



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

November 2006

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RARITY FOCUS

Once considered a rare vagrant to Arizona and California, Streak-backed Oriole has become a fairly regular Mexican visitor over the last decade (see your National Geo guide, page 444-5, or your "big" Sibley, page 518). Despite its regularity north of the border, it is always a thrill to find one of these beautiful orioles, as was the case last month in California.

On the afternoon of Monday, 9 October, an adult male Streak-backed Oriole was found in Zzyzx, California (Yes, that's Zzyzx.). California State University maintains a field station, the Desert Studies Center, at Zzyzx. This facility is a functional oasis in the Mojave Desert about 60 miles east of Barstow. For 30 years Zzyzx was the site of the Zzyzx Mineral Springs and Health Spa, before it began being used by the California State University system in the mid-1970s. Today a consortium of seven CSU campuses manages the 1,280-acre site in a special arrangement negotiated with the Bureau of Land Management.

The male Streak-backed Oriole seemed to spend most of its time in palms near the main pond in the area, or else among salt bushes and tamarisk trees at one or another scattered location within the site. Most observers who made the trip to this isolated locale were fortunate in being able to find the bird, at least through the early morning of Tuesday, 17 October.

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MANAGING FLORIDA SEARCHES FOR ELVIS

In the [October issue](#) of the E-bulletin, we wrote about reports concerning possible Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in the Florida Panhandle.

Starting in December 2005 researchers from Auburn University and the University of Windsor began searching for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers along the Choctawhatchee River. You can read the details of what they found (and didn't find) [here](#).

Almost as important as what they found is the sage advice offered to aspiring woodpecker-seekers. This information even includes some possible future locations to explore for woodpeckers. No one is discouraged from searching for woodpeckers, but the comment is made that if birders spread out their searches, the possible negative impact on any given area would be reduced. Conversely, if birders all crowd into one area looking for woodpeckers, any woodpeckers in the area might be driven out of an area. The interests of the bird are made primary, and some serious birding etiquette issues are raised. [See here](#).

Whether the evidence provided by these recent sightings eventually confirms the presence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers or not, the information presented certainly offers food for thought.

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CUBAN EMERALD ENIGMA CONTINUES IN FLORIDA

In Florida, another situation involving "evidence" vs. "proof" continues to unfold.

Since the 1940s there have been at least a dozen sight records of Cuban Emeralds (*Chlorostilbon ricordii*) in Florida. Alleged sightings have been made during every month except February and December. This species normally occurs only in the Bahamas and Cuba. Most of the Florida reports have been along the Atlantic Coast, but there are also several from Hillsborough County (i.e., the Tampa area). A number of these observations have been accompanied by considerable detail (e.g. Helen Cruickshank in 1964). The problem is that not one of the reports has ever been documented with a specimen or an adequate photograph. Unfortunately there are other vagrant hummingbirds that are large and green that could not be excluded in all these previous reports. As a result Cuban Emerald is not included among the list of birds that have officially occurred in the United States.

Nonetheless, last month another tantalizing report emerged of a large green hummingbird fitting the description of a Cuban Emerald. This report was in the vicinity of the Royal Palm Tennis Courts in Kendall, just south of Miami, a site historically known for its population of Red-whiskered Bulbuls. The report might have represented a female Cuban Emerald, since it was observed perched only a few feet away from a smaller Ruby-throated Hummingbird for comparison.

The bird came and went, not to be seen again, nor to be photographed. Again: a curious report, interesting circumstances, but no proof.

The take-away message from this situation is to keep on looking (and carry a camera)!

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COFFEE AND NON-MIGRANTS

For over a decade conservationists have consistently demonstrated that shade-grown coffee represents important habitat for Neotropical migrants. Less has been written, however, about resident bird species' use of shade-coffee plantations. Earlier this year in the journal *ORNITOLOGIA NEOTROPICAL*, a paper titled, "Avian Reproduction and the Conservation Value of Shaded Coffee Plantations" reported on just such a study.

The four authors examined coffee propagation in Puerto Rico, and demonstrated that shade-grown coffee provides important shelter for resident forest birds. The researchers reported on reproductive activity and productivity of resident avifauna in Puerto Rican plantations and compared their data with similar data from secondary forests. They found 253 nests in coffee plantations and 97 in secondary forests. The likelihood of nest success for vireos, tanagers, and hummingbirds did not differ significantly between secondary forest habitat and the coffee plantations. Similarly, the average number of young per nesting attempt did not differ significantly between habitat types for the four species where there was sufficient data for comparison.

For more details on the article and information on how to get a copy, see the bottom of this [page](#).

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IBA NEWS: RICE CAN BE NICE

There has recently been some interesting discussion about the validity of including rice fields within designated

Important Bird Areas (IBA). Although these are not completely natural habitats, they are clearly important to several groups of birds (e.g. waterfowl, egrets, herons, shorebirds, wetland songbirds), including some that are of serious conservation concern. One of the important issues here is that most of these rice-sites are privately owned.

In some areas where public lands exist as the core of land ownership and where the private neighboring lands serve as a buffer, IBAs can readily be designated. Examples would be National Wildlife Refuges or state-run Wildlife Management Areas that are located within a matrix of privately-held rice fields (e.g., in California, Louisiana, or Arkansas).

These IBA issues are reminiscent of those mentioned when we discussed the Rice and Waterbird Working Group mentioned last month. This group was created to promote the conservation of aquatic birds using habitats associated with rice cultivation, specifically by addressing needs connected to research, identification and promotion of best management practices, and outreach:

<http://www.fws.gov/birds/waterbirds/rice/rice.html>

For additional information about the ongoing IBA program in the United States, coordinated by the National Audubon Society, see this [link](#).

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RECORD NUMBERS OF WHOOPING CRANES DUE AT ARANSAS NWR

Record numbers of the Federally Endangered Whooping Crane are expected to arrive along the Texas coast this season. If migration goes well, 230+ Whooping Cranes, including 40 youngsters, should reach the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, compared to a total of 214-220 last winter. About 10 birds were lost during migration last fall. (Fortunately, shooting deaths of Whooping Cranes are rare, due in large part to efforts by state and federal agencies to make sportsmen and other citizens aware of their protected status. Seven Whooping Cranes from the Texas flock have been shot since 1968.)

The cranes have already started turning up at Aransas Refuge near Rockport, Texas, and they should continue to arrive through mid-December following their 2,500-mile trip from Wood Buffalo National Park in NW Canada. The birds nearly always migrate in small groups of less than six birds; however, they may be seen roosting and feeding with large flocks of Sandhill Cranes during migration.

You can view regular crane updates from Aransas NWR [here](#).

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STAMP PRIZEWINNER

On 8 October, wildlife artist Richard Clifton of Milford, Delaware, won the 2006 Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest in Memphis, Tennessee with a depiction of a pair of swimming Ring-necked Ducks.

Clifton's painting - chosen from among 297 entries - will grace the 2007-2008 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly called the Duck Stamp. The sale of stamps raises approximately \$25 million each year to fund wetland and grassland habitat acquisition for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Ninety-eight percent of the proceeds from the \$15-stamp go toward supporting the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund which secures properties for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

This year's competition was co-hosted by Ducks Unlimited, the Greater Memphis Arts Council, and the Memphis College of Art and was supplemented by a week of public events at the Memphis College of Art. The announcement of the winning artwork helped launch National Wildlife Refuge Week.

Second place in the contest went to Joseph Hautman, who painted a pair of flying Wood Ducks. Hautman, a previous winner for 1992-3 (Spectacled Eider) and 2002-3 (Black Scoter) is from Plymouth, Minnesota. Third place went to Ed Yanok of North Canton, Ohio, who painted a pair of swimming Cinnamon Teal.

You can see their artwork [here](#).

Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps bearing Clifton's winning design will go on sale in late June, 2007, at post offices, National Wildlife Refuges, certain national retail chain stores, and at various sporting-goods stores throughout the country. The Stamp not only allows holders to hunt waterfowl, it also serves as a "free pass" to the limited number of National Wildlife Refuges that charge for entry.

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MIGRATORY BIRD STAMP EFFORTS

In an attempt to increase the value of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp some interesting and creative proposals were recently made by the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV). The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, founded in 1987 to help implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), is a dynamic partnership that functions as a network that seeks to link conservation partners at all levels. Today it has objectives and a structure to deal with the conservation of non-game birds that parallel its

otherwise outstanding regular work that concentrates on waterfowl. The PPJV's recent 2005 Implementation Plan now includes shorebirds, waterbirds, and landbirds, as well as waterfowl.

The PPJV suggestions for the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp that were sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last month included ideas for strengthening refuge support (where stamp funding is spent to acquire habitat) and plans to seriously increase stamp marketing efforts. The suggestions included increasing and standardizing National Wildlife Refuge entry fees, posting the acreage-acquisition percentages at refuges and federal WPAs (Waterfowl Production Areas) that are the result of stamp revenue, using the full name of the stamp when possible, increasing the "shelf-life" of the stamp, increasing the size of the stamp (to allow for the inclusion of more art), and providing an increase in advance public information about where the stamp dollars go before such funds are actually committed, thus allowing for local acquisition campaigns to take place, whenever or wherever appropriate.

These ideas were presented as ways to possibly make the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp more appealing to a broader bird-conservation constituency than the waterfowl community that has already been supporting the stamp since the 1930s. These suggestions all deserve further exploration.

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NEW U.S. POSTAGE STAMPS FEATURE FLORIDA WETLAND BIRDS

In the area of standard postage-stamps - as opposed to the functional bird-habitat stamp discussed above - there is a new habitat sheet of stamps (eighth in the "Nature Of America" series) that was released last month. It is titled "Southern Florida Wetlands," and it depicts native flora and fauna of the Everglades and southern Florida wetland habitats. This is perhaps the "birdiest" of this stamp series to date, with such species as Roseate Spoonbill, Great Egret, Snail Kite, White Ibis, Wood Stork, and Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow all beautifully depicted by artist John D. Dawson.

When you next buy postage-stamps, you might want to try these. By doing so you are helping to raise an awareness of birds, while at the same time letting your mail-recipients know you are interested in birds and their conservation.

For more details and an image of these attractive stamps see this [link](#).

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NWRA REFUGE PHOTO CONTEST

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) has launched its second annual Refuge Photo Contest - a digital photo contest designed to showcase America's national wildlife refuges.

Images may be of birds, mammals, insects, fish, other animals, plants, people, or simply refuge scenery; in short, almost any aspect of a National Wildlife Refuge can be submitted for this contest. The contest submissions must be made by 15 January 2007.

Judges will be Maria Cecil (editor of WILDLIFE REFUGE magazine and former editor of DEFENDERS magazine), Jim Clark (nature photographer, writer, motivational speaker, and instructor), and Karen Hollingsworth (professional nature photographer). Two rounds of judging will select the winning entries. The first round will select up to 200 images to be included in the NWRA Refuge Image Library. The second round will result in the selection of the top prizewinners.

Prizes will include items from Steiner Binoculars, Trek Technologies, Swarovski Optik, Wild Bird Centers, and Houghton Mifflin. Also, each photographer submitting an entry will receive a complimentary one-year membership to the NWRA.

Click [here](#) for contest procedures, rules, and other details!

And [here](#) to view the current images in the NWRA Refuge Image Library.

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REFUGE BIRDING ACTIVITIES

The Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 recognizes that "compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the [National Wildlife Refuge] System." As such, a group of birders, bird-industry practitioners, and avi-tourist experts has been asked by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide some feedback on birding on Refuges. The birders team's chairman is Jon Andrew, Chief of Refuges from Region 4 (Southeast).

Members of this new team first met in late September to discuss the Refuge System's conservation of migratory bird habitat strategy. An effort was also made to explore the group's experience with strengthening a bird-conservation and bird-appreciation constituency, and encouraging awareness of birds' needs through quality wildlife dependent recreational opportunities.

The Refuge System is increasingly interested in educating Americans about the importance and value of

conserving our nation's birds. Key refuge staff want to know how their current bird-recreation and conservation efforts are faring on NWRs, as well as how they are contributing beyond their boundaries. For example, how does the Refuge System contribute to regional birding trails, local nature festivals, and neighboring communities?

If you have particular insights or concerns in this area, you are welcome to pass your thoughts along to either of the E-bulletin editors (see the end of the bulletin for our e-mails). We will make sure your concerns reach the Refuge Birders Team.

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NOW TRACKING MARBLED GODWITS

In our [September issue](#), we brought to your attention a website for following migrating Long-billed Curlews:

We mentioned that Marbled Godwits would be the next satellite-site to come on line.

Recently, Adrian Farmer (USGS) and Bridget Olson (USFWS) have created a website that provides information about the movement of Marbled Godwits that were marked with satellite transmitters at Great Salt Lake (Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge). This winter, if all goes as planned, an additional godwit should be marked on the Marismas Nacionales in San Blas, Mexico. The new website is found at: <http://www.fort.usgs.gov/Resources/GoGodwits/>

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MEGA-BIRD-CARNIVORE ANNOUNCED

We began this E-bulletin by discussing the potential for discovery - Streak-backed Oriole, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and Cuban Emerald. We end with the wonder of discovery.

In late October, paleontologists at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County released an amazing find. Apparently, a curious teenager in Argentina has discovered a fossil skull belonging to the largest bird ever found - a swift, flightless predator that was 10 feet tall and weighed perhaps 400 pounds. Apparently the bird pursued its prey across the plains of Patagonia 15 million years ago. As reported in the 26 October edition of the journal, NATURE, the skull, tapering to an impressive and powerful beak, belongs to a previously unknown offshoot of extinct birds known as phorusrhacids, or "terror birds." These birds most likely preyed on rodents that once grazed on South American savannas and were the size of sheep.

Luis Chiappe, paleontologist and director of the museum's Dinosaur Institute, said that this remarkable creature is now the largest bird known to science, with a skull larger than that of a horse. Until now, scientists thought that these unusual flightless birds became more portly and less agile as they evolved into bigger and bigger carnivores. To the contrary, the slender leg and foot bones found with the immense skull more closely resemble those of a typical running bird.

An Argentine high school student, Guillermo Aguirre-Zabiala, found the skull two years ago among rock outcroppings in his village east of Bariloche. The teenager was so motivated by his discovery that he changed his course of study from psychology to paleontology and earth science.

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BOOK REVIEW: NEOTROPICAL COMPANION IN SPANISH

Last month, the Spanish-language translation of John Kricher's highly acclaimed book, A NEOTROPICAL COMPANION, was sent to the printer. Distribution will begin shortly.

This has been a major effort on the part of the American Birding Association's , Birders' Exchange, and it represents the culmination of some most impressive coordination. The author (John Kricher), the publisher, (Princeton University Press), and the illustrator (William E. [Ted] Davis, Jr.) all graciously waved payment or royalties following the completion of this project. An impressive team of volunteer translators was recruited from across Latin America, and editors were found to make for linguistic, stylistic, and scientific consistency. In addition, major financial assistance, including from the U.S. Forest Service International Program, was secured to expedite the project.

Birders' Exchange now plans to distribute several thousand of these books gratis to our ornithological counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean.

You can find details on the project's dedicated team of volunteer translators [here](#).

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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.