

World Briefs

Undercover Work Nets Bird Smugglers

Six defendants have been charged with conspiring to smuggle the eggs of wild cockatoos out of Australia. Each autumn eggs were stolen from nests and smuggled into the United States to be hatched and sold. Several hundred eggs of several species, worth over \$1 million, were brought into the United States before a sting operation by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service cracked the scheme. Australian cockatoos are protected both by CITES and Australian laws prohibiting the commercial export of eggs from native cockatoo species.

Golden-cheeked Warbler

The United States Department of the Interior has halted plans to designate certain mixed oak and juniper woodlands in west Texas as critical to the survival of the Endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt told Gov. Ann Richards in late September that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service would halt work on the habitat designation, and that he would reexamine implementation of the federal Endangered Species Act.

The rare species, once found from Mexico through Oklahoma, is now known to nest in a relatively few sites in central Texas. Because the Golden-cheeked Warbler requires very specific habitat—nesting in oak while using cedar and juniper for nesting materials—it has a high degree of fidelity to nesting sites, often returning to the same tree throughout its life. When habitat is eliminated, studies indicate it is very difficult for the bird to relocate.

Areas landowners had protested the plan, and Gov. Richards argued that normal agricultural and ranching activities in Texas have little effect on the warbler. In early September, Dede Armentrout, Southwest Regional Vice-President of the National Audubon Society, testified before the Texas House and Senate joint committee on natural resources on behalf of federal protection. She observed that in the case of the Endangered Whooping Crane, critical habitat designation in Texas appeared to have helped the species.

She added that the majority of Texas landowners believe in good stewardship of their land, but that government agencies have not done an adequate job in furnishing landowners with the information to help them assist species such as the Golden-cheeked Warbler and to avoid putting additional pressure on fragile ecosystems. Cooperation has also been stymied by political information on the impact of critical habitat designation that is largely erroneous, said Armentrout.

“Both state and federal governments need

to do a better job of informing the public about the biology and the law,” said Armentrout. “Landowners need more information about what they *can* do, instead of intimidating, technical obfuscation about what they cannot do.”

House Finch Eye Infections

Feeder watchers in the mid-Atlantic states have noted House Finches with conjunctivitis since last February. The affected birds have swollen faces and runny or crusted eyes, severe cases leave the finches unable to see. Cases have been confirmed in Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, New Jersey, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

State and federal conservation agencies, animal health officials, and bird rehabilitators met in early September to compare notes on the outbreak. The House Finch appears to be the primary species involved, and because it can travel long distances, new cases could appear elsewhere.

The suspected bacterial organism causing the infections is *Mycoplasma*. The organism rarely occurs in small songbirds and is more common in domestic fowl. Further testing will be conducted on the strain found in the House Finches.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service has issued recommendations to help deter the spread of the disease. Since crowding is a key factor in spreading diseases, bird feeding should be done in a manner that alleviates overcrowding. Feeders should be kept clean of waste food and bird droppings, including the areas under feeders.

The units should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. Feeders with rough surfaces and cracks, which are hard to sanitize, should not be used. Siting of feeders should be rotated to avoid buildup of infectious organisms underneath.

Sick or dead birds recovered at feeders should be reported to state fish and wildlife agencies. The feeder should then be cleaned and feeding stopped for four to eight weeks.

Reports of birds affected can be made to George Haas of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service at 413-253-8576.

The Promised Land

The Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge in West Virginia became reality in August after a more than two-decade battle to preserve the unique habitat.

At 3400 ft. in elevation, it is the largest high-elevation valley east of the Mississippi. Its almost alpine climate, with spruce forest and bogs, comprise the largest wetland habitat remaining in the state, says Walt Pomeroy, Mid-Atlantic Regional Vice-President for the National Audubon Society, which worked to protect the valley. Surveys

indicate a large diversity of migratory landbirds and waterfowl use the valley.

The Canaan Valley Refuge is officially the 500th refuge in the national system established in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service first noted the valley's significance 30 years ago and, together with the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, fought developers and a power company to preserve the land.

The initial purchase of 300 acres could eventually be expanded to nearly 24,000. A refuge manager has been hired, and birders are welcome.

Computer Savvy

The National Birding Hotline Cooperative (NBHC) gives computer literate birders an edge in bird sightings and bird-related topics. Its several electronic mail lists, accessible worldwide through Internet, include discussions on bird topics as well as separate regional lists for Rare Bird Alerts from around North America (BirdEast, BirdWest, and BirdCNTR).

Birders "meet" on Birdchat to post queries, tell of recent memorable sightings, or to opine on everything from guide books to birding publications. Most Internet users, including birders on commercial services such as Compuserve, America Online, or Delphi, can connect to NBHC via email.

For more information on this service, contact Chuck Williamson by email at CWilliamson@PimaCC.Pima.EDU, or send a 58-cent self-addressed envelope by "snail mail" to 7309 E. Princeton Dr., Tucson, AZ 85710.

Birding Mentors

Do you have a soft spot for an individual who initiated you into the world of birding? Has that person inspired others? The tour company WINGS has announced a program of grants to "recognize teachers or mentors who through the gift of their time

and enthusiasm have conveyed a knowledge and interest in birds to new birdwatchers, children and adults alike."

WINGS will offer three \$1000 tour grants to teacher/mentors during 1995. For information, send a SASE to WINGS, PO Box 31930, Tucson, AZ 85751.

Christmas Bird Count

The 95th National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count will take place December 17, 1994 to January 2, 1995. Over 43,000 participants are expected to take part in the largest wildlife census in the world. Volunteers from Alaska to Argentina will count and record every individual bird and bird species encountered during one calendar day within a designated 15-mile diameter circle. These "citizen scientists" help to build one of the longest running data sets on bird populations, providing valuable information on the health of bird populations and the quality of their habitat. For further information, contact your local Audubon Society, bird club, or write to Christmas Bird Count, c/o National Audubon Society Field Notes, 700 Broadway, New York City, NY 10003.

Mono Lake Lives!

The city of Los Angeles has been ordered to stop diversion of water from Mono Lake until the water level rises, allowing the saline lake to regain its fragile ecological balance.

The lake, located in California's Eastern Sierra near Yosemite National Park, is a shallow inland sea crucial to hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds and nesting gulls, which feed on the shrimp and insects that live in the salty waters. Los Angeles began siphoning its water nearly 50 years ago, quenching the thirst of a growing, water-hungry metropolis.

Over the years Mono Lake's water level receded more than 40 feet. Scientists and conservationists, including the National Audubon Society and its local chapters, worried that the lake would become too salty

and lose its importance as habitat for birds and other specialized wildlife.

A 1979 suit by Audubon, the Mono Lake Committee, and other environmentalists charged that the diversions from the basin were destroying the public trust values of the lake. The city of Los Angeles unsuccessfully fought the suit through the courts.

But a unanimous decision by the California Water Board September 28 settled the issue. Los Angeles will stop current diversions until the lake rises by two feet; then use will be limited by as much as 85% to assist in increasing its depth by 16 feet from its present level. The ruling will ensure that Mono Lake never again falls to such low levels.

Ultrageese

The watch is on for flocks of Canadian Geese imprinted on an ultralight aircraft in Ontario and "led" to a wintering site in Virginia last year. The 18 geese migrated with the aircraft last fall, and 13 returned to Ontario in the spring. A new group will be led to South Carolina this fall. William J.L. Sladen, director of Environmental Studies at the Airlie Center in Virginia, is coordinating the experiment to see if waterfowl could be trained to fly a migration route. If successful, the technique could be used in restoring other rare species such as Trumpeter Swan or Whooping Crane. Birders are encouraged to report Canada Geese with gray neckbands.

This column is devoted to conservation notes and announcements concerning birds and birding. The format will vary—some issues will include briefs of interest, others will focus on one issue of importance. We want it to be your forum, also. We invite our readers to contribute bird conservation news from your communities, essays on issues of controversy, or summaries of conservation victories. Please send contributions to Susan Roney Drennan, Editor-in-Chief, National Audubon Society Field Notes, 700 Broadway, NYC, NY 10003.

Birders of a feather should flock together—especially during the holidays.



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