



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

July 2008

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RARITY FOCUS

For the third straight month, we present a monthly rarity from Delaware. The recent appearance of a Little Egret in Delaware makes it easy to see why Delaware is sometimes called the "Small Wonder" state.

On the morning of 7 June, Devich Farbotnik discovered a Little Egret at the far end of Shearneck Pool at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge in Smyrna, Delaware. The bird continued to be seen at least through the evening of 19 June, occasionally also being seen at the neighboring impoundment, Bear Swamp Pool.

Little Egret is a widespread breeder in the Old World that primarily winters from Africa east to India, southeast Asia, and Australia. It is a rare visitor to North America between late April and late September, often along the Atlantic Coast between Newfoundland and Virginia. There have been approximately 40 reports since 1954, including several birds that have presumably reappeared at the same site in successive years. (There is also one accidental record for Alaska.). Interestingly, the species, has become a regular but uncommon breeder on Barbados, if not elsewhere in the Caribbean.

For those not familiar with the Little Egret, an Old World species very similar to the Snowy Egret, you can find it described in a National Geographic field guide, page 112-113 and in the "Big" Sibley, page 59.

The Bombay Hook NWR Little Egret was the 300th species for the unofficial Delaware State Year List, an appropriate species to represent this particular milestone.

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SWEET DEAL FOR FLORIDA EVERGLADES

Words like "blockbuster," "bold," and "breathtaking" peppered the announcement in the last week of June that the U.S. Sugar Corporation, the nation's largest producer of cane sugar, was planning to sell the state of Florida 187,000 acres, or about 300 square miles, in the northern Everglades for \$1.75 billion. If approved, this deal would be the largest single conservation purchase the state of Florida has ever made, specifically to help restore the natural flow of water into the Everglades.

In 1999 Florida and federal officials embraced a multibillion-dollar plan to return the Everglades to a semblance of its former natural state. The plan, centered around rerouting a high volume of water through the Everglades, is already years behind schedule, and the cost has ballooned, according to a Government Accountability Office report released in July. (Through 2006, the federal government spent \$2.3 billion on restoration of the Everglades, while Florida spent \$4.8 billion.)

Despite efforts to reduce pollution by the sugar industry, water flowing from the treatment areas can still contain up to five times the phosphorous standards previously set for protecting the Everglades.

The deal, hashed out in secrecy over about seven months, surpasses the 74,000-acre Babcock Ranch acquisition in 2006, at the time the state's biggest conservation acquisition. The South Florida Water Management District will be the state's broker in the current deal. The \$1.75-billion acquisition price tag is tentative since the state will have to appraise the property. Reportedly, property taxes paid by people in 16 counties served by the South Florida Water Management District would be leveraged to issue bonds to help raise the money.

Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon of Florida, called the purchase the "missing link" in the ambitious restoration project, because it could serve to connect the Everglades with Lake Okeechobee.

"This is monumental, an unprecedented opportunity," added Jennifer Conner, a senior policy adviser at the Nature Conservancy.

The effort to undo and redirect decades of flood control that have diverted water away from the Everglades in an attempt to make way for agriculture and for urban and suburban growth in the past is reported to be the largest restoration project of its kind in the world. Today what's left of the Everglades ecosystem, the proverbial "River of Grass," is only about half its original size.

The Everglades, long known for its abundant bird life, has seen its wading bird populations decline drastically over the last century, with vital bird habitat literally squeezed out and dried up. The restoration plans, especially this new U.S. Sugar buyout, would hopefully significantly advance the avian potential of the region, once again raising bird population levels to those approaching those of the fabled past.

The effect on the U.S. Sugar Corporation will also be deeply felt. The company will continue to lease the land back from the state for the next six years to fulfill contract orders and labor commitments. A major force in Florida's economy and politics for decades, U.S. Sugar as we know it, could conceivably cease to exist thereafter.

It is unclear who first proposed the deal, but sources suggest that Republican Gov. Charlie Crist may have initially proposed the plan to sugar executives who had expressed frustration over numerous lawsuits and increasingly costly regulations.

Negotiations on the exact price for the land purchase begin this month and will hopefully be concluded by mid-September.

For an instructive map of the areas in question see:

<http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2008/06/25/us/25everglades.web.html>

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GLOBAL WARMING LEGISLATION: BACK TO THE DRAWING-BOARD

Consider the mounting scenarios: rising sea-levels threatening to evict salt marsh bird species; alpine mountain habitat and its birds eradicated by higher temperatures; grassland grouse populations diminished at southern plains latitudes; and warming climate trends outpacing the food sources of certain long-distance migrants.

Also consider that after a six-month-long journey through the Environment and Public Works Committee to the Senate floor, the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act of 2008 (S.3036) was dispensed with following a disagreeable and short debate during the first week of June.

Although the Act's carbon-reduction elements were tougher than many businesses desired, they were not as tough as many environmentalists wished. Nonetheless, the comprehensive wildlife-support language in the Lieberman-Warner Bill had been encouraging.

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We discussed this previously, most recently in January:
<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC08.html#TOC05> and <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan08.html>

In the Lieberman-Warner proposal, a hefty percentage of revenues from carbon permit auctions, amounting to as much as \$9.3 billion per year, would have been dedicated to natural resource adaptation. Of this, over a third of those revenues would have gone to state wildlife agencies - via the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program. This would have covered wildlife education and appreciation along with conservation activities to assist wildlife adaptation and habitat mitigation in response to the threat of climate change.

The implications for birds and their habitats are obvious.

While comprehensive global warming legislation has now gone farther in Washington than it has ever gone before, a fresh look will have to await a new Congress and a new President.

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DUNLIN PLAN RELEASED

In response to conservation priorities set in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) has been working to help develop individual targeted Species Conservation Plans. Beyond life-history essentials, these plans are intended to identify and prioritize conservation actions needed to stop or reverse the decline of various species showing population decline.

The most recently completed plan is for Dunlin, a species with various subspecies ranging from Southeast Asia and the U.S. Pacific and Atlantic Coasts, to Mexico's Baja Peninsula and Laguna Madre.

The 78-page plan (along with that of other shorebirds) is now available on the WHSRN website at:
http://www.whsrn.org/shorebirds/conservation_plans.html

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IBA NEWS: STANDARDIZING TERMS

There is a growing trend to standardize bird and other wildlife conservation efforts, using common terms for the problems and tools in the field, so that issues and threats can be better understood. This approach is being put into practice at various levels, from the global 'Red List' of endangered species, to bird conservationists working in remote regions of the Third World.

A standard classification of conservation threats and actions was pursued at both the Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), when the two projects pooled their efforts.

The joint effort tested their system on a list of 1,191 endangered bird species generated by BirdLife International, a bird conservation organization based in Cambridge, UK. BirdLife is currently applying the system to its inventory of 10,000 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) around the world.

The approach has also been adopted by the Alliance for Zero Extinction, and will be applied to species on the 2008 IUCN Red List.

According to Stuart Butchart, the coordinator of BirdLife's Global Species Program, "The new system pinpoints agriculture and unsustainable exploitation as those drivers [contributing to habitat loss]. It's a much more logical way of analyzing threats."

You can find more information here: <http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080620/full/news.2008.905.html>

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs, and those across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/>

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SHAKING UP THE TREE OF LIFE

Scientists working through a project called "Early Bird," a large-scale cooperative effort among five institutions in the U.S., Scotland, and Australia, released a new study to help explain the evolutionary relationships among major groups of birds. The initial results, distributed in the last days of June, are expected to provide a detailed estimate of the "family tree" of bird life that will help to organize and interpret related information about birds.

It is enough to say - in our available space - that a real shake-up in understanding some avian families is in the works. For example, songbirds and parrots are seen to have descended from a common ancestor; falcons and hawks/ospreys are not as closely related to each other as are falcons with songbirds/parrots and hawks/ospreys with New World vultures; and grebes share ancestors not with loons, but with tropicbirds. The tremors

with New World vultures, and grebes share ancestors not with loons, but with tropicbirds. The tremors continue, so don't start altering your checklists yet!

For a peek at the findings, see the scientific paper abstract: <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/320/5884/1763> and a summary from the participating University of Florida: <http://news.ufl.edu/2008/06/26/bird-evolution/>

Sushma Reddy one of the paper's authors said: "First, appearances can be deceiving. Birds that look or act similar are not necessarily related. Second, much of bird classification and conventional wisdom on the evolutionary relationships of birds is wrong."

Clearly, these findings will be discussed in the scientific community for some time to come.

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BOOK REVIEW: FLIGHTS AGAINST THE SUNSET

Since this title might slip below your radar, we mention it here. It's Kenn Kaufman's FLIGHTS AGAINST THE SUNSET (2008, Houghton Mifflin), a combination of thoughtful and humorous stories in the context of Kaufman visiting his ill mother in the hospital. Many of the chapters are taken from Kaufman's regular column in BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST. The book's narrative shifts between episodes covering the author's interaction with his mother, stories of his family, and bird-related adventures. It's a short read, worth the time.

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HITTING THE WALL

On 23 June the U.S. Supreme Court gave a green light to press forward with plans to complete a controversial wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. The court, without comment, declined to hear an appeal from two environmental groups - the Sierra Club and the Defenders of Wildlife - which had filed suit to reverse a decision by Homeland Security to waive environmental and other laws and regulations in the construction of 670 miles of the border wall by the end of the year.

We covered this important subject last year, with an emphasis on birds and National Wildlife Refuges: <http://www.refugenet.org/birding/junSBC07.html#TOC07> and <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/june07.html>

Over a dozen Democratic members of Congress supported the recent appeal, including four Texans whose congressional districts abut the Mexican border. Also, the Texas Border Coalition, made up of border mayors and county judges from 10 Texas border communities from Brownsville to El Paso, filed a separate lawsuit in May against Homeland Security.

A number of organizations, especially those concerned with wildlife issues, have passed resolutions and sent letters protesting construction of the border wall. These groups include the American Birding Association which passed a unanimous resolution by their Board this spring on the subject. You can see the details of that resolution here: <http://www.americanbirding.org/borderwallresolution.pdf>

There are at least two more lawsuits in opposition to the wall being brought by other environmental and citizens groups that are in various stages of court proceedings.

More details on these legal developments can be found here: <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2008/2008-06-23-092.asp>

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MBCC INVESTS IN BIRD HABITAT

In mid-June, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission (MBCC) approved \$4 million to purchase 18,118 acres of prime wetland and associated grassland habitat for the Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Minnesota. This constitutes one of the largest single purchases in history using dollars generated from Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp sales and import duties on firearms and ammunition which together make up the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund.

With this move, the Commission - comprised of four members of Congress and three federal cabinet secretaries - will increase the size of Glacial Ridge many times over, from its current size of about 2,800 acres. The refuge itself is relatively new, having only been created in October 2004, when 26 cooperating agencies, led by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Polk County Commissioners, provided the catalyst for its creation.

The just-approved funding will secure the land currently held by TNC over the next four years. The Fish and Wildlife Service will use the migratory bird funds to reimburse the conservation group at a level that maintains the group's nonprofit status. The first transfer of about 5,100 acres should be completed by October.

The expanded refuge will provide habitat for multiple species of waterfowl, shorebirds, long-legged waders, and grassland songbirds. The continuing return of the Greater Prairie-Chicken is also expected to be a showcase for the refuge.

Dave Bennett, manager of Glacial Ridge NWR, said that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will seek to acquire additional land within the refuge's federally approved boundary of 35,756 acres. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources owns some of this land, and the rest is privately owned.

Bennett indicated that the Service plans to continue restoring tallgrass prairie that has been tilled and drained for agriculture, along with working to maintain the improvements TNC has made through partnerships with state and federal agencies.

The refuge is in the early stages of developing visitor plans, but it will be open to birding, wildlife watching, hiking, and hunting during designated seasons.

You can find more information on the Glacial Ridge NWR acquisition here: <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2008/2008-06-12-092.asp> and http://www.doi.gov/news/08_News_Releases/080612a.html

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TIP OF THE MONTH: BUY YOUR MIGRATORY BIRD STAMP

And while we are on the subject of MBCC acquisitions, this is a reminder that the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp helps make projects like the Glacial Ridge NWR project possible.

The new Stamp was released just late last month. The Stamp costs \$15 and is available at Post Offices and NWRs across the country. Ninety-eight percent of the cost of the Stamp goes directly to secure wetland and grassland habitat for the Refuge System - National Wildlife Refuges and the smaller Waterfowl Production Areas. Every birder is encouraged to buy a Stamp and display it when in the field. It's about as simple as that.

For more information: <http://www.fws.gov/duckstamps/> and <http://www.duckstamp.com/> and <http://www.fws.gov/duckstamps/Info/Constituents/birder.htm>

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BEN BULLETIN LAUNCHED

The Bird Education Network (BEN) has launched a new and irregularly-appearing bulletin, focusing on bird education news. The first issue, announcing the Second National Gathering of bird educators to be held 22-26 February 2009 at Jekyll Island, Georgia, can be found on the BEN website here: <http://www.birdeducation.org/BENBulletinArchives.htm>

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SPECIAL ALL-BIRD BULLETIN WITH MEXICO EMPHASIS

The most recent, June, issue of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative's ALL-BIRD BULLETIN is dedicated to inter-American projects with a Mexican emphasis, concentrating on five areas: Laguna Madre, Marismas Nacionales, Chiapas (El Triunfo), Yucatan, and Chihuahuan Desert grasslands (Janos Valley and Saltillo). To have a copy e-mailed to you, contact the editor, Roxanne Bogart: Roxanne_Bogart@fws.gov

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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

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