



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

May 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

--

This issue is sponsored by NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC and the wonderful bird and birding books they make available:
www.shopng.com/birdbooks

Table of Contents:

- RARITY FOCUS
• MORE FINDINGS ON LEAD AND CONDORS
• POSSIBLE BIRD SEED CONTAMINATION: NOT TO WORRY
• THAT ALBATROSS NESTING ON MIDWAY
• FEDERAL CONSERVATION & BIRD SPENDING RESULTS FOR FY11
• IBA NEWS: SKAGGS ISLAND SECURED FOR BAY-AREA CONSERVATION
• HELPING PARROTS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY
• TIP OF THE MONTH: DON'T BE AFRAID OF A RAINY DAY!
• WHSRN: A QUARTER CENTURY OF IDENTIFYING VITAL SITES
• WHIMBREL TRAVELS: "HOPE"
• BOOK NOTES: BIRDING UPSIDE-DOWN
• FEDERAL JUNIOR DUCK STAMP CONTEST
• THE QUIZ FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

RARITY FOCUS

A fascinating gull was discovered on 9 April at Kalmus Beach in Hyannis, on Cape Cod, Massachusetts by Keelin Miller. Though it was first thought to be a Lesser Black-backed Gull, things didn't seem "quite right" for that identification. The gull, which was an adult in breeding plumage, seemed larger, chubbier, and paler-mantled than a typical Lesser Black-backed Gull. The identification problem was compounded by the absence of any obvious Lesser Black-backed Gulls for comparison. Following critical photo examination and considerable discussion among birders, opinion leaned toward the conclusion that the gull was actually a Yellow-legged Gull, a casual visitor from Europe. Although the possibility of the gull being a hybrid Lesser Black-backed X Herring was not completely discounted, opinion of most experts seemed to favor Yellow-legged Gull as the most probable identity.

The Yellow-legged Gull is a vagrant from Europe, once considered a European form of the Herring Gull. The species breeds on islands in the eastern Atlantic Ocean, in western Europe, and in the Mediterranean to central Asia. It winters south to the Persian Gulf and Indian subcontinent. If you are unfamiliar with the species, consult a European field guide, the National Geographic Guide (fifth edition) on pp. 206-207, the "big" Sibley on page 207, or the new Stokes guide on pp. 320-321.

Yellow-legged Gulls are rare but annual winter visitors to parts of Atlantic Canada (e.g., St. John's, Newfoundland), but they are even rarer anywhere in the U.S. There are now convincing reports for a number of locations, including Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, DC.

Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, DC.

The gull was very cooperative in the area of Kalmus Beach until the morning of 18 April, when it was last reported. To see photos of the bird taken by Peter Trimble, see:

www.flickr.com/photos/pbtrimble/sets/72157626486857850/detail/

MORE FINDINGS ON LEAD AND CONDORS

There are approximately 200 California Condors in the wild today (California 97, Arizona 73 and Baja California 20), and some of these belong to "experimental populations." Despite serious management efforts to reduce California Condors to the risk of lead exposure, they continue to be accidentally poisoned on a regular basis.

In March, findings presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Toxicology held in Washington DC, confirmed the fact that lead continues to be a primary factor limiting the survival of California Condors in the wild. In a cooperative study conducted by scientists from the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC), the University of Wyoming, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service, it was concluded that ammunition was the most plausible source of this lead exposure.

This study examined 70 blood samples collected from 49 free-flying condors in California. The blood analysis was compared to an examination of 71 lead-based ammunition samples. Employing a technique called lead isotopic composition analysis, the researchers identified the chemical fingerprint of the lead found in condor blood and concluded that about 90 percent of free-flying condors have been exposed to lead-based ammunition.

"For over 100 years we have known that condors can be poisoned when they eat carcasses shot with lead bullets, although facets of the hunting lobby remain unconvinced," said Myra Finkelstein of USCS. "Our findings help refute some of their claims."

Not only did the lead in condor blood match ammunition samples, the study also revealed that toxic lead has a larger impact than previously thought. For example, even at low levels, lead inhibits an important enzyme responsible for making red blood cells in condors. Even in California Condors with low lead levels in their blood, the enzyme's activity was inhibited by 60 percent.

Large-game carcasses, such as mortally wounded deer and elk which evade hunters to die in the wild, and gut-piles left when an animal is cleaned in the field (often with splayed tiny lead particles deposited when a bullet hits the animal) can leave lead behind. These bullets or tiny lead fragments may then be consumed by the condors.

Other findings also point to a persistent lead problem for condors. For example, in 2009 almost half of the condors monitored at one California release site (i.e., Pinnacles National Monument) received clinical treatment for lead poisoning.

Hopefully, these findings may encourage broader concern and stronger compliance with a fairly recent lead-bullet ban in a broad zone across California within areas covering the condor's historic range. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act (AB 821) into law in October, 2007. The bill went into effect on 1 July 2008, banning the use of lead bullets within condor territory, however it seems to be poorly enforced, reportedly due to a lack of funding. See the November 2007 E-bulletin for more details on AB 821:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/novSBC07.html#TOC12

To find a recent story on the current condor-and-lead situation, see:

www.gtweekly.com/santa-cruz-news/santa-cruz-environmental-news/2323-will-hunters-have-to-bite-the-bullet-.html

POSSIBLE BIRD SEED CONTAMINATION: NOT TO WORRY

Last month, the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) announced the results of a study to test the safety of popular wild bird seed. The laboratory analysis showed that all the tested seed was either free from pesticides or fell below levels that would threaten bird health.

The study involved samples taken from four different supply sources across the country: Home Depot, Lowe's, Target, and Walmart. The bird seed was randomly purchased from those stores and then tested at the California Food Safety Laboratory at the University of California, Davis. The laboratory conducted detailed analyses over many months. The investigation was specifically checking for harmful pesticides, such as organophosphate and carbamate insecticides.

"We wanted to make sure that the isolated problem cases in the past were indeed behind us, and as far as we can tell, that is the case. The bird seed producers seem to be doing a good job of producing a safe product," said Dr. Moira McKernan, Director of ABC's Pesticides and Birds Program.

For more details, see here:

www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/releases/110414.html

THAT ALBATROSS NESTING ON MIDWAY

We reported last month that 110,000 Laysan and Black-footed Albatross chicks at Midway NWR perished as a result of the tsunami in early March which were combined with two severe winter storms in January and February. At least 2,000 adults were also killed.

During this time, the status of Midway's one pair of rare Short-tailed Albatrosses raising a chick was unknown. It turns out that as a result of the tsunami, the chick had been washed approximately 100 feet from its nest, but was later

successfully returned by refuge staff. However, the chick's parents were not to be seen in the aftermath of the tsunami. It was hoped that the adults were simply spending an extended period at sea before returning to Midway to feed their youngster. Finally, and with considerable relief on the part of officials, the male Short-tailed Albatross was seen feeding its chick on 23 April.

Here are our reports from January:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/JanSBC11.html#TOC02

and from April:

<http://www.refugeassociation.org/birding/aprsbc11.html#TOC03>

FEDERAL CONSERVATION & BIRD SPENDING RESULTS FOR FY11

The federal budget battle and bird conservation were discussed in the E-bulletin in March and April:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/marsbc11.html#TOC05

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/aprsbc11.html#TOC06

The final FY2011 spending bill, enacted on 15 April, was devastating to bird-related conservation issues, but fortunately less drastic than in earlier proposed versions (e.g., H.R. 1).

Essential programs, such as the funding for the North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA), the State Wildlife Grants, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) were initially recommended for elimination, or drastic reductions, in the original House-passed H.R.1. Instead, they were "only" drastically slashed, with some of these and similar programs receiving cuts of one-third the 2010 levels.

Consider these numbers:

- The North American Wetlands Conservation Fund ended up at \$37.5 million, down 21 percent from FY10 (\$47.65 million), but up from \$0, proposed in the original H.R. 1.
- The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program is to be funded at \$62 million - a reduction of 31 percent from 2010 (i.e., \$90 million) and the lowest level for the program in its 10-year history. This is up from \$0 proposed in H.R. 1.
- Funding for LWCF was put at \$301 million - a 33-percent reduction from last year, but up from \$244 million proposed in H.R. 1.
- The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act was reduced to \$4 million, a reduction of 20 percent from \$5 million last year.
- The Wetlands Reserve Program, a crucial Farm Bill element, is reduced \$119 million from FY10.
- EQIP, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, is reduced \$80 million from last year.
- The Conservation Stewardship Program, another USDA effort, is reduced \$39 million.
- At the agency level, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will have to function with a \$118-million drop in its overall operations budget.

Most of the anti-conservation riders originally attached to H.R. 1 were removed from the final bill. This includes one that would have undercut the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to restore protections for certain wetlands and streams. Still, the final budget bill includes language that would undermine EPA's efforts to reduce pollution from mountaintop coal mining and mercury emissions from power plants; stop the BLM's new Wild Lands Policy (issued in late December and clarifying how BLM lands with wilderness characteristics are to be inventoried, described, and managed); and remove gray wolves from Endangered Species protection in a number of states.

With the battle over FY2011 ended, deep concern mounts over how drastic the budget cuts might be for FY 2012.

For more details, see this summary from the Wildlife Management Institute:

www.wildlifemanagementinstitute.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=521:conservation-programs-dodge-cuts-in-budget&catid=34:ONB%20Articles&Itemid=54

IBA NEWS: SKAGGS ISLAND SECURED FOR BAY-AREA CONSERVATION

For over 50 years, Skaggs Island was a secret and secure naval base, involved in communications and intelligence functions for the U.S. Navy and other federal intelligence organizations. Skaggs Island is located 40 miles northeast of San Francisco, California, near the shore of San Pablo Bay in Sonoma County.

The 3,310-acre site was purchased by the Navy in 1941 and closed in 1993, although high-frequency antennas continued to be used for some time after the official closing.

The island is also one of the largest diked wetlands in the North Bay. The combination of an abandoned federal facility and a complex of wetlands and associated other habitats made Skaggs Island an ideal candidate for conservation. In 2008, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) intervened with legislation when the Navy and the USFWS failed to agree on transfer conditions and when it appeared that the property might end up going to bid for alternate uses. As a result, the property was able to be transferred from the Navy to the USFWS to enlarge the nearby San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge, part of a larger, already existing IBA site.

In 2010, the U.S. Navy demolished more than 100 structures and completed an extensive environmental cleanup of the site, and in late March of this year the final documents were signed to transfer Skaggs Island to the Service. The site will increase the size of the 13,000-acre San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge by a quarter, and will add a much-needed haven in the North Bay for birds and other wildlife. Skaggs Island is essential to San Pablo Bay wetlands restoration because it is the center of the hydrology through which other restoration projects, totaling over 30,000 acres, can be connected. It will link San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge with the Marin Sonoma Marshes State Wildlife Area and

connected. It will link San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge with the Napa Sonoma Marshes State Wildlife Area and numerous other natural marshes and wetland restoration sites currently managed by the California Department of Fish and Game and the Sonoma Land Trust.

"Skaggs Island is a missing piece of the puzzle for restoration in the North Bay, and we're excited to see it become part of the refuge," said Don Brubaker, manager of the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge itself was created in 1974 to protect migratory birds, wetland habitat, and certain birds, such as the "California" Clapper Rail and what may be the largest population of wintering Canvasbacks on the West Coast. You can find details on the San Pablo Bay wetlands IBA here:

<http://iba.audubon.org/iba/viewSiteProfile.do?siteId=155&navSite=stat>

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/

HELPING PARROTS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas has the only accepted established and countable wild populations of Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets in the U.S. (with some outlier released populations in Florida and California). With winter freezes, increasing development, and new landscape practices in South Texas, the parrots and parakeets are losing some of their roosting, feeding, and, nesting sites which tend to be in cavities in dead palm trees.

A plan, starting in Harlingen and led by the RGV Birding Festival and the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society, is aimed at increasing nesting sites, promoting a local ordinance protecting the birds, and conducting surveys to better understand distribution, population size, and behavior. The local ordinance is currently being drafted, the survey implemented, and novel nesting cavities created.

To see a fine story on a very different sort of cavity-nesting project, check:

www.rqvf.org/2011/04/the-great-palm-raising-saga/

TIP OF THE MONTH: DON'T BE AFRAID OF A RAINY DAY!

At this time of year, when spring migration is foremost in the mind of many birders, don't be disappointed if there's the prospect of rain in the forecast. While it's true that rainy weather can put a damper on certain outdoor activities, it's also a fact that a light drizzle or misty conditions, especially when combined with warm temperatures, can produce some outstanding birding opportunities. Since most songbirds tend to migrate at night, foggy, misty, or light rain tends to force migrants down from their overhead nocturnal journeys, occasionally in spectacular numbers. So rather than postpone a day's birding because of less than propitious conditions, go birding anyway. You may be delightfully surprised by what you see and how much you find, even if you get wet while searching.

WHSRN: A QUARTER CENTURY OF IDENTIFYING VITAL SITES

During the mid-1980s, observers across the Americas were beginning to record serious population declines in many shorebird populations. As a result, a conservation initiative called the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) was launched in 1986. The first officially designated WHSRN site in the U.S. was Delaware Bay. Since then, WHSRN has proceeded with the simple strategy of trying to identify and protect key shorebird habitats throughout the Americas. The WHSRN program has currently identified 84 critically important sites in 13 countries, extending from Alaska in the north to Tierra del Fuego in southern South America. For a complete history and background of WHSRN, see here: www.whsrn.org/about-whsrn/history-background

On 9 May, WHSRN will celebrate the 25th anniversary of its first site of Hemispheric Importance, the Delaware Bay.

With this event in mind, Charles Duncan, Director of WHSRN's Executive Office, recently remarked, "The Network has increased awareness about shorebirds and their habitats and cooperation among agencies and member sites. But on its 25th anniversary we must also recognize that the habitats and coastlines that shorebirds depend on are increasingly threatened. Populations of many species are now only a small fraction of what they were when WHSRN was founded. This celebration must also mark a recommitment to conserving these magnificent birds, for their benefit and for ours."

A number of organizations are celebrating the anniversary on the Delaware Bay, and distinguished guests expected to attend include the former U.S. House member for Delaware, Michael Castle. Castle was Delaware's governor at the time Delaware Bay was designated as the network's first site. Henry M. Paulson, Jr., ardent conservationist and the 74th Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, will deliver the keynote address at the event.

WHIMBREL TRAVELS: "HOPE"

Also on the subject of shorebirds and their migrations, it may be particularly instructive to follow the travels of just a single Whimbrel, a bird nicknamed "Hope."

Hope is a female Whimbrel that was captured in Virginia on the southern Delmarva Peninsula on 19 May 2009. There, she was banded and fitted with a satellite transmitter. Since then, Hope has logged more than 21,000 miles (33,000 kilometers), flying between a remote Canadian breeding territory on the MacKenzie River (an IBA site, by the way) near Alaska and a comfortable winter territory on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands!

Last month, on 8 April, Hope returned to Virginia following a 75-hour, 1,850-mile (2,900 kilometer) flight over the Atlantic Ocean. For more details and to see a fascinating route map showing Hope's journeys, see here: www.fws.gov/northeast/news/2011/041411.html

BOOK NOTES: BIRDING UPSIDE-DOWN

All the ads say that THE CROSSLEY ID GUIDE will turn birding upside-down. It may do that for you, or perhaps it won't. Regardless, this new book will get you to take a thoughtful look at a unique way to present bird identification to the public. This guide, currently only to Eastern birds, consists of 640 photographic scenes, each created with superimposed individual bird photos, with a different scene for each species. The bird images were lifted and enhanced from about 10,000 photographs (all taken by author, Richard Crossley), and creatively presented in their most likely to be encountered habitats. For example, most gulls are shown on shorelines, storm-petrels at sea, swifts in the air, meadowlarks in short grasses, and Cattle Egrets in fields following cattle. The presentation is both novel and very helpful, verifying the old saying that a good picture is worth a thousand words. Most plumage variations – sex, age, and season – are shown, and shown well. And to keep the reader sharp and guessing, some are unlabeled on purpose.

Some readers may liken the page layouts to museum-oriented dioramas; others may feel the need to slip on a set of 3-D glasses; and still others will find each page simply a delight to behold. You'll have to see this book to be the judge.

The text and maps are good, but most readers will probably buy this book for the images, not for its other features.

The mere size and weight of the book – even bigger and heavier than the popular "Big Sibley," and weighing in at 3 pounds, 9 ounces – will make carrying it in the field bit of a chore. In fairness, however, a book with such a unique approach couldn't be any smaller or much lighter in weight. Our guess, however, is that Richard Crossley's new guide will certainly travel into the field, at least finding a place on the car seat or in the glove box on many a trip.

FEDERAL JUNIOR DUCK STAMP CONTEST

Abraham Hunter, a 17-year-old student from Vienna, Illinois, won the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest held on 15 April. Hunter's winning picture was a striking image of a pair of Ring-necked Ducks. The contest was held at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum, within a mile of the Philadelphia International Airport. Several hundred school students and local Philadelphia residents were in attendance for the contest.

To see the top three images and a list of the runners-up visit: www.fws.gov/juniorduck/results11.htm

THE QUIZ FOR A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BIRD BOOK

Here's our quick-and-easy quiz for the month where you have a chance to win a quality National Geographic publication. Each monthly quiz question will relate either 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

This month, 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.

Last month's question: What long-billed, cryptic, and early-migrant Eastern shorebird, somewhat secretive and nocturnal, is experiencing declining population due to presumed habitat loss?

The answer for last month: American Woodcock.

Last month's three copies of the ILLUSTRATED BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA (the folio edition of the National Geographic guide) were won by Robert Doster (Chico, California), Mary Harper (Margate, New Jersey), and Chris Welsh (Knoxville, Tennessee). Congratulations to these winners.

The prize for May will be a copy of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BACKYARD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA by Jonathan Alderfer and Paul Hess. This new book was reviewed in April: www.refugeassociation.org/birding/aprsbc11.html#TOC10

You can find more details on the book here: <http://shop.nationalgeographic.com/ngs/product/birding-books/national-geographic-backyard-guide-to-the-birds-of-north-america>

This month's question: Delaware Bay annually hosts thousands of shorebirds every May as they stop to feed on horseshoe crab eggs on their way to their Arctic breeding grounds. What are the four most predominant shorebird species in these annual late spring stopover concentrations?

Please send your answer by 15 May to: birdingbulletin1@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

If you wish to distribute all or parts of any of the monthly Birding Community E-bulletins, we simply request that you mention the source of any material used. (Include a URL for the E-bulletin archives, if possible.)

If you have any friends or co-workers who want to get onto the monthly E-bulletin mailing list, have them contact either:

Wayne R. Petersen, Director
Massachusetts Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program
Mass Audubon
718/259-2178
wpetersen@massaudubon.org

or

Paul J. Baicich
410/992-9736
paul.baicich@verizon.net

We never lend or sell our E-bulletin recipient list.