



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

May 2007

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RARITY FOCUS

The Black Noddy is a bit of an enigma among North American birds. It is a species that appears in virtually all our North American field guides, yet is found regularly only in one spot: the Dry Tortugas National Park (Fort Jefferson), located about 70 miles west of Key West, Florida. Moreover, the species is essentially a vagrant to the entire West Indies, possibly breeding only locally off the coast of Venezuela (Los Roques Islands).

Nonetheless, Black Noddies are often seen in spring at the Dry Tortugas, although not every year. The first Black Noddy ever sighted in North America was found on Garden Key in the Dry Tortugas in July, 1960, and the species has appeared there with some regularity ever since. When present, Black Noddies are usually seen in late April and/or early May. This also corresponds to the time of the greatest birder-visitation and the season when spring migration is in full swing.

The problem, of course, is to separate the Black Noddy from the many Brown Noddies that nest at the Dry Tortugas, and roost on the old coal dock or in the vegetation on nearby Bush Key. (Slightly smaller size, slightly darker and slimmer bill, and sharper demarcation on crown are the best field marks for the Black Noddy.) In 1995, as many as four Black Noddies were present at the Dry Tortugas, but one or two is the more usual number.

This year, a Black Noddy was observed by scope from the lighthouse looking toward Bush Key on 20 April, resting on opuntia cactus. Various birding groups saw the bird for a number of days through the end of the month.

To see a photo taken by Steve Collins of this year's bird (note ID elements summarized above), visit:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/odephoto/474161593/in/set-72157600136764013/>

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BAJA CALIFORNIA CONDORS

On 2 April, biologists working with the California Condor Recovery Program announced the discovery of the first California Condor egg laid in Baja California, Mexico, since the species' introduction to the Sierra San Pedro de Martir National Park in 2002. The egg was found in an abandoned eagle nest on a cliff in the national park, located in the arid interior of the Baja California peninsula more than 100 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The parents, among 11 condors released in the park in 2002, were bred in U.S. zoos, and have only recently reached breeding age.

On 24 April it was announced that the egg had hatched, making the chick the first California Condor hatched in Mexico in over 75 years. The last documented wild California Condor sighted in Mexico was seen in the late 1930s.

It is hoped that the condors reintroduced to Baja California may one day unite with condors from California to form one population. Up until early April, the birds had only flown as close as 15 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. On 5 April, however, the first wild California Condor was documented flying across the border in San Diego County since 1910. The announcement was made by the San Diego Zoo's Conservation and Research for Endangered Species (CRES) program.

Habitat loss, lead shot, collisions with power cables, and poisoning devastated the species' numbers through the years, and by the 1980s fewer than two dozen California Condors were actually left in the wild. Since then, several organizations have been working together to boost condor numbers under the Condor Recovery Program, a group founded in 1982 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Among the members are several Mexican groups, zoos (e.g., Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Zoo, Oregon Zoo), and the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey.

For information about efforts to protect California Condors from lead poisoning at the large Tejon Ranch in southern California (Kern and Los Angeles Counties), see the March E-Bulletin at:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC11>
and
<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/march07.html>

Are these California Condors currently "fully countable" as a wild species?

No, but who really cares when one recalls that we are dealing with one of the most effective bird-recovery and conservation efforts of the past two decades? Thanks to a captive-breeding program, population numbers have recovered to a total of about 280 California Condors. More than 130 of these birds now fly free in the skies above parts of California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Baja California (Mexico).

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POSSIBLE CRANE SUPPORT FROM CONGRESS

We have reported on the plight of Whooping Cranes a number of times. Most recently, we described the predicament facing the eastern experimental flock that winters in Florida. For details see the March E-bulletin at:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC07>
and
<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/march07.html>

In the last month, there have been efforts in Congress to raise the profile of crane conservation. Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) have submitted a bill that would provide federal funding for cranes in peril.

If passed, the Crane Conservation Act (H.R. 1771 and S. 1048) would allocate \$5 million per year over five years to be spent on crane conservation efforts. (Feingold and Baldwin each introduced a Crane Conservation Act to their respective legislative bodies in 2003 and 2005, but the bills stalled in committee. The recent shift in Democratic leadership power in the House and Senate may improve the bill's prospects. So far, the bill has garnered modest bipartisan support, although influential Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho has signed on as a Senate co-sponsor.)

A fund established under the Crane Conservation Act would cover 15 species of cranes, much like the multi-species conservation funds established for tigers, elephants, and great apes. The International Crane Foundation initiated the idea for the legislation and would serve as both a recipient of the funds and a resource for other organizations applying for possible grants.

The Feingold/Baldwin bill would support initiatives and organizations protecting cranes and their habitats, including deterioration due to diversion of water for human needs, the presence of power lines near wetlands, and human activities that disturb the cranes.

Cranes are among the most endangered families of birds in the world, with 11 of the world's 15 species at risk of extinction. None is more rare than the North American Whooping Crane.

The guiding of the experimental eastern migratory experimental flock of Whooping Cranes on their migrations from Wisconsin's Necedah National Wildlife Refuge to its wintering grounds in Florida's Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge has "captured the imagination" of citizens and lawmakers all along the route, according to Congresswoman Baldwin.

The crane bills will eventually come before the Committee on Natural Resources in the House and the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in the Senate.

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CRP REPRIEVE?

In March we wrote about threats to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the Farm bill:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/marSBC07.html#TOC08>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/march07.html>

More recently, the Bush administration is calling for caution, with the USDA secretary saying in early April that farmers should not be able to pull their lands out of CRP contracts without penalty. Previously USDA was considering loosening its requirements for CRP - a program that pays farmers to let their land remain idle for the benefit of wildlife habitat or soil-and-water conservation. Initially the USDA planned to excuse certain farmers from their multi-year contracts. This current reconsideration has eased some conservationists' concerns over millions of acres being withdrawn from CRP in order to plant corn for a burgeoning ethanol industry.

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns has indicated that he sees no need to release more CRP land, given the large number of acres that farmers are already planting in corn.

Farmers, livestock groups, and the ethanol industry have been eyeing the millions of acres of land that is currently in CRP for future corn propagation. A conservation community that regards the CRP as the "holy grail" for wildlife conservation in the Farm Bill has opposed these groups. The 20-year-old CRP provides birds and other species habitat that is almost equal to twice the size of all the National Wildlife Refuges in the lower-48 states combined.

In April, it was predicted that farmers will plant more than 90 million acres of corn this year - millions more than previously predicted and the largest corn planting since World War II. Even so, the USDA has estimated that farmers with expiring contracts will still withdraw 4.6 million CRP acres in the next three years.

This recent CRP relief might be temporary since Secretary Johanns said that he reserved the right to reverse the decision in the future.

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IBA NEWS: SALTON SEA RESCUE PLAN ANNOUNCED

In December 2006, we reported on the quandary over the future of the Salton Sea in Southern California - a great birding spot, an Important Bird Area (IBA), and the location of a popular National Wildlife Refuge:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/decSBC06.html#TOC02>

and <http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/dec06.html>

In late March, the state of California, tasked with devising a plan to restore the sea, unveiled a new preferred alternative design for restoration of the sea that will try to combine many of the most desired elements of several plans that have been under consideration. By late April, the California Resources Agency finalized a

proposal that has taken three years to develop and sent it to Sacramento. All restoration plans must be approved by the state legislature.

The upshot has been an expensive and highly complex design, basically a composite of the eight major alternatives that came out of the period for public dialogue. The final plan may take until 2078 to complete and it is estimated to cost about \$6 billion, not including the additional cost of maintaining and operating the Salton Sea every year. (That cost could range from \$20 million to \$149 million per year.) The U.S. Congress may also be called upon to set aside some funding for the project.

While some designs under consideration involved splitting the sea's basin in half with a sea wall, or establishing "concentric rings" of shoreline, marshlands and lake, the preferred alternative now appears even more complex. The plan calls for the construction of 40 miles of barrier, 20 miles of air quality management canals, and other

The plan calls for the construction of 40 miles of barrier, 30 miles of air quality management canals, and other elements needed to divide the existing sea.

One key feature of the preferred alternative plan for the Salton Sea is to maintain a large saltwater habitat to accommodate the hundreds of species of birds that rely on the sea during their annual migrations.

Without restoration the sea - already saltier than the Pacific Ocean - would become so salty that experts predict that the small invertebrates that are the basic component of the Salton Sea's aquatic food chain would stop reproducing. This could eventually cause the larger brine shrimp and tilapia to disappear. In essence, the Salton Sea would die. By the 2020s, biologists fear that fish-eating birds would simply stop coming to the sea, or, worse yet, they would arrive only to succumb at a deadly dead-end sea.

Some environmental groups in California favor a design that actually has fewer complexities than this final plan, yet it still contains some of the plan's expensive features.

For a map of the proposed Salton Sea restoration see:
<http://www.thedesertsun.com/assets/pdf/J167695328.PDF>

For more information on IBA sites in California see: <http://www.audubon-ca.org/IBA.htm>

For additional general information about the ongoing IBA program in the United States, see: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html>

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PADRE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE JOINS LAGUNA MADRE WHSRN SITE

Padre Island National Seashore in Texas has been designated as an element in the existing binational Laguna Madre Site (in Texas and NE Mexico) for the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). This decision was based on the large numbers of shorebirds using the site (particularly Piping Plovers and Western Sandpipers), its ecological significance for the integrity of the Laguna Madre system, and the consent of the National Seashore's management to make shorebird conservation a priority at the site.

Padre Island National Seashore is run by the U.S. National Park Service, and is the very first Park Service property to join WHSRN. Nearby Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge is already part of the Laguna Madre binational WHSRN site.

For more details, see:
<http://www.whsrn.org/news/whsrnews.html>
and
<http://www.manomet.org/WHSRN/viewsite-new.php?id=41>

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BOOK REVIEW: WAYS TO HELP

Laura Erickson's book, 101 WAYS TO HELP BIRDS (Stackpole, 2006) came out a year ago, but it hasn't received much attention. This is unfortunate, since it is an eminently readable and significant collection of ideas about how to help birds around one's home and yard, as well as at work, on the road, and through national action.

You may have seen some the backyard-and-feeder maintenance material explained elsewhere, but details on subjects like bird-conscious consumerism, bird-oriented citizen science, volunteer opportunities, media connections, and practical political action for birders are hard to find in a single volume. The final section of Erickson's book about serving "as an ambassador for birds" is particularly thoughtful.

Give the book a look. Give it to a friend.

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REFUGE "LEGACY" REPORT: FUNDING GAP

According to a report released in late April by refuge supporters, the National Wildlife Refuge System stands to lose 20 percent of its workforce and leave more than half of its refuges operating at a fiscal loss in the next five years unless Congress increases the system's budget.

The report from the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) said more operations and maintenance funding is essential to keep the refuges from a state of "crisis." (NWRs have a current backlog of operational and maintenance needs of over \$2.5 billion waiting to be addressed.) Twenty-one different conservation, recreation, environmental, and hunting groups backed the report.

CARE's analysis of NWR needs indicates that the refuges are operating at half the funding levels needed to

maintain the system - for the benefit of birds, other wildlife, and for wildlife-watching visitors.

You can download a copy of the CARE Legacy report at: <http://www.fundrefuges.org/CARE/CareHome.html> and <http://www.fundrefuges.org/new-pdf-files/RestoringLegacy07Web.pdf>

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SEABIRDS AGAIN DYING ALONG WEST COAST

West Coast seabirds on the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington are dying, seemingly from a lack of food. Some researchers think the events may be linked to global climate change.

This is the third year in which scientists have found unusually large numbers of marine birds - mostly Common Murres, but also Rhinoceros Auklets and Tufted Puffins - washed up on West Coast beaches. In 2005, the first year of the phenomenon, large numbers of Cassin's Auklets also died.

Bill Sydeman, head of marine ecology at PRBO Conservation Science, said that the deaths are troublesome because they are not isolated events. In the two past years, the winter mortality was followed by less

successful breeding at the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, one of the West Coast's most productive seabird rookeries.

The trend appears to be linked to changes in the California Current - that oceanic stream that delivers cold, nutrient-rich water from the Gulf of Alaska to the continental West Coast. Fluctuations in the current in recent years appear to have resulted in zones of warmer water that support less plankton, the basis of a food web that sustains everything offshore from small fish to whales.

For the past two years off the continental Pacific Coast, reduced upwelling, a seasonal phenomenon that results in the replacement of warmer water along the Pacific Coast with cooler, nutrient-laden offshore water, has not begun until summer, two months later than normal.

This is bad news for birds, since the warm water provided them little food during the height of the breeding season, said Julia Parrish, an associate professor in the school of aquatic and fisheries science at the University of Washington. She says that the once predictable North Pacific currents are "swinging like a pendulum." In summer 2006, for example, an unexpected "super upwelling" occurred off Oregon, sucking in vast quantities of low-oxygen water that created a temporary dead zone along the coast.

A related theory is that the location at which the eastward-flowing North Pacific Current splits may also play a role in redistributing zooplankton. Howard Freeland of the Institute of Ocean Sciences in Sydney, British Columbia, maintains that there is a strong correlation between where this split occurs and the distribution of warm- and cold-water plankton species off the coast. With a bifurcation heading northward, the phytoplankton off British Columbia shifts accordingly. Freeland says that, "The biology responds very, very quickly."

There may be additional connections between the splitting point and the health of seabird populations, at least for Cassin's Auklets. "In 2005-06, when the North Pacific Current bifurcated approximately in central Oregon, the auklets suffered complete reproductive failures, unprecedented in the 35 plus years of studying seabird ecology at the Farallones," said Sydeman.

For more information, see details from California Sea Grant and PRBO Conservation Science: <http://www-csgc.ucsd.edu/STORIES/SeabirdDeaths.html>

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CELEBRATING BIRDS IN MAY

International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) celebrates the incredible travels of migratory birds between their breeding grounds in North America and their wintering grounds in Latin America and the Caribbean. IMBD, which usually takes place on the second Saturday in May each year, encourages bird conservation and increases awareness of birds through hikes, festivals, bird watching, information-sharing about birds and migration, and a variety of educational programs.

Each year, a team of IMBD coordinators and sponsors work together to select a theme that meets diverse criteria to reach the varied audiences that celebrate IMBD. This year, the theme is the appropriate and compelling issue of climate change.

For more information on IMBD and how you can participate:

<http://www.birdday.org/imbdb.htm>

With the start of IMBD in the early 1990s the concept has continued to grow. Although IMBD is successfully celebrated in various parts of the western hemisphere, something similar was missing for the rest of the world. Thus, World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) was launched in 2006. Last year the event was promoted worldwide by the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds Agreement (UNEP/AEWA) and the global Convention on Migratory

Species (UNEP/CMS). This year, the theme of IMBD is climate change. The celebration dates are 12-13 May.

For more information on WMBD and how you can participate:

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

At the same time, during 10-13 May, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has invited city residents to "Celebrate Urban Birds" through activities such as gardening, bird watching, art, and citizen science. These activities will raise awareness about birds in the city and also help scientists learn how birds use urban habitats.

More than 100 organizations are expected to host special events as part of "Celebrate Urban Birds," including schools, public gardens, nature centers, museums, and parks, all of which are part of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Urban Birds Studies project. While supplies last, those who sign up early will receive a Celebration Kit in English and Spanish along with a colorful urban birds poster, educational materials about birds and urban greening, data forms, and a packet of sunflower seeds to plant in pots and gardens.

Find out more about this event at: www.urbanbirds.org/celebration

Not to be outdone, our colleagues in the Caribbean, through the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB), have announced their 6th annual Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival (CEBF) from 22 April to 22 May 2007. It focuses on the endemic birds of the Caribbean, not migrants, but the theme is generally similar. The month-long festival, supported by environmental organizations across the Caribbean, will also focus this year on the threat of climate change to regional biological diversity.

Find out more at:

http://www.scscb.org/programs/program_caribbeanendemicbirdfestival.htm

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RESIST THE CARSON OVERLOAD

In line with the report above about migratory birds, we present this notable quotation from Rachel Carson:

"There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds... There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter..."

Surely you will hear this coming month of the 100th anniversary of Rachel Carson's birth - 27 May 1907. Indeed, some of you may feel victims of a "Carson overload," a tsunami of media details on her contribution and life.

Please resist that potential "overload" feeling.

Instead, try to remember that all publicity about Rachel Carson's centennial, even the mildest mass-media material intended to "domesticate" this prescient eco-witness, can be positive, as long as we remember that Rachel Carson: was a pioneer professional woman with uncommon courage in search of truth; had a knack for transforming dry scientific facts into intelligible and even lyrical prose; had an enduring interest in birds, balanced by science and aesthetics; challenged the practices of agricultural scientists, the chemical corporations, and the government; called for changes, ultimately successfully, in the way we view ourselves and the natural world.

For more on Rachel Carson we recommend: <http://www.rachelcarson.org/> and a new site from the USFWS including biography and links to her writings: <http://www.fws.gov/rachelcarson/>

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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

If you DON'T wish to receive these E-bulletins, contact either of us, and we will take you off our mailing list IMMEDIATELY.

