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Swarovski Birding E-Bulletin

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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

November 2004

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WELCOME

Here is the seventh 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 the intentions for the Swarovski Birding in North America, focusing on bird information, birding news, and bird conservation developments.

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RARITY FOCUS

A Thick-billed Vireo was found on Boot Key in the Florida Keys on 3 October. The discovery was made during a field trip for the Florida Keys Bird Festival (thanks to Jeff Bouton, Mark Hedden, Rich Miller et al. and Larry Manfredi's subsequent confirmation).

There are about a dozen previous records for Thick-billed Vireo for North America, all from Florida. The species is a multi-island resident in the Bahamas, the Caicos Islands, the Cayman Islands, Tortue (off Haiti), and at least two other isolated locations.

The Book Key vireo played hide-and-seek for over a week, often appearing for multiple days at a time in the company of small flocks of migrating warblers and vireos, only to disappear again, sometimes for an equal number of days. Some birders made multiple visits to Boot Key to find the bird, which frequented patches of Poisonwood, Buttonwood, and scrub along CR-931, the only road traversing Boot Key. Other birders, even after making multiple visits, missed the vireo altogether. The bird may have been last seen on 19 and 23 October.

Regardless of whether or not visitors found the Thick-billed Vireo, many birders were treated to great views of migrating raptors, since Boot Key is one of the prime hawk watching sites in the Keys. Broad-winged Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Merlins, American Kestrels, and Peregrines were usually present in the area.

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FEDERAL DUCK STAMP WINNER

On Tuesday, 5 October, Mark Anderson of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, won the art competition for the 2004 Federal Duck Stamp. Anderson's artwork depicted two male Hooded Mergansers. His painting will now appear on the 2005-2006 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly known as the Federal Duck Stamp. For more information and to see the winning artwork, [click here](#).

Hooded Mergansers have appeared on the stamp in the past, in 1968 (artwork by C. G. Prichard) and in 1978 (artwork by A. Gilbert).

Birders and conservationists are encouraged to enthusiastically support the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp the sale of which supports wetland conservation and land acquisition in the National Wildlife Refuge System. (This program has collected over \$670 million since 1934 and has been used to secure more than five million acres of valuable wetland habitat for the Refuge System)

For details on birder interests and value of the stamp [see this page](#).

Of course, it would be wonderful if the current Duck Stamp program could be expanded to cover habitats besides wetlands, more conservation initiatives (e.g., the "bird plans"), a greater diversity of species (both biologically and artistically), and could appeal to a broader constituency. (See our July 04 E-bulletin for more details on this subject.)

In the meantime, remember that currently Duck Stamp-holders may gain free admission to every National Wildlife Refuge that charges an entry fee. The \$15 stamp is valid from 1 July through 30 June of the following year.

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SOOTY SHEARWATER SATELLITE TRACKING

We know that Monterey Bay and offshore south-central California are important destinations for trans-equatorial migratory seabirds during the austral (southern) winter. From May through September, Sooty Shearwaters that have migrated to California waters from breeding colonies in New Zealand and Chile spend time off the Pacific Coast of North America feeding on the region's abundant food sources (e.g. anchovies

time on the Pacific Coast of North America feeding on the region's abundant food sources (e.g. anchovies, sardines, rockfishes, squid, and krill) in order to rebuild lost reserves, undergo molt, and put on fat before engaging in their migration back to the Southern Hemisphere.

If you are interested in following the fascinating trans-equatorial migration of a dozen individual Sooty Shearwaters from California to the Southern Hemisphere, check out [this page](#).

The data on this site is updated every even-numbered day as birds with satellite tags make their way across the Pacific, toward New Zealand, Tasmania, or Chile.

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A LIGHTER LOOK: ALBATROSS CONSERVATION

On a related seabird topic, there was an interesting article in the most recent issue of PACIFIC SEABIRDS, "Do the Albatrosses of Midway Atoll Select Cigarette Lighters by Color?" by J. Cooper, H.J. Auman, and J. Klavitter.

The authors collected disposable cigarette lighters regurgitated by albatrosses on Midway Atoll. A total of 1,307 lighters were collected/separated by color. (Counts and collections were also made at other colonies.) Although the authors assert that "it is not possible currently to state with any certainty which colors of lighters Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses select," they do suggest that Laysan Albatrosses might be more selective, ingesting lighters that more closely resemble in color their natural food (whereas Black-footed Albatrosses seem to show less of a color bias, targeting food as they do in the form of egg masses clustered around the plastic lighters).

Before you scratch your head wondering why any of this is important, it is crucial to understand that upon returning from ocean foraging trips, adult albatrosses feed their young by regurgitating food into the throats of their hungry chicks. Along with the "goodies" can be plastic, yummy-looking cigarette lighters that the adults pick up at sea while foraging. While the chicks normally regurgitate unwanted food (e.g., squid beaks), sometimes they are unable to bring up the lighters and other indigestible trash (e.g., bags, combs, and other plastic bits), and they die as a consequence.

There is potential happy ending to this story, since the article suggests that the authors may have the beginnings of a creative solution to this unfortunate situation. They propose that "if new collections confirm color selectivity by the birds, then manufacturers of lighters in North Pacific rim countries should be approached to refrain from producing lighters of the selected colors, as a positive contribution towards the conservation of Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses." While curious to be sure, if this research proves true, it represents a most creative way to work toward albatross conservation.

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GROWING BOREAL BIRD INFORMATION

Canada's Boreal forest is a 1.4-billion-acre greenbelt of forest, wetlands, tundra, rivers and lakes that stretches across central Canada from Alaska to the Atlantic Ocean. Up to five billion birds - from warblers, sparrows and thrushes to ducks, pelicans, cranes, and shorebirds - annually migrate from Canada's Boreal forest to wintering grounds in the US and farther south. More than half a billion warblers of 27 species and close to a billion sparrows of 25 species are estimated to migrate out of the Boreal region each year. In addition, almost half of North America's ducks and geese use a portion of the Boreal forest for some part of their lives.

The Boreal Songbird Initiative (BSI) is a US-based organization dedicated to informing Americans about the importance of North America's Boreal forest as a habitat for many of our continent's migratory bird and wildlife populations, and its value as a key ecological resource. The BSI has promoted the Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, a creative approach for conserving the Canadian Boreal region by establishing a series of large protected areas in half the region, along with applying cutting edge sustainable techniques for long term economic development in the remainder. Leading Canadian logging and energy companies, conservation groups and First Nations (Canada's indigenous peoples) have signed on to the Framework and prominent bird scientists are working in partnership with them to make the vision a reality.

Last month the BSI, in partnership with the Ducks Unlimited and the National Wildlife Federation, launched new, interactive features on the BSI website, providing new insights into the lives of boreal birds. The new element, constituting a fine introduction to Boreal birds, is posted [here](#). It can also be viewed on the National Wildlife Federation's eNature website, a site receiving more than 600,000 visits each month.

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VIRGINIA IS FOR BIRDERS

With the opening of the Piedmont phase of the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, the state of Virginia has recently finished an ambitious ecotourism and wildlife-appreciation project. The state's partners - the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries and the Virginia Tourism Corporation - have just released the third and final guide in a series. The most recent guide outlines the Piedmont Trail. This project is a model for other states to emulate. Call for a free guide: 866/822-4737 (VABIRDS), or get more information [here](#).

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AVIAN FLU CONCERN IN WESTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

On 18 Oct, customs officials at the Brussels airport seized two Mountain Hawk-Eagles (*Spizaetus nipalensis*) from Thailand that had been concealed in a passenger's baggage. The customs officials were acting within the framework of strengthened controls on traffic from Southeast Asia. Such security moves were introduced at the beginning the year following the spread of an avian influenza epidemic, which has recently also claimed human victims. Throughout the year, the European Union has strictly prohibited the importation of birds from Southeast Asia.

While the raptors did not show any initial signs of the disease, the birds were later found to be positive for avian influenza virus, carrying strain type H5N1, identical to the strain circulating in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the same influenza strain has been discovered in migratory birds in the Novosibirskaya region of Russia (on the west-Siberian plain, just NE of Kazakhstan), reportedly carried by ducks and geese that had previously passed through Southeast Asia. An analysis of tests obtained from the birds in the spring and early fall is expected next month. The area in question is, according to Russian officials, "a rather sparsely populated area with many lakes; therefore, direct contact of the carrier birds with people is unlikely."

Wild, migratory waterfowl and other waterbirds are suspected of playing a significant role in the spread of these viruses. Efforts to cull these wild birds to control the spread of avian influenza are highly controversial and are probably ineffective.

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RICE CAN BE NICE

Most regular readers of this E-bulletin are well aware of the issue of bird-compatible shade-coffee and the efforts to make it a brew of choice preferred by bird enthusiasts and concerned consumers.

Recently there has emerged a new variation of the birder-as-consumer theme, and it comes from Europe. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in the UK in cooperation with the Sociedad Espanola de Ornitologia (SEO) of Spain is promoting organic rice from the bird-packed Ebro Delta of Spain. (Spain produces a quarter of all the rice grown in Europe; much is planted in an unsympathetic way - with widespread pesticide use, for example - however some is organically grown.)

The RSPB (in conjunction with Suma Wholefoods) has launched its own organic bird-compatible rice. The Ebro Delta, where the rice originates, is loaded with bitterns, egrets, herons, coots, terns, shorebirds, ducks, and wetland-associated songbirds. The Ebro Delta is the second-most-important IBA (Important Bird Area) in Spain.

Buying this pesticide-free rice, therefore, is a way to help sustain these bird populations.

Details on the organic Spanish rice can be found [here](#).

For some information about the birds of the Ebro Delta, see [this page](#).

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MAJOR HUDSONIAN GODWIT STAGING-AREA FOUND IN ALASKA

Hudsonian Godwits, those lovely large and somewhat mysterious shorebirds, breed at scattered and remote sites across the North American, primarily in the Hudson Bay Lowlands and southern Alaska. Because of the species' small population (estimated at 50,000 birds) and how little is known of its life history, the Hudsonian Godwit is a species of high concern in both US and Alaska Shorebird Conservation Plans. For this reason biologists were excited to discover a major unknown staging area for the species in the middle of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge this summer. After hearing reports of a large flock of Hudsonian Godwits from

Delta National Wildlife Refuge this summer. After hearing reports of a large flock of Hudsonian Godwits from researchers at Aropuk Lake, Refuge biologists visited the area and found 3,000 - 6,000 Hudsonian Godwits staging there between early July and mid-August. Not only is this the largest concentration of this species ever found in Alaska, it is one of the largest known for the continent. (The upper range of the estimate exceeds the maximum number known to use any of the major fall staging areas in Saskatchewan. In fact, only two staging sites in Hudson Bay are known to have larger concentrations of birds during fall migration.) Yukon Delta Refuge biologists are planning to work with Migratory Bird Management staff and cooperators in South America to determine the breeding range and wintering destination of these particular birds.

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WHOOPING CRANES APPROACHING TEXAS AND 200

Each year from late-October to mid-April, the only natural, wild flock of Whooping Cranes in the world makes its long journey south from Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories, Canada, to winter in the protected habitat in and around Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

The Whooping Crane is a great American conservation success story, making a comeback from a low of 15 or 16 birds in 1941. The 2003-2004 winter census at Aransas and surrounding areas resulted in a population record of 194 cranes. That total included 25 juveniles arriving safely at Aransas from the 28 that had fledged.

This month, birders and biologists alike are watching the skies and waters along the Texas coast, wondering if this will be the year when wintering crane populations finally pass the 200-bird mark. The birds left their northern nesting grounds in September with a record 41 chicks. If mortality is low on the 2,400-mile migration route from Canada to the Texas coast, the flock will set a new population record since the counts began in 1938.

For those who are interested this winter, the cranes can usually be seen from the Aransas Refuge observation tower into mid-April. (For information about commercial boat tours, call the Rockport Chamber of Commerce at 1-800/242-0071.)

Meanwhile, there are encouraging experiments with sustaining a nonmigratory flock in Florida (c. 87 birds) and another migratory flock, assisted by an ultralight "guide" (c.36 birds), traveling between Wisconsin and Florida.

For details on the cranes, see [this page](#).

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DAVID SIBLEY RECEIVES REFUGE RECOGNITION

During National Wildlife Refuge Week in October, David A. Sibley received a recognition award from the Refuge System for his outstanding support of migratory bird conservation through public education and the promotion of wildlife recreation.

At a refuge-system-sponsored ceremony held on 13 October at the Smithsonian Institution's Baird Auditorium, Sibley was acknowledged with these words: "His passion is evident in his magnificent illustrations. Expanding on the heritage of such greats as Roger Tory Peterson, David Sibley has inspired in millions of Americans a fascination for birds - and a concern for their habitats."

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE VOLUNTEER ACT PASSED AND SIGNED

On 30 September, the Senate passed H.R. 2408, the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Act. Among other things, this bill re-authorizes volunteer programs and community partnerships for National Wildlife Refuges. The bill, introduced in the House of Representatives by Congressman Jim Saxton (R-NJ), is designed to provide the Fish and Wildlife Service with additional tools and incentives to expand the Refuge System's volunteer workforce.

We know that many birders are involved with important Refuge Friends Groups, and that refuge volunteers play a key role in helping the Refuge System in meeting critical conservation objectives. Since the Senate legislation mirrored the already passed House version, a conference committee was not necessary, and the bill was signed by President Bush on 16 October.

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REFUGE AWARD REMINDER

Since we seem to be on a refuge theme, it's time for a reminder about the annual National Wildlife Refuge System Awards. These awards, sponsored by the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), honor outstanding accomplishments by refuge managers, refuge system employees, volunteers, and friends groups. Award recipients receive a commemorative plaque and a monetary award (\$1000 for Refuge Manager, Employee, and Volunteer awards and \$2000 for the Friends Group). Nominations are due by 15 November 2004. To find out more about the awards program and guidelines, visit [this page](#).

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WETLANDS AWARDS FOR 2005

While you're thinking about Refuge awards, you might also consider the related "National Wetlands Awards" for individuals who have dedicated time and energy to protecting our nation's wetlands. The National Wetlands Awards Program honors individuals from across the country who have demonstrated extraordinary effort, innovation, and excellence through programs or projects at the regional, state, or local level.

The 2005 awards will be given in six categories, including "education and outreach," "science research," and "conservation and restoration." You may know just the right bird-and-wetland individual who deserves such recognition. Program co-sponsors are the Environmental Law Institute, US Environmental Protection Agency, USDA Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA Fisheries, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and US Army Corps of Engineers.

The deadline for submitting nominations is 15 December. Organizations and federal employees are not eligible. Nomination forms and further details for the 2005 awards are now available [here](#).

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

If you have a friend who wants to get future copies of the North American Swarovski Birding E-bulletin, have them contact:

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