



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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July 2011

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This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed to 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):  
[www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html](http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html)

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### RARITY FOCUS

This month's rarity qualifies as either a wonderful North American "first" or simply an interesting curiosity.

On 20 June, Mike Shanley and Seth Wollney observed and photographed a Hooded Crow at the Crooke's Point section of Great Kills Park, part of the Gateway National Recreation Area on Staten Island in New York City.

To see photos taken by Seth Wollney from the "fisherman's" parking lot at Great Kills Park on Staten Island, see:  
[www.flickr.com/photos/sethbirds](http://www.flickr.com/photos/sethbirds)

Hooded Crow is an Old World species, formerly "lumped" with Carrion Crow, but now "split" and currently considered a distinct species. Hooded Crows range across northern, eastern, and southeastern Europe, as well as in parts of the Middle East, but usually no farther west than Scotland and Ireland. The species is hardly migratory through much of its range, except for some cold-weather movements from the northern parts of its range (e.g., Finland and Russia) into the North Sea countries and southern Scandinavia. Details can be found in just about any European field guide.

Locations frequented by the Hooded Crow at Great Kills Park through June included the fisherman's parking lot at the end of peninsula, the woods next to the lot, and along the wrack line on the beach, especially near a small rock jetty. The bird was mostly observed in the mornings, when it was often mercilessly harassed by local Northern Mockingbirds.

According to regular joggers at the park, the crow may have been in the vicinity for over two weeks before being discovered by birders.

The closest previous reports, from Greenland and at least 88 records for Iceland (through 2006), suggest at least occasional westward movement:  
[http://notendur.hi.is/yannk/status\\_corcrn.html](http://notendur.hi.is/yannk/status_corcrn.html)

Considering the fact that there are a few records for Greenland, natural occurrence in the northeastern U.S. is not totally implausible.

The presence of a Hooded Crow at the virtual mouth of busy New York Harbor could also suggest the possibility of a ship-assisted arrival, unless of course the bird is an escaped captive bird.

Not inconsequentially, corvids are regularly kept in captivity as pets, and previous reports of Hooded Crows in North America – e.g., Salton Sea, California (1973), Chicago, Illinois (2000), New Braunfels, Texas (2002), and Whitecourt, Alberta (2006) - have all been attributed to escaped birds.

Still, a major breeder of exotic crows and ravens in Heflin, Alabama, indicated that he no longer has Hooded Crows and knows of no one who does.

The question of provenance of this bird is interesting to consider and the New York Bird Records Committee will no doubt have fun sorting out the answer.

In any case, many birders from the NYC area and beyond have gone to Great Kills Park to see this bird, wild or not.

## **AN ERRANT PTARMIGAN**

A Willow Ptarmigan was positively identified and photographed in early June at the 500-acre Darlington Nuclear Station on Lake Ontario, about 40 miles ENE of Toronto. This tundra-loving species is very rare in southern Ontario, usually ranging no farther south than the Hudson Bay coast. A few days later, on 10 June, Ontario Power Generation (OPG) generously decided that it would make the site available to birders on Sunday, 12 June, for a one-time access at the secure site. Brian Henshaw, who works for Beacon Environmental at the station, organized the on-site field logistics, the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) provided advice and notice to the Ontario birding community, and the OPG took on the essential security, escort, and safety-orientation for the visitors.

There were 147 birders who were bused to the field site, escorted by OPG staff (including armed guards). They carefully followed directions and had to remain together as a group. Fortunately, the Willow Ptarmigan strutted for several minutes in full view for all the birders to see and enjoy.

It turns out that last winter there was a large irruption of Willow Ptarmigan - and even a few Rock Ptarmigan - into south-central Quebec. The Darlington Willow Ptarmigan was probably an extreme overshoot from last winter's irruption, and there is actually evidence that this bird may have been present since March.

The OPG Darlington experience was well-received by all parties, including regular station staff, security, contractors, birders, and the media. To read a story from the TORONTO STAR and see a link to a short video, check:  
[www.thestar.com/news/article/1008739--rare-arctic-ptarmigan-causes-flap-when-it-stops-by-darlington-power-plant](http://www.thestar.com/news/article/1008739--rare-arctic-ptarmigan-causes-flap-when-it-stops-by-darlington-power-plant)

More details and photos from Ontario birder, Jean Irons, can be viewed here:  
[www.jeaniron.ca/2011/willowptarmigan.htm](http://www.jeaniron.ca/2011/willowptarmigan.htm)

## **IBA NEWS: STATE PARKS HAMMERED**

What do following sites have in common?

Baxter State Park (Maine), Cape Henlopen State Park (Delaware), Cape Mears State Park (Oregon), Montana de Oro State Park (California), Ochlockonee River State Park (Florida), and Perdaneles Falls State Park (Texas)?

The answer, they are all state parks, and they are all Important Bird Areas (IBAs) or are parts of IBAs. Although state parks only account for two percent of public outdoor recreational real estate in the U.S. according to the National Association of State Park Directors, they are very important to birds and birders in many states.

State parks are also under budget assaults from coast to coast. In the words of birder and Chief of Public Policy for the National Recreation and Park Association, Rich Dolesh, "What was once unthinkable – the closure of state parks because of budget shortfalls – has rapidly become a reality in many states."

This is not to suggest that all the mentioned parks are about to be closed, but a number of states are starting to look at state-park "solutions" that might include the exploitation of natural resources at parks, the consolidation of state park systems into other state agencies, the elimination of funding for parks that don't produce revenue, the privatization of multiple park features, and, the aforementioned simple closures.

The search for new revenue and looking for creative ways to fund state parks is not necessarily a bad thing; however, care must be given to keep the core objectives of parks in mind, in order to protect the character of and visitor

experience at state parks.

Already the Arizona state legislature has wiped out almost two-thirds of its state park budget during the past several years; Georgia park financing has been cut by almost 50 percent since 2008; Florida is considering privatizing state park operations; Ohio has approved drilling for oil and gas beneath some of its state parks, and in California 70 of the state's 278 parks are now slated to close. A Minnesota state-government shutdown, of course, includes "padlocking" state parks.

It won't be long before budget cuts, consolidation, privatization, drilling, and additional closures take place due to the pressure of state-budget shortfalls, IBAs or not.

Some states seem to understand and appreciate that parks contribute greatly to local and regional economies and will continue to protect them; other states, however, simply don't get it. For birders, it's mainly issues of access, accommodation, appropriate management, and simple fairness that are at stake.

For more on the state park scene, see this recent article from THE NEW YORK TIMES:  
[www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/us/07parks.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/us/07parks.html)

To get additional information about IBA programs worldwide, including those across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:  
[www.audubon.org/bird/iba/](http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/)

### **SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS SUCCESS**

Regular readers of the Birding Community know that we've been tracking the status of a pair of nesting rare Short-tailed Albatrosses and their one offspring at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge since last January. To see some of our previous reports (including before and after the tsunami), see:  
[www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maysbc11.html#TOC04](http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maysbc11.html#TOC04)

Happily, the good news continues. First, over the past few months there were continued reports of both parents bringing food to the youngster every one to five days. Then, on 8 June, the five-month-old Short-tailed Albatross chick was banded with a metal band on its right leg and a red-and-white band coded "AA00" on its left. By 11 June, the banded young albatross was observed moving from its nest area to explore the nearby shoreline while its instinct to swim and to fly increased. It was observed through the evening of 15 June exploring and practicing flight. By 17 June, it was gone; it fledged with no one to witness its departure.

The fledging is a testament to the care and skill of its parents, the resilience of the young albatross, and the wise management of Midway Atoll NWR.

For the full story of the last month's activities along with wonderful photos and a video, see here:  
[http://us.vocuspr.com/Newsroom/Query.aspx?SiteName=FWS&Entity=PRAsset&SF\\_PRAsset\\_PRAssetID\\_EQ=127511&XSL=PressRelease&Cache=True](http://us.vocuspr.com/Newsroom/Query.aspx?SiteName=FWS&Entity=PRAsset&SF_PRAsset_PRAssetID_EQ=127511&XSL=PressRelease&Cache=True)

### **HOPE MAKES IT TO THE ARCTIC**

Another favorite with of our readership has been "Hope," the banded Whimbrel that we described in May:  
[www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maysbc11.html#TOC10](http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/maysbc11.html#TOC10)

Hope, tracked via satellite, arrived on her breeding grounds along the MacKenzie River in northwest Canada, on 14 June. This is the third year that she has been tracked to the same location just south of the Beaufort Sea. Her travels through three migration cycles have taken her more than 24,000 miles. In addition to Hope, three other Whimbrels were tracked this spring to breeding grounds west of Hudson Bay. Updated tracking maps for Hope and others may be viewed at:  
[www.ccb-wm.org/programs/migration/Whimbrel/whimbrel.htm](http://www.ccb-wm.org/programs/migration/Whimbrel/whimbrel.htm)

### **MORE HELP FOR THE SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER**

We have reported previously on the plight of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, most recently in the E-bulletin, last August:  
[www.refugeassociation.org/birding/AugSBC10.html#TOC02](http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/AugSBC10.html#TOC02)

Spoon-billed Sandpiper numbers are estimated to be perhaps under 500 individuals and are now the focus of a multi-national conservation campaign. The sandpipers breed in tundra habitat in Far Eastern Russia and winter in southeast Asia, with the largest concentration in Myanmar (Burma). There are only a handful of records of this species for North America.

Recently, as part of the effort to help this species, Audubon California and David Sibley teamed up to raise \$5,000 to support the Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST) build and staff a visitor center in the community of Pak Thale, Thailand. This new center, about 75 miles from Bangkok on the Gulf of Thailand, will help visitors enjoy the nearby salt pans which support a small wintering population of Spoon-billed Sandpipers and other wintering waterbirds. As a fund raiser, David Sibley auctioned a painting of the sandpiper, and Audubon California provided matching funds. The funds will help the BCST provide year-round staffing for the center to increase public interest in the plight of this species, build local and provincial support for conservation measures, and help bring income into the local community from visiting birders.

See here for a photo of the center:  
[http://www.bcst.or.th/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=341%3A2011-06-09-02-26-](http://www.bcst.or.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=341%3A2011-06-09-02-26-)



elected officials, and conservationists to discuss the problems and solutions confronting North American grasslands in an effort to raise the profile of this endangered ecosystem and to work on developing a roadmap for its conservation.

The event will be immediately followed by a "Grasslands Policy Summit" on 18 August sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and World Wildlife Fund. More details can be found here: [www.sdstate.edu/wfs/grasslandconference](http://www.sdstate.edu/wfs/grasslandconference)

## **TIP OF THE MONTH: PRACTICE GIVING DIRECTIONS**

When you're birding with a group in the field and you hear a companion say, "There's an oriole in the largest tree ahead at three o'clock." you probably know what that means. The familiar "clock technique" is a useful way for one birder to direct others to seemingly hard-to-spot birds. By using the "clock technique" you'd at once know that the imagined clock face was superimposed over the tree and that the oriole could be found at the outer right edge of the tree. (As we increasingly go digital, in the future, analog clocks may be less understood!)

But the clock technique is only one tool. Many of us also need to polish up our direction-giving, since general terms such as "straight ahead" or "up there" are often not clear enough for our colleagues to readily spot a bird in the field. "In top of the bush that's the shape of Ukraine" or "in the top of the Osage Orange tree," might also seem perfectly clear to you, but perhaps not to others.

Beyond the clock orientation, consider some additional possibilities. When giving directions, think about the precise location of the tree, bush, or other supporting feature in question; any outstanding characteristic in the supporting feature; how close or far away the bird or vegetation is located; how near to the edge or how deep into the vegetation/water's-edge/or pond the bird might be; any obvious foreground or background objects that might be useful for orientation; what direction the bird might be moving; and the color or tone of the bark, the branch, the leaves, the water's edge that will serve to help locate the bird.

Locating a bird in the sky for your companions – say, a soaring raptor – takes additional practice, involving orienting on other birds in the sky, objects in the foreground (e.g., treelines, towers, buildings), cloud shape, distance, and flight direction.

Then, try to convey the location in the clearest, most sequential order (from general to specific) to guide your companions to seeing the desired bird. At the same time, think about doing it as quickly as possible.

It takes practice at first, but practice makes perfect.

Footnote: giving directions on a boat at sea is totally different, and is a subject we will take up another time!

## **BOOK NOTES: BEEE-BZZZ**

Observers of birds – from poets to naturalists – have often attempted to capture the songs of birds through words and phrases in their efforts to replicate the sounds that birds make. John Bevis has recaptured and recounted many of these attempts in his quirky book, AAAAW TO ZZZZZ: THE WORDS OF BIRDS (MIT Press, 2010), which is actually a new version of his earlier book, AN A-Z OF BIRD SONG. In this new book, coverage is expanded from the birds of Great Britain to include those of North America. The results are mixed, yet the effort is admirable, combining the skills of a wordsmith, a near-poet, and a naturalist.

Bevis admits that his attempt to learn, record, and, most importantly, remember the unique characteristics of the sounds that bird species make, in written words may often appear bizarre, nonsensical, sometimes pretty, and sometimes comic.

While there is some confusion resulting from British vs. American bird references, this little book still manages to hold together. In a little book that has only 144 pages the listing of lexicons and mnemonics for North American birds accounts for 38 pages, and the corresponding pages for Great Britain and Northern Europe add up to another 38 pages.

The book concludes with a discussion of some of the early field recordings, graphic notations (e.g., sonograms), birdsong in music (including mimicking instruments), and even in clocks.

If you are a true bird-song devotee, you might want to go through this book of written words just "for a lark," or as a prelude to listening to increasingly accessible and exceedingly helpful actual bird recordings. (And, yes, BEEE-BZZZZ is a representation for Blue-winged Warbler.)

## **PURPLE MARTINS AND THE U.S. OPEN**

Millions may have watched the televised U.S. Open last month, focusing on four days of flawless golf by Rory McElroy. There was one activity at the 18th green at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Maryland, that might have missed most public attention, however.

This year, the Congressional 18th green, located near a pond, has been home to a small colony of six to eight Purple Martins. "We don't get Purple Martins every year, but this year they have returned," says Mike Giuffre, director of golf and grounds maintenance at the Congressional Country Club. "It's pretty neat to see. We have about six martin boxes on the property, all near ponds, but there is only one occupied by Purple Martins this year."

Co-habitation with wildlife is also a part of the golf course's maintenance, Giuffre says. For example, staff has built and monitored about a dozen bluebird boxes, all of which are occupied this year. Although the Purple Martins are among the welcome inhabitants, the course staff has less enthusiasm for resident Canada Geese, which fortunately did not nest at

Congressional this year.

For more on this, including a photo of the current martin housing on the 18th green, see here:  
[http://wamu.org/news/11/06/15/at\\_us\\_open\\_fans\\_and\\_golfers\\_are\\_visitors\\_birds\\_are\\_natives.php](http://wamu.org/news/11/06/15/at_us_open_fans_and_golfers_are_visitors_birds_are_natives.php)

## **TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD COUNT REVEALS PROBLEMS**

A recent California-wide census of Tricolored Blackbirds, a species found almost exclusively in California, has revealed a 34 percent decrease in population since the last survey in 2008. With the help of over 100 volunteers from bird clubs and Audubon chapters, state and federal agencies, and local independent birders, Tricolored Blackbird colonies were sought at over 600 sites, with 138 active colonies found. Unfortunately, only 259,322 birds were seen, a long-term decrease from over 3 million birds estimated in 1937.

In 1990, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) added the Tricolored Blackbird to its list of Bird Species of Special Concern, and the species is still considered a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Bird of Conservation Concern (USFWS 2002), even though its candidacy for Endangered Species Status was turned down in 2006.

Recent declines may be due to low reproduction over the past three years, along with several large colonies failing to produce offspring because either Cattle Egrets predated the colonies or farmers harvested fields to which the colonies have moved. Long-term population declines are linked to habitat loss through the continued conversion of Central Valley wetlands into agricultural landscapes.

The blackbirds continue to concentrate in fewer and larger colonies in the San Joaquin Valley (especially in Merced, Tulare and Kern Counties, which alone accounted for 88 percent of the breeding population in April). These birds would have used native cattail wetlands, but due to the current lack of wetlands throughout the San Joaquin Valley, birds are now using agricultural fields near dairy farms to raise their young instead. Four of the top six largest colonies, representing 42 percent of the global population, occurred in such farm fields. The problem arises when farmers harvest their spring crops in the middle of the breeding season.

There are some positive signs, however.

Audubon California, with help from many agency and birding groups, has been providing incentives to farmers in exchange for delaying their harvests long enough to allow the birds to finish nesting. (This year, the nests of an estimated 42,000 birds were protected.) We wrote about this kind of effort in July 2006:  
[www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julSBC06.html#TOC04](http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julSBC06.html#TOC04)

Kern County duck clubs are also providing shelter for the blackbirds. A couple of clubs have flooded portions of their marshes in the spring - as well as in the winter when they usually do it - to create native cattail nesting habitat for Tricolored Blackbirds adjacent to threatened agricultural fields. These efforts have been crucial in providing native nesting habitat for over 10,000 birds already this year.

Other efforts have also produced encouraging results. For example, earlier this year and with the help of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, a pond choked with dead and matted cattails was burned during a fire training exercise. This stimulated the growth of new, green cattails with an immediate response by Tricolored Blackbirds. Some 600 Tricolored Blackbirds nested at this site where only 100 were seen last year.

## **MORE OPEN FIELDS DOLLARS**

Last month, the Department of Agriculture announced further commitment to the new state-based grants program, popularly known as "Open Fields," to enhance public access on privately owned lands via the Voluntary Public Access (VPA) and Habitat Incentive Program (HIP).

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack approved eight additional states and one tribal government to participate in VPA-HIP, allocating \$4.6 million in grants toward the total of \$17.8 million in VPA-HIP funds obligated in 2011. There are \$50 million in funds available for three years through the Open Fields element of the Farm Bill.

VPA-HIP, or Open Fields, was successfully included in the 2008 Farm Bill in response to public support, especially from hunting and fishing organizations. The benefits are not limited to hunting and fishing, however. All sorts of wildlife-associated recreational opportunities can make use of Open Fields, including birding, wildlife photography, and hiking. VPA-HIP facilitates public access to private lands by augmenting existing state access programs and encouraging new walk-in programs. It also provides landowner incentives to improve fish and wildlife habitat on enrolled lands.

Open Fields has already expanded access to recreational opportunities and promoted the conservation of millions of acres of privately owned lands.

With last month's announcement, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Montana, New Hampshire, Texas, Virginia and Wyoming, along with the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, join 17 other states as VPA-HIP participants.

You can view the full USDA announcement here:  
[www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2011/06/0250.xml&contentidonly=true](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2011/06/0250.xml&contentidonly=true)

## **IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR**

July is the time of year to get your new \$15-Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp, dedicated to securing wetland and grassland habitat for the Refuge System.

For those birders who regularly visit NWRs that charge for entry, holding a valid Stamp also gets you free access for all such refuges. So you can feel good about making a conservation contribution, and you can simultaneously get a free pass for refuges that charge.

If you are curious on how the Stamp money is spent, in mid-June, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission approved investing more than \$3 million from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (with Stamp dollars) to protect an estimated 1,600 acres of habitat on three units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These three refuges were Nestucca Bay NWR in Oregon, San Bernard NWR in Texas, and Canaan Valley NWR in West Virginia.

## **ACCESS MATTERS: AN INTRODUCTION**

Speaking of access through the Stamp, if there is a sub-theme in this current E-bulletin, it's that access for birders is increasingly important. While it's always nice knowing that a bird is at a particular site, for birders it's crucial to have access, to actually see – and sometimes even photograph – that bird.

Access has been part of many stories in past issues of the E-bulletin, and you can see that it has even been brought up in a number of news items this month. For example, take another look at our reports on the Ontario ptarmigan, the plight of state parks, Open Fields opportunities, and buying and using the latest Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp. Birder access has been part of each of these reports.

Access is becoming a recurring topic for birders across North America, so we hope to bring it up regularly in the Birding Community E-bulletin. Basically, access is all about how birders are welcomed (or are made unwelcome), what accommodations are made for birders by public and private land/property managers, and how birders use and maximize access to great birding locations. This access may include waste water treatment plants, landfills and dumps, dams, power plants, sod farms, golf courses, farms and ranches, bird feeder and backyard bird-hosts, military bases, Army Corps of Engineer facilities, and all of "the usual" NWRs, National Forests, National Parks, Provincial Parks, State Parks, and State Wildlife Management Areas.

We have topics that appear monthly in the E-bulletin, such as the Rarity Focus, and almost every month, such as our IBA story, our Book Notes, and our Tip of the Month. Accordingly, from now on, you can expect an access story to appear fairly regularly. Such stories should appear in most future issues, because, after all, access matters.

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Wayne R. Petersen, Director  
Massachusetts Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program  
Mass Audubon  
718/259-2178  
[wpetersen@massaudubon.org](mailto:wpetersen@massaudubon.org)

or

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

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