



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

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

December 2004

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SEASONS GREETINGS!

Welcome to the eighth of our "Swarovski Birding Community E-bulletins" for North America, an electronic bulletin appearing every month. It is intended to keep friends and associates informed about bird and birding developments in North America - and often elsewhere!

This month, as we approach the Holiday Season, we also mark the start of the 105th annual Christmas Bird Count. The counts will begin on 14 December 2004 and end 5 January 2005. We hope you will be able to participate in a count near you and make a contribution to the understanding and appreciation of our birdlife through the CBC. What a fine way to observe birds in the Holiday Season!

In the meantime, let us know what you think of this E-bulletin, and if you know others who want to receive future issues, look at the message at the very end of this E-bulletin.

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RARITY FOCUS

Our Rarity Focus for the month which just ended is Crimson-collared Grosbeak, a species which only breeds in northeastern Mexico (south to Veracruz) and which has only occurred in the U.S. (Texas) fewer than ten times (see National Geographic Guide, page 428). The first bird to appear in Texas was in 1974. Most previous sightings have been in winter, with six of them in the winter of 1987-1988.

The Crimson-collared Grosbeak made another colorful appearance in Texas in November. First, a male was found on Tuesday, 2 November at the Frontera Audubon Sanctuary in Weslaco, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley. This male Grosbeak was seen regularly over a period of four days. He was sometimes found feeding on the fruit and leaves of potato trees near the bird-feeding station. During the four days, the site received over 300 visitors from 18 different states including Alaska, California, Florida and New Hampshire and from two other countries, Canada and England.

Then, on 10 November, a female Crimson-collared Grosbeak was found at Frontera, and a new wave of birders visited with hopes of seeing the female. (These sightings corresponded with the 11th Annual Rio Grande Birding Festival in Harlingen - 10-14 November - with busloads of happy festival participants coming to Frontera.)

Within a few days it was established that there was a juvenile and an adult female Crimson-collared Grosbeaks present at the Frontera Sanctuary. And if that wasn't enough, an adult male bird appeared - or reappeared - on 29 November, and then there were two adult males and one adult female!

The Frontera Sanctuary is located at 1101 South Texas Boulevard (open daily except Monday; entrance fee). While the Sanctuary was closed on Thanksgiving, it was open on the next day, Friday 26 November, thanks to two thoughtful volunteers.

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DIGISCOPING VS. SLIDES: END OF AN ERA?

How many slide presentations have you sat through? How many slide -presentations on birds? Well, those days may soon be over.

We missed an important milestone in last month's E-bulletin, but we can catch up here. The very last Eastman Kodak slide projector was manufactured in upstate New York in October. This is after seven decades of production and 35 million projectors sold. (The company will make parts, however, for another seven more years.)

With this near-historic event, it's time for birders reconsider the whole area of digiscoping - digital photography through quality spotting scopes. It's certainly not going away, and the old alternative - slides - is fading fast.

For a good introduction to digiscoping, see the following [collection of links](#) by Mary Scott.

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CONTINUED SAGE-GROUSE DILEMMA

When the American West was settled, abundant sage-grouse helped sustain hungry pioneer travelers and homesteaders. Today, however, the sage-grouse and their accompanying sage habitat are in trouble. We have presented some sage-grouse concerns previously in this E-bulletin (e.g., June, July, October). Clearing for farms, overgrazing, fire suppression, invasive plants, energy development, road-building, and habitat fragmentation have all damaged the sagebrush ecosystem and the sage-grouse that live in it.

In response, 11 state-based wildlife agencies released a 600-page conservation evaluation in June, "Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats" through the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). (The effort represents the work of over 100 individuals from the state, federal, and private sectors and the peer review of nine anonymous scientist referees selected by the Ecological Society of America.) The USDA also recently announced over \$2 million of Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and related funds specifically targeted to help protect sage-grouse habitat in Colorado, Idaho,

Utah, and Washington. At the same time, and in response to petitioning, the USFWS must decide by 29 December, whether to propose listing the Greater Sage-Grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

Whatever the eventual ESA listing decision, most serious observers agree that there is a need for an intensive management approach to recover the sagebrush ecosystem and the Greater Sage-Grouse. This is particularly urgent since approximately 30 percent of the lands dominated by sagebrush cover (40 million acres) is privately owned. The longer the delay, the more painful the solution.

Recently, key information concerning the status of sage-grouse and its habitat in 11 western states has been challenged under the Information Quality Act (IQA) by Partnership for the West (PFW), an organization dominated a group of energy companies. PFW has called for the USFWS to correct or retract information presented in the lengthy state-based study presented in June. The PFW maintains that the WAFWA document overstates threats to Greater Sage-Grouse, underestimates abundance of the species, and understates current conservation efforts. The PFW is also challenging the petition to list the Greater Sage-Grouse under the ESA.

Many conservationists are increasingly concerned that growing IQA challenges can provide more avenues to challenge and delay agency natural resource decisions. Meanwhile, the status of the sagebrush ecosystem as well as the sage-grouse are the focus of special concern at the upcoming 70th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in March.

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MORE COFFEE TALK

You may have seen the announcement in mid-November that starting next year Starbucks will add 10% recycled paper to their coffee cups. Starbucks currently uses recycled paper in its cardboard cup sleeves, napkins and carriers, but not cups.

Despite the small percentage of recycled cup content, the company said the move will have considerable environmental impact, saving approximately five million pounds of virgin tree fiber a year. That's because Starbucks uses an estimated and astounding 1.5 billion serving-cups annually.

While applauding Starbucks' move, some environmentalists have said that the company should do even more about being a green company. Most critics focused on the small percentage of recycled content. Others faulted Starbucks for loudly broadcasting its fair-trade and shade-grown coffee content but rarely serving those products to customers.

While watching these developments, however, here's a reminder: shade-grown, bird-compatible coffee is a wonderful gift for this Holiday season. It a great conservation-conversation-starter when you bring a bag of coffee along when visiting friends!

For three good sources of shade-grown coffee, try the following ([ABA](#), [Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center](#), and a local northeast favorite, [Sombra Buena](#)).

There are other excellent sources. In fact, most of the bird-specialty stores - franchise or not - usually sell one or another fine brand of shade-grown coffee.

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MORE LEAD

In July, we mentioned the efforts in New Hampshire, going into effect next month, to expand the prohibition on using certain sizes of lead sinkers and jigs on all freshwaters in the state and to ban the sale of this gear statewide beginning January 2006.

A 1991 ban on the use of lead ammunition in waterfowl hunting has resulted in a reduction of lead-based mortality in waterfowl. Since ingesting even small bits of lead can be deadly, more can be done to save birds (e.g., loons, raptors, shorebirds, and doves) and other wildlife from lead toxicity and death.

For background and ongoing information, see [this fresh website](#) from the folks at HawkWatch International.

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WHOOPIING CRANES CROSS THRESHOLD, BUT SOME DON'T MAKE IT

Last month, we suggested that wintering Whooping Cranes along the Texas coast would probably surpass the

Last month, we suggested that wintering Whooping Cranes along the Texas coast would probably surpass the 200-mark this season. The Whooping Crane population is still only at a level of 50-60 breeding pairs in the wild after the species hit a precariously low level of only 15 or 16 individuals in 1941. The cranes left their Canadian nesting grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park in September and progressed along their 2,400-mile migration route from Canada to the Texas coast.

There are also encouraging experiments with a nonmigratory flock in Florida and a smaller migratory flock, assisted by an ultralight "guide" traveling between Wisconsin and Florida.

As predicted, Whooping Crane wintering in and around Aransas National Wildlife Refuge are now above 200 birds, actually at 213 (181 adults and 32 young, with a few more expected to arrive over the next couple of weeks). This new number is a population record since the counts began in 1938. The increase in numbers is due to excellent nest production last summer. The Canadian Wildlife Service reported a total of 54 nesting pairs that fledged 40 chicks on their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park. This achievement, for the cranes and for bird conservationists, is universally celebrated. For details, see [this site](#) with [a report on a recent ariel count](#) along the Texas coast from Tom Stehn (USFWS biologist and US Whooping Crane Coordinator).

Unfortunately, we know the fate of at least two Whooping Cranes that didn't make it to Texas. They were shot in Kansas by a group of seven hunters on 6 November near the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. The hunters mistook the cranes in early morning light for Sandhill Cranes, which have been legal to hunt there since 1993. At Quivira, there were 22 Whooping Cranes reported in the area the morning this event occurred.

When the Whooping Cranes pass through Kansas, they are most often spotted at or near the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and the Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, both near Great Bend and both critical stopover sites. Normally during migrations, the greatest danger for the cranes would not be hunters, but would be tall structures or power lines.

One of the Whooping Cranes that was shot died while under care; the other was treated for wing and body wounds and was sent to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, to recuperate and join a captive breeding flock.

Some basic hunting changes for Sandhill Cranes have been recommended in order to avoid this sort of thing from happening again. Such moves might including the following: 1) Delay the opening date for the Sandhill Crane season until at least 15 November, when most Whooping Cranes have already moved through the state. 2) Move the daily opening time from sunrise to 9 a.m., to reduce the chance of dim-light silhouette shooting and mistaken identity. 3) Close not only Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge but also the entire county or counties to hunting when Whooping Cranes are reported in the area.

There have now been about nine known cases of Whooping Cranes to be shot in North America dating back to 1989, an average of nearly one loss every other year. Shootings have been located in Texas (3), Florida (3), Canada (1) and now Kansas (2). Five of the shootings were connected to hunting seasons.

Shooting Whooping Cranes is a federal violation punishable by fines up to \$100,000 and a year in prison.

Kansas has considerable responsibility for the Whooping Crane Recovery Plan under the Endangered Species Act due to the state's location, along the species' major migratory route. The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) has indicated that it would look into the season and regulations to see what adjustments might be necessary.

For warnings to hunters on crane misidentification, see [this site](#).

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CONDOR IN CALIFORNIA TAKES FLIGHT

There is good news about another Endangered bird, hopeful news on California Condors.

On 4 November, the first wild-born California Condor chick to fly in California in 22 years took its first flight. The bird officially fledged when it took a 150-foot flight. The bird had hatched in early April and left its nest in early September, perching 20-50 feet below the nest cave near the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura County, California. (The 2,417-acre Hopper Mountain NWR was established in 1974 to protect the officially Endangered California Condors.)

Both parents are captive-released condors. The 10-year-old father is the dominant male of the southern California flock, having been released by Hopper Mountain NWR in 1995. The seven-year-old female was released at Big Sur by the Ventana Wilderness Society in 1998. The parents are expected to care for the chick until it is approximately 18 months old.

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In the meantime, an experimental population of California Condors is doing well by the Grand Canyon, with almost 50 free flying birds there.

For background on young bird in California, see the following sites:

<http://pacific.fws.gov/news/2004/Chick%20Fledges.pdf>

http://refuges.fws.gov/generalInterest/wildCondor_Calif.html

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ANCIENT CALIFORNIA CONDOR DIET

And while we're on the subject of California Condors, it has been suggested that the species' diet may have permitted the birds to survive the mass extinctions at the end of the last ice age (c. 12,000 years ago). New evidence has come to light in a study by Kena Fox-Dobbs of the University of California, Santa Cruz, discussed at a meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in Denver last month.

Many species of large land mammals (e.g., mammoths, camels, horses, and sloths) died off about 12,000 years ago in North America. Scientists place the cause of those extinctions on changes in climate, hunting by newly-arrived humans, disease, or a combination of factors. Whatever the cause, the die-offs removed the source of carcasses for scavengers, and those scavengers suffered population crashes as well.

While avian scavengers before the last ice age included California Condor, Western Black Vulture (*Coragyps occidentalis*) and Merriam's Teratorn (*Teratornis merriami*) only the condors survived the post-ice-age extinctions. The scavengers had depended on large browsers, grazers, and/or coastal sea mammals (seals, sea-lions, whales, etc.).

Nitrogen-isotope data from fossil bones of the scavenging birds have revealed their specific ancient diets. Analyses of the bone collagen from Merriam's Teratorns and Western Black Vultures suggest that those extinct birds consumed only the remains of browsers and grazers. The marine-mammal food supply-one that modern-day California Condors have been known to exploit-remained relatively steady, however, and California Condors along the Pacific coast may have held on by relying on the corpses of sea mammals. This is verified by nitrogen-15 isotopes found in the bones of Pacific-coastal California Condors. Chemical analyses of bone collagen from California Condor fossils found away from the coast - in Texas, New Mexico, and northern Florida - suggest that those birds fed only on grazers no-longer-present.

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ALOHA PO'OULI

A native Hawaiian bird, a Po'ouli (*Melamprosops phaeosoma*) died in captivity in late November, possibly signaling the extinction of the species.

The black-and-gray Po'ouli was first discovered in 1973 and placed on the Endangered Species List the following year. (The species, part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family, is so unusual it has been given its own genus.) In the mid 1980s, the total population was thought to number around 100 birds, though no more than a handful have ever been seen. In 2002, one of the three known remaining birds was caught and released within the territory of another bird, in an attempt to encourage breeding. However, the translocated bird did not remain in the area. By the time the decision was made to begin captive-breeding efforts by the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project, only these three birds were thought to survive on Maui.

Only one bird was located and captured in early September of this year. Since this lone captive bird died, and since the other two birds in the field have not been refound, the species may now be extinct. (There is a search afield for the two remaining birds.)

"Our goal of saving the Po'ouli is now very difficult and may not be achievable, but we must continue to try to save the species we have left," said Gina Shultz, acting field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Islands office. "In addition to the Po'ouli, we have 31 other endangered bird species in Hawaii that are threatened by loss of habitat, introduced predators, and diseases. Rather than giving up hope, we need to rededicate our efforts to save these unique birds that are such an important part of Hawaii's native forests."

If "Aloha" is both a greeting and farewell in Hawaii, one would hope that this passing would not simply be a farewell to a bird species, but a greeting for a new commitment to save the remaining native birds of the Hawaiian islands. Indeed, a lack of sufficient funding and commitment from federal and state authorities could result in the extinction of more Hawaiian birds.

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For more information on the plight of the Po'ouli and accompanying information, see the following sites:

<http://www.hawaii.gov/dlnr/dofaw/pubs/endgrspp/>

http://cres.sandiegozoo.org/about/news_041130_poouli.html

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NEF BULLETIN FROM BRAZIL

Last month, the very first issue of the "Neotropical Eco Foundation Bulletin" made its debut. It comes from Brazil, and it will be published periodically, with no fixed schedule, appearing whenever the publishers have important information to share with others who care about birds.

If you are interested in birds of the Neotropics, and local efforts to protect them in Brazil, you may want to

[visit this website.](#)

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NABCI NEWS

You can find the November 2004 issue of the "All-Bird Bulletin" with NABCI (North American Bird Conservation Initiative) news [here](#).

Inside you will find these and other articles:

United States Reauthorizes North American Waterfowl Management Plan

Coordinated Bird Monitoring Report Completed

Bird Conservation Alliance Takes Off

National Audubon Holds First Western Hemisphere IBA Conference

Refuge System Recognizes Migratory Birds as Priority

Wetlands Association Dedicates Conference to Migratory Birds

Report on Webless Migratory Game Birds Available

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ADDITIONAL SATELLITE TRACKING?

Last month, we described the fascinating satellite tracking of Sooty Shearwaters from California across the Pacific. We have been aware of Internet-posted satellite-tracking of birds in the past, including projects dealing with albatrosses, raptors, waterfowl, and Wood Storks. If you know of current projects - with on-line posting and maps - dealing with North American birds, please let us know. (Ongoing projects are, clearly, the most interesting to monitor.) If you inform us (see our addresses below), we'll share the information.

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We welcome your distribution of all or parts of this E-bulletin, only requesting mention of the material's origins.

Remember, if you have a friend or co-worker who wants to get future copies of this North American Swarovski Birding Community E-bulletin, that person can contact either of us:

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If you DON'T wish to receive these E-bulletins, contact either of us, and we will take you off our mailing list IMMEDIATELY.

Have a great Holiday Season!

