



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

June 2008

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RARITY FOCUS

There were some wonderful Neotropical birds that appeared along the U.S.-Mexican border in May, several of which could have been highlighted as our rarity of the month. These included a Piratic Flycatcher near Corpus Christi, Texas, for a few days early in the month, and a Tufted Flycatcher that was at Cave Creek Canyon in southeast Arizona, off and on for about two weeks.

Our choice for this month's rarity, however, is a Wood Sandpiper that entertained hundreds of birders at the Broadkill Beach section of the Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge, near Milton, Delaware. This is the second month in a row that the Delaware coast has received our attention as the location for our monthly rarity focus.

On 5 May, Sharon Lynn found and photographed a medium-sized mystery sandpiper at the Broadkill Beach impoundment at Prime Hook NWR. After electronically distributing some digital images of the bird, it was soon identified as a Wood Sandpiper.

Wood Sandpipers are highly migratory Eurasian shorebirds that only occur in North America as rare migrants and very local breeders in western Alaska. They are accidental visitors elsewhere in North America, with definite records for British Columbia (1994), Washington (1988), and New York (1907 and 1990). There are also records for Bermuda (two records in the early 1980s), Tobago (1996), and Barbados (multiple recent records).

records for Bermuda (two records in the early 1900s), Tobago (1996), and Barbados (multiple recent records). For illustrations of this species, see the most recent National Geographic guide, pages 166-167, or the Kaufman Focus guide, pages 184-185.

For photos and a description of the discovery and identification of the Wood Sandpiper at Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge, see Jeff Gordon's webpage:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jeffgyr/sets/72157604940005597/>

Not surprisingly there were many visitors to the location where the bird was present through 14 May. George R. Parsons, a professor at the University of Delaware, has been collecting information on the impact of Wood-Sandpiper and avitourism at Prime Hook.

Visitor numbers driving to see the Wood Sandpiper were boosted by those reaching Delaware via the Cape-May/Lewes Ferry, some of which were travelers from birding activities taking place at Cape May, New Jersey.

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CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF THE WORLD SERIES

May 2008 marked the 25th anniversary of the New Jersey Audubon Society's World Series of Birding, an event that first got its start on 19 May 1984, with 13 teams setting out on a 24-hour quest to see as many birds in New Jersey as possible. The primary objective, however, was to raise money for various bird conservation causes. The rest is history.

To date this annual birding classic has raised over \$8,000,000 for bird conservation and has become a primary event in today's North American birding landscape.

To see the details of a quarter century of birding fun and serious fund-raising, check out the 2008 World Series of Birding results on-line at:

<http://www.birdcapemay.org/wsob.shtml>

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COSEWIC UPDATE

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) held its spring Species Assessment Meeting in late April in Yellowknife. Among other species, the status of the Canada Warbler was assessed as Threatened in Canada. This warbler has experienced a significant long-term decline over most of its breeding range. The Ferruginous Hawk, formerly listed as Special Concern, was upgraded to Threatened due to a 64 percent population decline in Alberta (the heart of its Canadian range) since 1992. Five other bird species were also reassessed, but maintained their previous status: Greater Sage-Grouse, *urophasianus* subspecies (Alberta-Saskatchewan), Endangered; Greater Sage-Grouse, *phaios* subspecies (British Columbia), Extirpated; Great Blue Heron, *fannini* subspecies (coastal British Columbia), Special Concern; Spotted Owl, Endangered; Short-eared Owl, Special Concern; Kirtland's Warbler, Endangered.

For more details on these and other species assessments, visit the COSEWIC website:

http://www.cosewic.gc.ca/rpts/Detailed_Species_Assessments_e.html

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IBA NEWS: TEJON RANCH DEAL

Now, after years of contention, owners and conservationists in California have come up with a plan to preserve 90 percent of the sprawling Tejon Ranch, in Kern and Los Angeles counties, while still allowing 26,000 homes to be built on the property.

Tejon Ranch is the largest chunk of privately owned wild land remaining in Southern California. It is 270,000 acres in extent, and marks the juncture of four distinct ecosystems: Mojave Desert grasslands, San Joaquin Valley oak woodlands, Tehachapi pine forests, and coastal mountain ranges.

Portions of Tejon Ranch have been designated as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) for a number of reasons, including the ranch's importance as a foraging area for California Condors and because large number of Purple Martins nest in the ranch's oak woodlands.

Depending on one's point of view, the recent Tejon Ranch agreement could either be considered encouraging or a bargain with the devil.

The developer, the Tejon Ranch Co., has agreed to set aside 178,000 acres along with providing an option for public purchase of 62,000 additional acres - 49,000 for the creation of a state park, 10,000 to realign a 37-mile segment of the Pacific Coast Trail through the core of the wild lands, and about 3,000 to allow expanded tourism

segment of the Pacific Crest Trail through the core of the wild lands, and about 3,000 to allow organized tours access to sensitive habitat. The company will also pull back development plans along those ridgelines considered crucial to California Condors.

Early last year, we reported on the innovative lead-bullet ban at the Tejon Ranch that was part of an effort to protect California Condors:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC11>

or

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/march07.html>

In exchange for the protective elements of this most recent agreement, a coalition of environmental groups does not intend to oppose the company's plans to build three urban centers that will include more than 26,000 homes, as well as hotels, condominiums, and golf courses at the western and southwestern edge of the Tejon Ranch.

The agreement also launches an "independent Tejon Ranch Conservancy" comprised of a dozen members appointed by the company and its environmental partners to manage the preserved land in perpetuity. The company will provide approximately \$800,000 a year for seven years to sustain this conservancy. After that, the effort will be funded through transfer fees from the sale of residential properties.

Graham Chisholm of Audubon California commented that, "There is probably no more important property for the future of the California Condor." A week previous to the agreement, roughly half of the 38 California Condors in Southern California were actually foraging on Tejon Ranch property.

For a summary and statement on the agreement, see Audubon California's announcement:

http://ca.audubon.org/newsroom/080508_tejon.php

Despite the plans outlined above, some environmentalists continue to express reservations about the accord, claiming that virtually all of the areas to be acquired or managed under the conservation agreement are "undevelopable anyway," and that insufficient protection is being afforded the condors. For one example, see:

http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2008/tejon-ranch-05-08-2008.html

More background on the ranch and the resulting agreement can be found here:

http://www.tejonpreserve.com/natural_factsheet.php

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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SPOTTED OWL PLAN MAY FALL SHORT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a new recovery plan for the Northern Spotted Owl in early May, a plan that backs away from some of the more controversial features of a draft plan unveiled last year.

The Northern Spotted Owl was listed as a Threatened species in 1990 under the federal Endangered Species Act. Spotted Owl numbers are declining in almost all the areas where researchers are monitoring them, and the birds are showing little sign of reversing this trend.

The previous plan failed the scrutiny of four independent science reviews because it severely downplayed the importance of protecting the species' old-growth forest habitat. Those reviews were conducted by the Sustainable Ecosystems Institute, the Society for Conservation Biology, the American Ornithologists' Union, and The Wildlife Society. Not surprisingly some leaders in these organizations are already criticizing the most recent version of the plan.

Although recovery plans lack the legal clout of regulations, they are a major influence on USFWS decisions to permit logging and other activities that could impact a species.

The recent recovery plan outlines a series of 34 steps aimed at halting the Spotted Owl's decline, reducing threats, and returning the species to a stable population in Washington, Oregon, and California. The \$489-million plan says that logging, wildfires, and an expanding population of Barred Owls remain as threats, but that the Spotted Owl's population can still be restored within 30 years.

The new plan creates Managed Owl Conservation Areas (MOCAs) on 6.4 million acres, which is considerably smaller than the existing system of reserves on 7.5 million acres created under the Northwest Forest Plan.

smaller than the existing system of reserves on 7.5 million acres created under the Northwest Forest Plan. Critics point out that while the MOCAs overlap with the reserves in many places, overall they provide 1.1 million acres less habitat protection, and do not include any forests on the east side of Cascade crest. There is also fear among some critics that the creation of MOCAs will be used to justify eliminating the existing system of reserves.

Clearly, the Spotted Owl controversy isn't over, as indicated by Dominick DellaSala, director of the National Center for Conservation Biology and Policy, who said that, "The Fish and Wildlife Service once again has ignored scientists, even its own federal working group, who called for an outright ban on logging of remaining mature and old-growth forest."

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LEONARDO DA VINCI'S "CODEX ON THE FLIGHT OF BIRDS" TO VISIT USA

For the first time in history, Leonardo da Vinci's "Codex on the Flight of Birds," which normally resides in Italy, will travel to the United States. The Birmingham Museum of Art (in Alabama) has negotiated with the Biblioteca Reale in Turin for the loan of 11 important and rarely seen Leonardo da Vinci drawings, including the "Codex on the Flight of Birds." The collection comprises 18 folios and measures 21 x 15 centimeters.

The bird sketches presented in this particular codex reflect Leonardo da Vinci's mechanical drawings that ponder the flight of man. In these sketches, the artist and scholar goes "back to the source," contemplating the musculature, aerodynamics, physics, design, and construction of birds in hopes of putting his findings into practical, scientific application. In the codex, Leonardo da Vinci notes for the first time that the center of gravity of a flying bird does not coincide with its center of lift.

The exhibition provides a rare opportunity for visitors to have a glimpse into the mind of one of the greatest and most innovative draftsmen of all time and his thoughts about bird flight.

The exhibition opens on 28 September and runs through 9 November:

<http://www.artsbma.org/exhibitions/leonardo-davinci/>

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RTP CENTENNIAL ART EXHIBIT

Also on the theme of birds and artwork, there will be a special exhibit opening in June at the Roger Tory Peterson Institute (RTPI) in Jamestown, New York, titled, "The Roger Tory Peterson Centennial Exhibit: Original Paintings by the Master Nature Artist." The exhibit is part of the centennial celebration of Peterson's birth, and will run from 15 June to 15 October.

The one-of-a-kind paintings in this exhibit have seldom, if ever, been available for public viewing. For more information, see RTPI:

<http://www.rtpi.org/?p=438#more-438>

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CANADIAN TAR SANDS CALAMITY

The death of 500 migrating ducks perished in late April in Alberta was cause for serious alarm. The ducks were unintended victims at one of the massive toxic tailings ponds located in the boreal forest of Canada's tar sands region. The tailings pond was created from wastewater used to extract oil from the region's soil.

The waterfowl were exposed to oil on a partially-frozen basin at Syncrude Canada Limited's Aurora North Site mine, about 25 miles north of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Syncrude is the world's largest producer of synthetic crude oil from so-called tar sands.

Based on research and observations at the Alberta tar sands tailings ponds it is likely that birds may land on the tailing ponds at night, particularly under weather conditions that restrict visibility, or when surrounding lakes and ponds are frozen. Under these circumstances, waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wetland-dependent birds, especially flocking species, are in jeopardy.

Tar sands oil is a dangerous and potentially damaging substance that emits high volumes of greenhouse gases during extraction, separation, and development, all of which contribute to global warming. (Currently, tar sands projects are the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Canada.) Moreover, future tar sands expansion is scheduled to proceed at the expense of the destruction of some of Canada's most important Boreal Forest.

Jeff Wells, from the Boreal Songbird Initiative, remarked, "While this is truly a sad event, these deaths are a

drop in the bucket, should the tar sands expand as planned. Over the next 20 years, pristine boreal forest bird habitat will be destroyed, leading to bird declines in the millions.”

A summary of the event - with a link on the impact of tar-sands extraction - from the Boreal Songbird Initiative can be found here:

http://www.borealbirds.org/news_pages/news_detail.php?a_id=1089

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U.S. - CANADIAN PEACE BRIDGE PLAN SCRAPPED FOR THE BIRDS

A modern bridge-span between the U.S. and Canada, conceived by world-renowned bridge designer Christian Menn, has been scrapped to favor the birds. A Peace Bridge project that would connect Buffalo, New York, and Fort Erie, Ontario, will have to be redesigned. The design jury had originally considered 33 design concepts before narrowing its choices to six finalists: five cable-stayed concepts and one with a three-arch design.

Common Terns which nest in Buffalo Harbor but feed downriver must pass through the area proposed for the Peace Bridge many times a day. Since the terns typically fly over - not under - bridges, flying over a 567-foot-high structure could reduce their chances for survival and their ability to successfully feed their young.

Reportedly, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will not issue the permits needed to construct such a cable-stayed span. Similarly, the Federal Highway Administration - which is financing the environmental study and which must approve the plan before a new bridge can be built - will not approve the originally favored cable design.

Presently, plans for a new Peace Bridge have shifted to a three-arch span — taller than the current bridge on the site (originally opened in 1927), but less tall than the soaring two-tower proposal. Of the final options, only the three-arch bridge, at 226 feet high, can apparently gain approval from the environmental agencies.

The bridge project's current timetable calls for an environmental impact statement to be finalized this year and construction to begin by the end of 2009.

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EVENTUAL FARM BILL RESOLUTION

The five-year, nearly \$310-billion 2008 Farm Bill has finally been hammered out after months of extensions and negotiations in multiple open and closed meetings, chiefly among farm-state lawmakers.

The mainstream media watched the House and Senate pass the bill in early May, only to have it vetoed by President Bush, and then overridden by Congress. Most of the media's focus was on the level of subsidies to large farmers, the perception (and reality) of "pork," a new "permanent disaster" program, and nutrition elements. Conservation elements within the Farm Bill were given little serious attention.

That was unfortunate, since the status of the conservation features of the Farm Bill is particularly important for grassland and wetland birds and other wildlife. At the end of this process, the conservation elements for birds were mixed.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) proposed acreage will be lowered from the previous Farm Bill's 39.2 million acres to approximately 32 million acres. This loss is not a positive development for grassland bird conservation, but neither is the fact that CRP has to compete for cropland at a disadvantage in the face of remarkably high commodity prices.

Both the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and the newer Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) were renewed, but with smaller amounts than in the previous Farm Bill.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) focusing on working lands conservation received meaningful increases in funding. Both CSP and EQIP have been beneficial, but not as proficient in delivering direct benefits to birds and wildlife as some of the other Farm Bill conservation programs.

A creative new Chesapeake Bay Program targeting conservation for the Chesapeake Bay was authorized at \$372 million.

There was a two-year extension to tax-deduction incentives for conservation easements on private lands.

And a small Open Fields program to help states enroll private land in programs to public access for wildlife-dependent recreation was authorized at \$50 million.

The new "permanent disaster" program, costing an estimated \$3.8 billion is expected to encourage farmers to

plow marginal lands.

Most disappointing, however, in terms of an innovative suggestion that failed to pass unscathed, was the "Sodsaver" proposal. As we've described previously in the E-bulletin, Sodsaver was intended to remove taxpayer financed incentives to cultivate crops on virgin native grasslands. The provisions were originally planned to be mandatory nationwide. Changes to the bill altered the language to apply only to parts of five Prairie Pothole states (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota), and the provisions were further weakened in that they are applicable only at the option of those states' individual governors. At least an almost toothless Sodsaver is now on the books, hopefully available for strengthening in future versions of the Farm Bill.

A number of conservation organizations backed final passage of the Farm Bill, sometimes almost grudgingly, while other organizations were neutral, seemingly without a position pro or con. Among the more traditional conservation organizations, the National Wildlife Federation, which had originally supported the bill because it had increased conservation funding, urged its ultimate defeat after seeing changes to grassland and wetland protections that were made behind closed doors, and because of the implications for increased greenhouse gas emissions.

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BOOK REVIEW: RIO GRANDE BIRDING

The anthology, BIRDING THE BORDER, as its subtitle indicates, is a collection of "tales of the Rio Grande Valley" (Publish America, 2007). The book's 30 short narratives, edited by Nancy Millar and Ron Smith, capture much of the wonder of discovery and variety in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Of course, as a birding hotspot of major interest, the Lower Rio Grande Valley yields tributes aplenty from birders. The book's authors range from Jimmy Carter, Pete Dunne, and Kenn Kaufman, to a number of lesser-known fans of The Valley.

The book's contributions likewise range from the brilliant to the mundane, but the book contains some real gems and some wonderful surprises for all readers. Give it a look.

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IZEMBEK "ROAD TO NOWHERE" GOING NOWHERE IN SENATE

Last month we reported on the persistence of the U.S. House and Senate to support a proposal to put a road through Izembek National that would possibly place birds at risk:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/maySBC08.html#TOC11>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/may08.html>

On 7 May, however, the Senate's Energy and Natural Resources Committee chose not to advance legislation that would allow construction of this \$30+ million, U.S. taxpayer-funded road through Izembek NWR and the

Congressionally-designated Wilderness on the Alaskan Peninsula.

Details from the National Wildlife Refuge Association are found here:

<http://www.refugenet.org/new-publications/flmay08.html#TOC08>

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CARE FOCUSES ON REFUGE HEALTH

On a somewhat related theme, the 22 organizations grouped around the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) has released a report to Congress profiling the status and health of the 548 National Wildlife Refuges.

Among issues of concern in "Restoring America's Wildlife Refuges" are the facts that:

- A third of the refuges are operating without a single staff member.
- The Refuge System has already cut 300 staff positions, and without adequate funding increases, plans for a 20 percent staff reduction will resume.
- More than two million acres have already been lost to invasive species, placing Threatened and Endangered species at greater risk.
- The refuges are suffering from a \$3.55 billion backlog in operations and maintenance.

The role of birding and avitourism is emphasized on page 8 of the report. The report claims that birding on

The role of birding and avitourism is emphasized on page 6 of the report. The report claims that birding on NWRs is handicapped by limited refuge staffing, lack of appropriate facilities, and inadequate associated support.

To download the full 11-page CARE report, see:

<http://www.fundrefuges.org/new-pdf-files/CAREreport2008.pdf>

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TIP OF THE MONTH: SHARE THE GAS COST

For as long as we can remember, there has been an unwritten rule in birding circles: when riding as a passenger on a long field trip in another birder's car, always offer to help defray the cost of the gasoline. Even if your driver accepts nothing, you as a passenger have made the appropriate offer. Today, with the cost of gasoline approaching and ever surpassing \$4 per gallon, that "unwritten rule" ought to carry more weight.

Offsetting the cost of the tank is one practice that has almost become the norm, but offsetting your carbon footprint during birding field trips is quite another. We'll take up that topic in a future "tip of the month."

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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.