this unique marine monument.
3. This move is a reminder of a host of other possibilities, in even difficult times.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands have been part of a 600,000-acre refuge since 1909 when President Teddy Roosevelt created the Hawaiian Island Bird Reservation to stop the poaching of bird feathers. For an excellent chronology of the status of these Northwestern Pacific islands, you may want to look [here](#).

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SUPREME COURT PUNTS

Another story in the category of news in the mainstream press that impacts birds as well as people was the Supreme Court decision in late June on the status of wetlands.

We told our E-bulletin readers to be aware of this possibility back in February, including the importance of the anticipated decision ([here](#) or [here](#)).

A divided Supreme Court ruled that regulators might have overstepped their bounds when they halted two Michigan landowners from developing properties on wetlands, but the justices were unable to come to a majority view on limiting the scope of the Clean Water Act. While the Supreme Court voted 5 to 4 to set aside lower court rulings that had favored the government, the court stopped short of siding completely with the landowners. Instead the Supreme Court has sent the two cases back to lower courts.

Still left unanswered is how extensively the federal government can restrict threatening development on or near wetlands protected under the Clean Water Act. Vital among the unanswered questions in the cases was how the government can define "adjacent" and how it ought to determine connections among water systems.

The lower courts - now tasked to reconsider these two cases - have no clear standard to apply. Congress, of course, has the option of stepping in to bring clarity to the situation by revisiting and explaining its intent and interest under the Clean Water Act. But don't hold your breath.

Wetland habitat management and clean water are both at stake here. For us, it may have to do mainly with ducks, herons, shorebirds, and multiple species of wetland-oriented songbirds (note the blackbirds profiled in this E-bulletin, for example), but the issue of protecting wetlands is simply nothing short of immense.

What are the long-term consequences of the Supreme Court's action and inaction? At the moment it is too soon to tell, but this recommended [website](#) from the Association of State Wetland Managers should have plenty of ongoing analysis and information.

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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:

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