



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

May 2006

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RARITY FOCUS

For this section of the E-bulletin we usually highlight a species that would constitute a rarity found anywhere in the continental US and Canada. For example, recent past choices for this year have included: Falcated Duck (OR), Yellow Grosbeak (NM), Pink-footed Goose (CT), and Piratic Flycatcher (TX).

Since there was no outstanding candidate to fill this role this month, we have selected a rarity of a different sort - a White-tailed Hawk that apparently appeared in both Massachusetts and New Jersey in less than a week. White-tailed Hawk is a species that is locally common in south coastal Texas, but with only the barest handful of previous vagrant occurrences in Louisiana, New Mexico, and Arizona. So you can imagine the shock when Scott Sumner and a group of his birding class students identified a White-tailed Hawk on 22 April in the fields near the University of Massachusetts Equine and Livestock Center in Hadley, MA.

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With virtually no records of this species in the U.S. north of Louisiana and the Southwest, speculation on the hawk's provenance began immediately. Cell phones and e-mail postings were at once brought to bear, and area birders began salivating over the presence of such a mega-rarity so far from home in their own backyard. No fewer than 150 people saw the hawk in the first two days of its visit to central Massachusetts.

The question was, "How did the bird arrive in Massachusetts?" The possibilities were more or less clustered into two camps.

Some birders favored natural vagrancy as the explanation, while others felt the bird was probably an escape from captivity. Although White-tailed Hawks hardly migrate in their native range, one hypothesis suggested that the bird somehow attached itself to a group of northward migrating Broad-winged Hawks passing over Texas in late April and simply continued traveling north until it reached New England. Another possibility is that the hawk had been kept in captivity (possibly by a falconer) and then later was either released or escaped, potentially miles from its native Texas.

But the story isn't over. Although the bird was last seen in Hadley on the morning of 24 April when it took flight and sailed off in a southwesterly direction, presumably the same bird was re-discovered and photographed in the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in northern New Jersey late in the afternoon of 25 April! Unfortunately, photos obtained in New Jersey were unable to be positively matched to those of the Massachusetts bird.

The saga isn't finished, however. In mid-morning on 27 April, a White-tailed Hawk passed a hawk-watching site in Truro on outer Cape Cod in Massachusetts!

Regrettably neither the New Jersey nor the Cape Cod sighting could be definitively matched with photographs taken of the bird in Hadley. While the distances between the observations and the time of the sightings were significantly separated, the likelihood that there was more than one White-tailed Hawk in the Northeast in three days is so remote that this scenario probably best serves as a reminder of how remarkable the flight capabilities of certain raptors are as much as anything else. As for the true origin of the bird, we may never know.

[More details and photos from Massachusetts.](#)

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KUDOS FOR IVORY-BILLED BIRDERS

In the March-April 2006 issue of REFUGE UPDATE, the official bulletin for the Refuge System, the managers of Cache River NWR and White River NWR praised birder restraint when it came to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Dennis Widner, Cache River NWR manager, was initially expecting chaos and a flood of birders hoping to add the Ivory-billed Woodpecker to their life lists after the reports of the species in Arkansas last April. Instead, he was pleasantly surprised when birders seemed to assume responsibility for protecting the bird. He said that messages on birding Web sites and listserves "have discouraged birders from rushing to the refuge."

Likewise, Larry Mallard, manager of nearby White River NWR, says that news of the woodpecker has given both refuges international visibility among birders and other non-consumptive visitors.

As was mentioned last month, Ivory-billed seekers are encouraged to examine the [USFWS-sponsored site](#) for more information.

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GETTING AROUND THE IVORY-BILLED DEBATE

Recently, there has been increasing debate over the authenticity of reports of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in Arkansas. We reported on the controversy in the March E-bulletin ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Rather than paraphrase the controversy, we recommend that readers of the E-bulletin read an article in EOS, the transactions of the American Geophysical Union, for 21 March 2006 (Volume 87, No. 12).

This article, "Decadal Drought Effects on Endangered Woodpecker Habitat," by D. W. Stahle and six colleagues, focuses on questions pertaining to habitat-type and the status of candidate, non-commercial cypress-tupelo forest remaining in the Southeast.

In general, the article raises viable questions for Ivory-billed hopefuls: What makes these forests look like they do? When do these stands of trees begin or end their existence? How can we predict what will be good Ivory-billed habitat elsewhere in the future? How can we manage the forests so that there will be suitable habitat in the future?

These are difficult questions, and all worthy of pursuit, especially since they add "urgency to the identification and protection of other ancient swamp forests throughout the bottomlands of the South."

The questions also present opportunities for bird enthusiasts to work with specialists from the forestry community in sharing information and in supporting each other's research. By working jointly these groups may improve the chances for increasing funding for vital research and expanded acquisition and habitat preservation in the future.

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GREAT WHITE HERON: GOOD TAXA? BAD NEWS!

When a bird species gets "lumped," there is often a tendency to neglect it and not pay too much attention to its biology or its population status. Such may be the case for the "Great White Heron," a bird of southernmost Florida that was considered a separate species until the 1970s, when it was determined to be a white color morph of the Great Blue Heron.

Although there are indications that the Great White Heron may indeed be a "good" species, that's not what is most pressing at the moment.

Recent surveys in the lower Florida Keys suggest that the Great White Heron may be experiencing its greatest drop in numbers on record. For example, surveys of traditional nesting sites at Great White Heron NWR and Key West NWR have not been encouraging. In the mid-1980s there were approximately 250 nests at 19 rookeries, but a survey in February of this year located only 83 active nests at 18 rookeries. Other systematic surveys have also shown a pronounced downward trend over the past six years.

It is also feared that similar downward trends on National Park Service properties (e.g., Everglades National Park, Florida Bay) may also be taking place, even despite a year or two of recent increases. Clearly, a range wide survey is warranted. Tropical storms and hurricanes may be a factor in the decline, but there could be other causes related to the health of Florida Bay and its surrounding waters.

For a summary of the Great White Heron's past status in Florida see the [Florida Breeding Bird Atlas pages](#) on the site of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Though somewhat dated, it is still informative.

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GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE NOT LISTED

In April, federal officials decided not to list the Gunnison Sage-Grouse as either Endangered or Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) said that the species' numbers have remained stable or actually increased over the past several years.

An estimated 4,500 to 5,000 Gunnison Sage-Grouse were present in southwestern Colorado and near the Colorado-Utah border last year, with an estimated 3,000 birds in 2004. Research suggests that most of the decline for the species, once found throughout the Four Corners area in Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Arizona, occurred with the loss of sagebrush habitat prior to 1958.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife is currently enlisting landowners to help protect the species and the agency has applied to the federal government to enter into conservation agreements aimed at giving landowners greater assurance about the use of their land in exchange for protecting the sage-grouse.

In the meantime, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) plans to continue upholding its limited protection of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse, despite the fact the bird was determined to be healthy enough to remain off the Endangered Species list. More than half of the sage-grouse's habitat is on land managed by the BLM, according to the USFWS. The BLM has required special drilling stipulations in habitat occupied by the Gunnison Sage-Grouse and has deferred thousands of acres of known habitat from oil and gas lease sales. There is, however, debate over whether this protection is adequate. The BLM is also working on a strategy with the state of Colorado and other partners to come up with a plan to manage habitat currently occupied by sage-grouse. For now, this protection will not change, but some biologists continue to worry about whether the sage-grouse may not slowly disappear.

Clait E. Braun, a retired Colorado Division of Wildlife employee who was in charge of sage-grouse research from 1973-1999 says that once the initial "buzz" over the listing decision dies down, things might return to normal. "I think people will proceed cautiously in the short term, but they'll go back to what they've always done... Why pinch someone economically when the species is no longer even a candidate for the [endangered species] list?"

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HUMMINGBIRD MEMORY

Could it be that hummingbirds have qualities of "episodic memory" - the ability to recall things that happened in the past, or where and when they happened?

Researchers working in the Canadian Rockies suggest that Rufous Hummingbirds may literally be able to keep track of when a particular flower has replenished its nectar so that it might be worth revisiting at a later time. T Andrew Hurly and his colleagues from the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, claim as much in the March issue of CURRENT BIOLOGY.

To test hummingbird memory, the researchers set out arrays of artificial flowers made from syringe tips surrounded by cardboard discs. They refilled half the syringes 10 minutes after a male drank the sugar solution,

and the other half after 20 minutes. Even when keeping track of eight fake flowers, hummingbirds tended to visit the refilled flowers at appropriate intervals-about 10 minutes for quickly refilled flowers and 20 minutes for the slower refills.

This is evidence that at least some hummingbirds have capabilities similar to episodic memory. Scrub-jays and Acorn Woodpeckers, for example, have similarly been proven to have the ability to remember where and when they hid stores of food.

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IBA NEWS

As a new feature in our monthly E-bulletin, we plan to include brief highlights from various Important Bird Area (IBA) Programs around the country. The IBA Program is an effort coordinated in the United States by the National Audubon Society.

This month, we draw attention to the significant annual staging concentrations of American Golden-Plovers found during spring migration in west-central Indiana, specifically in Benton County. One-day counts of 5,000-6,000 golden-plovers in untilled soybean fields in this area clearly underscore the importance of Benton County as an IBA in Indiana.

[More information about the ongoing IBA program in the United States](#)

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HORICON CROSSWINDS

For some months now, we have been following the wind power situation near Horicon Marsh in Wisconsin. The controversy has revolved around the placement of wind-turbines as close as two miles to the marsh, an area which serves as a National Wildlife Refuge, a state Wildlife Management Area, and a location that has been recognized as a Ramsar Site of international significance. Critics of the wind farm have called for at least a four-mile setback for the turbines. We summarized the issue in our [October 2005 E-bulletin](#).

In late March, Dodge County Circuit Court Judge John Storck affirmed the Wisconsin Public Service Commission's order approving construction of the wind facility. The judge also rejected a request to initiate a three-year study to examine the possible impact of wind turbines on migratory birds in the project area.

Fortunately, appealing the court's decision is a viable possibility for the Horicon Marsh System Advocates, leaders in the effort to stop attempts to locate the wind farm in close proximity to the marsh. Recently, however, an additional wrinkle has been encountered.

The Federal Aviation Administration will not approve the wind power project yet, due to concerns about how the wind turbines might interfere with Air Force use of regional radar. Apparently, the wind facility is within line-of-sight of radar that the Air Force uses to monitor planes across the country. It is thought that the turbines' moving blades can register as "false targets." This could have an "adverse physical or electromagnetic interference effect upon navigable airspace or on air navigation facilities." Therefore, "it is in the best interest of the Air Force mission to delay the wind farm development until a comprehensive analysis can be completed."

Such an analysis may be finished in June.

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NANTUCKET SOUND WIND POWER

Meanwhile, off the Massachusetts coast another wind power issue is blowing strong. Currently, not a single wind power turbine exists off the coast of the U.S. Only Europe, most notably Denmark and the UK, has experienced significant offshore wind power development in recent years.

Over the past several years, considerable attention has been focused on a proposed wind farm project in Nantucket Sound. Cape Wind Energy has a plan to locate America's first offshore wind facility in Nantucket Sound off the southern coast of Cape Cod. The project calls for the erection of 130 wind turbines spread over 25 square miles of Horseshoe Shoal in Nantucket Sound. If fully implemented, the project is slated to provide the equivalent of three-fourths of the electricity consumed on Cape Cod and the nearby islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

Questions persist over this project.

The project will set a precedent for future offshore wind projects in North America. (For example, there are projects on the drawing board off Hull, MA, Corpus Christi, TX, and Long Island, NY.) The Nantucket situation, therefore, deserves careful review. In this context, the independent Massachusetts Audubon Society has taken a leadership role in analyzing the potential environmental impact of this project, with particular attention being directed at possible risks to birds that live in or fly through the area proposed for the wind farm.

Mass Audubon has challenged Cape Wind and other appropriate permitting agencies to embrace comprehensive and rigorous monitoring and mitigation that would hopefully reduce the risk to birds and other wildlife. Mass

and rigorous monitoring and mitigation that would hopefully reduce the risk to birds and other wildlife. Mass Audubon has gone on record as saying, "If these conditions are adopted, and remaining significant data gaps are filled with a finding of no significant threat to living resources, Mass Audubon will support the project, what is expected to be the largest, clean, renewable-energy project in the Northeast." In regard to birds and other wildlife, Mass Audubon goes on to point out that this "does not mean zero impact on those resources because the production of energy always entails some level of environmental impact."

It is clear that much still needs to be learned and evaluated about the potential impact of such a massive project might have on terns and other seabirds, sea ducks, shorebirds, and nocturnal migrating songbirds.

Readers are encouraged to study the balanced and thoughtful [Mass Audubon statement pertaining to the wind farm](#).

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NEOTROPICAL MIGRANT LANDBIRD MAP

Under the leadership of Peter Blancher of the Canadian Wildlife Service, an international team of Partners in Flight colleagues has put together a fascinating new document. This [document](#) and tool is called, "Making Connections for Bird Conservation: Linking States, Provinces & Territories to Important Wintering and Breeding Grounds."

In this document, maps are utilized to summarize migratory connections between locations at opposite ends of migration. This is a fine way to explore partnerships and mechanisms that could further conservation action connecting regions. The document is composed of several parts: a text portion; maps of migratory connections from each state, province and territory; and related appendices.

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PABLO CANEVARI AWARD ANNOUNCED

The winner of the Pablo Canevari Memorial Award for 2006 is Brazilian shorebird biologist and researcher, Inês de Lima Serrano, of CEMAVE (Centro Nacional de Pesquisa para Conservação das Aves Silvestres).

The Award, established by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, gives recognition to Latin American biologists and conservationists who reflect the values and contributions of the late Pablo Canevari in their work.

Inês de Lima Serrano and CEMAVE have been considered the first to develop research and conservation projects for migratory shorebirds in South America. Inês has taught over 20 bird-banding courses from 1988 to 2003 for Brazilians and other South American researchers. In this role, her influence on South American bird study has been immense, as many researchers began their banding work through these courses. Beginning in 1997, Inês has been a key participant in the ongoing cooperative and hemispheric study of Red Knots.

In addition to these shorebird efforts, Inês's energy and commitment to conservation have been reflected in a variety of other projects. These include monitoring colonial birds, including the Jabiru in the Pantanal, Mato Grosso do Sul; studies of the risks, problems and solutions for bird-aircraft strikes at some of Brazil's most important international airports, including Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Manaus; and the development of instructional materials about migratory birds for children. She has also been a tireless supporter of volunteers and new researchers.

Pablo Canevari, for whom the award was named, was the first Director of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), as well as a scientist, skilled illustrator, and committed conservationist. In March of 2000, Pablo died suddenly of cancer.

Read about [previous Canevari Award winners](#).

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FARALLON WEBSITE/BLOG

The Farallon Islands off the coast of central California were established as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1909. The islands and their surrounding ocean environment have also been recognized by the United Nations and governmental agencies as a site of hemispheric biological importance (designated as an International Biosphere Reserve, a National Marine Sanctuary, and a State Ecological Reserve).

The Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO) has been working at the Farallon Islands in cooperation with the USFWS since 1968. Since December 2005 the PRBO project has also maintained a lively [Farallon Islands web log](#). The web log is an attempt to get information about the Farallon project out to the public. The blog contains news about research and island living, pictures, and video from the field. Recent content focused on Elephant Seals, but since mid-April the blog has been filled with seabird information that is updated directly from the island about once every two weeks.

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SCAUP TRACKER

Last month we mentioned the status of Greater and Lesser Scaup, and reminded readers that, among other things, the 2005 estimate for the two species is 46% below the goal of 6.3 million scaup set in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). (Read [here](#) or [here](#).)

Early this spring, the Long Point Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Fund (LPWRF) captured and tagged 18 Lesser Scaup and 2 Greater Scaup from the Great Lakes in order to track their seasonal movements across North America. By now all these tagged ducks have departed the lakes and are back in the U.S./Canadian Prairie Pothole Region. At least one bird traveled swiftly from Lake Erie, past Lake Superior and on into northwestern Ontario in less than three days.

[Follow the movements](#) of these marked birds. You will have to click on "Scaup Tracker" for the latest tracking information. Satellite locations are updated daily, so be sure to check regularly.

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NAWCA REPORT AVAILABLE

Last month we wrote about the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission (MBCC) and its function in acquiring refuge-associated habitat through the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation ["Duck"] Stamp.

The MBCC also approves the distribution of NAWCA (North American Wetlands Conservation Act) funding. The most recent of the programmatic biennial reports required by the Act is now [available online in PDF format](#).

This 48-page report contains summary information on U.S., Canadian, and Mexican projects funded under the Act, grouped by country and arrayed by state or province, for Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005. The categorical information provided for each project includes the number of acres protected, restored, or enhanced; the type and duration of the conservation mechanism used; and the amount of grant and partner dollars involved.

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CALL FOR NWR ACQUISITION

In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and related agencies, on 28 April, Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, called for a \$100-million investment in Refuge System land acquisition in FY 07.

He encouraged the Subcommittee to allocate "sufficient funding to purchase high-priority lands and conservation easements." With a Refuge System land acquisition backlog estimated at \$4 billion, approximately 15.4 million acres remain to be acquired within approved refuge boundaries. Willing sellers across the country are standing by to work with the USFWS, but the Service has neither the funding nor the resources to handle these land acquisition opportunities.

Hirsche stressed that "vital refuge buffer areas and corridors may be lost, jeopardizing the very integrity of refuges. While a full suite of conservation strategies should be employed in working with private landowners, in cases where fee title acquisition is preferred by the landowner and the refuge has identified it as a top priority, the USFWS should acquire the land." Even with \$100 million, Hirsche stressed, it would still take at least 40 years to acquire priority lands under the Service's Land Acquisition Priority System (LAPS).

In the essential area of National Wildlife Refuge System annual operations and maintenance (O&M), Hirsche called for a funding level of \$415 million in FY 07 - an increase of \$33 million over the President's request.

Read the full [NWRA testimony \(pdf\)](#).

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TWO BOOKS TO CONSIDER

We usually don't review books here for fear that our E-bulletin would become far too long. Two books, however, both published last year and both worth mentioning recently captured our attention.

LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS, by Richard Louv (2005, Algonquin Books) is about what the author calls a "nature-deficit disorder" among our youth. "Our children," he writes, "are the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world." Best of all, Louv not only eloquently describes the problem, but also makes some observations on how it is being addressed today, creatively and in various ways. It's a valuable read.

LOOKING FOR MR. GILBERT, by John Hanson Mitchell (2005, Shoemaker & Hoard) is subtitled "the re-imagined life of an African American." While doing research on another book, Mitchell was astonished to find 2,000 old glass plate photographs ascribed to William Brewster, a primary founder of the AOU, but actually taken by Brewster's "man servant," Robert Gilbert. Mitchell reconstructs the life of this experienced and accomplished natural historian and birder, and the indispensable right-hand man for Brewster. Sometimes the trail grows cold, but what Mitchell discovers tells us much about the times of Brewster and Gilbert, the depth of our pastime, and the quest for discovery.

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