



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

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

September 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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AMONG KATRINA LESSONS

It has been difficult to prepare this month's E-bulletin, given the continuing disaster unfolding in New Orleans and beyond. The events and the human suffering take your breath away. There is little we can say other than to remind readers that there have been previous warnings about an event of this magnitude delivered initially by Mother Nature. As an example, we recommend an article that appeared in the October 2004 issue of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, "Gone with the Water." This article clearly addresses the predicted consequences of the someday loss of marsh habitat south of The Big Easy. We suggest a long and hard look at [this link from August 2004](#)

[this piece](#) from almost a year ago.

The loss of this natural habitat - "the hardest-working marsh in America" - does not lead to a natural disaster as much as it leads, inevitably, to a human disaster, that is, in fact, what we are watching unfold.

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RARITY FOCUS

Last month we reported the late-breaking news of a mega-rarity, a Hornby's Storm-Petrel seen off Southern California, on 2 August. This potential first North American record could be our regular monthly rarity, except that it came and went in three minutes! (We usually like to highlight birds that multiple observers have been able to visit and revisit over the month.) The very good news is that, despite its ephemeral appearance, the Hornby's Storm-Petrel was skillfully photographed, and the image can be viewed [here](#).

An additional rarity focus for August is a Crescent-chested Warbler, reported mid-month in Miller Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains, near Sierra Vista, Arizona. Crescent-chested Warbler, a species normally found from northern Mexico south to Nicaragua, has been seen in the U.S. about six times, all since 1983. Except for one likely report in the Big Bend area of Texas, all records have been from southeastern Arizona.

This most recent Crescent-chested Warbler was found along the Miller Canyon Trail upstream from the popular Beatty (of hummingbird fame) property. For at least a few days, the bird spent much of its time high in conifers, often traveling in a mixed-species flock.

This is a great season for birds in Southeastern Arizona. In the Huachucas alone, there have been other exciting rarities, including White-eared Hummingbirds visiting the feeding station at the Beatty's Guest Ranch in Miller Canyon, at least two Aztec Thrushes in Carr Canyon, and a Berylline Hummingbird being seen daily, although irregularly, at The Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve.

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IVORY-BILLED SOUND EVIDENCE

At the top of everyone's list of most wanted North American rarities must be the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Happily, additional convincing evidence continues to mount concerning the species' existence in Arkansas.

At the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) meeting held late last month in Santa Barbara, California, audio recordings were played publicly for the first time, recordings that Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology researchers had collected and reviewed electronically. There were 18,000 hours of recordings, made from equipment placed in various moist woods and swamps near the Cache and White Rivers in Arkansas last winter. Out of these thousands of hours of recorded sounds, researchers found about 100 characteristic "double-knocks" that resemble those of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Although not "proof," this is compelling evidence of the bird's continued existence. The fact that a recording from 24 January revealed a distant double-knock, followed by a very similar and closer at hand double-knock less than four seconds later, strongly suggested the possibility that two Ivory-billed Woodpeckers may have been communicating with each other.

The recordings also captured nasal tooting calls similar to those characteristic of the woodpecker, but ornithologists have not been able to state conclusively that the tooting calls captured in recordings were not those of Blue Jays.

Even so, the recordings, made over many months at the White River National Wildlife Refuge, just south of Cache River, indicate that a potential breeding population could still exist. "We felt all along that the White River was probably the core of the bird's habitat and it was dispersing out," said Sam Hamilton, southeast regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "It gives you chill bumps to think about that vast bottomland hardwood being certainly home to more than one bird."

Speaking at the AOU meeting, John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology said: "This bird has this mythic position in natural history in North America. The idea that we could bring it back, and bring back that forest with it, is an idea that has a lot of power with Americans - that we haven't completely blown it."

You, too, can listen to a sample of these amazing sounds from [this page](#).

You should also know that the latest issue of NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS (Vol 59, #2) contains some fine articles on the woodpecker, including an overview of recent Arkansas sightings, information on Ivory-bill searches in Florida in 2003, and some future possible forest management protocols.

What's crucial for the future for all Ivory-billed enthusiasts is probably included in three primary and related goals:

- to save habitat in the area - not only the immediate areas around the White River and Cache River

- National Wildlife Refuges, but elsewhere in the broader region,
- to foster appropriate behavior by those devotees visiting the locations where Ivory-billed Woodpeckers have been reported (i.e., cooperation with searchers, managers, and others with a stake in the habitat), and
 - to use the entire experience as a model for 21st century conservation (e.g., the Big Woods Conservation Partnership is managing the search for the rare woodpecker, state and federal agencies are addressing management and endangered-species-recovery responsibilities, and a number of parties are looking at ways to increase habitat security).

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CALIFORNIA CONDOR PROBLEMS

It was only about twenty years ago that the chances for California Condor survival seemed almost hopeless. Since then, daring approaches, solid science, hard work, and a spirit of optimism have buoyed chances for the condor's positive future.

With healthy appearing experimental populations flying free, it seems as though we may have turned the corner, or at least approached the corner, for this species.

Lead bullets in the environment (i.e., in carrion) have been seen as the only significant impediment to condor population growth, while other things have certainly been looking up.

Last month, however, researchers at the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in California had to remove a condor chick from the nest of male #21 and female #192. The chick appeared to be underdeveloped and was losing feathers; however, once in hand, the bird to have something impacted in its crop and gut.

After transporting the chick to the Los Angeles Zoo, and following a three-hour operation, an astounding amount of material was removed from the ventriculus and proventriculus of the condor chick. The following items were among the debris removed from the chick: 4 bottle caps and a screw top, 3 electrical fittings, 5 washers, 13 22-caliber shell-casings, 1 38-caliber shell-casing, a shotgun-shell, several pieces of plastic bags, about a quarter cup of broken glass and a similar amount of broken plastic, a few small pieces of fabric, 4 small stones, a metal bracket, a piece of wire, and a few small pieces of rubber.

Fortunately, it did not appear that any of this remarkable collection of detritus perforated the gut, and currently the chick appears to be doing well.

Does this mean that all adult condors are attracted to ubiquitous shiny objects and will bring them back to their nest for their chicks? Or does this simply mean that male #21 and/or female #192 have this tendency? If the first option is the case, then the species is clearly in deep trouble, since these sorts of objects are virtually everywhere in a condor's environment. If the second is the case - with this unfortunate chick simply having "idiot parents" - then we should remain hopeful.

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POSSIBLE HOPE ON WNV AND SAGE GROUSE

University of Wyoming researchers announced a breakthrough last month. For the first time, they found a few infected Greater Sage-Grouse that apparently have survived West Nile Virus. Of 50 birds recently tested, five show West Nile virus antibodies, indicating they survived infection. In a past experiments sage-grouse that were given even tiny doses of the virus all died.

Todd Cornish, veterinary pathologist for the University of Wyoming, said "I suspect that in the field, most infected birds do die and only a few survive. That's how biology works."

Still, this is a glimmer of hope for a species that is under assault, both by habitat pressures and WNV. For our previous coverage on sage-grouse and WNV, see [this link](#).

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NEOTROP ACT MOVEMENT AND COUNTDOWN

As we mentioned in previous editions of this E-bulletin, the fate of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act rests with the 109th Congress. The Act is due to expire after 30 September.

Fortunately, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act of 2005 was introduced in the House as H.R. 518 and in the Senate as S.1410. These two similar (but not identical) bills are moving, but moving slowly. There have been hearings in the House on the subject, and the bill has already passed the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Happily, \$4 million of FY 06 funding for the current Neotrop Act can

still be implemented, even without reauthorization, since there is an appropriations law.

In spite of this, bird conservationists need to maintain continuity in their Act, especially since a number of improvements in the Act, essential for the development of integrated bird conservation in North America and throughout the hemisphere, need to be made. Foremost among the proposed improvements would be to increase the funding level by FY 09 (e.g., \$10 in the Senate version, \$15 million in the House version), adjust the fund-matching requirements from 3-1 to 1-1, and allow for coverage in Canada.

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TRANSPORTATION BILL ROLLS ACROSS FINISH LINE

Many conservationists will recall when both the Farm Bill and the Transportation Bill were perceived, rightfully we might add, mainly as pork-delivery mechanisms. Today, although the Farm Bill continues to be a pork provider, it is also much more than that, with important conservation measures included within it (e.g., CRP, WRP). Fortunately, conservation organizations are increasingly beginning to recognize that the Transportation Bill (also called the Highway Bill) also has the potential to promote conservation, specifically elements for bird conservation.

After more than a two-year delay, the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users was finally signed by President Bush on 10 August. While this six-year \$286.4-billion bill still includes plenty of pork, it also includes some significant benefits for wildlife and for wildlife refuges.

Specifically the bill includes support for scenic byways, transportation enhancement, refuge roads, and wildlife planning benefits.

Scenic byways and transportation enhancements include acquisition and creation of scenic easements, vistas, and landscapes; construction of visitor centers and viewing areas; conversion of rail-to-trail facilities and birding-trail possibilities; wildlife passages (ameliorating fragmentation for wildlife movement); and a variety of other worthwhile projects.

The Refuge System will get \$29 million annually for roads, which is a considerable increase over previous years' funding of about \$17 million annually. For refuge roads, the final bill reflected the improved Senate numbers and wording of the bill: \$29 million annually, interpretation (signage and information) as an allowable transportation enhancement, and the inclusion of recreational trails besides the standard roads, parking lots, and bridges. There is also a proposal for a new program of alternative refuge transportation possibilities. This long-needed refuge package is a real success for refuges, especially since every dollar spent out of transportation funding means a potential dollar saved out of refuge operations and maintenance budgets.

A number of bird-oriented groups, many operating through the Bird Conservation Alliance, called for these adjustments. The groups included the American Bird Conservancy, the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, New Jersey Audubon Society, Illinois Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Tennessee Ornithological Society, Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The 21 organizations comprising the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) and traditional hunting and sportsmen's organizations also pushed very strongly for the refuge roads program.

Congress also included in the final bill provisions to include wildlife conservation in transportation planning. Currently, highway projects are planned, funded and designed without ever considering the potential impacts to wildlife and habitat. This process often leads to construction delays, lawsuits, and unnecessary loss of habitat. Under the new law, transportation planners will consider habitat locations at the outset of planning in order to avoid building roads in sensitive areas, and concentrating more on improving existing roads and highways instead of necessarily building new ones.

"This is historic," said Trisha White, Director of the Habitat and Highways Campaign for Defenders of Wildlife. "For the first time ever, wildlife will be one of the first things considered when building roads, instead of the last."

While creative elements in the Transportation Bill are increasingly being identified, there is still plenty of pork contained therein, there is still resistance, and there have been some conservation reversals. In the area of resistance, for example, provisions for funding the eradication of roadside non-native invasive plants were removed. Nonetheless there may yet prove to be something of a silver lining to the once completely dismal Transportation Bill.

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WHITE/BLACK-BACKED WAGTAILS LUMPED

In the 46th supplement to the AOU's checklist in the July 2005 issue of THE AUK, we see that two wagtails have been "lumped" or more precisely "re-lumped."

been "lumped," or more precisely, "re-lumped."

In the early 1980s, the AOU "split" the White Wagtail into two species - White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba* - occurring in North America as a nester on the northwest coast of Alaska) and Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla lugens* - occurring in North America as a migrant through the western Aleutians). Previously the "Black-backed Wagtail" had been considered a subspecies of White Wagtail.

Both forms have also occurred as rarities on the West Coast of the lower-48 states, mainly in fall and winter. Their specific identity during these seasons, however, has almost always been problematic.

The original split of the White Wagtail was based on studies by Russian workers, L. Stepanyan (1978) and A. Kistchinski (1980) who suggested that only limited hybridization existed between the two taxa. Most European authorities, however, failed to agree and did not recognize the forms as distinct species. Recent genetic work by Gary Voelker (2002) also recommended that they be treated as a single species.

Following a re-evaluation of new research information, the AOU Checklist Committee proposed that the evidence no longer supports the fact that the wagtails represent two distinct species and opted to once again consider them as a single species, White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*).

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SNAIL KITES IN FLORIDA SLIP

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is keeping water levels in Florida's Lake Okeechobee too high, according to a suit filed last month by the National Wildlife Federation and its Florida affiliate.

Corps policy is reportedly impacting the federally endangered Snail Kite by drowning many of the lake's marshes and reducing the number of apple snails (*Pomacea* sp) available for the kites to eat. Conservationists argue that Lake Okeechobee should be kept between 12 and 15.5 feet above sea level, as recommended by state wildlife scientists, instead of the 13.5 to 17 feet, which is the current Corps policy.

Lower water would be healthier, argue policy opponents who claim that the Corps should release small amounts of water year-round instead of its current tactic of making massive releases. The conservationists want the court to declare the Corps' actions illegal under the Endangered Species Act and order the Corps to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a step that could result in binding requirements for the Corps to protect Snail Kite habitat. Also requested is a prohibition that the Corps stop doing anything else on the lake "that further destroys or degrades" the habitat.

Snail Kite numbers have recently plummeted by over 50 percent - from 3,577 in 1999 to 1,610 in 2003.

Conservationists have accused the Corps and South Florida water managers (not named in the suit, however) of keeping Lake Okeechobee high to ensure a plentiful water supply for the surrounding sugar industry and other agricultural interests. The Corps' commander in Jacksonville said his agency is trying to be fair to all interests while dealing with a lake swollen by this spring's rains, pollution stirred by last year's hurricanes, and communities throughout Central and South Florida irate about excess water.

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STAMP AND WETLAND PROPOSAL - WLA

In the early 1960s, Congress passed the Wetlands Loan Act (WLA). The intent was to borrow against projected future revenue from the sale of the "Duck Stamp" purchased by hunters and other conservationists. The WLA was extended twice, but was allowed to sunset in the late 1980s.

A new Wetlands Loan Act is being contemplated which would again tap into funds from the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (i.e. "Duck Stamp") and potentially double the federal dollars spent each year on wetlands and grasslands on which a great many waterfowl and other birds depend.

The proposal, currently supported by some key governors and also looking for some champions in Congress, would borrow nearly \$400 million against future stamp revenues. The new WLA legislation, if passed, would place the borrowed money into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. This would enable the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to advance land acquisitions (fee title or easement) for vital national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas that could be either too difficult, or too expensive, or simply no longer of use to waterfowl and other wetland-oriented birds in the future.

The beauty of this proposed new Wetlands Loan Act would be its capacity to preempt wasteful habitat destruction and accelerate land conservation efforts. Such an opportunity should not be missed.

The only drawback in the proposal is that it sidesteps one vital issue. Rather than discussing how to sell more stamps to a broader constituency, the idea is predicated on advancing loans based on future stamp sales. This

avoids the important question of future marketing, and actually mortgages future sales of the stamp, rather than addressing the reality of the current flat or declining stamp proceeds.

Proponents of a new WLA would well to combine its ability to address the grave wetland habitat situation with a creative drive to sell more stamps.

For background on the original WLA, you can look [here](#).

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SIX TROUBLESOME, SIX SUCCESSFUL REFUGES CITED

A new report, "Beyond the Boundaries," by the National Wildlife Refuge Association presents an urgent need to devise strategies that conserve lands outside national wildlife refuges. Finding that lands and waters surrounding refuges - called buffers in the report - actually have more agriculture, subdivision and other human activity than the national average, the report describes a dozen refuges - six threatened and six rescued - that graphically illustrate why Americans need to take swift action.

The six threatened National Wildlife Refuges described in the report are Pocosin Lakes (NC), Horicon (WI), Stone Lakes (CA), White River (AR), Alaska Maritime (AK), and Desert (NV).

The six rescued National Wildlife Refuges in the report include Sacramento (CA), Minnesota Valley (MN), Lake Umbagog (NH/ME), Tensas River (LA), Red Rock Lakes (MT), and Lower Rio Grande Valley (TX).

Many of the refuges mentioned in the report both troublesome and successful, are Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Most are also popular birding, wildlife-watching or visitor-oriented locations. Indeed, two of the threatened locations, Horicon and White River NWRs, are mentioned elsewhere in this E-bulletin this month. At Horicon, a proposed 32,400-acre wind farm is being considered at a location deemed to be too close to the refuge for the safety of birds, while at White River the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is constructing a pumping station capable of sucking water out of the river and into reservoirs at the rate of more than 1,600 cubic feet per second in order to ensure the survival of area rice crops.

The twelve sites were named for either imminent threats, or for having successfully averted threats through creative strategies. Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, said, "Since many of the lands within buffer zones are privately held, we must work closely with landowners to ensure the long-term protection of these national treasures."

The NWRA is urging Congress and the Administration to implement five specific solutions to address the situation:

- strengthen incentives for private landowners to practice conservation;
- conserve more land through acquisition and easements;
- allocate more funds at the state level;
- conduct more research to determine priorities; and
- establish preventative systems for shipping disasters near refuges.

The full "Beyond the Boundaries," report can be found [here](#).

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HORICON UPDATE

For many months, a proposed wind-energy facility just east of Horicon National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin has generated controversy. Unfortunately, it pits two conservation values against each other. - the development of non-fossil-fuel energy sources and the protection of valuable refuge habitat.

The project proposes that 133 wind turbines be built by Forward Energy and that they be located on over 32,000 acres as close as 2 miles from the refuge. (The company actually wanted to locate turbines as close as 1.2 miles from the refuge boundary and is still pursuing that option.) These areas are zones where waterfowl, cranes, and other waterbirds regularly fly or feed.

Horicon Marsh is made up of a NWR in its northern two-thirds and a State Wildlife Area in its lower third. The marsh is also designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance (for which there are only 20 in the U.S.). We outlined the issues in our [May 2005 E-bulletin](#).

Most wildlife-oriented organizations have called for a wind farm buffer of 4 or 5 miles, based on a Wisconsin DNR-associated study done in 1999, so a July announcement of a 2-mile turbine set-back by the Wisconsin Public Service Commission was a disappointment.

There has also been an effort to appeal to Wisconsin's Governor Jim Doyle, asking that he:

- Require that adequate studies be completed before construction begins.
- Re-establish a wind power advisory committee to establish responsible statewide guidelines.
- Set a construction moratorium on wind farms at all sensitive locations in Wisconsin until guidelines are in place.
- Push back the controversial Horicon buffer beyond two miles to four or five miles, allowing construction beyond that limit only.

[Late-breaking news: The Wisconsin Public Service Commission has refused to re-consider their decision. This action will surely have implications on the future of wind-power and wildlife-proximity issues. The governor can still act.]

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QUAIL FOREVER LAUNCHED

Using as its model the success of Pheasants Forever (PF), a new organization, Quail Forever (QF), has been launched. Quail Forever will build on PF's 23-year track record of successful local chapter development, localized habitat initiatives, and advocacy for the new organization.

PF's successes include 300,000 habitat projects benefiting 3.4 million acres for wildlife since inception. PF has also participated in over 800 land acquisitions.

In forming Quail Forever, PF plans to deploy its current organizational model - localized decision-making with lean, low-overhead central administration. Plans for the new organization include recruitment of additional wildlife biologists and a phased chapter development plan.

PF is outlining a phased approach to establishing the Quail Forever operation. Initial focus will be on states with both pheasant and quail hunters and habitat. (PF already has a strong presence in states with shared habitat. Those same states have also been among the most successful at enrolling acres in the bobwhite buffers component of the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program - CRP.) Quail Forever's expansion will be based on chapter interest and available resources. In the organization's first year, Quail Forever has set a goal of forming 50 chapters and recruiting 12,000 members to work on quail habitat projects.

For more information, visit [this link](#).

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MORE BIRDS IN ART

It's that time again. The annual "Birds in Art" exhibit has its opening in September at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin. The exhibit, run since 1976, begins on 10 September and ends on 13 November.

The museum aims to present first-rate contemporary artistic interpretations of birds and related subject matter. Approximately 100 artworks in all media (other than crafts and photography) are displayed. Of these, about 60 will also go on an extended national tour.

General details found [here](#).

To buy a catalogue and to see an impressive list of artists this year, click [here](#).

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WHITE HOUSE SUMMER CONSTRUCTION SPARES SWALLOWS

While the first family spent August at the President's ranch in Crawford, a number of White House renovations took place. Among them was a project to restore the masonry and stucco in the West Colonnade leading from the main residence to the West Wing. But before the President left for Crawford, he asked if the work would disturb the nesting Barn Swallows at the top of one of the columns. "He wanted to make sure the birds would still be there when he got back," says Laura Bush's press secretary. To protect the birds, White House carpenters constructed a box around the mud-based nest - probably a second nesting for the season given the late date - on a column that remained unmolested until the birds were big enough to fly away.

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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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