



THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN

September 2011

This Birding Community E-bulletin is being distributed to active and concerned birders, those dedicated to the joys of birding and the protection of birds and their habitats.

You can access an archive of past E-bulletins on the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA):
www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

Table of Contents:

- [RARITY FOCUS](#)
- [FINDING LONG-BILLED MURRELETS](#)
- [NEW SEABIRD SPECIES DISCOVERED IN HAWAII](#)
- [ACCESS MATTERS: OPEN FIELDS, OPEN QUESTION](#)
- [IBA NEWS: KIRTLAND'S WARBLER RESULTS](#)
- [NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY: 24 SEPTEMBER](#)
- [IOWA LEAD-SHOT POLICY REVERSED](#)
- [EVOLUTION TOWARD A SOCIETY FOR ORNITHOLOGY?](#)
- [TIP OF THE MONTH: PREPARE FOR OCTOBER'S BIG SIT!](#)
- [BOOK NOTES: A SHOUT PAEAN TO OUR FIELD GUIDES](#)
- [THOSE BETTER HIGHWAY DOLLARS](#)
- [REVISITING BIRD-CONSERVATION CUTTERS: AN UPDATE](#)
- [CARBON OFFSET BIRDING CORRECTIONS](#)

RARITY FOCUS

On 24 July, Sara Burch and Jacob McCartney photographed what was identified as a Gray-hooded Gull at Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York. The bird's identity was confirmed by others on 29 July. This bird was a real shocker!

Gray-hooded Gulls in the Western Hemisphere are usually found no closer to the United States than Ecuador in the west, and southern Brazil in the east; however, there is one previous record for the U.S. discovered in 1998, when a bird was found at Apalachicola, Florida, on a boat landing near the headquarters for St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge:
<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/NAB/v053n03/p00337-p00339.pdf>

There are also vagrant records for Panama and the Galapagos Islands, but those are about as close as the species had ever previously come to the U.S. at least until the Florida bird in 1998 and the Coney Island bird this year.

Once relocated on 29 July, between Nathans food stand and the ferris wheel, the gull was observed for a number of days along the Coney Island boardwalk and beach. Often accompanying Laughing Gulls, the gull could often be found near a fresh-water palm-tree sprinkler, on the roof of a restroom pavilion, making visits to a cluster of trash cans near Ruby's Bar & Grill, or sitting on the water or beach close to the amusement park.

It was last reported on the morning of 4 August, having happily entertained the many birders quick enough to make it to Coney Island in time to see the bird.

For the original and fascinating photos taken by Sara Burch on her iPhone (yes, her iPhone!), see here:
www.flickr.com/photos/44202767@N00/with/5987219569/

Colleagues at eBird provided an excellent summary of the sightings of the gull, its habits, and the excitement it engendered, along with excellent photos, here:

<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/ebird-and-the-gray-hooded-gull>

Did this bird arrive under its own power to the New York City area? Who knows? But the interest it generated even reached the pages of THE NEW YORK TIMES:

www.nytimes.com/2011/08/01/nyregion/gray-hooded-gull-rare-bird-in-us-is-apparently-on-coney-island.html

FINDING LONG-BILLED MURRELETS

On the other side of the continent, came a very different report of a very different sort of bird, this time the enigmatic Long-billed Murrelet. Until 1997, this bird was thought to be a subspecies of the Marbled Murrelet, but then it gained full species status, at which time attention to this cryptic species increased considerably.

Long-billed Murrelet is thought to breed only in coastal areas surrounding the Sea of Okhotsk in Russia, northeastern Hokkaido Island in Japan, the Kuril Islands, and possibly the Commander Islands west of the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea. In Alaska, the Long-billed Murrelet is considered casual, with coastal records from Kodiak, Adak, and the Pribilofs, mostly in May, and curious remains once were found northeast of Denali National Park. There are also sporadic and unexplained reports along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, mainly between July and December, with an equal number of surprising reports of single individuals found far inland in North America far from the sea.

As birders have begun to pay closer attention to the possibilities of finding this species, more of the birds have been found, especially during winter when the species is easier to identify.

This summer was different, however, for several observers in Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska.

First, Karl Stoltzfus, a birder and local water-taxi guide reported and photographed a single Long-billed Murrelet on 2 June. Stoltzfus had previously observed individuals he thought were Long-billed Murrelets on the waters of Kachemak Bay over the last decade, but photographs at that time were never secured.

This year, a Fish & Wildlife Service team of surveyors conducting a marine transect found multiple birds of this species probably three murrelets on 23 July. Two behaved as if they were a pair, and photographs were taken.

More searches were initiated, and at least one Long-billed Murrelet was relocated by multiple birders on 6 August, in roughly the same area where the three birds were originally found and photographed.

A fine summary and photograph of these June and July observations written by Kathy Kuletz, one of the original USFWS surveyors, can be found at:

http://alaska.fws.gov/index_murrelet.htm

In the past, the odd Marbled Murrelet may have escaped closer scrutiny in these surveys, but as Kuletz writes: "Because of uncertain species definition we may never know if the occurrence of the Long-billed Murrelet in Kachemak Bay is a new, or previously unrecognized, event but at least we now have some baseline data for comparison to future surveys." Stoltzfus adds, "I suspect in the future we will all be paying a little closer attention when identifying murrelets here in Kachemak Bay."

NEW SEABIRD SPECIES DISCOVERED IN HAWAII

Scientists were astounded recently to discover a bird species in Hawaii new to science. The discovery was based upon a tiny shearwater specimen obtained in a petrel colony during the Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program in 1963 on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Careful reexamination of the nearly 50 year-old specimen by ornithologist Peter Pyle and subsequent DNA analysis by Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute scientists Rob Fleischer and Andreanna Welch determined that the shearwater specimen is unique in both physical characteristics and DNA from the otherwise very similar Boyd's Shearwater. Genetically, however, the shearwater is apparently totally unique from other living shearwater species. It has been assigned the name Bryan's Shearwater (*Puffinus bryani*) in honor of Edwin Horace Bryan Jr., who was curator of collections at the B.P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu from 1919 until 1968.

While it is tempting to believe that Bryan's Shearwater may nest (or have nested) in the Midway Atoll region, the fact that the sole known specimen was discovered there is inconclusive evidence since many seabird species regularly prospect colonies far from their primary breeding sites. In other words, the existing specimen could have simply been a prospector from a colony elsewhere in the Pacific. In any case, this discovery will put marine scientists on notice to the fact that perhaps this obviously rare species might still exist.

For more information about Bryan's Shearwater, see:

<http://smithsonianscience.org/2011/08/bryan%E2%80%99s-shearwater-new-seabird-species-from-northwestern-hawaii-discovered/>

ACCESS MATTERS: OPEN FIELDS, OPEN QUESTION

We have previously written about Open Fields, most recently in July, when we described the distribution of funds to enhance public access on privately owned lands via Open Fields, officially known as the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) in the Farm Bill:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/julsbc11.html#TOC15

Although for the last 25 years, taxpayers have wisely invested in conservation of our most valuable agricultural and

Although for the last 25 years, taxpayers have wisely invested in conservation of our most valuable agricultural and private lands through the Farm Bill, there is now a drive afoot to reduce funding for public access. U.S. House of Representatives recently approved unprecedented cuts to Farm Bill conservation programs. The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), and Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program were slashed so heavily that the new VPA-HIP may actually cease to exist.

VPA-HIP, or Open Fields, was only included in the 2008 Farm Bill in response to public support, especially support from hunting and fishing organizations. The benefits, however, are not limited to hunting and fishing. All sorts of wildlife-associated recreational opportunities can be facilitated through Open Fields, including birding, wildlife photography, and hiking. Open Fields is intended to expand existing state access programs and to encourage new walk-in programs. Unless Congress hears from real and potential recreational users, Open Fields will likely be eliminated.

IBA NEWS: KIRTLAND'S WARBLER RESULTS

Kirtland's Warbler habitat in Michigan stretches over more than a dozen counties in the state, all of which are managed specifically for the purpose of sustaining this Endangered warbler species. As such, they constitute an Important Bird Area (IBA) for the state:

<http://iba.audubon.org/iba/viewSiteProfile.do?siteId=3064&navSite=state>

Last month, we discussed access and opportunities to view Kirtland's Warblers in Michigan, and we specifically mentioned that the nesting-season survey results for the Endangered species were about to be released:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augsbc11.html#TOC06

A summary of this year's Kirtland's Warbler census results follows:

In central Michigan there were 1,770 singing males counted, while in Michigan's Upper Peninsula there were an additional 35 birds (an all-high record for the UP). The first nests found outside of Michigan were found in 2007. This year in Wisconsin, there were 21 singing birds, and in Ontario, Canada, there were two.

The total of 1,828 singing males is a record high, just eclipsing the previous high of 1,826 in 2009. This is a far cry from the first formal census of singing males started in 1971. At that time, the species was at the edge of extinction, with only 201 singing males counted, all of them in central Michigan.

Clearly the Jack pine habitat favored by Kirtland's Warblers in Michigan qualifies as an IBA, further emphasizing the significance of IBA status.

For additional information about IBA programs worldwide, including those across the U.S., check the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program web site at:

www.audubon.org/bird/iba/

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY: 24 SEPTEMBER

The Important Bird Area we've just described in Michigan is made up of an aggregate of 27 publicly-owned lands and one privately-owned parcel. This is another reminder of the importance of public lands as underscored in the recently-published State of the Birds report which we described in June and which this year focuses on the importance of public lands to bird conservation:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/junesbc11.html#TOC08

Another way to acknowledge and highlight the importance of public lands is to support National Public Lands Day (NPLD) to be held this year on Saturday, 24 September.

On this day, volunteers will give their time and energy to improve and enhance the public lands we all enjoy. This year, NPLD is supporting the efforts of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" connection to healthy activity. The idea is to promote volunteerism as a healthy activity, but also to encourage individual site managers to host and/or promote recreational activities such as nature hikes, runs, bike rides, and other physical activities.

There is no good reason why birding projects shouldn't be part of this mix.

A number of local parks, refuges, and forests may be hosting a clean-up, maintenance, visitor access, educational, or restoration project on public land near you. You can find out more here:

www.publiclandsday.org

IOWA LEAD-SHOT POLICY REVERSED

Iowa's elected state officials are currently ignoring science and the recommendation of a state commission charged with setting policies and rules related to hunting.

As we wrote last month, the Iowa Natural Resource Commission recently voted to require dove hunters to use nontoxic shotgun pellets instead of shot made from lead:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augsbc11.html#TOC07

In mid-August, however, the Iowa Legislatures Administrative Rules Review Committee, struck down that anti-lead provision.

Right now, at least for this hunting season in Iowa, its only voluntary action by dove hunters that will slow the contamination of the environment by not using toxic lead shot.

More details can be found here, in a recent editorial from the DES MOINES REGISTER:

www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20110820/OPINION03/308200014/0/BUSINESS04/?odysey=nav%7Chead

EVOLUTION TOWARD A SOCIETY FOR ORNITHOLOGY?

At the July meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, a grand reorganization was unanimously approved which would retire the AOU in name and combine the organization with a number of other pre-eminent ornithological groups.

A new professional ornithological organization, tentatively called the Society for Ornithology would supposedly have a more hemispheric scope and also take a larger role promoting research in bird conservation and management across the Americas.

THE AUK, bimonthly journal of the AOU, would be replaced by four new journals, housed at a single editorial office and appearing online monthly and in a hard-copy form quarterly. The door is now open for other societies to pursue this proposed merger. A draft business plan is being developed for presentation to the AOU Council and other potential partner groups by February 2012.

More details can be found here:

<http://ornithologyexchange.org/articles.html/> /community/aou-and-other-societies-to-evolve-into-new-society-for-ornithology-r46

TIP OF THE MONTH: PREPARE FOR OCTOBER'S BIG SIT!

Our tip this month is to consider participating in The Big Sit! We've mentioned this birding event in the past, but not for at least a few years.

The Big Sit!, that annual noncompetitive birding event held in October hosted by BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST and founded by the New Haven (Connecticut) Bird Club, is scheduled this year (the 17th annual event) to take place on Sunday, 9 October. The premise of The Big Sit! is simple: find a good spot for birding, and identify as many birds as possible from inside a 17-foot-diameter circle within a 24-hour period.

It's an easy-going event, perfect for families, refuge/park visitors, and casual birders, as well as a fine way to learn about birds. Bringing non-birding friends to a Big Sit! near you is a good way to introduce them to birding. Moreover, some bird clubs, nature centers, and bird observatories also use The Big Sit! as a fund raiser, not unlike a sitdown bird-a-thon.

To obtain details about The Big Sit!, find the location of a local circle near you, or to register your own site, see:

www.birdwatchersdigest.com/site/funbirds/bigsit/bigsit.aspx

BOOK NOTES: A SHOUT PAEAN TO OUR FIELD GUIDES

When your two editors started birding as youngsters (many years ago!) there were basically two standard field guides available: a Peterson Guide and the venerable Pough Guides. That's it! (This was even before the much appreciated Golden Guide [Robbins, Bruun, Zim, and Singer] burst onto the scene in 1966.)

Today we are awash with a cornucopia of bird identification field guides. Not only do we have Peterson guides recycled and reworked from Peterson's original grand sources, we have lots of others, including (in no particular order) the Sibley iterations, the Kaufman Focus guide, the new Stokes Birds, the unique Crossley ID guide, and the Smithsonian (Floyd), NWF (Brinkley), and National Geographic guides to North American Birds. (Indeed, the National Geographic guide will release its sixth edition this month, and we expect to provide a brief review next month.) There are special regional ID guides, too, and at least one fine book for young birders in Eastern North America (Thompson).

We won't even dip into the many bird-family ID guides that are available, covering everything from shorebirds and gulls to warblers and waterfowl, and more

These guides are simply amazing and represent a tribute to the energy and growth of bird watching in North America over the years. And we are only talking about non-electronic, hard-copy field guides!

We would like to take this opportunity to briefly pause, tip our hats, and thank all those writers, artists, and photographers who have made the identification, appreciation, and enjoyment of birds accessible to millions of fans through the years.

Bravo!

THOSE BETTER HIGHWAY DOLLARS

There are some huge and potentially ugly parts to the multi-year Highway Bill, portions that specifically lay out roads where they shouldn't be, facilitate unnecessary wetland draining, and damage other valuable habitat. But there are also some creative and innovative portions to this huge bill, such as the Transportation Enhancements (TE) and Recreational Trails programs.

If you've ever birded, or biked and birded, along a rail-trail - a former railroad bed that has been banked for future use and made into a walking or biking trail - then you know about a good example of one these innovative corners buried within the much larger and often dismal Highway Bill.

One would hope that such better sections of the Highway Bill would survive the slash-and-burn trend coming out of

One would hope that such better sections of the Highway Bill would survive the slash and burn trend coming out of Washington DC these days.

Well, think again.

The current extension of the Highway Bill (the seventh extension in about two years) expires at the end of September. Unfortunately, there are significant moves afoot in Washington DC to eliminate all future dedicated funding for Transportations Enhancements, all in the name of drafting a smaller and less expensive Highway Bill. (By the way, previous bill extensions surpassed the current seven extensions, with 13 extensions in recent mentor.)

Since 1991, if you've ever obtained birding access as the result of a rails-to-trails opportunity, you benefitted from TE features in the Highway Bill. Transportation Enhancements have also included such elements as the acquisition of scenic or historic easements; inventory, control, and removal of non-conforming and illegal outdoor advertising; the planting of wildflower meadows along roadways; the mitigation of runoff pollution; and making provision for wildlife connectivity. You can find the dozen core TE provisions embedded in the Highway Bill described here: www.enhancements.org/12_activities.asp

Many of these are both bird-friendly and birder-friendly. As long as the House and Senate are approaching different versions of Highway Bill change, all the TEs are under threat.

REVISITING BIRD-CONSERVATION CUTTERS: AN UPDATE

And now for those sweeping bird-conservation issues. Last month, we described the onslaught of conservation-cutting measures that reached the floor of the U.S. House. Among other things, we described the assault against the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the State Wildlife Grants, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the Refuge System Budget that were all contained within the Interior funding bill (H.R. 2584):

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augsbc11.html#TOC02

After making a final deal on the nation's debt ceiling, Congress recessed for the month of August, leaving amendments to the spending bill unfinished. When the House returns to session in September, the members will likely not have enough time to complete work on the Interior bill. Instead the bill will probably be bundled with several other spending bills and will be presented as a large omnibus package.

It's unclear if funding and policy amendments already made in H.R. 2584 will be included in any comprehensive package that will be developed in the fall. The stripping of restrictions on the Endangered Species Act, for example, or the minor additions to LWCF, may actually be revisited in the final package.

For bird conservation, it's not a pretty scene. For example, even with the LWCF bump upward from the original H.R. 2584, LWCF appropriations for FY 12 still stand at less than one-tenth of the \$900 million that Congress is actually authorized to spend on LWCF each year.

It is becoming increasingly clear that overall funding levels for conservation - and especially bird conservation - will be threatened in the coming years as discretionary spending continues to slip away.

An error that we made in the E-bulletin which may actually help to highlight the gravity of this situation was the claim made last month that if H.R. 2584 passed unchanged, it might necessitate the closure of 140 National Wildlife Refuges. We were wrong. The correct number would "only" be 128 NWRs.

No, it's not a pretty scene.

CARBON OFFSET BIRDING CORRECTIONS

We also wish to point out that last month we mentioned that the Carbon Offset Bird Project (COBP) at the upcoming Midwest Birding Symposium would be the very first specifically tailored to bird watchers and birds at a U.S. birding event. What we specifically wrote about the project is found here:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/augsbc11.html#TOC11

It has subsequently been brought to our attention that the Biggest Week in American Birding (in northwest Ohio) had a CarbonNeg effort (to benefit bird habitat in Ecuador) in the spring of 2010 and that last month's Tucson Bird and Wildlife Festival, run by the Tucson Audubon Society, had a similarly creative carbon-offset project to benefit local low-income solar power installation and the enhancement of urban bird habitat.

It's encouraging to see these efforts reaching the public and driven by concerned birders.

You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:

www.refugeassociation.org/birding/birding5.html

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

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

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