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

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

August 2004

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Greetings!

Welcome to the fourth of our "Swarovski Birding Community E-bulletins" for North America. This communication is appearing every month, and it is intended to keep friends and associates informed about bird news and the developing plans for the Swarovski Birding Community here in North America.

Just for your information, the Swarovski Birding mission is as follows:

- * To enhance peoples' fascination and appreciation of birds and wildlife.
- * To create an international community comprised of people who share a passion for birds.

* To foster an environment that will allow people to gain access to nature through birding and bird protection.

* To remove impediments to the enjoyment of birds.

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RARITY FOCUS

The "Rarity Focus" for June is Ruddy Ground-Dove (*Columbina talpacoti*), a species which has gradually expanded northward from Mexico over a number of decades. Starting in the 1950s, Ruddy Ground-Doves first made rare appearances in South Texas. Still, prior to 1978, there were only five accepted records for North America, all from Texas. The first non-Texas bird was found in November 1978, at Fillmore, California; however, this individual's origin was considered questionable. By the mid-1980s there was a score of U.S. records, including at least three from California, six from Arizona, and two from New Mexico. Some of these records may have involved escaped birds (since the species is a common cage bird in Mexico) - a possibility entertained by some birders for quite a while. Gradually a seasonal pattern of increasing records began to emerge that suggested that most, if not all records probably pertained to wild birds wandering northward from Mexico. Most of the early records fell between mid-October and early May. Increasingly, however, the number of records reached into the many dozens with occurrences virtually throughout the year, especially in Arizona and southern California. In California records were almost regular at Furnace Creek Ranch and at Calipatria, while in Arizona, the "usual sites" have included the Marana Pecan Grove, Patagonia, and Red Rock.

During the last several months, if not longer, Ruddy Ground-Doves have been seen regularly in Arizona and California. In Arizona, the most popular site has been at Red Rock, north of Tucson, where a small group of Ruddy Ground-Doves has been observed a little over two miles west of I-10 at a feedlot adjacent to some Palo Verde trees and a silvery water-tank. The ground-doves were even reported nesting there last month. Evidence of nesting in Arizona dates back to 1993 at the Hassayampa River Preserve. Currently in California, the favored site is at Calipatria, slightly southeast of the Salton Sea. From Calipatria, take Eddins Road (S30) west to Sperry, where the birds are most reliably seen in the northwest corner around the pig pens. The first nesting record for Ruddy Ground-Dove in California was confirmed here when two recently fledged young were observed on the last day of May. Some bird record committees have now gone so far as to remove this species from official "rarity review lists." As of this writing, Ruddy Ground-Doves should still be considered rare, but increasingly regular in the southwestern United States. In the Southwest they are often found in association with Inca Doves, or at sites that can best be described as oases or riparian areas. Note that distinguishing between female Common Ground-Doves and Ruddy Ground-Doves can be difficult, even though both species are pictured in most popular field guides these days.

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TWO CANADA GOOSE SPECIES?

Yes, you read it correctly. According to the 45th Supplement of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-List of North American Birds, released just last month, "Cackling Goose" has been split and is now considered a separate species from Canada Goose. Under the new taxonomy several traditionally recognized subspecies are now "lumped" under one or the other of the newly recognized species. A brief summary follows:

Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) [the small forms] now includes the former Canada Goose subspecies *hutchinsii* [Richardson's], *asiatica* [Bering - extinct? - status uncertain], *leucopareia* [Aleutian], *taverneri* [part of the Lesser complex], and *minima*.

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) now includes the subspecies *canadensis* [Atlantic], *interior* [Interior], *maxima* [Giant], *moffitti* [Moffitt's], *parvipes* [the other part of the Lesser complex], *fulva* [Vancouver], and *occidentalis* [Dusky].

The AOU Check-List Committee suggests that more splits of this complex may be yet to come, since work with mitochondrial DNA indicates that "more than a single species is involved." Indeed, the Dutch have split the Canada Goose into as many as six species!

The separation of the "Lesser" Canada Goose complex may present some real field challenges. Check the Sibley Guide (p.75) to see illustrations of some of the differences. The National Geographic guide (p. 72-73) also has a helpful treatment. For a fairly thorough description of Canada Goose subspecies (prior to the release of this most recent AOU supplement), visit [Angus Wilson's website](#).

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DIGISCOPING

Digiscoping is quick and handy. It's as simple as that.

As an example, take the experience of Blake Maybank back in 1991, traveling through Haines, Alaska. There, Maybank, visiting from Nova Scotia, observed a House Finch, a species he is very familiar with, but one that was unknown in Alaska at the time. The upshot: no camera, no photo, no record, no accepted listing for the Alaska list!

Fast-forward to this past May: the same Blake Maybank visiting Alaska, this time in Juneau (the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Reserve) had a sighting of a Dickcissel, again a "first" for Alaska. This time, however, there was a happy ending. Maybank had his digital camera and got images that verified that he had something very special. Also unlike his earlier experience, other birders were present and able to view and also photograph the Dickcissel.

This fortuitous digital documentation is only one of many recent examples of how the ease of digital photography is changing the birding scene. For more details on this particular story, click [here](#).

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COZUMEL THRASHER "REDISCOVERED"

Two hurricanes, Gilbert in 1988 and Roxanne in 1995, are thought to have contributed to the decline and possible extinction of the Cozumel Thrasher (*Toxostoma guttatum*), an endemic species from the island of Cozumel off Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Following hurricane Gilbert, numbers of the thrasher dropped precipitously. The species became exceedingly rare, but small numbers were known to exist until the species was last reliably sighted in 1995. That same year, hurricane Roxanne tore through the island of Cozumel.

Although it has been estimated that as many as 10,000 Cozumel Thrashers once thrived on the island, recent searches proved futile. The bird was believed by many to be extinct. Last month, however, a team working in conjunction with Villanova University and the Mexican counterpart of the Island Endemics Institute, spotted a single Cozumel Thrasher, confirming that the species was not extinct. The field biologists who located the thrasher were on a rediscovery mission sponsored by the American Bird Conservancy and Conservation International.

While the hurricanes are believed to have had a major impact on the birds, ornithologists believe that other factors must have contributed to the decline, since Cozumel Thrashers have likely survived hurricanes for millennia. Exotic species, especially predatory and abundant Boa Constrictors introduced to the island in 1971, may also have had a contributing impact.

Fortunately, appropriate tracts of deciduous and semi-deciduous forest on Cozumel still remain. Protection and management of Cozumel's habitat could benefit other island species, including at least two other endemic bird species, fifteen endemic bird subspecies, and three endemic and threatened mammals.

The search team is scheduled to return next January to attempt further surveys at a time when Cozumel Thrashers are known to sing most frequently. "The rediscovery of the Cozumel Thrasher is a reminder of two key things: the importance of tropical islands for biodiversity conservation, and the importance of never giving up on a species - no matter how rare," said Dr. Russell Mittermeier, President of Conservation International. In the meantime, the exact location of the rediscovery on Cozumel Island is not being disclosed to the public.

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"APHRODITE" WINS ALBATROSS RACE FOR CONSERVATION

It started quietly in Tasmania in late April, when 18 Shy Albatrosses, all juveniles, were equipped with specially fitted satellite transmitters to enable scientists - and gamblers - to plot their migration. Soon, however, many bird enthusiasts and celebrities were following the event through the Internet.

This was a race, designed to find the fastest albatross in a field of 18 young birds migrating at sea 6,000 miles from Australia to South Africa. Ladbrokes, a major British bookmaker and Internet betting service, ran the race in cooperation with the Conservation Foundation (from the UK and based at the Royal Geographic Society) with profits placed in a fund for global seabird conservation. (Information provided by consulting

society), with profits placed in a fund for global seabird conservation. (Information provided by consulting ornithologists, as well as any lead an albatross had by being "quick out of the traps" was factored into the odds.)

All the profits from the race are being placed in a fund for global seabird conservation administered by the Conservation Foundation and aimed at improving regulations for longline fishing - a practice that claims many seabird lives each year. The initial contributions came to almost \$30,000. The albatross race was the brainchild of conservationist Tim Nevard, from Queensland, Australia.

The first participating Shy Albatross to reach South African territorial waters was Aphrodite, a bird sponsored by Texas model and actress Jerry Hall - perhaps better known as Mick Jagger's ex. A relative long shot, with initial odds of 20-to-1, Aphrodite apparently took an early lead and maintained it, despite some technical problems midway through the race with her electronic tracking device. Nicholas Coleridge's Xanadu came in second. Nicholas Coleridge is the great, great, great, great grandson of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote the classic "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" that featured an albatross. Third place winner was Susan Hampshire's Monarch of the Glen, and Daniphobouska came in fourth. Other albatrosses were "owned" by Australian rugby star David Campese and Jordan's Queen Noor. The Duke of Edinburgh will present Jerry Hall with a silver trophy later this year.

By identifying where the birds fly and where the biggest threat from longline fisheries exist, ornithologists plan to apply international pressure so that fishing hazards can be reduced or eliminated. It is hoped that the resulting publicity will encourage more countries to sign the Agreement for the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP).

The race of albatrosses from Tasmania to South Africa will become an annual event if bird conservationists get their way.

For more details, see: <http://www.conservationfoundation.co.uk/> and <http://www.ladbrokes.com/bigbirdrace/>

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BIRD FLU SCARE CONTINUES IN EASTERN ASIA

Last month, there were reports of outbreaks of avian influenza in Thailand, Vietnam, and southern China. Earlier in the year, the bird flu ravaged Asia's poultry industry and jumped to humans in Vietnam and Thailand, killing 24 people. About 100 million Asian chickens were slaughtered to halt the spread of the disease. Moreover, a ban on movement of fowl in and out of zones of infection has continued. Migrating wild birds, especially waterfowl, were widely blamed for spreading the epidemic across much of Asia, and such claims have engendered calls for widespread wild-culling.

In Thailand, for example, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ordered the culling of wild storks on 13 July, claiming that the birds were responsible for two fresh bird flu outbreaks in the kingdom. Thaksin conceded that environmentalists were protesting against the move to eradicate the storks, but he stressed that public health took precedence over wildlife as the country moved to contain the potentially deadly virus. (The flu had also been verified in wild ducks near Bangkok.)

By the next day, however, the order was rescinded, even though officials believe the storks carry the virus. "It is not an effective way to contain the bird flu virus," Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisang told reporters.

Meanwhile, in Hanoi, Bui Quang Anh, director of Vietnam's agriculture ministry's animal health department, said that poultry samples from the south of the country had detected the virus but officials had the disease - which killed 16 people in Vietnam earlier this year - under control. In late March, the ministry prematurely declared that Vietnam was free of bird flu. The 30 March declaration, which came just 15 days after the disease claimed its 16th fatality, prompted criticism from international experts that Hanoi's claim was overly optimistic and premature. (The World Health Organization warned that it could take months, probably years to eliminate the virus from the environment.)

In China, nearly four months after the government claimed victory over the disease, officials confirmed a new outbreak in a central province. Officials ordered the culling of all poultry within a three-kilometer radius of Chaohu, in Anhui province. In nearby Hong Kong, authorities have suspended imports from Anhui. The city is a big consumer of chickens from the mainland. A Chinese agricultural bureau official said that the source of the outbreak had been sealed and claimed that migratory birds had spread the virus.

Culling wild birds to control avian influenza is an extreme, highly controversial, and probably ineffective measure. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. issued a recent "Animal Health Special Report"

stating that "Wild birds should not be depopulated in an attempt to control avian influenza but separation, as much as possible, should be attempted."

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TIME TO STOP HORSING AROUND

Let's face it: horses are magnificent creatures, not the least of which are the legendary wild horses of the American West. For many Americans they are a living symbol of America's natural strength, beauty, and history; for others, they are a feral pest that has overpopulated limited public lands.

Take the largest example: about 36,000 horses and burros roam public space managed by the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, competing with grazing cattle for food, stressing the vegetation and native wildlife (including grassland and sage birds), reproducing at a rate that can double their population every four years and having few natural predators. (An additional 20,000 wild horses and burros have accumulated in recent years in government corrals and sanctuaries.)

It has been estimated that wild horse and burro herds occupy almost 43 million acres of public and private land in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming.

Taxpayers are asked to pay the rapidly increasing bill. Four years ago, the BLM program cost about \$21 million. Today, with an additional 5,000 horses to manage, the BLM is asking for \$42 million.

Federal efforts to manage the herds, as mandated by law in the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, have been historically unsuccessful. Over the years, an array of solutions has been suggested. One plan,

to round up excess horses and put them up for adoption for about \$125 a horse (the cost to taxpayers was about \$1,400 each) actually led to thousands of the creatures being sent to slaughterhouses in the 1980s and 1990s, where they were sold for a profit and processed for human consumption in Europe. Another plan, to use a birth-control vaccine on wild mares, is working but has been given to only about 1,500 horses since 1992. (A two-year vaccine is being studied, but the BLM would prefer a four-year vaccine.) Other options involve Internet bidding for the horses and small-herd adoption by Western ranchers.

Meanwhile, other land-managers deal with slightly different horse-issues. Some wild horses roam National Wildlife Refuges (e.g. Chincoteague NWR). Other horses are part of the riding-scene at state and national parks. Sometimes the riding trails work well within the natural environments; sometimes they create erosion and other problems.

Horses may even stress coastal-nesting and feeding birds. For example, in Georgia in May, the Jekyll Island Authority allowed a trail-ride vendor to set up and run a tour-route through ecologically fragile areas on the island. This was at the same time that Least Terns and Wilson's Plovers were nesting in the area. The Authority needs to more carefully delineate sensitive natural areas, as well as develop a well-thought-out wildlife management plan that will reduce disruption of breeding coastal species and migratory shorebirds along the Georgia Coast.

Horses are surely majestic, but there need to be ways to have them better integrated into sensitive ecosystems.

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BERTRAND HONORED

In late July, Queen Noor of Jordan presented Dr. Gerard A. Bertrand with the BirdLife International President's Medal in recognition of his outstanding contributions to international bird conservation. "Jerry has inspired us all with his infectious enthusiasm for birds and the environment and his passionate chairmanship of BirdLife International," said Queen Noor. "Under his leadership the BirdLife Partnership has grown to be a substantial forum for conservation working closely with governments, other NGOs, and local communicators to make the world a better place for birds, biodiversity and people."

He has been active in international wildlife conservation since 1969 and has traveled to over 50 countries in an official government capacity and to an additional 45 more countries for non-profit consulting and conservation work.

Dr. Bertrand was the Chairman of BirdLife International at its creation in 1994 until March this year, when he stepped down after 10 years of service. Previously (from 1980-1989), he served as President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Over the last four years he has also served on the board of the National Audubon Society.

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