



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

May 2008

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RARITY FOCUS

There were a number of interesting rarities in April, including a Fork-tailed Flycatcher in eastern Massachusetts, a Flame-colored Tanager in southeast Arizona, a Gargany in Quebec, a Smew in Alberta, and two Black Noddies and a Red-footed Booby at the Dry Tortugas in Florida. These were all worthy of a profile; however, our focus species this month is White-winged Tern.

On 26 April, a White-winged Tern was observed at the north pond of the Ted Harvey Wildlife Management Area along the Delaware Bay shore. The Ted Harvey WMA is one of a number of fine birding locations that stretch between Bombay Hook NWR and Cape Henlopen State Park.

White-winged Tern is a species that breeds from Eastern Europe to northeast China and southeast Siberia; it winters from tropical Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Australia. It is a rare migrant and visitor to North America, mostly along the Atlantic coast, with at least three dozen historical reports, mainly between May and August. It has actually been seen most often along the Delaware shore, but the species has also been found at a number of other locations in North America, including New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Vermont, California, and Alaska.

The White-winged Tern at Ted Harvey WMA was reported to be in the difficult to discern non-breeding plumage. In this plumage the species closely resembles the North American Black Tern. (For illustrations see the most

recent National Geographic guide, pages 224-225, the "big" Sibley, page 237, or the Kaufman Focus guide, pages 86-87.)

This White-winged Tern was observed by a number of lucky birders at the north and south ponds at the Ted Harver WMA most mornings through the end of the month.

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CARRIER OWL

On 17 March, a small owl was discovered in the wheel-well of an F/A 18 Hornet strike fighter on the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier "USS Harry S. Truman" (CVN 75). The carrier was at sea during operations in the Persian Gulf. The bird was examined for injuries and given a solution of sugar water for mild dehydration. The owl was affectionately named "Fod" by Navy personnel. FOD is a Navy acronym for "Foreign Object Damage" and refers to objects or debris found on a flight line or carrier flight deck that can be sucked into aircraft engine intakes and cause damage. On 18 March, the owl was taken ashore to an undisclosed location aboard a delivery aircraft during a scheduled flight and then released.

For more details and an image of the owl, see this official U.S. Navy website:

http://www.navy.mil/view_single.asp?id=56514

Originally called a "screech-owl," the species was not positively identified from the photo. One possibility is that the owl may have been in migration between the Arabian Peninsula and northeastern areas of the Middle East. There is some question about whether the owl could have been one of several closely related Old World scops owl species. See details here:

http://www.owls.org/Species/otus/striated_scops_owl.htm

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EARLY REAUTHORIZATION POSSIBLE FOR NEOTROP ACT

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) originally passed the U.S. Congress in 2000 and established a competitive, matching grants program that supports public-private partnerships carrying out projects in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These efforts are designed to meet the growing needs of Neotropical migrant bird species, many of which are in serious decline.

Hemisphere-wide habitat loss due to deforestation and development, as well as a number of other human created hazards, threaten the survival of these Neotropical migrants. Conservation efforts are crucial, and the NMBCA is a vital source of funding to study and protect these birds.

Between 2002 and 2007, the Act supported 225 projects, coordinated by partners in 44 U.S. states/territories and 34 countries. More than \$21 million from NMBCA grants has leveraged over \$95 million in partner contributions. Projects involving land conservation have positively affected about 3 million acres of bird habitat. Unfortunately many more requests for high quality conservation projects are received than can be awarded at the current funding level.

The legislation was originally passed with an authorization of \$5 million per fiscal year, and then in 2006 was reauthorized with a funding level to increase to \$6.5 million over five years. Regrettably, actual appropriated funding for the program has yet to exceed \$4.5 million annually.

Representatives Ron Kind (D-WI) and Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD) have recently introduced a bill (H.R. 5756) for the reauthorization of the act. This would reauthorize the existing Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act at significantly higher levels, ultimately to reach \$20 million by 2015.

For background on the value of NMBCA funding, see:

http://www.sfbayjv.org/pdfs/NMBCA_General_5-06.pdf

To help with the NMBCA reauthorization effort, see:

<http://www.birdconservationalliance.org/actforsongbirds/index.htm>

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NEW JERSEY HORSESHOE CRAB MORATORIUM: GOOD FOR RED KNOTS

On a number of previous occasions in this E-bulletin, attention has been drawn to the research, monitoring, and conservation actions on behalf of the Red Knot and its connection to one of the species, essential food sources, the eggs of Horseshoe Crabs. Recent concern has been on the moratorium on the harvest of Horseshoe Crabs in New Jersey.

The harvest moratorium was dropped in February when the NJ Marine Fisheries Council rejected a recommended moratorium extension on Horseshoe Crab harvesting that was proposed by the NJ Department of

recommended management direction on horseshoe crab harvesting that was proposed by the US Department of Environmental Protection. Ten days later, New Jersey legislators introduced a bill that would ban Horseshoe Crab harvesting in New Jersey. That bill passed in the full Assembly on 13 March and then passed in the Senate on 18 March. New Jersey Governor Jon S. Corzine signed the new bill into law on 25 March.

This legislation was the result of incisive state legislators and hard-working conservationists (from in-state and out) that propelled this effort. The new moratorium on harvesting Horseshoe Crabs in the New Jersey will stay in effect "until the populations of both Horseshoe Crabs and Red Knots have returned to a level where they will be self sustaining, as determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." This represents a landmark piece of legislation for bird conservation.

For Governor Corzine's press release, see:

<http://www.state.nj.us/governor/news/news/2008/approved/20080325.html>

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MEANWHILE, IN EUROPE . . .

Recent research suggests that many of the birds migrating to Britain and the European continent from Africa every spring, from Willow and Garden Warblers to Spotted Flycatchers and Common Cuckoos, are undergoing significant population declines.

The drop in numbers appears to be so sharp and so broad that the possibility is being considered that the whole system of bird migration between Africa and Europe may be in crisis. Each spring, millions of birds of nearly 50 species arrive in the UK from their African wintering grounds to breed, while perhaps as many as five billion arrive in Europe as a whole, before returning south in the fall. Many species make journeys of thousands of miles, including crossing the desolate Sahara Desert twice a year. Now, however, their numbers appear to be tumbling.

This problem has recently been outlined in a full statistical account put together by researchers seeking to understand what is happening and why. Figures in an unpublished survey produced by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) reveal some startling statistics about these plunging populations. Of the 36 British-African migrant species for which there is long-term population data (going back to 1967), 21 have declined significantly. Of these, 11 have suffered declines of more than 50 percent. Among this 50-percent-plus group, the Spotted Flycatcher, the Tree Pipit and the Turtle Dove have suffered declines of 84, 83, and 82 percent respectively. For 42 migrants for which there are short-term population trends available (going back only to 1995), 23 have declined - 55 percent of the total. This includes a 30 percent decline for the Common Cuckoo, a 43 percent decline for the Pied Flycatcher, and a 60 percent decline for the Wood Warbler, in only a 13-year period.

No one knows for sure the reasons for these declines, but habitat loss in Africa and climate change are among the leading suspected causes. The problems may be along the birds, migration routes, which are full of hazards just as they are in the Western Hemisphere or on the wintering grounds of the various species south of the Sahara. Whatever the case, the Afro-European bird migration system appears to be in a perilous situation.

Ornithologists from across Europe will meet in Germany this month to discuss both the vanishing migrants, and the possibility of setting up a network of research stations in Africa to investigate the situation. The meeting, which will be held at the Radolfzell Bird Observatory on Lake Constance, has been organized by two scientists, Volker Salewski from Radolfzell and Will Cresswell from the University of St. Andrews.

In the meantime, the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) are shifting their attention from farmland birds, whose declines due to intensive agricultural practices have long been a major concern, and beginning to focus on the startling fall-off in migratory bird populations.

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EU GETS MALTA TO COMPLY

Also from Europe, we have bird news from Malta, a tiny Mediterranean state that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004.

On multiple occasions, the European Commission has sent Malta warnings regarding the practice of spring hunting of wild birds, illegal under the EU Birds Directive. The EU had opened an infringement procedure against Malta in June 2006, but Malta continued to allow spring hunting and trapping in 2007.

On 25 April, however, Malta finally banned spring bird hunting and trapping after the European Court of Justice issued a temporary ruling against the practice in the tiny country.

The ECJ issued the interim decision specifically to prohibit hunting of Turtle Doves and Common Quail, migrating species that stop in Malta on their northward migration to Europe to breed. The island nation is the only member state that has allowed spring hunting of these two species in recent years, both of which are declining rapidly in Europe.

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A final ECJ ruling is not expected for two or three years.

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IBA NEWS: NEW BERMUDA NATIONAL PARK WITH IBA STATUS

Last month we described the increasingly successful translocation of the Bermuda Petrel to Nonsuch Island at Castle Harbor, Bermuda. This experiment is attempting to re-establish a breeding population of this species (also known as the Cahow) beyond the reach of potential hurricane damage:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/aprSBC08.html#TOC07>

and

<http://www.steiner-birding.com/bulletin/april08.html>

This month, we report that the largest island in Bermuda's Castle Harbor, part of Bermuda's only Important Bird Area (IBA), is to become the Cooper's Island National Nature Reserve, and classified as a National Park. The entire world population of the endangered Bermuda Petrel nests within one kilometer of Cooper's Island, and the southern promontory of the island is the only place where this species can occasionally be observed from land.

The 77-acre Cooper's Island is also the site of nesting White-tailed Tropicbirds and with the other Castle Harbor islands hosts the largest colonies of this species on Bermuda, at over 600 nesting pairs.

Parts of Cooper's Island are still used for potentially non-compatible uses for a Nature Reserve (e.g., a radar tower, marine communications antenna, and police firing range) but the Department of Conservation is reportedly making efforts to limit these impacts.

You can find more details at:

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/03/Coopers_island.html

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

<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/>

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BOOK REVIEW: SMALL BOOK, HUGE TOPIC

In April, John C. Robinson published a little book called BIRDING FOR EVERYONE, with the subtitle, "Encouraging People of Color to Become Birdwatchers."

Though it's a small book, it addresses a hugely important topic.

The author is a long-time birder who has successfully introduced thousands of people to birds and birding. More importantly, Robinson refuses to be limited by stereotypes or settle for the status quo. The author has actively been researching the issue of minorities and birding through the use of surveys and personal interviews. In this book he pulls together the results of his research and presents an optimistic view for the future. Because of the magnitude of this issue, any discussion of the topic is worthy of examination.

For more details on the book:

<http://www.onmymountain.com/birdingforeveryone/>

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"GABE" HONORED IN VIRGINIA

Dr. Ira Noel Gabrielson (1889-1977), pioneer conservationist, distinguished field ornithologist, renowned author, and tireless civil servant was honored on 26 April in Oakton, Virginia, with a historic roadside marker situated by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Among his many accomplishments, Ira N. Gabrielson, known as "Gabe" or "Dr. Gabe" to his colleagues, served as the first director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1940-1946) where he effectively led the agency during its formative years. He later became the first president of World Wildlife Fund, and was also the President and Chairman of the Wildlife Management Institute. For many years he chaired the American Ornithologists, Union Committee on Bird Protection, and he faithfully prepared its annual reports for publication. He was elected an AOU Fellow in 1938.

Gabe's interest in birds and wildlife conservation were reflected in three major books written during the crucial years of 20th century conservation: WILDLIFE CONSERVATION (1941), WILDLIFE REFUGES (1943), and

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT (1951). His major ornithological contributions include BIRDS OF OREGON (Gabrielson and Jewett 1940) and THE BIRDS OF ALASKA (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959), both still considered classics today. He also coauthored BIRDS: A GUIDE TO THE MOST FAMILIAR AMERICAN BIRDS (Zim and Gabrielson 1949), a very popular introductory guide that has been reprinted many times (with reportedly over five million copies) and that introduced countless people to birds.

For details on the Oakton, Virginia, marker and ceremony, see:

<http://www.hmdb.org/Marker.asp?Marker=7433>

For a fascinating obituary on Gabe from THE AUK, see:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/Auk/v102n04/p0865-p0868.pdf>

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LPBO BANDS 750,000th BIRD

The Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO), at Long Point, Ontario reached a major milestone on 7 April, becoming the first North American migration monitoring station to band 750,000 birds. With the banding of a Brown

Creeper LPBO's Old Cut Field Station by Hugh McArthur, a long-time volunteer, the 3/4-million mark was reached.

Researches have been banding birds using standard protocols at LPBO since 1960. As most readers probably know, banding involves placing a uniquely numbered metal band around a bird's leg. At the same time, information such as the bird's species, wing length, age, fat content, sex, and weight are also recorded. After 48 years of research, LPBO houses a vast, diverse, and valuable data set on North America's migratory birds. Together with the efforts of other stations in Canada, the U.S., and Central and South America, the banding information collected has helped identify global ranges and population trends for hundreds of North American bird species.

LPBO is North America's oldest bird observatory, and it will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2010. More information can be found at:

<http://www.birdscanada.org/longpoint/>

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IZEMBEK NWR "ROAD TO NOWHERE" PASSES HOUSE COMMITTEE

On 23 April, members of the House Natural Resources Committee approved H.R. 2801, legislation that would allow the construction of a \$30 million, U.S. taxpayer-funded road through Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and its Congressionally-designated Wilderness Area. This road would connect the small communities of King Cove and Cold Bay.

Izembek National Wildlife Range was established in 1960 and was designated a NWR in 1980 to protect the region's extraordinary ecological values and to potentially safeguard waterfowl, shorebirds, and wetlands of national and international significance. In 1987 the Reagan Administration recognized Izembek as a RAMSAR site, the first site so-named by the United States under the Convention on Wetlands of International Significance. Numerous migratory birds depend on the refuge, including Steller's Eider, "Black" Brant, and Emperor Goose, all of which are declining in Alaska.

H.R. 2801 has yet to reach the House floor for a vote. (An equally troublesome companion bill, S. 1680, may yet reach the Senate's Energy and Natural Resources Committee in early May.)

For background on the proposed road, see this report from the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges:

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

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TIP OF THE MONTH: STAY CONNECTED WITH IMBD

International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) 2008 is an ideal opportunity to celebrate birds and bird conservation. Officially scheduled for 10 May, events are taking place from Alaska and the Yukon to Central America and the Caribbean. While most events will take place on 10 May, associated programs, events, or festivals are actually being celebrated when it best suits particular localities and the and when the birding is best at each one.

Migratory birds, of course, travel long distances between breeding and non-breeding sites throughout the Western Hemisphere. It is therefore appropriate that this year's IMBD theme reflects this reality: "From Tundra to Tropics: Connecting Birds, Habitat, and People."

To participate in an IMBD event - or better yet, to take a curious friend to an event- look at the IMBD

"Explorer's Map" to find a celebration close to where you live:
<http://www.birdiq.com/journey/index.html>

For more information on IMBD, see:
<http://www.birdday.org/>

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FARM BILL RESOLUTION?

House-Senate negotiators reached a tentative agreement on the long-awaited Farm Bill on Friday, 25 April. The provisional agreement on a new five-year Farm Bill was approached after another round of spending and tax cuts, and the establishment of new customs fees to meet budget rules and to win over Republicans, support in the Senate.

Conservation measures in the Farm Bill are deemed crucial to bird-and-wildlife protection. Native prairie, certainly one of this country's most endangered ecosystems, is suffering a heavy loss, since incentives remain in place encouraging conversion to cropland. (e.g., more than half a million acres of native prairie were lost nationwide in 2007.) A proposed provision called Sodsaver is part of the new Farm Bill. It is aimed at discouraging this destruction by removing crop insurance eligibility and other subsidies. Even the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), long considered the centerpiece of Farm Bill conservation, is suffering as rental rates for the program are being outstripped by commodity prices (e.g., rental rates in the Prairie Pothole Region on CRP land average \$31 per acre, while commodity crops are bringing in more than \$150 per acre).

Details are still pending, and although refinements on some policy issues are still being made, the optimistic expectation is that Congress can complete the bill by mid-May.

We hope to have a more thorough report in the June E-bulletin.

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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.