



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

June 2007

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RARITY FOCUS

The rarity for May is a Bahama Mockingbird found on 6 May at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park, Dade County, Florida. (For description and illustration, see the "big" Sibley guide, page 411 and the National Geographic Guide, page 362-363.)

What, another month with a Florida entry?

Yes, this is four months in a row (the previous three Florida rarities were Western Spindalis, Loggerhead Kingbird, and Black Noddy). This is purely a coincidence because all we try to do each month is try to pick out the month's accessible and interesting rarity, without regard to location. With this in mind, the Bahama Mockingbird is the bird of choice for the June E-Bulletin, even though it happens to be in Florida again.

A resident of the Bahamas, Jamaica, and small islands on the coast of Cuba, Bahama Mockingbird has only been found in the U.S. about 20 times before. Most sightings have been in Florida from early April to mid-June, and mostly between the Dry Tortugas and West Palm Beach. The first individual ever found was at the Dry Tortugas in 1973.

Interestingly, the Cape Florida bird was not the only Florida Mockingbird reported in May. On the morning of 2 May, a different Bahama Mockingbird was described from the NW side of Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas. Another Bahama Mockingbird, or the same Fort Jefferson bird, was reported on 29 May. However, the Cape Florida bird stayed longer and was enjoyed by more observers.

The mockingbird at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park was found on a trail by the park's southernmost parking

lot. Much to the delight of many observers the bird frequented buttonwood, strangler fig, and sea grape in the area through 9 May.

Over the years, many birders believe that the increase in Bahama Mockingbird sightings is attributable to an increased number of observers, greater observer awareness, and increased coverage of birding localities. The species has been usually found in coastal parks and suburban habitat. May's mockingbird at Bill Baggs Cape Florida is at least the sixth occurrence of this species at that particular location.

For a photo by Trey Mitchell of this most recent Cape Florida bird:

<http://www.photographwildlife.com/images/TASpost/CapeFlorida/May72007/index.htm>

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NEAR-SHORE ATLANTIC ALBATROSS(ES)

Seeing an albatross near shore in the U.S. or Canada is a rare experience anywhere outside of Alaska or Hawaii. One exception is the now-famous Laysan Albatross of Point Arena, California, a bird that has spent fourteen consecutive winters at that harbor. (Local fans have dubbed him "Mr. Al B. Tross," a bird that will even join local surfers beyond the waves right outside the harbor.)

An albatross off the northeast coast of North America is another story. Over the last eight years there have been a spate of Yellow-nosed Albatross reports. This species is a bird of the southern Atlantic waters, breeding on a few isolated islands and only rarely found in the North Atlantic. Initially, a bird was sighted in February 2000 at sea about three miles off Salvo, North Carolina. This event was followed by a cluster of sightings in May, some of them actually on land, in Massachusetts, New York (Fire Island), New Jersey (Cape May area), Rhode Island, and in June, in Massachusetts again.

Since then, there have been additional reports, mainly along the New England coast, particularly in Massachusetts and Maine. Some observers believe this is a single stray Yellow-nosed Albatross being spotted again and again. Others feel that several Yellow-nosed Albatrosses may be involved.

In any case, in late April a Yellow-nosed Albatross was found dazed and emaciated in a cow pasture behind the home of Shelley and Ryan Coite in Cape Neddick, Maine. The Coites contacted the Center for Wildlife, also in Cape Neddick, and the center eventually delivered the bird to the Tufts Wildlife Clinic in North Grafton, Massachusetts, a facility capable of sophisticated treatment. There, the albatross was fed squid and fresh fish until it doubled its weight, eventually attaining a healthy 4.2 pounds.

In late May, the bird was released at a beach in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and on its back it carried a light satellite transmitter - a \$3,000-device donated by Habit Research, a Canadian manufacturing company. The bird's wanderings were to be tracked until the batteries wear out, or until the albatross molts the feathers carrying the unit.

Unfortunately, the bird was tracked back to land on Cape Cod a few days later. As of this writing the bird is back at Tufts, but should soon be released again offshore. Eventually, a website will be established so the public can follow the travels of this remarkable wanderer. (Once a web site is made public, we will let you know via this E-bulletin.) Among other things, we might eventually determine if future reports of Yellow-nosed Albatross off the NE coast involve the same bird or multiple individuals.

For a map of the normal range of the species, plus some New England locales, see:

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2007/05/21/Map_of_albatross_breeding_ground/

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WINDPOWER: NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES ANNOUNCES THE OBVIOUS

In early May, a report was released by the National Academy of Sciences on the environmental impact of wind-energy projects.

Among other things, the report criticized "the lack of any truly coordinated planning" in the rapid growth of wind farms across the country. It specifically encouraged federal, state, and local governments to pay more attention to the planning, regulation, and location of wind-energy projects at sites where there could be threats to wildlife, or where scenic landscapes could be adversely impacted.

Wind currently provides less than one percent of the nation's electricity; however, it is still the fastest-growing alternative to fossil fuel-produced power.

The report noted that the percentage of birds killed by collisions with wind towers and their spinning blades is relatively low compared to the numbers killed by automobiles or collisions with buildings and other lighted structures. As wind power increases during the next two decades, wind turbines could also begin to threaten local populations of certain bat species and continue to impact birds, especially along unspecified "migration corridors."

Although the report failed to break any new ground, it did report that, "In light of the lack of follow-up by environmental impact studies. . . more careful tracking of bird and bat populations, behavior, migration corridors, and other factors that may affect their risk of collisions with turbines is warranted, especially for threatened or endangered species." To provide an organized approach to the use of wind energy and its effects

...method of energy-use operators. To provide an organized approach to the use of wind energy, and its effect on the environment, the report's evaluation guide recommended using systematic pre- and post-construction studies to explore potential wildlife and other impacts to improve how such facilities are built, located, and operated.

Mandated by Congress, this report was drafted by a group of academics assembled by the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academy of Science.

That the obvious findings were accompanied with trumpet and fanfare came as a surprise to some observers, as did the recommended guidelines on "aesthetic impacts" since the recommendations came from a body ostensibly assigned a "scientific" task.

The Academy's summary can be found here: http://dels.nas.edu/dels/rpt_briefs/wind_energy_final.pdf

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BIOFUELS AND BIRD CONSERVATION

And speaking of energy and birds, we recommend you take a look at an article, "Biofuels and Ducks" in the May/June issue of DUCKS UNLIMITED magazine.

Although this article by Jim Ringelman has a waterfowl emphasis, concentrating on the Prairie Pothole Region of the northern Great Plains, its message has almost as much to do with all the birds living in the Prairie Pothole Region, including grassland and wetland songbirds, shorebirds, and other waterbirds. We've previously addressed concerns in this arena mostly focusing on CRP and ethanol. Ringelman's article is a thoughtful primer on the options inherent in the ethanol-and-biomass choices increasingly confronting us.

You can find an on-line version of Ringelman's article here:

http://www.ducks.org/DU_Magazine/DUMagazineMayJune2007/3213/BiofuelsandDucks.html

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FLAP OVER BIRD COLLISIONS: KILL THE LIGHTS

In March 2006, we wrote of cooperative bird-conservation efforts in Toronto to reduce avian mortality as result of collisions with glass and lights: http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC06.html#TOC03_and <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/mar06.html>

In early May of this year, the volunteers at the Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP) in Toronto announced that they had recovered a "record number of birds in 2006: over 5,400 birds from 93 species" that had collided with buildings within the Greater Toronto Area. Forty percent of the birds rescued were released back into the wild. Another 2,500 dead birds killed during fall migration in 2006 were dramatically displayed at the local Metro Hall Rotunda. The display of these dead collision victims, though grim and theatrical, was also most effective: <http://www.toronto.ca/lightout/news.htm>

The creative project, "Lights Out Toronto," involving the city and multiple partners, has resulted in a public awareness campaign aimed at drawing attention to the issue of glass-and-light induced bird-strikes, along with establishing a practical set of new building- and lighting-guidelines. For more information see: http://www.toronto.ca/lightout/pdf/development_guidelines.pdf

At a time when Global Warming has drawn the well-deserved attention of many, the reduction of light pollution (and parallel energy savings) is an element that can easily be brought into the discussion. One campaign slogan in Toronto is: "Kill the Lights. Save the Birds."

We have, of course, discussed building strikes and glass-issues multiple times in the E-bulletin, including Chicago's parallel Light-Out program. For more details see: <http://www.lightout.audubon.org/> and <http://www.birdsandbuildings.org/index1024.html>

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STUDY SUMMARIZES WEST NILE BIRD LOSSES

A study in NATURE last month summarized some of the losses in bird populations as a result of the emergence of West Nile Virus in 1999. The research examined 26 years of Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data to assess declines among certain common bird species.

The researchers, S. L. LaDeau, A. M. Kilpatrick, and P. P. Marra, actually focused on 20 common species that are regularly surveyed each breeding season. Populations of seven of these species have shown measurable, if not dramatic, declines across the continent since West Nile's arrival.

West Nile Virus hit seven species - American Crow, Blue Jay, Tufted Titmouse, American Robin, House Wren, Black-capped/Carolina Chickadee and Eastern Bluebird - hard enough to be statistically significant. Only the Blue Jay and House Wren have bounced back since 2005. The hardest-hit species was the American Crow. According to this study about one-third of the crows in the United States may have been killed by West Nile virus.

Suburban America, where many of these species are found in numbers, may offer a ready home for the virus, with an abundance of all the things the virus needs to spread. In the case of the eastern seaboard, Dr LaDeau said, "That heavily packed urban corridor is a bad place to be a bird. The reason for that is that the mosquito prefers human landscape. They do very well in suburbia."

Among the 20 bird species examined, 13 species did not show declines attributed to West Nile. Biologists say that other species have exhibited significant mortality, such as owls, hawks, sage-grouse and Yellow-billed Magpie, but there are no reliable or broad-based surveys to quantify (before and after) how bad the losses may have been. Researchers suggest that birds of prey could be particularly vulnerable.

West Nile Virus has been mentioned numerous times in the E-bulletin, including its impact on beleaguered sage-grouse populations that we summarized last September:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/sepSBC06.html#TOC14> and <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/sept06.html>

For a concise abstract of the study from NATURE, see:

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/vaop/ncurrent/abs/nature05829.html>

For another summary see: <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?alias=west-nile-killing-off-bel&chanID=sa003&modsrc=reuters>

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DO FENCES REALLY "MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS"?

Birders have been among those watching with dismay the plans by the U. S. Department of Homeland Security to build a 700-mile barrier of fencing, raised levee-like roads, vehicle barriers, radar units, flood lights, and video surveillance along the U.S.-Mexican border. The focus last month was the Rio Grande Valley. (Previously, the issue, particularly with bird-and-wildlife impact, has focused on Arizona and California.)

After decades of turning back the clock along the banks of the Rio Grande, planting cleared agricultural fields with native trees and brushy thickets to shelter wildlife, and otherwise building a natural corridor that had severely suffered through the years as a result of inappropriate previous development, these restoration efforts are now facing a stark new barrier, quite literally.

Local mayors in The Valley were appalled in February to learn of a map showing 153 miles of border fencing in Texas, part of a plan to erect 370 miles by the end of 2008. The Mayors said that the effort would cut off landowners and endangered wildlife from the river, ruin flood-control systems, and send the wrong message to Texas' biggest trading partner.

Things looked worse in early May when it became clearer that such core sites as Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, and a number of county and state properties essential to nurturing an effective wildlife corridor, were not only not immune from the barrier plans, but were at times front-and-center.

For example, wildlife refuge officials recently learned at a meeting with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that plans could impact the refuges much sooner than previously anticipated. This is because refuge property could be placed on the "fast track" because it is already owned by the federal government and no condemnation proceedings would be required.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has since said the map is no longer accurate, and was simply a "starting point" for discussions. Still, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection admits that "all areas of the border, including federal lands, are included in our efforts to gain effective control."

Most local leaders in The Valley insist that the fence clearly sends the wrong message:

"This wall would do damage to those of us living on both sides of the wall," said State Sen. Eddie Lucio from the border city of Brownsville. "This is a wall of shame that we neither want nor welcome. Texas is connected to Mexico by 23 bridges. Through these bridges we maintain our centuries-old friendships and blood ties with Mexico, as well as the trade and tourism which benefits this state and the entire United States of America."

"No physical wall is going to keep people from coming in. The core of the problem is an economic issue. We have integrated all of the markets in North America but we have failed to integrate the labor market," said McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez.

Father Tom Pincelli, a Catholic priest and birder in The Valley who chairs the American Birding Association board of directors, commented on the \$125 million pumped into the Valley's economy each year by nature tourists, by saying, "They've opened up a tremendous amount of land, and eco-tourism is growing by leaps and bounds. This is one more step backward. And the municipalities, right and left, are dead-set against it."

For a summary of developments, see: <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/front/4799025.html>

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BOOK REVIEW: GOOD BIRDERS

Lisa White, editor at Houghton Mifflin, has assembled an easy-going and lively collection of birding advice, with 50 short essays by well-known birders. The collection, *GOOD BIRDERS DON'T WEAR WHITE*, dispenses recommendations and advice to birders at every level, on topics ranging from feeding birds and cleaning binoculars to the value of birding traditions and introducing children to birds.

From satirizing bird snobs to sharpening your field skills, the essays can be viewed as both entertaining and useful. Most importantly, they are presented in a lighthearted manner. Among others, the essayists include: Jon Dunn, Pete Dunne, Victor Emanuel, Laura Erickson, Tim Gallagher, Jeff Gordon, Kevin Karlson, Kenn Kaufman, Paul Lehman, David Sibley, Don and Lillian Stokes, Clay Sutton, Bill Thompson III, Dick Walton, Scott Weidensaul, Sheri Williamson, and Julie Zickefoose. Artist Robert Braunfield illustrates many of the essays with comical black-and-white line drawings. A portion of the proceeds of the book will be donated to the Roger Tory Peterson Institute, dedicated to the teaching and study of nature and an appreciation of birds:
<http://www.rtpi.org/>

In the interest of full disclosure, both of the E-bulletin's editors also have little essays in the book. This should not discourage you from buying the book, however!

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SCIENTISTS WORLDWIDE CALL FOR BOREAL FOREST PROTECTION

Last month, some 1,500 highly respected scientists from more than 50 countries around the world called for the protection of Canada's Boreal Forest. The scientists identified the 1.4 billion-acre Canadian Boreal Forest as one of the largest intact forest and wetland ecosystems remaining on earth. Its health is vital to the survival of North America's migratory birds.

As regular readers of this E-bulletin know, the Boreal Forest is under increasing pressure from corporate logging, mining and oil and gas operations, and only ten percent has been protected to date, far less than what is scientifically recognized as necessary to sustain the ecosystem over time.

The scientists' letter recommends preserving a minimum of half of Canada's Boreal Forest in protected areas, and only allowing carefully managed development on the rest. This plan is in accordance with the Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, a program already endorsed by Canadian conservation groups, 25 Canadian First Nations, and more than 75 major businesses having annual sales of \$30 billion or more.

Here is the link for more information (press release, the letter itself, scientist signatures by region, and more):
<http://www.borealbirds.org/scienceletter.shtml>

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NOT ENOUGH FUNDING FOR BIRD CONSERVATION?

Recently, when bird conservationists have gone to Congress with proverbial hat in hand, the response has often been that "there is just not enough money to go around." This is because each appropriations subcommittee in Congress works under a finite spending cap. The result is that there is often unpleasant squabbling over insufficient slices from the same small pie.

This year might be different.

This year there may be more money to address some of our conservation concerns. On 17 May, Congress passed its fiscal year 2008 Budget Resolution that sets overall caps on various categories of spending within which the individual appropriations committees must operate. This included \$31.94 billion for "Function 300" which encompasses most natural resource and environmental spending. That's a \$1.5 billion increase over last year and \$3.1 billion more than the President's budget requested.

Indeed, the "Function 300" increase means that there is more for FY08 for multiple issues of concern to bird conservationists, resulting in better potential distribution from that larger pie. Some of these conservation-spending numbers passed their first important hurdle through a late May "mark-up" in the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. They appear below in millions (m), after some Bird Conservation Funding Coalition (BCFC) or Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) requests and last year's FY07 approved spending in parentheses

Program (number requested through BCFC or CARE - FY07 enacted - actual mark-up)

Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (\$5.5m - \$4m - \$5m)
Migratory Bird Joint Ventures (\$15.1m - \$10.8m - \$11.1m)
Fish and Wildlife Science and Support (\$29.52m - \$26.94m - \$27.94m)
North American Wetlands Cons. Act - NAWCA (\$50m - \$39.4m - \$42.6m)
State Wildlife Grants (\$85m - \$67.5m - \$85m)
Forest Service International Programs (\$8m - \$6.9m - \$8m)
National Wildlife Refuge System Operations & Maintenance (\$451.5m - \$395m - \$451m)

As the last listed numbers show, these all went up, some significantly. Further decisions on spending must go through the House Appropriations Committee, the full House, the Senate Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriation Subcommittee, and the full Senate. Still, indications are encouraging, as long as

Congress hears from a concerned public.

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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.