



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

March 2007

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RARITY FOCUS

A male Western Spindalis, originally found in mid-January at the Evergreen Cemetery in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, started being seen with more regularity during February.

The species, previously called Stripe-headed Tanager, is a vagrant from the West Indies. (See National Geographic, fifth edition, p 402-403 and the „big%oo Sibley, page 460.) The very first observation of the species in Florida was in 1957, but there have now been about 50 records in the state, mostly of the black-backed race.

This is the smallest tanager to be encountered in the U.S. Although there are records for the species in Florida for every month from September through June, the majority of sightings are from mid-December through mid-May.

Established in 1910, Evergreen is Fort Lauderdale's oldest intact cemetery, the final resting place for many of the founding families and pioneers of the community. On some days the tanager was easy to find, while on others it was surprisingly secretive. The bird was most often observed, at least through the middle of February, in Strangler Fig, Sea Grape, and other associated trees in this small historic cemetery, pleasing many visitors from far and wide who came to see it.

Another male Western Spindalis was reported several times in early February from Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park near Miami, a favored place for spindalis sightings in past years.

Photographs by John Schwartz of the bird at the Evergreen Cemetery can be found at:
<http://www.birdspix.com/ARCHIVE%20SPECIES%20PAGES/Western%20Spindalis.html>

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ANI LUCK?

While were on the subject of birds in Florida, its worth reminding readers that a short drive from the Evergreen Cemetery can take one to the Fort Lauderdale International Airport. The south end of the airport has been a traditional location for finding Smooth-billed Anis for years. Sadly, it may also now be one of the last know locations for this species in the state.

Smooth-billed Anis from the West Indies began breeding in south Florida in the late 1930s, gradually spreading northward to Cape Canaveral and westward to Tampa Bay. By the early 1970s, Christmas Bird Count (CBC) numbers of anis in the state reached over 1,100 birds, but this trend has now been reversed, so that by the late 1980s count totals dropped to under 150, and by the late 1990s annual CBC ani tallies were below two dozen for the whole state. By the start of the current century the species has been virtually extirpated from central Florida and the west coast.

To our knowledge, no studies have been made to determine reasons for the changes in Smooth-billed Ani populations in Florida, although numerous explanations have been posited to account for the decline. These speculations include cold spells, hurricanes, pesticides, invasive plants, habitat destruction, and most likely, some combination of these factors.

Surprisingly, the state,s wildlife agency, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, has not included the Smooth-billed Ani among its species of greatest conservation concern in the state,s recent Wildlife Action Plan. Other birds, both resident and migratory species, that have earned this status (e.g., Crested Caracara, Sanderling, Sandwich Tern, Gray Kingbird, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Henslow,s Sparrow, and Eastern Meadowlark), may be in some serious trouble, but none appear to be as grave as the Smooth-billed Ani. .

Recently, there has been a family group of four-to-six Smooth-billed Anis at the south end of the Fort Lauderdale International Airport and along Old Griffin Road, in an area that appears to be one of shrinking and increasingly inappropriate habitat. As far as active birders seem to know, these may be the very last anis in Florida.

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BALD EAGLE DELISTING DELAYED TO LATE JUNE

In early February, a federal judge granted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service until 29 June to determine whether the Bald Eagle should be removed from the Threatened species list, pushing back a previous mid-February deadline.

There have been complaints by many about removing the Arizona population from the list, as well as overall concerns that the remaining safeguards, including the definition of the word „disturb%0 under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, were inadequate.

In the early 1960s, a decade before the banning of DDT - a major cause of eagle endangerment - there were only slightly more than 400 breeding pairs of Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states. Today, the USFWS estimates there are over 7,000 breeding pairs.

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WHISTLING-DUCK MUSINGS

In the „Would you believe this?%0 column, a remarkable occurrence of West Indian Whistling-Ducks in Massachusetts has recently come to light. On 7 August 1983, a Massachusetts bird photographer photographed two unfamiliar waterfowl at Monomoy NWR that at the time were ultimately thought to be Fulvous Whistling-Ducks. Recently, however, a published photograph of these birds caught the attention of expert birder, Marshall Iliff, who noticed that the 1983 whistling-ducks were in fact West Indian Whistling-Ducks, not Fulvous Whistling-Ducks as had been supposed for the past 25 years! Fortunately, because the photograph appeared in a commercially available book, the picture has now come to the attention of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC), a group now faced with the question of provenance for this 25-year-old record.

Needless to say, the question of the origin of these birds will probably never be fully answered, but the occurrence is particularly interesting, since there are previous occurrences for this strong-flying West Indian waterfowl in Bermuda, Florida, Texas, and Virginia.

Stay tuned on this one!

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ANOTHER ANALOGOUS AVIAN POLAR BEAR?

Last month we suggested that the Kittlitz's Murrelet could serve as the „Avian Polar Bear,‰ suffering as it does under the loss of glacier ice, a result of global warming:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/febSBC07.html#TOC02>

or

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/feb07.html>

Another bird species that has also recently been suggested as filling a similar niche is the Ivory Gull.

Defenders of Wildlife last month drew attention to the predicament of Ivory Gulls in light of global warming trends. Apparently the wholesale retreat of ocean pack ice from shore is an immediate threat to the gulls, a species that depends entirely on edges of sea ice to find food. Moreover, the disappearance of natural barriers that keep the Ivory Gulls safe at their inland breeding sites seems to be an additional problem. Their isolated inland nesting havens - usually outcroppings of barren rock surrounded by ice and snow - can now no longer keep predators (e.g., arctic foxes) away.

Chris Haney, chief scientist for Defenders of Wildlife and co-author of the BNA account for Ivory Gull, stressed that there are quite possibly fewer Ivory Gulls in the North American population today than there are of the better known and more widely recognized Polar Bear.

The Ivory Gull inhabits remote islands and coastal zones of Alaska (non-breeding), Canada, Greenland, Norway, and Russia. In the early 1970s, aerial surveys of wintering habitats in Canada and Greenland made estimates (possibly inflated) of as many as 35,000 birds. Recent surveys suggest that the population has dropped dramatically. Eastern Canadian populations may have dropped by 75 percent from 1993, and by 85 percent from the 1980s when the Canadian population was thought to be about 2,400 birds. The latest Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) survey came up with only 200 Ivory Gulls, a population drop of 90 percent!

In 2006, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) designated the Ivory Gull as near threatened, and Canada listed the bird as a species of special concern under its Species at Risk Act (SARA). Accurate surveys of Ivory Gulls are urgently needed in Canada, Greenland, Norway, and Russia, especially given the suspected freefall in Canada.

You can read the second chapter of Defenders "Navigating the Arctic Meltdown," on Ivory Gulls at:

<http://www.defenders.org/globalwarming/meltdown/navigating-the-arctic-meltdown-chapter-2.pdf>

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CLIMATE CHANGE BILLS: A CRACK IN THE DOOR FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION, EDUCATION, AND APPRECIATION

As the previous report on Ivory Gulls illustrates, the evidence continues to mount over the effects of global warming on birds and other wildlife. One of the consequences is that there are now multiple draft climate-changes bills on Capitol Hill, some clearly better than others.

Several bills will attempt to address the impacts on wildlife, such as those by Senators Feinstein (D-CA), Lieberman (D-CT), McCain (R-AZ), and Sanders (I-VT) and by Representatives Gilchrest (R-MD), Oliver (D-MA), and Waxman (D-CA). A couple of these bills already include a dedicated source of funding for fish and wildlife conservation in the states. Others talk in more general terms about wildlife mitigation.

A couple of the bills would provide potential revenue from emission credit sales directly into the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Account. This program, similar to State Wildlife Grants, is the wildlife conservation, education, and recreation core of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act [CARA] that many conservationists championed in the late 1990s. The program has not been funded since 2001 but is still on the books, ready for a revenue stream. One of the best things about the awaiting Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Account is that it can cover the state-based wildlife education and wildlife appreciation that the current State Wildlife Grants exclude.

Where might the actual funding for birds and other wildlife come from? A "cap and trade system" on global warming pollution could provide industries with a limited number of credits for allowable emissions of global warming pollution. For example, one credit could allow an electric company to emit one ton of carbon dioxide, the primary global warming pollutant. Each year a portion of the credits could be auctioned off to emitters, and some of the auction revenue would be dedicated to wildlife.

The whole process of selling pollution credits has its downside, but with the concept already accepted and in motion, a wildlife mitigation element ought to be included in any and all of the bills, particularly if they embrace much needed wildlife education and wildlife appreciation components.

The Teaming With Wildlife campaign has devoted part of its website to these potential developments, actions that deserve close watching. For more information, see:

that deserve close watching. For more information, see:
http://www.teaming.com/global_climate_change.htm

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WHOOPIING CRANE: NEWS FROM FLORIDA

In January, we wrote of the successful arrival in Florida of the first natural young Whooping Crane with its parents, all members of the eastern experimental flock:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/janSBC07.html#TOC10>

or

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/jan07.html>

On the night of 1 February, however, tragedy struck when almost all of this past years young cranes were killed in storms. The cranes were being kept in a seasonal enclosure at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge near Crystal River, Florida, when violent storms hit the region. On 1 February thunderstorms and at least one tornado in central Florida caused widespread damage and killed 19 people.

For the past half dozen years, Whooping Cranes hatched in captivity have been raised at the Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin. They have then been taught, using ultralight aircraft to guide them, to follow a new and novel migration route to Florida. Eventually, the birds learn to migrate on their own, north in the spring and south in the fall.

The various groups and agencies working on the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership have seen the size of the crane flock grow to 81 birds, counting last fall's latest arrivals, so the loss of 17 of the most recent 18-member cohort was a real tragedy.

For more details, see the Operation Migration field journal, especially the early February entries:

http://www.operationmigration.org/Field_Journal.html

At the suggestion of many project supporters and Craniacs, a „Remembering the Class of 2006 Fund“ was launched to help continue the work of the eastern experimental flock:

<http://www.operationmigration.org/rememberingclass06.html>

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FARM BILL: CONSERVATION CONCERNS IN CONFLICT

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is expecting a shift away from conservation programs in land use across farmlands in the U.S. over the next five years. Millions of acres are expected to change to corn production instead of remaining in conservation programs. The Department of Agriculture anticipates that three million acres of land presently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will drop out of the program next year, mainly in response to rising corn prices.

CRP enlists farmers in 10-year and 15-year contracts to remove land from regular production and, instead, plant native grasses to reduce erosion and provide wildlife habitat. USDA has said it will not enroll farmers in any new contracts next year and may allow some farmers out of their existing contracts ahead of schedule in order to help fuel the demand for corn acreage in response to high commodity prices, along with satisfying the demand for corn-based ethanol.

CRP currently enrolls about 36 million acres - an area nearly double the size of all National Wildlife Refuges in the lower-48 states combined. Agreements covering more than 28 million acres of CRP will expire soon - between October 2007 and 2010.

Farm and energy interests have been eager to release CRP acres to provide more corn for ethanol and feed stocks. Hunting and other conservation groups have resisted the potential changes to the 20-year-old CRP, since the program provides valuable habitat for ducks, galliformes, and other grassland-related landbirds.

In the meantime, USDA economists predict extreme fluctuations in CRP for the future. They project that while farmers may take land out of CRP over the next few years, CRP may still return to its maximum 39.2 million acres, but only over the course of a decade.

A flurry of alternatives is being floated in preparation for this years projected gargantuan Farm Bill. Some suggest that CRP acres should be used to grow switchgrass and other grasses that could be harvested for cellulosic ethanol. The National Wildlife Federation and other groups are pushing a "biofuels innovation plan, which would target farmland that is already in production, paying farmers to produce native perennial energy crops on currently cultivated land. (Also, funds would only go to groups of farmers located near each other and within a 50- to 70-mile radius of a biomass processing plant.)

As the debate for the Farm Bill continues, the Bush Administration has also suggested that other agricultural conservation programs, beyond CRP, are at risk. While the administration in its 2008 proposed budget has recommended increased support for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), it has also proposed no direct funding for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and the newer Grassland Reserve Program (GRP).

...funding for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and the Newer Grassland Reserve Program (NGRP), a troublesome indication of possibilities to come.

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TWO NEW WHSRN SITES

Two new Sites of Regional Importance were recently added to the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN): Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri, and the Lagunas de Ecuasal, in Guayas Province, Ecuador. Both were accepted because they host more than 20,000 shorebirds annually, and on the commitments of their landowners to work with WHSRN to ensure their viability over time.

Squaw Creek NWR is located in northwestern Missouri and is contained within the Lower Missouri River Ecosystem. Of its 7,000 acres, 3,452 acres are man-made, seasonally-flooded wetlands. The wetlands include 15 managed marshes in 10 designated pools. This refuge is annually visited by more than 24 shorebird species (some 60,000+ individuals), along with 150,000 ducks, 250,000 geese, and 250 Bald Eagles. This new WHSRN site is already a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA).

The Lagunas de Ecuasal, on the coast of Ecuador, is the site of a commercial salt extraction facility, owned by the Ecuasal Company, the leading producer of salt in Ecuador. Pumped seawater at the site enters a series of evaporation and crystallization ponds, where the varying salinity and depth of the ponds attract a wide variety of shorebirds and other waterbirds, such as ducks, pelicans, and flamingos. In addition to qualifying for WHSRN status on the basis of hosting well over 20,000 shorebirds annually, the Lagunas de Ecuasal are annually visited by over two percent of the world's Wilson's Phalaropes. While 15 years of International Shorebird Survey (ISS) counts have been conducted at the site by birders Ben Haase and Paco Hernandez, there are two sections of the Ecuasal ponds that to date have never been adequately surveyed for shorebirds. Clearly, the actual numbers of shorebirds present are higher than the original counts supporting the WHSRN nomination.

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BOOK REVIEW: POWER LINE POSSIBILITIES

In our May, 2005 issue, we drew attention to an innovative agreement between the Edison Electric Institute, Avian Power Line Interaction Committee (APLIC), National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This agreement aimed at encouraging utility companies to take steps to reduce harm to birds that might come in contact with power lines:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/maySBC05.html#TOC05>

The USFWS and the APLIC have a history of working together on avian and power-line issues going back to 1983 when they first addressed Whooping Crane collisions with power lines. There have been multiple guidelines published on protecting birds since then, including versions in 1996 and 2005.

There is now a new book on the subject, SUGGESTED PRACTICES FOR RAPTOR PROTECTION ON POWER LINES: THE STATE OF THE ART IN 2006. Produced as a cooperative effort of the APLIC, the Edison Electric Institute, and the California Energy Commission, this book provides a profile of the research and safeguards now available to remedy the issue of raptor electrocutions, and it also touches on other taxa as well, since electrocutions have been reported in over 30 non-raptor species, including corvids, herons, pelicans, gulls, doves, and songbirds.

Though not exactly a nighttime page-turner, this publication is a valuable resource for engineers, biologists, utility and roadside planners, along with the concerned public that may have an interest in reducing avian electrocutions.

You can find details on buying the book (with CD-ROM) from the Edison Electric Institute at:

http://www.eei.org/products_and_services/descriptions_and_access/suggested_pract.htm

A free pdf version of the 206-page book can be found at:

[http://www.aplic.org/SuggestedPractices2006\(LR\).pdf](http://www.aplic.org/SuggestedPractices2006(LR).pdf)

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TEJON RANCH IN CALIFORNIA: GETTING THE LEAD OUT

California's largest private game reserve plans to ban the use of lead bullets because of concern that the ammunition is poisoning endangered populations of California Condors.

Robert A. Stine, president of the Tejon Ranch Company, announced in late February that a lead-bullet ban at Tejon Ranch would go into effect for the 2008-hunting season. Tejon Ranch Company worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, Audubon California, and several

hunting and environmental organizations to design this new policy.

The sprawling 270,000-acre ranch along I-5 in Kern and Los Angeles counties is a favorite feeding and resting spot for California Condors. While significant progress has been made in bringing the condor back from the brink of extinction, poisoning from lead ammunition is still regarded as the single greatest threat facing the continued recovery of this iconic species. Lead ammunition poses a threat to the condors when the birds eat carrion containing the bullet fragments. (More than 1,800 hunters come to Tejon Ranch each year to hunt - from deer, elk, and antelope, to pigeons, doves, and quail.)

In a related development, the California Fish and Game Commission is positioned to consider a partial ban of lead ammunition-use for big game in condor habitat at its mid-April meeting.

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A COMING ATTRACTION: BARCODE SURPRISES

In late February, it was announced that genetic testing among North American birds could reveal as many as 15 new species and about an equal number of consolidating "lumps." This information emerged from a study of avian DNA "barcodes." This DNA bar-coding procedure, part of a Canadian-led effort, is controversial among some taxonomists. We will report more in the April E-bulletin on the announcement and its implications.

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- 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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