

# OVERVIEW

## Chicken Little

The Endangered Attwater's Prairie-Chicken, a race of the Greater Prairie-Chicken, has successfully bred in captivity for the first time. But a spokesman for Fossil Rim Wildlife Center in Texas concedes it has more to learn about raising birds to maturity—by early July, only five of this spring's 20 hatchlings had survived.

The Texas Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that only 444 Attwater's Prairie-Chickens survive in the wild, down from 1070 in 1967,

when the bird was listed as Endangered. Conservationists blame the species' decline on commercial hunting, and conversion of the tallgrass prairie of southwest Texas to rice fields, suburbs, and woodland. Chick mortality also is high; in the wild, only one bird may survive a clutch of 14 eggs.

The captive breeding program hopes to establish a flock of 150 birds. Eventually, scientists from Texas Tech University plan to reintroduce captive-bred Attwater's Prairie-Chickens into the wild.

## The Fence Is Defense

Thousands of Purple Martins die needlessly each year at Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana; the low-flying birds are hit by automobiles crossing the causeway over the lake. Protective fencing on each side of the bridge can virtually eliminate these deaths by forcing the fast-flying martins to fly up and over the traffic. Purple Martins roost under and alongside the causeway for most of the year, with a peak of 250,000 in June and July. Most of the fencing has been funded, but local officials do not have the money for the final stretch of the nearly two miles where martins most frequently cross. The Purple Martin Conservation Association seeks help for the project. For information, write the PMCA, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Edinboro, Pennsylvania 16444.

## North/South Birding

Five Latin American scientists, experts in the winter habitat of birds such as the Golden-cheeked Warbler, went to Texas this spring to study familiar species' summer homes. About half of the nearly 600 avian species seen in Texas are neotropical



Golden-cheeked Warbler

migrants. International cooperation between North, Central, and South America is crucial in saving habitat for birds whose range spans the continents. Conservation efforts in the oak forests of Honduras, for example, would be almost useless in helping the Golden-cheeked Warbler if Texas didn't preserve the juniper and oak woods of its Hill Country. The project was cosponsored by federal, state, and private conservation groups, and the Austin Audubon Society took part in guiding the visitors, according to the *Austin American-Statesman*. The visiting scientists came from Honduras, Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil.

## Texas Adventures

A new entrant into ecotourism is the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The state agency is inviting the public to join scientists and naturalists at four protected scenic areas. Visitors pay to take part in three- and seven-day *Texas Adventure* programs, where they will "learn, work, and have fun." A study of coastal biology and migratory wildlife will take place in November at Matagorda Island State Park, for example. The state has provided initial funding for *Texas Adventures*, which will ultimately operate like a business, with the aim of raising money for conservation programs. For information, contact the Texas Parks and



Attwater's Prairie-Chicken

Wildlife Department, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744.

**The Eagle Has Landed**

For the first time in more than 100 years, a pair of Bald Eagles has successfully nested in South Dakota. Two eaglets were hatched along the Missouri River at the Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge in early April, and by mid-June the young birds were exercising their wings in anticipation of flight. A portion of the river near the nest tree was temporarily closed to fishermen and boats so that the eagles were not disturbed.

**Shooting Cranes**

Kansas hunters could legally bag Sandhill Cranes this fall, if the state's Department of Wildlife and Parks Commission adopts pending game regulations. Kansas and Nebraska are the only Plains states that forbid hunting of cranes.

Hunters near Cheyenne Bottoms, a key wildfowl migration stop, petitioned for the season. The Kansas Audubon Council opposes it, arguing that the midcontinent population of Sandhills may already be overhunted.

Dwindling habitat may have splintered the population into isolated flocks, and if most of a small breeding flock blundered into opening day, "it could easily be wiped out," says David A. Rintoul, a biologist at Kansas State University. A game season could further imperil the Endangered Whooping Crane, which migrates with the Sandhill, which is North America's more numerous crane. Wildlife officials are under pressure to permit more Sandhill hunting by sportsmen, and by farmers who insist that the birds raid fields of winter wheat.

Kansas wildlife commissioner Bill Anderson says that

limited hunting would expand political support to preserve crane habitat. Data from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service convinced him that Sandhills could withstand an additional harvest of 200 birds regionally, and Kansas' season could avoid the few days that Whooping Cranes pass through. A vote on the proposal is scheduled for August. The season could open as early as October 1.

**Geese on Loan**

Ten pairs of (Aleutian) Canada Geese have been loaned to Russia by the United States, to

International Airport in New York City this summer by shooting the gulls. New York State environmental officials granted permission following a warning by the Federal Aviation Administration that the birds were an "urgent" threat to aircraft.

The gulls breed in large numbers at the end of runways. Some conservationists fought the shooting, arguing that there are other equally effective methods—such as scaring birds or planting tall grass to discourage nesting near the airport. Supporters of the measure say it has effectively reduced the number of gull



(Aleutian) Canada Goose

take part in a captive breeding program, according to *Outdoor News Bulletin*. The offspring of the geese will be released in an attempt to increase the small flock that now migrates between Russia and Japan.

The subspecies was formerly listed as Endangered in the United States, but a similar captive-breeding program raised the population to more than 8000 birds by 1987. Russian biologists hope to duplicate that success.

**UPDATES**

**They're Not Laughing**

The Federal government again sought to control the Laughing Gull population at Kennedy

collisions with aircraft. (See *Science article, page 220*)

**Peregrine Pride**

The "Plight of the Falcons" has been happily resolved in New York City. Despite well-publicized concern last year (*American Birds*, Vol. 46, No. 3), a pair of Peregrine Falcons, one of nine pairs in the city, returned to their nest at the former Pan Am building near Grand Central Station. The birds had nested behind the "P" in the skyscraper's old logo. The *New York Post* put the Peregrines on the front page when the new owner of the building, MetLife, removed that logo. Oblivious to the loss of cover (the new logo is shorter and left the nest

exposed), the birds produced three chicks.

Once extirpated east of the Mississippi, Peregrine Falcons have recently nested in 24 North American cities—most in the East and Midwest. Nearly half of the known aeries in New York state are in or around New York City, which provides Peregrines their choice of high ledges and an inexhaustible feast of pigeons and starlings.

**Endangered Rivers**

Ten North American rivers have been listed as "endangered" in a report by the conservation group American Rivers. In descending order, the waterways are: the Rio Grande and Rio Conchos system; the Columbia, Snake and Yakima river system; the Everglades; the Anacostia River; the Virgin River; the Rogue and Illinois river system in Oregon; the Penobscot River; the Clavey River; the Alsek and Tatshenshini river system; and the Platte River, home to the National Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary.

Both people and birds are affected by the degradation of these waterways. The Platte, for example, is a crucial stopover for more than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes during their spring migration, as well as millions of ducks and geese. But dams and water projects have reduced the river to only 30 percent of its original flow in central Nebraska.

**Wanted: Information**

The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center would like to learn what birders did on International Migratory Bird Day, May 8, 1993. Conservation and community groups around the country took part.

Detailed descriptions of events will be included in the second edition of *The*

# BIRDER OF NOTE

**Fernando E. Rondon**

**Age:** 57

**Home:** Falls Church, Virginia

**Profession:** Foreign Service Officer. Currently, dean, The Senior Seminar, Department of State; formerly, ambassador to Ecuador and to Madagascar.

**How long birding?** Seven years.

**What binoculars do you use?** Bausch & Lomb Custom 8 x 36

**How many birds do you have on your life list?** 1796. The most recent was a Grasshopper Sparrow near Lucketts, Virginia. I saw six the following week.

**What is your favorite birding habitat?** Cliffs and mountains, far away from mosquitos.

**What is your favorite birding place?** Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

**What was the most interesting place you've birded?** Japan, where my wife Marian and I discovered new friends, a new culture, and lots of other lifers.

**What was your biggest thrill in birding?** In the Galapagos, riding to Floreana Island's uplands in the back of a dump truck to find the Medium Tree Finch, my twelfth Darwin's Finch.

**Why do you bird?** I enjoy the pursuit of species, and the pleasure of watching nature in its different manifestations. Birding is a kind of yoga for me. I tend to forget whatever else is on my mind and emerge with memory banks clean and refreshed.

**And?** I have a respectable life list because I was a State Department Inspector for three years, visiting sites as remote as Mongolia and Papua New Guinea. I'll never forget birding in Hungary, where rangers showed me three components of the Feherto Reserve. Communication proved impossible in either English or Hungarian, so we used the plates in our guidebooks and the Latin names. At the end of the day, each ranger gave me a crane feather, which shepherds place in their caps for good luck. Cranes are protected in Hungary and their feathers are difficult to obtain. I received three feathers as, I was told, a display of friendship for America. That was in 1989.



*Migratory Bird Handbook*, which the Center plans to publish this year. Send information, press releases, educational materials, and pictures to Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, Publications Department, c/o The National Zoo, Washington, D.C. 20008.

## Penguin Reprieve

Argentina has temporarily halted plans to build an oil pipeline through a colony of more than 200,000 Magellanic Penguins at Cabo Virgenes, according to *The Guardian* (See *American Birds*, Vol. 47, No. 1). Legal action, brought by a Buenos Aires resident and various conservationists, led to a court ruling suspending the plan. Now the Argentine government must either prove that there is no danger to the penguins, or propose alternative routes for the oil pipeline.

## AUDUBON REPORT

### Saving Refuges for Wildlife

The United States Congress has a chance to adopt legislation to ensure that birds and other wildlife come first on National Wildlife Refuges. The refuge system includes wetlands, forest, prairies, tundra, desert, and marine communities—"an unparalleled national treasure," says Jim Waltman, National Audubon Society wildlife specialist.

But it is currently debased by grazing, off-road vehicles, water-skiing, low-flying military aircraft, and other activities harmful to wildlife. The National Wildlife Refuge System Management and Policy Act was introduced by Senator Bob Graham, a Florida Democrat, in late April. The refuge system covers 91 million acres in the 50 states and several United States territories. An estimated 175 threatened or endangered species use

refuges for nesting, wintering, or stopovers on migration.

The act would establish conservation of natural diversity as a priority for refuge managers, and create a scientifically based, publicly reviewed process to determine what other activities are compatible.

The National Audubon Society sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last fall, demanding a stop to inappropriate practices. Negotiations with the Clinton Administration seem promising, any may set the stage for enactment of Graham's reform legislation, says John Echeverria, NAS chief legal counsel.

The suit has led to reforms. Early ground-nesting waterfowl at the Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge in Washington state, such as Cinnamon Teal, had been impacted by grazing there, which left little ground cover in spring. Grazing has now been halted as a result of the suit.

### NAFTA Watch

Conservationists closely monitored recent negotiations between the United States, Mexico, and Canada on side agreements to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At issue for birders is the status of previous international treaties that affect neotropical migrants. Kathleen Rogers, Wildlife Counsel for the National Audubon Society, reports that environmental treaties, including the Migratory Birds Treaty Act, need to be protected in the side agreements.

"Many of these treaties have no direct trade sanctions, but they have trade implications," she says. The free trade agreement, to which other Latin American countries could accede, will give businesses incentives to continue expansions in those countries. Rogers says it is important that environmental safeguards are



**Poster detail: Blackburnian, Cape May, and Magnolia warblers**

in place.

The problem is not just south of the border. Current legislation imposes a tariff on lumber imported from Canada when it is harvested from virgin forests. Under NAFTA, Rogers says, "if those tariffs disappear, it's possible that habitat for migratory birds will also disappear." Negotiations on the side agreements were expected to be complete in July, and considered by Congress this fall.

**It's Not Spider Man, But ...**

Here's something kids can hang on the wall next to comic book heroes or BoyzIIMen: a poster of birds that breed in North America and spend the winter in the Caribbean and Latin America. The National Audubon Society hopes its *Disappearing Habitats, Disappearing Birds* poster will educate young people on the importance of preserving the places that birds live. The colorful work features such birds as Scarlet Tanager, Yellow-

billed Cuckoo, Blackburnian Warbler, and Wood Thrush. A satellite photo of the Americas, as well as range maps, show the different habitats birds live in during both summer and winter.

Some 18,000 Audubon Adventures' classrooms have received the poster. Individual posters can be ordered from the National Audubon Society, Route 1, Box 171, Sharon, CT 06069. The cost is \$6.95 folded, \$10 rolled.

**WORLD BRIEFS**

**Russia**

The biggest continuous expanse of tundra in Eurasia has been declared a reserve by Russia, protecting birds and wildlife in a four million hectare area on the north coast of the Tamyr Peninsula. The uninhabited land provides nesting grounds for birds such as geese, plovers, and knots. The park is part of a network of Arctic reserves created by international treaty in 1989.

**El Salvador**

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have a strong ally in the villagers from Jocotal in southwestern El Salvador. The hamlet on the wildlife-rich Jocotal Lagoon has long relied on duck eggs to supplement a diet of corn, rice, and fish. But as the population grew, the elegant whistling-duck declined, according to the *Tropical Conservation Newsbureau*. The ducks nest in holes in trees, which were being cut for firewood, building materials, and farmland. By the mid-1970s, only about 500 whistling-ducks remained.

Government biologists began a duck rescue program, enlisting the help of the villagers. Artificial nest boxes were built and nailed onto remaining trees. Whistling-ducks moved in. In 1977, the village watched 800 ducklings emerge from the boxes. Because several ducks would nest in the same box and lay more than 80 eggs, the biologists and local guards removed the excess eggs for the village's use.

The 1500 Jocotal residents now fiercely protect the ducks and the lagoon, which also provides fish, freshwater shrimp, medicinal plants, and a place for bathing and laundry. Villagers recently prevented ranchers from draining the wetlands to create more pasture. Today there are more than 480 nest boxes, and an



**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck**

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estimated Black-bellied Whistling-Duck population of 15,000.

**Kuwait**

An unexpected bonus from the Gulf War has been resurgence of birdlife and vegetation in western Kuwait. The area had been undergoing desertification, but the presence of thousands of unexploded bombs and mines have put a virtual halt to human encroachment. Birds and other wildlife had been pursued by hunters, and joy riders destroyed habitat. According to *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, western Kuwait's bird population has increased one-hundredfold since before the war. Natural vegetation has returned to a state similar to that of a prairie. The slowing of desertification is considered temporary, as munitions experts continue to remove mines and unexploded bombs in the area.

**New Zealand**

Two of New Zealand's three kiwi species showed a large decline in number and distribution in a 1991-1992 survey, according to *Forest & Bird*, which is taking part in a kiwi-recovery program.

Only the Spotted Kiwi, extinct on the mainland and restricted to island sanctuaries, was found to have healthy breeding populations.

Dogs pose the main threat to kiwis. In addition, an introduced opossum—which competes for food—takes over burrows, and eats eggs.

The New Zealand Department of Conservation has endorsed destroying dogs that kill kiwis, but conservationists there argue that all kiwi habitat should be made dog free.

## QUOTES

**"A fair reading of the available data suggests a rate of [species] extinction not even one-thousandth as great as doomsayers claim."**

Julian L. Simon and Aaron Wildavsky in a *New York Times* opinion piece

**"We can quibble about numbers—the ecological equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns—or try to prevent this irreversible and senseless loss."**

David Wilcove and Michael Bean of the Environmental Defense Fund in response to the Simon and Wildavsky piece

### Mexico

A new quarterly journal of Mexican avifauna, *The Euphonia*, has been launched. The editors are looking for submissions, from recent sightings to scientific studies of birds in the ornithologically

rich area. Feature articles in Spanish are encouraged, and Spanish-language abstracts are provided for all articles.

For more details, contact: Kurt Radamaker, Editor, *The Euphonia*, P.O. Box 8045, Santa Maria, CA 93456-8045.



Blue-hooded Euphonias (male and female)

## DIRECTIONS

### Honored

The Elliott Coues Award of the American Ornithological Union has been given to Joel Cracraft of the American Museum of Natural History. Cracraft has spent more than 25 years pursuing a more rigorous classification for birds, arguing that the prevailing system recognizes too few species.



Shirley A. Briggs, left, and EPA Administrator Carol Browner

Shirley A. Briggs was given the Rachel Carson Award by the Environmental Protection Agency. Briggs was honored for her book *Basic Guide to Pesticides*, which informs the public about chemical pesticides used in their homes and communities.

Richard T. Holmes received the William Brewster Memorial Award of the AOU for his work on avian forest communities. Holmes' long-term research on the ecology of neotropical migrants—both in North America and the Caribbean—helped advance conservation of these species.

### Elected

The American Ornithological Union has elected new officers for 1993-94. President Brina Kessel of the University of Fairbanks, Alaska, will continue into the second year of her two-year term, as will Richard Banks, president-elect. Lewis W. Oring has been elected vice president; M. Victoria McDonald is secretary, and

Frederick H. Sheldon is treasurer. Elective Councilors are Marion A. Jenkinson, Scott M. Lanyon, and Terry L. Root. The annual AOU conference was held in Fairbanks, Alaska.

### Of Note

Canadian birders and aficionados of northern exposures can now take advantage of the newly formed Yukon Bird Club, the first in that

province. In addition to field trips and workshops, the club will advocate for bird conservation. For information, contact Cameron Eckert, 14-11th Avenue, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, Y1A 4H6.

BirdLife International has been launched, evolved from the International Council for Bird Preservation. BirdLife International has expanded its partnership with amateurs, scientists, developing countries, and on-going programs. World headquarters will remain in Cambridge, England, with regional offices in Washington, D.C.; Quito, Ecuador; Bogor, Indonesia, and Brussels, Belgium.



Brina Kessel

## BEHAVIOR WATCH

### Savannah Sparrow Feeds Young Longspurs

Certain parental instincts seem to take a powerful hold on adult birds during the nesting season—especially the instinct to stuff food into the gaping mouths of baby birds. As a result, nestlings sometimes get their meals from unusual sources.

In northern Quebec, Henri Ouellet watched a Savannah Sparrow that persisted for three days in trying to feed a nestful of young Lapland Longspurs (*Bird Behaviour* Vol. 9, No. 1). Sometimes the sparrow was successful in feeding the young, but usually it was actively driven away by the adult longspurs, whose own instincts apparently did not allow them to appreciate the “help.”

### Magpies and Piping Plovers

Piping Plovers nesting along the Atlantic Coast are threatened by a variety of predators. It has been assumed that the same is true for plovers in the interior of the continent, but the identities of the predators there are not as well known.

In North Dakota, Daniel Licht and Kevin Johnson found a Black-billed Magpie in the process of eating the eggs



Northern Flicker

from a Piping Plover nest on a sandbar in the Missouri River (*Prairie Naturalist* Vol. 24, No. 4). The adult plovers, protesting nearby, were unable to defend their nest against the magpie. Because Black-billed Magpies have prospered with human alterations of the northern Great Plains, their significance as predators may be increasing.



Black-billed Magpie

### Conflicts Over Cavities

Birds that nest in tree cavities may have to compete for such sites, and even those birds that make their own cavities can get drawn into the fray. Wallace Rendell and Raleigh Robertson, studying Tree Swallows in Ontario, saw Northern Flickers both winning and losing in competition against the swallows.

On two occasions, Tree Swallows had completed clutches of eggs in cavities when flickers moved in, enlarged the cavities for their own use, and the swallow eggs disappeared. More surprising was another case in which a pair of swallows managed to evict a flicker that was excavating a new cavity.

Despite the flicker's larger size, it was seemingly unnerved by the constant harassment of the swallows, which chattered and dived at the flicker until the latter bird apparently gave

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up and left. The swallows promptly moved in and raised a brood (*Canadian Field-Naturalist* Vol. 105, No. 1).

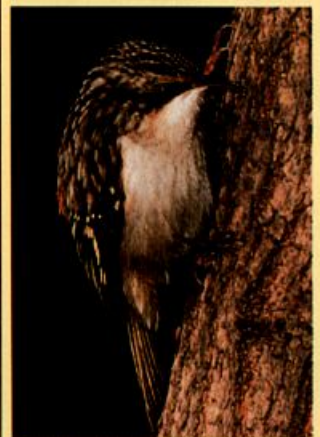
### Seedy Tales and Creeper Stories

Food-storing behavior has been observed in several families of songbirds; some of the best-known examples involved chickadees or nuthatches taking seeds from feeders and hiding them nearby. Now creepers have been added to the list of hoarders.

While studying chickadees, Steven L. Lima and Robert M. Lee saw Brown Creepers storing fragments of sunflower seed kernels taken from feeders (*Condor* Vol. 95, No. 2).

Seed fragments were carried one at a time to the trunk of a pine, and then thrust upward into crevices in the bark. The creepers tended to do this when few chickadees were around.

Although the creepers were



Brown Creeper

never seen coming back to retrieve their cached seeds, this might have been because observations were made only in the morning: Many food-storing birds tend to hide their food items in the morning and retrieve them late in the day.



Swainson's Hawk

**Follow That Dragonfly!**

For most of the year, Swainson's Hawks live mainly on large insects (which is why almost all of them leave North America in winter).

Grasshoppers have been considered their staple fare.

However, studying Swainson's Hawks wintering in Argentina, Alvaro P. Jaramillo found that the main course there was a dragonfly called *Aeshna bonariensis* (*Condor* Vol. 95, No. 2). At Jaramillo's study site, both the dragonflies and the hawks were nomadic. Certain weather conditions might trigger an arrival of millions of dragonflies—to be followed shortly by Swainson's Hawks, in concentrations of 1000 to 5000 or more, mainly capturing and feeding on the dragonflies in flight. Almost all the hawks were juveniles, in accord with most previous observations in

Argentina. The winter whereabouts of most adult Swainson's Hawks remain somewhat mysterious.

**Kinglet "Borrows" Verdin Nest**

The Verdin and Ruby-crowned Kinglet are among our smallest songbirds, and they have different strategies for surviving the cold months. The Verdin is a permanent



Verdin

resident in the desert southwest, and it builds a covered nest for sleeping in, providing insulation against chilly nights. The Ruby-crowned Kinglet migrates from northern and montane coniferous forest to lowland areas, and may overlap with the Verdin in winter. In New Mexico, Greg H. Farley found a Ruby-crowned Kinglet regularly roosting in an abandoned Verdin nest on cold February nights (*Southwestern Naturalist* Vol. 38, No. 1). This behavior had not been reported before, but it might not be unusual: These tiny birds might need to seek sheltered sites in order to survive overnight in cold weather.

**Tree Swallows that Feather the Nest**

Because they are common birds that readily nest in birdhouses, Tree Swallows have played a part in many important studies. Researchers have noted that

Tree Swallows usually line their nests with feathers. It was assumed that these feathers provided some advantage, but there had been little testing of that assumption until David Winkler began studying swallow nests in upstate New York (*Auk* Vol. 110, No. 1). With careful counting of feathers, and with experimental removal of the feathers from some nests, Winkler found solid evidence that these downy linings were valuable to the birds. In nests with fewer feathers, the young swallows developed more slowly and tended to have more external parasites. The efforts of parent Tree Swallows to feather their own nests clearly have a payoff for the nestlings.

**Robins and Robbers**

Birders sometimes see a fruit-eating bird (such as a robin or

mockingbird) vigorously defending its food source against all comers, but seldom are these cases systematically studied.

In Oregon, Rex Sallabanks watched American Robins feeding at hawthorn bushes in winter (*J. Field Ornithol.* Vol. 64, No. 1). Single robins ("owners") defended feeding territories around stands of hawthorn, while others ("intruders") would slip in to feed whenever the "owners" left to drink water nearby.

The feeding rates of these two groups differed dramatically. "Owners" fed in a leisurely way, eating only about two fruits per minute but continuing to feed for up to ten minutes at a time. When "intruders" arrived, they fed much more rapidly, grabbing fruits and swallowing them twice as fast until the "owners" returned to chase them away. With such different feeding rates, the birds might be able to control the rate at which they digest these fruits.

*American Birds* extends an invitation to all of its readers to contribute items to our Overview department. Tell us about something of particular interest to birders: new products, relevant legislation, exhibits, grants, awards, honors, career transitions, or interesting quotes about birds and ecology taken from articles and speeches. Use this issue as a model for items we'd be likely to publish. Send items to: Overview, *American Birds*, 700 Broadway, New York, NY 10003