



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

March 2011

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed 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 the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA): www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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RARITY FOCUS

Once again the focus of this month's rarity is in Texas.

On 27 January, Larry Geiger found a Yellow-faced Grassquit at Goose Island State Park, north of Rockport, Aransas County, Texas. Three days later, Samuel Taylor confirmed and photographed the male grassquit near campsites 204 and 205 in the park. To see some of Taylor's photos visit:

http://picasaweb.google.com/BrushFreeman/Grassquit2#

Yellow-faced Grassquit is a resident in the Greater Antilles, the Gulf slope of northeast Mexico (central Coahuila and southern Tamaulipas), south through Central America to the Pacific slope of northern Ecuador and western Colombia. It has occurred in the U.S. as an accidental visitor in south Florida, with about five reports, and also in south Texas, with about three reports. In Florida, reports have been of the West Indian race, "olivacea." In Texas, previous records have been of the darker Mexican race, "pusilla."

If you are unfamiliar with this handsome little bird, check a Mexican, West Indian, or similar field guide to see an illustration, or also check the National Geographic guide (5th edition), pages 402-403, or the new Stokes North American guide, page 650.

The Goose Island State Park bird remained through February, obliging many visiting birders from coast to coast. It was usually found in the northeast section of the park, near campsites numbered in the 200s, often frequenting the brushy edges, mowed lawn, or pathways, making it sometimes difficult to observe, and often seen associating with a small flock of Field Sparrows.



Yellow-faced grassquit
Image: Tony Northrup (source)

IBA NEWS: FLINT HILLS OPPORTUNITY

In the previous two issues of the E-bulletin we highlighted two National Wildlife Refuge innovations that embrace entire "Conservation Areas," regions congruent with multiple IBAs, specifically in the Dakotas and the Everglades Headwaters region:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/JanSBC11.html#TOC04

and

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/febsbc11.html#TOC04

This month our emphasis is a similar NWR project, the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area in Kansas. This proposed project is intended to conserve up to 1.1 million acres of tallgrass prairie through voluntary, perpetual conservation easements. (About 45,000 acres are already protected in this region.) New easements would further protect habitat for scores of species of nesting, migrating, and wintering grassland birds and about 90 native species of grasses. These working landscapes would also ensure that the region's ranching culture is sustained.

Sadly, Kansas is one of the states without an ongoing and functioning IBA program, although the Flint Hills region clearly ranks as a deserving IBA. In *The American Bird Conservancy Guide to THE 500 MOST IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS IN THE UNITED STATES (2003)*, this region was called "one of the great remnant source areas for grassland birds on the continent." For example, the area in eastern Kansas supports important populations of Greater Prairie-Chicken, Short-eared Owl, Lark Bunting, and Henslow's Sparrow.

This project deserves careful watching and support. You can find details on the proposal here:

www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/Habitat%20Protection%20Plans/Kansas/flh/flh_lpp_factsheet.pdf

For additional information about worldwide IBA programs, including those across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:

www.audubon.org/bird/iba/

SAVE AN OWL; SHOOT AN OWL

Given a series of disappointing previous results in the effort to save Northern Spotted Owls in the Pacific Northwest, a new and controversial plan is now being considered.

In an Environmental Impact Statement expected to be issued in a few months, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may suggest controlling the spread of Barred Owls to encourage rejuvenation of the Spotted Owl population. Barred Owls are doing well in the Northwest because of their supposed adaptability, while the Spotted Owls apparently have more demanding environmental requirements.

A limited experiment on private California timberland showed that Spotted Owls returned every time Barred Owls in the area were removed.

Still, the expected plan is already controversial, with few clear winners. Some see the plan as interfering with natural selection; others claim we have already interfered by changing the environment; still others are simply hesitant about the idea of this drastic action to "level the playing field." Industry supporters say that ongoing restrictions on federal timber sales have already been directed to benefit a species that may not be recoverable.

Lowell Diller, a wildlife biologist from Northern California who holds a collecting permit to shoot Barred Owls, estimates that a reduction of 10 to 20 percent of the Barred Owl population would be effective. But then again, it might not. "The worst thing would be to spend millions, kill a bunch of Barred Owls, and get no treatment effect," he said.

Clearly, this development merits further attention.

RUSTY BLACKBIRDS AND LEAD SHOT

The US Fish and Wildlife Service recently issued a final rule concerning its "depredation order" for native blackbirds and corvids. Depredation orders are periodically issued by the USFWS to allow the killing of migratory birds such as crows, grackles, and other blackbirds which are deemed to be causing damage to public or private property, pose a health or safety hazard, or are damaging agricultural crops or wildlife. The new regulation in this case has two beneficial changes that should interest E-bulletin readers.

First, it removes Rusty Blackbird from the list of species that may be considered under such depredation orders. Rusty Blackbird is a species in serious decline, a subject and species we have covered previously in the E-bulletin, and the species' status actually warrants further protection, including its removal from the potential "pest" list. Mexican "Tamaulipas" Crow was also removed from the depredation order, although its status in the U.S. has become such that inclusion from the list is inconsequential.

Second, this new rule precludes the use of lead shot to kill other species of blackbirds covered under the depredation order. Despite pressure on the Service to reverse this particular provision, the USFWS has stood firm. The Service has stated that "Poisoning of many... species of birds by lead shot has been well documented. We reasonably infer based on this information that lead [toxicity]... provides sufficient justification to ban the use of lead shot in bird control under this order."

The lead-shot ban is partial, limited to this particular depredation order, but it does contribute to the body of evidence supporting the pernicious effects of lead, and its effects on birds in particular. This is a topic we have covered in the E-bulletin previously, including most recently in December, 2010:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/DecSBC10.html#TOC08

For more details on the new ruling, see the following from the American Bird Conservancy:

HOUSE TARGETS CONSERVATION/BIRD SPENDING

It's Congressional budget-slashing time, and it's also open season.

Last month, the House of Representatives passed H.R.1, the Full Year Continuing Resolution (CR) for 2011. That bill proposed a whopping \$60 billion cut in the federal budget, mainly from domestic programs. Besides the reduction of

programs as varied as NASA, Amtrak, state law enforcement, and education, the Republican-led formula for cutting the budget and keeping the government operating also included major cuts in essential bird-and-wildlife spending. Some of the more essential conservation programs - familiar programs to regular readers of this E-bulletin - facing proposed cuts included:

- State Wildlife Grants - This effort leverages more than \$100 million per year in state, tribal, local, and private dollars- associated with State Wildlife Action Plans. Funded previously at \$90 million, this program is facing \$0. Yes, zero.
- North American Wetlands Conservation Fund- This program (NAWCA) has leveraged over \$2 billion in matching funds, impacting 20 million acres through the work of more than 4,000 partners for migratory bird conservation, flood control, erosion control, and water quality. Funded in FY10 at \$47.6 million, it would have \$0.
- Land and Water Conservation Fund - One of our favorites, LWCF uses offshore oil and gas revenue, "recycling" the funds back to federal, state, and local land-based conservation and acquisition. While it is authorized (since 1977) at \$900 million, it historically receives a lot less. In the last year it received more than usual, about \$450 million. The proposed CR would reduce that by over 86%, to \$59 million. This would be the lowest amount ever for LWCF.
- Refuge System Operations and Maintenance - Funded in FY10 at \$503 million, the refuges face a cut of \$12 million, bringing essential services down to \$491 million. Simply to "stand still," NWRs would need at least \$511 million. Important restoration, management, and visitor services would suffer.

Other drastic cuts would include the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund authorized under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act, Farm Bill elements (such as the Wetland Reserve Program - WRP - and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program - EQIP), the USDA National Resource Conservation Service, and enforcement aspects of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Virtually all the wildlife, land-preservation, environmental, hunting, and bird-conservation organizations have recently come out against this onslaught, often citing the package of essential conservation elements outlined above.

The Senate indicated that it would not take up the House bill, and President Obama stated that he would veto the House approach as it stood. At the start of March, an alternative short-term Continuing Resolution - or even consecutive CRs - may be expected, thus kicking the can down the road, so to speak, but at least avoiding a complete catastrophe with government shutdown.

Although stopgap CRs with incremental cuts are expected, the core conservation programs will remain on the chopping block. More on this next month.

TIP OF THE MONTH: THE PATAGONIA PICNIC TABLE EFFECT

Traditionally we start the E-bulletin with coverage of a rare bird found somewhere in the U.S. or Canada. Sometimes, when birders show up to look for the rarity in question other remarkable birds are found. This simply proves that with enough birder coverage, and enough eyes, the discovery of one unusual bird often leads to the discovery of another.

This phenomenon has a name: the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect, and its origin goes back several decades. Sometime in the late 1960s, birders realized that there were nesting Rose-throated Becards at the wooded roadside picnic area on Arizona 82, about four miles south of the small ranching community of Patagonia. The stop is no more than 0.3 miles of old pavement, with concrete picnic tables under cottonwood and ash trees abutting an arid thornscrub hillside. Regular stops at the rest area and along the wooded trail on the opposite side of the road often seemed to produce other interesting sightings: Thick-billed Kingbird, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Five-striped Sparrow, Yellow Grosbeak, and more. To this day, birders regularly pause at the picnic roadstop, rather than simply drive by on the way to someplace else.

Thus evolved "The Patagonia Picnic Table Effect:" one good bird attracts birders, who often discover yet another good bird, which brings more birders, ad infinitum.

In reality, similar scenarios play out several times a year somewhere in North America. The end result is a the locality becomes "well known for rare birds," even though it may be little or no better than other similar nearby localities!

Stay alert and stay tuned, because you may find this very phenomenon in action in the next few months or in the coming year somewhere near you!

BOOK NOTES: BIRD LESSONS

Sy Montgomery has given readers another engaging and well-written book about animals. With care, originality, and humor, she delivers BIRDOLOGY (Free Press 2010). It's a different look at birds, with birds as characters, even as individuals, sometimes almost bordering on anthropomorphism... but not quite.

In seven thematic chapters, Montgomery delves into the intrinsic nature of birds, their interaction with humans, and their behavior. The seven chapters cover birds as individuals (including chickens), as primitive relations to dinosaurs

(cassowaries), as denizens of the air (hummingbirds), as fierce some predators (raptors), as superb navigators (pigeons), as remarkable communicators (parrots), and as social beings (crows).

At least one of these chapters is likely to strike a chord with every reader. (The chapters on cassowaries and crows, in particular, did for us.)

This fun book, ultimately, tells us as much about humans as it does about birds.

A REINTRODUCTION OF OUR QUIZ FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

We are delighted to reintroduce our quick-and-easy quiz where readers have a chance to win a fine National Geographic birding publication. Each monthly quiz question will either relate to one of our previous news items, or it will pertain to an event or experience that is scheduled to occur during the current or coming month.

For more on NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC bird books, see:

www.shopng.com/birdbooks

We will give away three books to E-bulletin readers whose names are picked at random from among those submitting correct answers. Due to shipping constraints only folks residing in the U.S. or Canada are eligible to win.

The prize for March will be a copy of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BACKYARD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA by Jonathan Alderfer and Paul Hess (2011). This new book will be released this month and will be reviewed here next month. Be among the first to get this new book into your hands.

You can find details here:

<http://shop.nationalgeographic.com/ngs/product/books/animals-and-nature/animals-and-wildlife/national-geographic-backyard-guide-to-the-birds-of-north-america>

This month's question is linked to February's status as National Bird-Feeding Month: Who designed and invented the now-common tube bird feeder?

Please send your answer by 15 March to:

BirdingEbulletin1@verizon.net

Make the subject line "QUIZ! " and please include your full name and mailing address along with your answer so that we can mail you a book should you be a fortunate winner. We will also provide the correct answer next month.

You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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