



**SWAROVSKI BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN SWAROVSKI BIRDING
COMMUNITY**

Information, communication, and inspiration on birds, wildlife, and nature

October 2005

This E-bulletin is distributed as a joint effort between Swarovski Optik of North America (SONA) and the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). You can access [an archive of past E-bulletins](#) on the NWRA site.

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RARITY FOCUS

On 17 September, a unusual medium-sized plover was found at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, in Wakulla County, in northwest Florida. The bird's identity was in question, with Lesser Sand-Plover (aka Mongolian Plover), Greater Sand-Plover, and even Collared Plover in contention.

For the next few days, the bird continued to be observed, with the consensus agreeing that it was, indeed, a Lesser Sand-Plover. The Lesser-Sand Plover (formerly called the Mongolian Plover) is a medium-sized plover with gray upperparts, white underparts, a bright rusty breast-band and nape. The head has brown-gray cap, and thick black eye stripe broken by a white forehead. The throat is white with a black border. Winter adults and juveniles lack breast bands.

The individual at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge was found in the far end of Stoney Bayou Pool near the entrance to the refuge, where the levee recently was breached during Hurricane Dennis. On most days the bird was found about an hour after sunrise and a few hours after high tide.

The plover was observed at least through the morning of 21 September, to the delight of many birders who studied it.

This species normally breeds in central and northern Eurasia from the Pamir Mts. (Tajikistan) eastward to the Asian side of the Bering Sea and southward to western China and Tibet. In North America is a migrant in the western Alaska: in the western Aleutians, the Pribilofs, St. Lawrence Island, and the Seward Peninsula. It breeds, perhaps irregularly, in western and northern Alaska. The species has been a casual migrant along the Pacific coast south to California, and an accidental in Alberta. Eastward, however, there have only been a few records, all since the late 1970s: Louisiana (1977 and 1986), Ontario (1984), New Jersey (1990), and Rhode Island (1999).

Photos of the St. Marks refuge bird are found [here](#).

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IVORY-BILLED WHITE RIVER SUIT

In order to protect the habitat of the recently rediscovered Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the National Wildlife Federation and the Arkansas Wildlife Federation filed a legal action in early September in federal district court to halt construction of the controversial Grand Prairie Irrigation Project.

The complaint claims that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) violated the law by not completing a thorough enough survey of the project's potential impact on woodpecker habitat as required under the Endangered Species Act.

"This project is designed to draw 158 billion gallons of water from the White River each year, effectively draining the wetlands habitat where the Ivory-bill was first sighted," said David Carruth, a National Wildlife Federation board member and president of the Arkansas Wildlife Federation. Construction of a major pumping station - about 20 miles from where the first recent Ivory-bill sighting was reported - has continued without interruption.

The legal action asks the court to set aside the findings that the Grand Prairie Irrigation Project poses no risk to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, to order a formal Endangered Species Act consultation and an environmental assessment on the project, and to enjoin the Corps from further construction on the pumping station until the required consultations and analyses are completed.

For background information, click [here](#).

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IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER SIGHTING PROTOCOL

Meanwhile, there has been an effort to establish a protocol to report sightings of Ivory-billed Woodpecker. The USFWS and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology have announced the establishment of an e-mail address (ivorybill@cornell.edu) and an associated [web site and report-form](#) to communicate sightings of the woodpecker.

This information is being collected to explore any promising leads - from the areas around the White River and Cache River National Wildlife Refuges, as well as from other locations. The USFWS has also established a second e-mail address (ivorybill@fws.gov) where the public can submit questions or comments about the recovery of the species.

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DOWNWIND OF HORICON

In early September, the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin affirmed its approval of a large wind-farm just east of Horicon National Wildlife Refuge when it denied a petition for rehearing. The wind turbine project has been the source of controversy in the area for many months because of its potential threat to wildlife and its proximity to the Horicon Marsh. The turbines may now be constructed as close as two miles from the marsh, an Ramsar wetland of international significance. The project area will cover 32,400 acres, consisting predominately of farmland.

Horicon Marsh System Advocates (HMSA), a local group, had filed a petition on 3 August with the commission, citing concerns about the impacts on wildlife at the nearby Horicon Marsh. Other organizations had joined HMSA in expressing opposition to the project, including the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the Audubon Society, and the American Bird Conservancy.

This case has been watched closely since it pits rival conservation forces in contention, ostensibly "clean energy" vs. "safe wildlife." Nevertheless, those who tried to have the project physically pushed back - closer to four or five miles from the marsh - were not opposed to wind power per se, but stressed the potential damage of close proximity (e.g. to waterfowl and cranes using the fields close to the marsh).

When the governor, Jim Doyle, would not intervene, the Public Service Commission rejected the appeal. Local opposition, however, continues to be strong, and more legal battles are in play.

At the same time, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study released mid-month stated that wind power does not appear to be responsible for a significant number of bird deaths in the context of other sources of avian mortality. Yet, findings in the GAO study also suggested that some state and local officials may not have the expertise necessary to determine whether a proposed wind farm would harm wildlife. The report recommended that federal officials take a more active role in assisting state and local officials to analyze the impacts of bird and bat deaths caused by wind turbines.

Clearly, the whole wind-power issue is highly complex. Different suites of bird species raise different sets of problems: grassland species, nocturnal migrants, grouse, raptors, waterfowl, cranes, and seabird (seaducks). This is not a "one-size-fits-all" situation, pro or con. It is highly nuanced, with the element of specific placement being the crucial variable.

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ETHANOL, BIOMASS, AND BIRDS

If exploration into wind-energy can be a lesson for bird-conservationists that "all green energy is not necessarily equal," there are probably parallel lessons developing for those crops planted to create alternate energy. Ethanol, currently used as a blend additive in petroleum-based fuel, can be made from corn and other starches and sugars. Biodiesel, can be made by combining alcohol (usually methanol) with vegetable oil, animal fat, or recycled cooking greases. It can be used as an additive to reduce vehicle emissions (typically 20%) or in its pure form as a renewable alternative fuel for diesel engines.

One problem with the corn-to-ethanol program is that it is often perceived to be a politically motivated effort that may result in no net energy, depending on the price of petroleum. Another problem with ethanol or soy biodiesel is that given a potential surge in demand, increased production could actually accelerate the loss of native grassland habitat (e.g., in the prairie pothole region). More isn't necessarily better when you consider soy fields or corn fields. (One researcher estimated that if all U.S. cars could use pure ethanol, corn would have to cover practically the entire U.S. land surface.)

On the other hand, biomass can have some real advantages. Researchers have claimed that the use of biomass fuels could reduce coal use by 5% in some areas and would have the potential to greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), for example, has proven to yield more biomass per unit area than other herbaceous energy crops, and it can provide habitat for numerous priority species of grassland birds.

Switchgrass is a native prairie plant that grows to about 8 feet tall. Since the plant is a perennial, it greatly reduces soil erosion, especially on steep slopes unsuitable for corn and other row crops. The dense mat of roots stores up to 80 percent of the carbon contained in the plant. Depending on the height of the switchgrass, species such as Grasshopper Sparrow, Bobolink, Sedge Wren, and Northern Harrier will use the fields.

Perhaps the corn-soy-ethanol-biomass-switchgrass conundrum could be resolved if we could somehow stuff switchgrass-fuel into our automobile gas-tanks!

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM AWARDS

The National Wildlife Refuge Association opened nominations for the 2006 National Wildlife Refuge System

Awards. These Awards, sponsored by the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, honor outstanding accomplishments by Refuge Managers, Refuge System Employees, Volunteers, and Friends Groups.

Think back over the past year, evaluate what has been accomplished for the Refuge System, and consider taking this opportunity to recognize the dedicated people whose achievements were instrumental in strengthening our National Wildlife Refuges. Nominations are due no later than 30 November 2005.

Award recipients will receive a commemorative plaque, a certificate, a monetary award (\$1,000 for Refuge Manager, Employee and Volunteer awards, \$2,000 for Friends Group), and paid travel expenses to the award presentation at the 71st North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, 22-23 March 2006 in Columbus, Ohio.

For more details and a nominations form, click [here](#).

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NEW MIGRATORY BIRD STAMP WINNER

This year, competing bird artists were asked to feature one of five species for the 2006-2007 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp competition: Brant, Northern Shoveler, Ross's Goose, Ruddy Duck, or Canada Goose.

The contest winner was announced on 15 September in Memphis, marking only the second time in history that a woman has won the competition. Sherrie Russell Meline of California submitted her painting of Ross's Goose, selected out of more than 230 entries in this year's contest.

Sherrie Russell Meline's artwork has been chosen for more than 30 state waterfowl stamps, and she will soon begin work on a project creating waterfowl stamps for the Canadian provinces.

For the top entries in the contest, see [here](#).

Ninety-eight percent of the proceeds from the annual \$15-stamp goes into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which secures wetlands for the National Wildlife Refuge System and associated Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). The new stamp will go on sale on 1 July 2006.

For background on the stamp, its history and purpose, see [here](#).

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WLA GAINING MOMENTUM

Last month, we reported on the interest in initiating a new Wetlands Loan Act to secure \$400-million worth of wetlands (fee title and easement) through a loan based on the future sales of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation [Duck] Stamp. The logic of the proposed WLA would be to secure wetland/grassland complexes while they still exist and at today's prices. See [here](#) for last month's report.

There have been a number of organizational resolutions in favor of the new WLA since then, of which the most interesting would connect the formation of a fresh Wetlands Loan Act with innovative efforts to sell more stamps to a broad birding-and-conservation community (e.g., at least two migratory bird joint ventures - Upper Mississippi & Great Lakes JV and the Prairie Pothole JV - have passed such resolutions).

Stay tuned for more developments.

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CAN A CALIFORNIA CURRENT JOINT VENTURE BE BUILT?

Over a dozen migratory bird joint ventures serve as self-directed, partnerships that implement on-the-ground bird-conservation for a region to include biological planning and prioritization, project development, monitoring, evaluation, and funding. They have been highly successful, and they cover much of North America, including, recently, parts of Mexico.

The "JV model" has been much discussed in bird-conservation circles, and some forward-thinking sectors of the bird-conservation community have posited the vision of a sea-based JV. Recently, the Point Reyes Bird Observatory has sought to initiate a California Current Joint Venture (CCJV). The CCJV would be a non-regulatory, science-based coalition to support sustainable management and conservation of the California Current Large Marine Ecosystem. The CCJV concept aims to be a cooperative, voluntary, partnership modeled after other successful migratory bird joint ventures.

PRBO has paved the way by announcing the publication of the California Current Marine Bird Conservation Plan (CCS Plan) available [here](#).

One can only hope that this innovative approach can address the vital issues impacting the health of seabirds, their prey, and their environments throughout the California Current.

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NEW WEBSITE FOR JOINT VENTURE

The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) was established in 1987 as one of the original six priority Joint Ventures under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. This ambitious Joint Venture has expanded its efforts, not only aiming to protect, restore, and enhance high priority wetland/grassland habitat to help sustain populations of waterfowl, but also serving the needs of shorebirds, waterbirds, and prairie landbirds.

As such, the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, has served as a model for successful bird-conservation partnerships. Last month, the PPJV unveiled its [new website](#). It's worth a look.

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STATE-BASED ACTION PLANS CROSSING FINISH LINE

Each state wildlife agency has been tasked with the development of a proactive Wildlife Action Plan to conserve wildlife before they become rare and more costly to protect. These Wildlife Action plans are to be turned in to the USFWS at the start of this month.

The plans offer an unprecedented opportunity to get the state wildlife agencies to deliver conservation for all species, not simply the game species they have traditionally attended. So far, the states have been submitting Wildlife Action Plans creatively designed to identify and prevent wildlife conservation problems before they get any worse.

The state wildlife agencies can't do this alone. They need to leverage the implementation of the Wildlife Action Plans through state and federal partner agencies, non-governmental organizations, foundations, business, and other alliances often through the "Teaming With Wildlife" efforts across the country. Only in dialogue can the state wildlife agencies identify and address the conservation issues. As is, the plans stand as the culmination of years of work by field-biologists, active sportsmen, wildlife conservationists, and other members of the community.

For those involved in the "bird plans," in the migratory bird joint ventures, in refuge support groups, in community organizations, these Wildlife Action Plans are the ideal conservation-delivery vehicle for birds and other species.

As the Wildlife Action Plans are implemented by the states, the opportunities to promote a comprehensive "national wildlife conservation system" increases. For more details on the intent of the plans, see [here](#).

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ESA BATTLE JOINED, HOUSE YIELDS

Readers of this E-bulletin have probably followed the rapid developments at the end of September leading to the passage of Congressman Richard Pombo's (R-CA) inaccurately-titled Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2005. On 29 September, the House of Representatives, by a vote of 229-193, passed the most sweeping changes in the Endangered Species Act in over 30 years.

Among the bill's most disturbing changes are the elimination of mandatory habitat protections in favor of loose and voluntary measures, the elimination of oversight by experts in the registering of hazardous pesticides, the ability of political appointees to overturn science-based decisions, and the potential to break the Act's budget by accelerating exorbitant payments to developers who plan projects on ecologically valuable habitat.

Opponents of the bill stated that it would make the extinction of species much more likely, that species like Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and California Condor would not have been saved if this bill had been on the books instead of the original ESA, and that the 59 National Wildlife Refuges created for endangered species since the ESA's enactment in 1973 could be put in jeopardy.

Many Congressional opponents of the bill thought that the ESA could be made more efficient, but they claimed that the "Recovery Act" would gut the ESA by giving far too much power to property owners and by diminishing government authority. A group of Democrats and moderate Republicans (e.g., Congressmen Gilchrest [R-MD], Miller [D-CA], and Boehlert [R-NY]) offered an alternative that would strengthen the recovery plans, eliminate the payments to landowners for blocked developments, and create a scientific advisory board. This alternative had been broadly favored by many conservation organizations, but was narrowly defeated in the House (216 to 206).

The bill now goes to the Senate where its passage is currently unlikely.

To see how your House member voted on the bill, click [here](#).

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PUERTO RICAN FOREST WILDERNESS MOVES AHEAD

There is actually good news from Congress, too. As we reported in our August E-bulletin, Wilderness designation for a part of the Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico passed the U.S. Senate in July. See [here](#) for our report.

Last month, the Caribbean National Forest Wilderness Act, designating the 10,000-acre El Toro area within the National Forest as Wilderness, also passed the House. The bill awaits some final resolution in the Senate

concerning minor differences and then presidential signature.

The same year that President Theodore Roosevelt was designating the very first National Wildlife Refuge (1903), he established the 5,116-acre Luquillo Forest Reserve, later to become the Caribbean National Forest. At 29,000 acres it is currently the smallest forest in the entire National Forest System. Located 25 miles east of San Juan, the forest features 50 varieties of orchids, 240 native tree species, and the Puerto Rican parrot, among other birds. (Biologists estimate that this parrot's population has declined from a million at the time of Columbus's arrival to less than 100 today.)

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BIRD FLU VIRUS WORRIES

As we approach the winter season, the season for flu, it's instructive to review a few points, especially since we can't help but hear regular news on the potential impact of bird flu.

The bird flu impacts birds, which is simple enough. Its principal victims have been chickens - more than a hundred million killed either by the virus, H5N1, or in sweeping - and often fruitless - control efforts. Some experts have suggested that the virus has traveled in the guts of wild waterbirds - geese, ducks, heron, and even shorebirds - which might have picked up the infection from farms. (Domesticated ducks may be the most vexing participant in Asia. Unlike chickens, infected ducks will behave normally - swimming, waddling, preening - while they spread the virus in their droppings.)

The flu only rarely infects humans and does not normally spread from person to person. The H5N1 virus has killed about 65 people in four Asian countries - more than 40 in Vietnam - since it was first detected in 2003. The flu is contracted through contact with sick birds - usually poultry - not humans.

The H5N1 virus has not changed in a way that would allow for widespread human infection. So far, studies show that this virus is not particularly good at passing from birds to people, let alone from one person to the next. Sustained transmission is not quite yet in the cards, its step across the species barrier tentative.

This is all good news. Now for the troublesome points:

The virus produces severe disease, killing about half of those few people seemingly infected.

Flu viruses are prone to mutation and exchanging genetic material when they infect an animal together. An ordinary human flu virus and the bird flu virus just might mix genes, creating a new type of dangerous human-bird flu virus.

If the virus were to mutate, scientists said they would not know precisely how to combat it until after the fact, when they would be able to study its composition and exactly how dangerous it was. It could take researchers four to six months to develop a vaccine to protect against the virus, by which time tens of thousands - or millions - of humans could have become infected. (Tamiflu, effective against avian flu in clinical trials, has been stockpiled in some countries due to World Health Organization recommendation. Still, it is unclear if this medication will be the right fit.)

Bottom line: H5N1 has pandemic potential, but it is not a pandemic virus. The situation is worthy of concern, but not panic.

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BROWN TREE SNAKE IN OKLAHOMA

As you may know, shortly after World War II, Brown Tree Snakes (*Boiga irregularis*) were accidentally transported to the island of Guam and became established. Over the past half century, this snake has wreaked ecological and economic havoc on the island, causing the extinction of about half Guam's native bird species (e.g., Mariana Fruit-Dove, White-throated Ground-Dove, Guam Flycatcher, Rufous Fantail, and Cardinal Honeyeater) and millions of dollars of damage from power outages. They will also enter homes and inflict venomous bites requiring medical attention. Since their establishment on Guam, Brown Tree Snakes have been known to stow away on departing cargo ships and air flights. There has been an effort to patrol all planes leaving Guam for some time. As an invasive species, the Brown Tree Snake could cause enormous damage if new populations were to become established.

You can imagine our surprise when we heard of the accidental arrival of a Brown Tree Snake in Oklahoma.

A stowaway Brown Tree Snake was captured on 12 September at the McAlester Ammunition Plant in southeastern Oklahoma. The snake was discovered in a shipment of military supplies that left Guam in June. Base personnel capture and euthanized the snake, which was then shipped to the USGS Fort Collins Science Center in Colorado where it was positively identified. The approximate three-month journey from Guam to Oklahoma demonstrates the invasive characteristics of the pest, which survived without food or water.

Of course, this does NOT mean the snake will establish itself in the U.S. mainland, but it does suggest that the resilience of the species is remarkable.

For background on Brown Tree Snakes and Guam, visit these pages:
<http://www.mesc.usgs.gov/resources/education/bts/resources/faq.asp> and
<http://www.fort.usgs.gov/resources/education/bts/impacts/birds.asp>

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REFUGE WEEK COMING UP

Finally, National Wildlife Refuge Week is celebrated this month - 9-15 October. It's a great opportunity to showcase the country's 545 National Wildlife Refuges, their contributions to the conservation and recovery of wildlife, and the chance to experience outdoor wildlife-associated recreation and appreciation. The Refuge System's approximately 100 million acres are home to 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, and more than 1,000 species of fish, let alone the many invertebrates, plants, reptiles and amphibians. For a listing of specific Refuge Week events, see [here](#).

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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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