



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

March 2008

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed through the generous support of Steiner Binoculars as a service 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 [on the birding pages of the National Wildlife Refuge Association \(NWRA\) website](#) OR on [the birding webpages for Steiner Binoculars](#).

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RARITY FOCUS

On 9 February, Dan and Honey Jones found an elaenia, a tropical flycatcher, at one of the small conservation lots at South Padre Island, Texas. Originally thought to be a Yellow-bellied Elaenia from nearby Mexico, the bird's identification didn't quite seem to fit that species: the belly color wasn't particularly bright yellow, the wing bars seemed a bit too prominent, and the white on the crest seemed too obvious and extensive for a Yellow-bellied Elaenia. As a result various alternative species needed to be considered.

Remarkably, a Patagonian species called White-crested Elaenia (*Elaenia albiceps*) seemed to most closely match this bird, specifically the chilensis subspecies. This bird is an abundant breeder in central and southern Chile, and in Argentina as far south as Tierra del Fuego. The southern race is highly migratory, spending the Austral winter north to at least Peru and possibly as far north as Colombia. Vagrants have been previously found out of range on the Falklands Islands and elsewhere. The White-crested Elaenia normally breeds during the austral summer, from September to March, and young birds might possibly initiate their long, northward migrations by early to mid February.

While a few lucky birders got to see the elaenia on Saturday and more on Sunday, 2-3 February, the bird was not seen thereafter. It could have simply moved on, or it could have fallen victim to one of the many feral cats prowling the neighborhood.

A few words about the location where the bird was seen are in order. The South Padre Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary, located on West Sheepshead Street on South Padre Island, is a project of the Valley Land Fund. In

1999, six small residential lots were purchased as resting areas for weary trans-Gulf Neotropical migrants, birds that quite literally will drop in during their early spring migration. In addition to offering habitat protection for migrants, these small plots of land are a fine showplace for educating local residents and visitors about the importance of making their own properties "bird-friendly." The sites are open to the public.

Although these small lots are particularly important to trans-Gulf migrants, they can also obviously harbor unexpected surprises at other times of year, as clearly demonstrated by the presence of the elaenia in early February.

Another lesson to be learned from this event is the importance and value of quickly sharing digital photographs when a "strange" bird like this appears. Such action clearly facilitated the discussion and prompt ID clarification of the elaenia with amazing speed.

To view some original photos of the bird in question see (go down to the 9 February postings):
<http://spinaturecenter.com/blog/>

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NSRE: THE 365ERS AND MORE

For many years, the NSRE (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, out of the Forest Service) has been unveiling some fascinating information on approximately 80 recreational outdoor activities, including birding.

For example, a recent NSRE release indicated that over 35 percent of the people 16-years of age or older in America participate at some level in birdwatching at or away from home. This amounts to almost 82 million people. (These birding statistics are from the latest data from NSRE - 2004-2007). In comparison to the 1999-2000 NSRE survey, the estimated number of people interested in birdwatching has grown by over 8 million.

Given how bird interest is defined in this survey, your E-bulletin editors prefer to call these robust numbers of observers "bird-curious," rather than traditional "birdwatchers" or "birders." Nonetheless, these are significant figures that clearly reflect something interesting. Recently, NSRE researchers have further tweaked these numbers to reveal another interesting snapshot of this bird-interest cohort.

Researchers H. Ken Cordell, Carter J. Betz, and Nancy G. Herbert have generously given us a peek at those active birders who claim to watch birds every day of the year. The researchers with the NSRE project in Athens, Georgia, affectionately refer to this most active birding group as the "365ers," - a group that represents about 16 percent of all birdwatchers.

This category is interesting for a number of reasons: Two-thirds of them are female; well over 80 percent are non-Hispanic White in race; 53 percent are over 55 (actually over 1/3 are over 65); over half of the group have never spent time in college; about a third of the group have annual incomes under \$25,000, and somewhat more of the group than the national population average live in rural areas. The percentages of this group that participate in various other outdoors activities are as follows:

Walking for pleasure 89%
Gardening or landscaping 87%
Viewing or photographing natural scenery 83%
Viewing or photographing flowers, trees, etc. 83%
Viewing or photographing wildlife other than birds 78%
Attending family gatherings outdoors 66%
Visiting nature centers and other nature sites 59%

Among these other activities, there are a number in which less than 2 percent of the 365ers participate. These include scuba diving, windsurfing, surfing, ice fishing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, orienteering, and bird hunting. This group of birdwatchers may simply be too busy studying birds, gardening, viewing nature in all its forms and enjoying those outdoor family picnic spreads to be able to participate in these other activities.

In addition to the study described above, the NSRE Team and others (H. Ken Cordell, Ted L. Eubanks, Carter Betz, Gary T. Green, Becky Stephens, and Shela Mou) also released another thoughtful study in mid-February, "Bird Watching Trends in the United States, 1994-2006."

This study segments the bird-interest among the "Occasionals" (people who participate 1-6 days a year), the "Actives" (people who participate 7-60 days per year), and the "Enthusiasts" (people who participate over 61 days per year). According to these findings, birdwatching at almost all levels continues to grow as an outdoor interest among Americans. The gains in the number of people and the number of days of birding are particularly impressive.

This study is the first of three parts, and you can find it here:
<http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IRISRec/IrisRec2.html>

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THOUSANDS OF EARED GREBES DIE IN MEXICO

In late January, a Canadian resident encountered approximately 3,000 Eared Grebe carcasses along a six-mile stretch of beach in La Paz, Mexico. A flurry of communications between biologists from Canada to Mexico revealed that this was not unusual. During an El Nino event in 1997, tens of thousands (and possibly hundreds of thousands) of Eared Grebes died in Mexico. There have also been several winter die-offs of Eared Grebes at the Salton Sea in California over the past two decades. In 2006-07, 15,000 Eared Grebes died at Great Salt Lake in Utah, which together with Mono Lake in California supports over 95% of the continent's Eared Grebes in fall. Aerial surveys at Mono Lake following the 1997 El Nino event revealed a near 50% drop in numbers of these birds from the previous year, from 1.5 million to about 800,000. The causes of these die-offs are not well understood, although some have been attributed to avian cholera.

As colleagues at Bird Studies Canada noted, "this January's discovery was not made on a formal beached bird survey, [but] it helps to underscore the value of regular beached bird surveys, and having a long-term baseline of data from which to better understand episodic events like this. It also highlights the importance of monitoring bird populations at key staging areas like Mono Lake, and illustrates how vital international cooperation is to the conservation of species whose distributions span much of the continent."

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REFUGE MONTHLY NEWS

To start off 2008, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) launched a new electronic publication designed keep refuge supporters informed of ongoing developments. Each issue of THE FLYER will include articles and information relating to NWRA's policy, programmatic priorities, and opportunities for taking action in support of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Bird-related information is also included where it relates to specific refuge developments (e.g., the Navy's plans to halt their proposed training field near the Pocosin Lakes NWR with its waterfowl and safety implications.)

For the latest issue of THE FLYER, see:

<http://www.refugenet.org/new-publications/flNewest.html>

If you wish to keep abreast of refuge issues, you can sign up for THE FLYER at:

<http://refugenet.e-actionmax.com/signup.asp>

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RTPI ON THE LOOKOUT FOR NATURE EDUCATORS

The Roger Tory Peterson Institute (RTPI), dedicated to continuing the legacy of the great bird-and-nature educator, is gearing up for the celebration of the centennial of Peterson's birth. RTPI will be seeking and recognizing those who are continuing in Peterson's footsteps through a program called The Roger Tory Peterson Nature Education Achievement Award.

You can find details here (midway down the page on the RTPI website):

<http://www.rtpi.org/>

An application for the award is found here:

http://www.enaturalist.org/nomination_form.php

Nominations for the awards are due by 30 April 2008.

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BOOK REVIEW: 50 PLACES

Chris Santella has put together an interesting collection of birding localities in his newest book, called FIFTY PLACES TO GO BIRDING BEFORE YOU DIE (Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 2007). This fun book provides short profiles of 50 prime locations that should not be missed in a lifetime - at least if at possible! Almost half of the localities listed are places in the U.S., but the wide-ranging collection varies from such locations as New York City's Central Park to the Tari Valley of New Guinea. Each brief chapter is highlighted by a well-known birder (your two E-bulletin editors were among those making recommendations) but Santella is the one who skillfully weaves the narrative about each of the 50 listed localities. The same author has produced similar books about fly-fishing, golfing, and sailing. Almost any birder would appreciate this book and find it to be an enjoyable read.

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PIGEON WOES AND THE MBTA

Last month we reviewed a delightful book on pigeons, „the world,s most revered and reviled bird.% You can find the short review of Andrew Blechman,s book here:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/febSBC08.html#TOC05>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/feb08.html>

This month we report on the darker side of the pigeon-fancier subculture.

Last year, we learned that thousands of raptors - such as Cooper's Hawks, Peregrine Falcons, and Red-tailed Hawks - had been killed in Oregon, California and Texas. These raptors were the victims of hobbyists who breed "roller pigeons," those Rock Pigeons that carry a genetic trait that causes them to stop flying and tumble in the air before righting themselves and continuing to fly.

Unfortunately, the pigeon-rolling in the air may actually look like crippled and vulnerable prey to a raptor, and many pigeon enthusiasts have been routinely killing raptors in an attempt to protect their roller pigeons.

There arose multiple arrests and charges, the result of a 16-month investigation of pigeon hobbyists and clubs in at least five states by law enforcement agents of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service estimated that as many as 2,000 to 3,000 raptors had been killed on the West Coast alone each year using methods that included poisoning, beating birds to death with clubs, and suffocation in plastic bags.

The 13 men charged with these crimes received little more than proverbial slaps on the wrist after pleading guilty to a Class B Misdemeanor under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). This is particularly galling since one of the species in question, Peregrine Falcon, was only removed from protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1999.

Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-OR) has recently introduced legislation that would amend the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 so that the intentional killing of protected bird species would be considered a felony, rather than the current Class B Misdemeanor. Passage of HR 4093 could send a strong message to prosecutors and courts that Congress takes these crimes seriously. If the legislation passes, the most grievous bird-related crimes could result in significant fines (up to \$50,000) and jail sentences (up to 1 year).

You can find more details on the American Bird Conservancy website:

http://www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/stories/high_rollers.html

and from the USFWS:

<http://www.fws.gov/pacific/highroller/>

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BROWN PELICAN MAY FLY OFF ESA LIST

In early February, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne marked the recovery of the Brown Pelican from the edge of extinction by formally proposing to remove the remaining protected populations of the species from coverage under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) along the Gulf and Pacific Coasts, as well as in the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

The pelican's recovery is due in large part to the federal ban on the use of the pesticide DDT in 1972, following Rachel Carson's published revelations about the dangers associated with unrestricted pesticide use.

The Brown Pelican was first declared endangered under the Endangered Species Conservation Act in 1970, a precursor of the current ESA. The Brown Pelican was removed from the list of endangered species in 1985 in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and northward along the Atlantic Coast wherever it nested. . Today there are over 620,000 brown pelicans found across Florida and the Gulf and Pacific Coasts of the U.S., as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America.

If the Brown Pelican is removed from the list of Threatened and Endangered species under the ESA, other federal laws, such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Lacey Act, will continue to protect the species, along with its nests and its eggs, from harm.

The proposal to remove the bird from the ESA has been published in the Federal Register:

<http://www.fws.gov/policy/library/E8-2829.html>

The Service is seeking comments received or postmarked on or before 21 April 2008. Comments may be submitted in hard-copy or may be submitted electronically on the Federal eRule-making portal at:

<http://www.regulations.gov/search/index.jsp>

Here is some additional background information collected as the delisting proposal became official:

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/news/2008/images/BrownPelcanQsAs.pdf>

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TIP OF THE MONTH: A BINOCULAR OLDIE-BUT-GOODIE

For some time, birders have been encouraged to wear their binoculars when entering places of business while on a field trip. Today, the reason is well known and accepted, but it merits are worth repeating: get businesses to recognize that there are active birders who are frequenting their establishments, and spending real dollars.

Hunters - often in season - will wear camouflage clothing, or blaze, and are easily recognized as sportsmen. Birders are more difficult to spot, unless they carry binoculars. (Yes, a bird-themed t-shirt or similar baseball cap often helps, but nothing is better than binoculars.)

Your two editors recently returned from last month's Partners in Flight conference held in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, where birders and bird conservationists regularly wore binoculars into restaurants, gas stations, and motels, becoming immediately identifiable to the businesses in the area.

If we birders are not getting the attention we deserve from decision-makers - and in most cases we are not - then part of the problem is that we need to be better recognized, and in readily identifiable ways. Wearing binoculars is one reliable way to do just that!

Another way to increase our birder profile is through the use of "birder calling cards" left behind at business establishments. This is simply a further development of the same concept, and is something that we'll take up in more detail at another time in the "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.