



## THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

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March 2009

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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 the morning of 4 February, Richard Webster found a Blue Mockingbird at the Slaughter Ranch in southeastern Arizona, adjacent to the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. The ranch is a historic site maintained by a private foundation.

Blue Mockingbird is normally a resident of Mexico (from s. Sonora and s. Tamaulipas to Oaxaca) with only about five records along the U.S. side of the border since the 1990s. If you are unfamiliar with this species, you may want to check the latest edition of the National Geographic field guide (pp. 362-362).

The Blue Mockingbird was originally located just a short walk from the ranch parking lot. The bird was shy and wary of the many visiting birders that came to see it. Nonetheless, it was regularly seen frequenting an area just southeast of the main pond, not far from a small visitor center and a large hackberry tree with fruit and an adjacent tangle.

For more details (including map) and to view excellent photographs from multiple photographers, see: [http://www.azfo.org/gallery/2009/html1/BLMO\\_Douglas\\_Moore\\_20090205.html](http://www.azfo.org/gallery/2009/html1/BLMO_Douglas_Moore_20090205.html)

The mockingbird remained at the Slaughter Ranch through the month.

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## **TIMBERDOODLE, ANYONE?**

Now is the time when American Woodcocks are migrating from their southern wintering grounds to their breeding grounds in the northern and central states and southern Canadian Provinces. Woodcocks, nicknamed Timberdoodles, will also begin their remarkable courtship display flights. This elaborate "sky dance" is a delight to behold.

In November 2005, we reported on the developments for a "Woodcock Conservation Plan" to identify conservation and management goals for this species:  
<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/novSBC05.html#TOC10>

The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service has recently estimated that American Woodcock numbers over the last 30 years have declined on average 1.2 percent each year. This adds up to an estimated loss of 839,000 displaying male woodcocks across the species' range since the 1970s. Multiple studies have shown that hunting is not the cause of the woodcock population decline, however. The problem appears to be a continuing loss of habitat that woodcocks need for feeding, migration stopover, and nesting.

For more details about woodcocks, check out the Woodcock Conservation Plan at:  
<http://timberdoodle.org/>

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## **MORE ON BIRDSTRIKES**

Immediately after the February Birding Community E-bulletin was sent out, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) indicated that there was organic material - "snarge" - found in both engines of the commercial jet that was dramatically ditched in the Hudson River on 15 January. (Snarge is the name used by investigators when referring to organic remains found on planes. Snarge actually means "snot and garbage.") To see our February report, check:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/febSBC09.html#TOC03>

By mid-February, researchers at the Smithsonian Institution confirmed that the snarge removed from the A320 aircraft was from Canada Geese. There is no way to know how many geese were involved in the incident.

To read an interview with Carla Dove, director of the Smithsonian's feather identification lab, see:  
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/Fighting-the-Perils-of-Bird-Plane-Collisions.html>

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## **SHEDDING SOME LIGHT**

Also on the topic of birds and aircraft, in early February the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced plans to conduct a study to determine whether steady-burning sidelights on tall communications towers can be safely eliminated without endangering air traffic. These steady-burning sidelights are known to attract nocturnal migrating birds and cause fatal collisions with such structures.

Current FAA guidelines on towers over 200 feet require the utilization of red or dual-type lighting systems including the use of steady-burning sidelights mounted at various intermediate levels (depending on tower height). These requirements, now over 30 years old, may no longer be applicable, based on current lighting technology. Furthermore, blinking lights are suspected of causing far fewer bird deaths than steady-burning lights.

The study should begin later this year, with a report and recommendations hopefully announced before the start of 2010.

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## **SODSAVER: WALLFLOWER**

We have reported multiple times in the past on the expectations for "sodsaver" in the last Farm Bill, most recently in June 2008:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/junSBC08.html#TOC10>

A "sodsaver" element in the Farm Bill would be vital to an entire spectrum of grassland birds. The "sodsaver" provision was originally intended to eliminate taxpayer incentives to cultivate crops on virgin native grasslands, and it was that it would be mandatory nationwide. (Ripping up 10,000-year-old prairie would not have been forbidden, just not eligible for subsequent federal subsidy.) Final passage altered the bill's language to apply only to parts of five prairie states (i.e., Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota), and then only at the option of those states' individual governors.

The sign we posted for the comments to proceed was 15 February 2009. Guess what? To date, the comments

The sign-up target for the governors to respond was 15 February 2009. Guess what? To date the governors have passed on taking advantage of this conservation opportunity. Democrat? Republican? No matter. No takers. The "sodsaver" so far remains ignored and unused. Still, some optimists feel that the governors may be waiting for some further ruling on language.

If anything, an almost toothless "sodsaver" on the books is evidence for the need to strengthen the provision in the next Farm Bill, as well as the need to make it compulsory across the country. America's native prairies deserve as much.

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#### **CONCERN OVER THE SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER**

Astute bird conservationists are well aware of the plight of the Red Knot - a situation closely associated with the decline in the availability of horseshoe crab eggs at the crucial Delaware Bay stopover site for Red Knots. Researchers have recently raised concern over yet another species, Semipalmated Sandpiper, whose decline may also be linked to the Delaware Bay.

In late January, a team of five researchers with the New Jersey Audubon Society along with a Dutch scientist, completed weeks of field work in northern South America, announcing that they had found evidence that Semipalmated Sandpiper is also in serious decline.

Only 400,000 of the sandpipers were located in South America, where in the 1980s the population was estimated at upward of 2 million.

"We had already found a 50 percent decline over 15 years by 2006. Now, this is a 70 to 80 percent decline since the survey in the 1980s. I think it's alarming," said David Mizrahi, from New Jersey Audubon.

While there does not seem to be a significant change in the South American wintering areas or in the Arctic breeding grounds, the bottleneck for both this species and the Red Knot seems to be the Delaware Bay.

"About 80 percent of the world's population of Red Knots goes through the Delaware Bay on their return north. About 60 percent of the world's population of Semipalmated Sandpipers comes through at the same time," Mizrahi added.

"The Semipalmated Sandpipers cement the underpinning that something more is in play here than just a problem isolated to the Red Knots," said Eric Stiles of New Jersey Audubon. "The Semipalmated Sandpipers don't winter in the same area as the Red Knot, or breed in the same areas. They only share this one stopover area, the Delaware Bay, and they, too, are in decline."

Further investigation is probably warranted at the breeding grounds, but continued monitoring at the Delaware Bay will likely reveal new concerns over declines in Semipalmated Sandpiper numbers.

For more details, see this news summary:

<http://www.nj.com/news/ledger/jersey/index.ssf?/base/news-12/1233465958202690.xml&coll=1>

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#### **BOOK NOTES: A UNIQUE RICE BOOK**

Ducks Unlimited and the Rice Foundation teamed up late last year to produce a 180-page book on the issue of conservation in rice lands, with a special emphasis on birds in these managed landscapes. The issue of rice and birds is one we have written about in the E-bulletin multiple times in the past.

The compact book, *CONSERVATION IN RICELANDS OF NORTH AMERICA*, is edited by Scott W. Manley of Ducks Unlimited.

Readers of the E-bulletin may have particular interest in two sections, one on "Wildlife Values and North American Ricefields," and the other on "Wildlife, Rice, and Water, Building Common Ground."

You can find more information here:

<http://www.ducks.org/states/19/news/pub/article1717.html>

The small book may soon be available as individual chapter-by-chapter downloads.

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#### **TIP OF THE MONTH: THINKING LIKE A BIRD**

When you are in the field, and especially when you are examining a particular habitat, ask yourself: "If I were a bird, and not a human, where would I go in this habitat?" Look for the best brushy tangle, the best mudflat, the best dead limb, the best cove, the best burned-over area, the best scrubby transition zone, the best stretch of

beach.

And if you are searching for a particular species in that habitat, look for the sub-habitat that could be most productive for the species in question. You may be surprised how well this strategy works!

Yes, try thinking more like a bird next time you're in the field.

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### **STREAMER PLAN SPREADS AMONG WEST COAST FISHING BOATS**

In July 2005 we reported on the practice used by most fishing-vessels in Alaska where streamer-lines and other avoidance devices were being required to keep seabirds away from longline fishing gear. See here for details: <http://www.refugenet.org/birding/julSBC05.html#TOC10>

Because seabirds often follow fishing vessels looking for an easy meal, they can also readily drown when they try to take bait attached to longline fishing hooks. The use of streamers has proven successful in discouraging many seabirds from trying to snatch some bait.

Last month, the Fishing Vessel Owners' Association (FVOA) which represents longline captains in the halibut and sablefish fisheries along the West Coast, instructed its members to use streamer lines when longline fishing in Washington, Oregon, and California waters. The program, based on Washington Sea Grant marine research, is voluntary.

Find more details, see this Oregon story:

[http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/2009/02/fishing\\_vessels\\_agree\\_to\\_save.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/2009/02/fishing_vessels_agree_to_save.html)

and this summary from the American Bird Conservancy:

<http://www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/releases/090212.html>

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### **BIRDER BAND: HELPS BIRDS IN MAINE, HELPS SECURE BINOCULARS**

Steve Walker and Judy Camuso from the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife have come up with an innovative way for birders to support Maine's non-game bird activity, and at the same time label their binoculars with a lost-and-found system.

The Department has started selling metal "Birder Bands" which can be easily locked onto binocular straps. Each of the Birder Bands has a unique registration number and each has the phone number where lost and recovered optics can be reported, thus allowing the Department the ability to notify the registered owner and then reunite him/her with their binoculars.

To participate in this system, each individual band costs \$20 per year, with the funds going to state-based bird conservation projects.

For details, see:

[http://www.maine.gov/ifw/wildlife/species/endangered\\_species/birder\\_band.htm](http://www.maine.gov/ifw/wildlife/species/endangered_species/birder_band.htm)

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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](mailto:wpetersen@massaudubon.org) OR
- Paul Baicich 410/992-9736, [paul.baicich@verizon.net](mailto: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.

