



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

November 2005

The Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed as a service for 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).

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RARITY FOCUS

In late September, a juvenile Fork-tailed Flycatcher was found near the entrance to the Hornsby Bend Wastewater Treatment Ponds, not far from the Austin Bergstrom International Airport. This species, widespread throughout the Neotropics, has been recorded north of Mexico well over 120 times. It is hypothesized that many of these vagrants actually come from the southern population of Fork-tailed Flycatchers centered in Brazil and Argentina, migrating northward during the austral winter and "overshooting" as far as the U.S. anywhere from June to November, and most often in September and October.

Most of the U.S. records for this species are along the Atlantic seaboard, with a concentration between Delaware Bay and southern Maine. Recently, however there have been multiple observations in Texas, suggesting a source from the range of the generally sedentary southern Mexican and Central American population of Fork-tailed Flycatchers. The bird at Hornsby Bend was often found associating with a flock of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.

Many reports of Fork-tailed Flycatchers in the U.S. are single-day observations - apparently of birds in passage - or observations for just a few days. Fortunately, the Hornsby Bend bird continued for over a month, at least through 26 October.

Birding at Hornsby Bend is on public land owned by the City of Austin and operated as the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant (HBBMP) by the City of Austin Water Utility. The HBBMP is where all of Austin's sewage and yard trimmings are recycled. This facility consists of 1,200 acres of ponds, woods, agricultural fields, abandoned pasture, and 3.5 miles of Colorado River bottom. The City of Austin graciously provides birders access to the site.

For photos (by Steve Matherly) of this juvenile individual, without the long tail-feathers of an adult, see [here](#) and [here](#).

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BIRDING'S MOST SEDENTARY EVENT

On Sunday, 9 October 2005, the 13th annual "Big Sit" took place. The Big Sit was started by the New Haven (CT) Bird Club and is hosted by BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST and sponsored by Swarovski Optik and Eagle Optics.

The Big Sit is like a Big Day or a bird-a-thon in that the object is to tally as many bird species as can be seen or heard within 24 hours. The difference lies in the area limitation - observers must remain inside a 17-foot diameter circle!

People engage in the Big Sit just for fun, sometimes as an education effort in a popularly visited site, or sometimes as fund-raiser for a bird club or conservation effort.

To see details on this year's Big Sit, look [here](#).

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WILL MARBLED MURRELET BE DE-LISTED?

In late October, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) confirmed that it would propose removing the Marbled Murrelet as a Threatened species from the Endangered Species List. Federally listed since 1992, the Marbled Murrelet lives most of its life at sea, but uses giant and old coastal conifers for nesting, laying a solitary egg in a mossy depression on a large branch, often high in the canopy.

The de-listing proposal, which will probably be formalized by the end of the year, will initiate a yearlong evaluation of the bird's status. The proposal is centered on the idea that the 17,000 to 20,000 birds living off Washington, Oregon, and California are not distinct from the nearly 1 million other individuals living off the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska.

Whether the murrelets in the Pacific Northwest represent a distinct population has long been an issue of dispute among environmentalists and the administration, as well as between the regional Service office and D.C.-based officials. In a draft review, policymakers in the Service's Pacific Northwest office concluded the birds were, indeed, a distinct population and therefore warrant continued listing. Moreover, a team of 16 international scientists assembled under contract to the USFWS last year found that the Marbled Murrelet was still declining in North America. The scientists warned that the species was likely to disappear from the Pacific Northwest by the end of this century, particularly if more nesting trees are harvested.

We described early developments in this listing controversy in [October 2004](#).

We will continue provide updates on these developments as they unfold.

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REFINERY BILL AND PUBLIC LANDS

In early October the Gasoline for America's Security Act, commonly know as the Refinery Bill, barely passed the House of Representatives (212-210). Sponsored by Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Barton (R-TX), the bill provided for incentives for refinery expansions by giving the Energy Department "lead agency" designation for the siting of refineries, allowing it to create a timeline for an orderly permitting process, easing Clean Air Act requirements, and using federal funds to compensate oil and gas companies for "unforeseen regulatory or litigation delays" to refinery projects.

Congressman Sherwood Boehlert of New York, among those Republicans who voted against the bill, said it would "weaken environmental laws, interfere with states' prerogatives, and give undue aid to oil companies."

For readers of this E-bulletin, the bill also rang alarm bells, since it would allow the President to designate areas on federal lands around the country (with an emphasis on closed military bases) to become potential sites for new oil refinery construction. Such federal-property sites could include National Wildlife Refuges, National

Forests, and BLM property. The refuge element had a number of conservationists particularly concerned.

Although the bill barely squeaked through the House, it did not make it to the Senate floor. On 26 October, the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee voted 9-9 on the bill, thus stopping legislation that could locate new oil refineries on federal lands, including National Wildlife Refuges. Refuge supporters played a significant role in halting the move.

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MERCURY, COAL, AND BIRDS

Since we've covered wind, ethanol, and biomass energy in the E-bulletin over the past few issues, and since we've just highlighted the issue of oil refineries (above), we thought we'd bring to readers' attention yet another energy consideration: the negative impacts of coal and mercury in the environment.

It all started with loons. Loon numbers in many locations have been slipping. The causes have included water pollution, noisy boats, and lakeshore development. But there is also the issue of fish and crayfish (primary prey for loons) containing high mercury levels. And where does this mercury come from?

Quite simply, the mercury comes from power plants and incinerators around the country, and then is deposited in rain. For years we have known that mercury emitted from coal-fired power plants, industrial boilers, incinerators, and chlorine manufacturing plants falls into lakes and ponds, where the mercury is then easily converted into a toxic form that interacts with bacteria in freshwater sediment.

While the sources of mercury emissions in places such as in the Northeast have declined 40 percent since 1990, coal-burning sources are still the largest single contributor of airborne mercury. The upshot is that New England now has a number of mercury "hotspots" where high mercury levels threaten fish and wildlife. Studies have indicated that Common Loons in the states of Maine and New Hampshire, for example, appear to be raising fewer young than they need to keep the loon population stable. Besides loons, other fish-eating birds - like Bald Eagle, Osprey, and Belted Kingfisher - can also have high mercury levels.

Researchers such as David C. Evers of the BioDiversity Research Institute, however, have painted a much broader picture. In a study released earlier this year, Evers and others have discovered that birds that do not eat fish, such as forest songbirds and coastal sparrows, have also been found to have elevated mercury levels in their bodies.

Indeed, the forest songbird species with the highest level of mercury concentrations in its blood was the Bicknell's Thrush, a high-elevation mountain species that might be considered among the farthest in distance (altitude) from the lakeside habitat of the Common Loon. Apparently when mercury-laden rain reaches mountaintops and moist forest floors, tiny insects take up the mercury, and the mercury is then passed along through the food chain, in this case to the Bicknell's Thrush.

Until now, these terrestrial systems have been completely overlooked. While the nine states in the Northeast examined in this study have or are attempting to put mercury controls in place, there are still over 100 new coal-fired power plants proposed in the U.S.

And as in the case of ethanol and other alternative energy sources, you have to use energy to extract energy! Clearly everyone needs to become more aware of what happens when we turn on the lights.

For a copy of the informative BioDiversity Research Institute report on mercury, see [here](#).

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NAWCA BONUS EXTENDED

Bird conservationists know that the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) is a major funding mechanism for bird conservation. NAWCA was enacted in 1989, and it provides Federal cost-share funding to support the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and other conservation objectives - often through the activities of the bird habitat joint ventures (JVs). NAWCA is funded yearly through Congressional appropriations, most recently at about \$40 million per year.

What most bird conservationists don't know is that a supplemental source for NAWCA funding has been an additional \$7 million from the collected interest generated through Pittman-Robertson funds (the tax on hunting guns and ammo that is distributed to the states).

In early October, President Bush signed S. 1340 into law. This law continues for another 10 years the payment of approximately \$7 million per year in interest generated from undistributed Pittman-Robertson (PR) funds into the NAWCA program.

The legislation was expedited through Congress with Republican and Democrat cooperation, unity that is often missing these days. (The state wildlife agencies were also supportive, helping to move these funds which otherwise might be viewed as "theirs.")

The NAWCA "bonus" is a very creative way to "recycle" interest gained from PR funds back into conservation. If

bird conservationists could only discover some OTHER source of parallel funding to perform a similar function for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (e.g., covering other birds, other habitats, and generally broader coverage), what a bonus that would be!

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CONGRESS APPROACHES ARCTIC REFUGE THROUGH BUDGET

Drilling language for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will probably be included in the Congressional budget reconciliation legislation in the first couple of weeks of November. Including the measure in the budget reconciliation serves drilling supporters in a couple of important ways: it is a way to "find" revenue to justify other expenditures, and it need only pass by a simple majority. (Past attempts to open up the Arctic Refuge to drilling were subject to a Senate filibuster, meaning pro-drilling lawmakers needed at least 60 votes.) Under these new circumstances, the only way to prevent drilling in the refuge is to vote down the budget reconciliation measure. (The fate of drilling is thus tied to other elements in the budget, for better or worse.)

Currently, 95 percent of Alaska's coastal plain is already open to potential oil and gas development. Arctic NWR, representing the remaining 5 percent, is the only place on Alaska's North Slope that remains closed to exploration and development, and remains home to a spectacular diversity of wildlife, including Musk Ox, Polar Bear, Caribou, and approximately 135 species of birds - shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, terns, and songbirds.

Drilling in the Arctic Refuge, of course, has been debated in Congress for decades with the issue becoming virtually an iconic struggle. The issue pits preservationists who say the refuge and its wildlife would be despoiled by drilling, against certain oil companies and other business interests that argue that development is needed to produce more domestic energy and to create jobs.

The Department of the Interior's own assessment (in 1987) concluded that the Coastal Plain is the biological heart of the Refuge, and that wilderness value "would be destroyed by the addition of oil facilities." Moreover, drilling, most observers agree, will not improve America's energy security nor will it lower gasoline prices.

Curiously, and unlike previous Arctic Refuge drilling attempts, there is no explicit requirement to consult with the USFWS in this most recent move by Congressional supporters of drilling; the administrator of the leasing program would be the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This could divorce the mineral development aspects from the biological or wildlife purposes of the refuge, along with the expertise of refuge personnel, which could result in even less protection.

If Congress passes a budget with Arctic Refuge drilling, we could be seeing the start of a new era for our National Wildlife Refuges and, indeed, for all our public lands.

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BANKING ON NATURE

In early October, the USFWS released a 434-page report that shows that recreational use on National Wildlife Refuges generates almost \$1.4 billion annually in total economic activity. The lengthy report, "Banking on Nature 2004: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation," was compiled by USFWS economists. A similar, but less-detailed report, was released in 1997.

According to the most recent study, nearly 37 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2004, creating almost 24,000 private sector jobs and producing about \$454 million in employment income. Additionally, recreational spending on refuges generated nearly \$151 million in tax revenue at the local, county, state, and federal level.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton said, upon release of the report, that "Our national wildlife refuges are not only beautiful places where fish and wildlife can flourish, they are also economic engines for their local communities, providing jobs, customers for local businesses, and tax revenue for local governments." The report also reinforces the travel industry's belief that ecotourism is becoming big business, says Roger Dow, president of the Travel Industry Association of America, who unveiled the report with Secretary Norton. The study measured the economic impacts of ecotourism as well as hunting and fishing.

The report has four main sections. An introduction details the study's overall rationale, outlines its economic concepts, and describes the methods and data sources used. The second section presents 93 sample refuge descriptions, highlighting the activities enjoyed at each refuge, analyzing the regional economic factors involved, and putting the results of this analysis into perspective. The next section discusses the overall results for the sample refuges and extrapolates them to a nationwide estimate. Finally, appendices provide background detail on the economic models used for the refuge estimates and the nationwide aggregation.

While the study is packed with great economic information there are, perhaps, two disappointing aspects:

1. Except for a regional count (with the southeast leading the country with nearly 11 million refuge visitors and more than \$451 million in economic activity), there is little in the way of information on who exactly is using refuges. Through this report, we know nothing about refuge-users age, gender, family income, education, and - dare we add - race. The information may be out there, but it's not in this report.

2. Thorough daily-visitor expenditures for both residents and non-residents were revealed for five "consumptive activities" (freshwater fishing, saltwater fishing, migratory bird hunting, small game hunting, and big game hunting), but all "non-consumptive activities" (general wildlife watching, birding, wildlife photography, wildlife interpretation, wildlife-associated education, etc.) were simply lumped together. In a report that touts the economic advantages of ecotourism, one might have expected more details in these areas.

Still, "Banking on Nature" is fascinating and valuable, and it deserves careful study. You can download a copy of the entire 434-page report from [this page](#).

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ANAHUAC NWR: LATEST WHSRN SITE

Based on its key role for more than 10 percent of the hemispheric population of Whimbrels as well as the presence of many others shorebirds, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge has become the latest U.S. site in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). This was approved unanimously in October by the WHSRN Hemispheric Council.

Participation in WHSRN is an indication of a meaningful, voluntary commitment by landowners, managers, biologists, communities, and local organizations to accept responsibility for the sustainable management of the shorebird site and to collaborate in a constructive way for the benefit of the shorebirds and society.

For more details on WHSRN, see [here](#).

And for details on WHSRN activity outside of the U.S. in October, see [this report](#) on the dedication of the Upper Bay of Panama as a WHSRN site.

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WOODCOCK CAMPAIGN TAKING OFF

As we witness the maturation of our nation's forests, and as farmlands give way to development, conservationists continue to mark the decline of the American Woodcock. In May we reported on a developing Woodcock Conservation Plan with specific recommendations and action plans for reversing the decline of this species' population.

The concern and the work continue. Partners in Flight and the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) have ranked American Woodcock among the highest priority species in need of conservation action within several Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has also named the species as one of a handful of national focus species. At the same time, many states have declared American Woodcock to be a species of significant conservation need within their respective State Wildlife Action Plans.

Habitats used by American Woodcock also sustain other high-priority species in need of conservation action. The Partners in Flight physiographic plan for New England, for example, lists seven other highest-priority birds that require habitats similar to those used by American Woodcock.

Fortunately, the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) has assembled the most sweeping public/private coalition ever created to address habitat improvement for American Woodcock. Over twenty partners, ranging from private landowners to federal agencies, have agreed to an initiative designed to link improvements on public lands with widespread management gains on neighboring and distinct private lands. Partners within the initiative include private forest landowners, the USFWS, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), International Paper Company (IP), state wildlife agencies, and numerous conservation organizations.

The effort is directed at improving management practices, monitoring, and technical assistance to improve American Woodcock habitat. Steve Williams, WMI President, stated that "We are overdue at bringing some focused attention to this suite of species. Our challenge now is to integrate woodcock habitat management into lands that we conserve and restore on national wildlife refuges, and then bring those lessons to the private landowners we work with through the Partners for Wildlife program."

The WMI American Woodcock initiative will launch in BCR 14, the Atlantic Northern Forest region. Moosehorn, Umbagog, Silvio Conte, and Misisquoi National Wildlife Refuges, as well as numerous private and state-owned tracts, will serve as initial demonstration areas.

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SAVE THE ALBATROSS

In early October, BirdLife International and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) launched a new website as part of their ongoing campaign to halt worldwide seabird mortality as a result of longline fishing. The website is supported by numerous additional cooperating organizations. Regular articles, diary pages, and news will appear on the website as it develops.

The website currently includes information about albatrosses, the problems of longline fishing, and proposed solutions to the problem. A wide range of famous people is also giving support for the project, and their

messages will be posted as they arrive. To view the website see [here](#).

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SEABIRD BANDING EXPERTISE?

A few years ago the Pacific Seabird Group was asked by the North American Banding Council to produce a Seabird Banding Manual. If you know someone interested in helping with this effort - including reviewing drafts of the completed document, contributing technical information, or writing particular sections - please contact [Rob Suryan](#) at the Oregon State University Hatfield Marine Science Center.

The final product should be a great resource for both novice and experienced bird banders.

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FREE TRIAL MEMBERSHIP TO NWRA

Coinciding with National Wildlife Refuge Week in mid-October, and the organization's 30th anniversary, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) announced the launch of WILDLIFE REFUGE magazine, a new publication devoted entirely to generating visibility and support for the Refuge System. The magazine is designed to highlight the challenges, opportunities, and threats that the System and individual refuges face.

In celebration of the organization's 30th anniversary, the NWRA is also offering - for a limited time - a one-year complementary membership, which insures future receipt of the magazine. Interested individuals can visit [NWRA's website](#), and click the "Free Introductory Membership"

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You can access an [archive of past E-bulletins](#) on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website..

You can also get other excellent bird-oriented "All about birds" information through an Internet project between Swarovski and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology here: <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

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