

# World Briefs

## Rare Eagle Nest in Guatemala

A Crested Eagle nest, the first ever found north of Brazil, was discovered in the Petén area of Guatemala in April 1994. A farmer, familiar with The Peregrine Fund's work to conserve birds of prey in Guatemala, reported the find.

Not only was the discovery exciting, said the Fund's David Whitacre, but "the fact that it was discovered and brought to our attention by a farmer familiar with our conservation project is even more important. The education of local people in this area is as important as the research we are conducting."

The nest, which had an egg in it, was monitored for about one month, but was eventually destroyed, presumably by a nocturnal mammal. Even in so limited a time, biologists were able to learn a lot about the very rare eagle, which inhabits dense tropical forests in Central and South America. The Crested Eagle pair remains in the area, and the Peregrine Fund hopes to establish a full study of the



Crested Eagle. Photograph/Rob Bierregaard

species in 1995 or 1996. Only one other nest has ever been observed by biologists.

The Crested Eagle, which looks similar to the Harpy Eagle but is smaller, feeds mainly on snakes and arboreal mammals. The greatest threat to its survival in Guatemala is deforestation from slash and burn farming. The farmers near the nest site have agreed not to conduct further cutting nearby.

## Birds and Airports

The shooting of Laughing Gulls at Kennedy Airport in New York City over the past three summers has been called a success by airport officials. Collisions between birds and airplanes has fallen steadily since a peak in 1991. But area naturalists don't agree on tactics to control the bird populations around the airport, which sits on wildlife-rich Jamaica Bay.

The airport has tried other means of removing gulls from the busy runway areas, including decoy owls and removing bodies of standing water from certain parts of the airport property. But the shooting program has been considered the most effective by airport officials. Nearly 4000 gulls were killed in 1994, compared to 14,000 in summer 1991.

John T. Tanacredi, chief of natural resources at Gateway National Recreation Area, which includes the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, told *The New York Times* that the airport should intensify other successful tactics in making the airport less attractive to birds. Though he conceded that some shooting may always be necessary, he pointed out that some major airports, such as London's Heathrow, have full-time ornithologists on staff to study and institutionalize more moderate safety strategies.

## The Business of Birding

The continued growth of birding as "non-consumptive wildlife recreation" is being recognized by everyone from nature tourism businesses to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. There is a drive to get birders recognized as a constituent power in wildlife management decisions, just as waterfowl hunters, for example, have wielded clout through organized groups. A recent issue of the *Wildlife Society Bulletin* reported on a study of the specialization and motivations of birders.

"Because birdwatchers represent a potential economic and political influence for wildlife conservation efforts, addressing their needs is important in gaining support for wildlife conservation and management," wrote Bonita L. McFarlane. Based on her survey of 787 birders in Alberta, Canada, McFarlane identified three primary motivations for birding: appreciation, conservation, and achievement. Specialization, or the degree of involvement in birding—from beginner to advanced, usually signaled some shifts in the goals of birders. For example, a high proportion of advanced birders had an achievement orientation, compared to casual birders who listed appreciation as a primary factor, or

novice and intermediate birders who noted conservation as an important component in birding.

What does this all mean for managers of wildlife resources? The author says these managers need to tailor birding programs and market them to specific groups. They must be able to fill a variety of desires, such as listing, assisting in conservation efforts, or simply enjoying nature.

### Turkey Vulture Concentrations

Gulls are not the only problem for low-flying aircraft. Turkey Vultures, which soar slowly at low levels, were responsible for the loss of ten military planes in the last five years, more than any other bird. Major Russell De Fusco, an ornithologist at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, told *Discover* magazine that the vultures are not usually quick to flee when they see an aircraft in their vicinity: their heavy body weight and large wingspan do not enable them to make speedy aerial maneuvers. But the sheer density of vulture concentrations may be the biggest threat. To help pilots avoid collisions, De Fusco has mapped out seasonal Turkey Vulture distributions, showing the heaviest concentrations for each season. Summer brings the biggest hazard, when up to 40 vultures per 10 square miles soar in areas of Texas and Florida.

### Dandy Duck Production

Anyone who reads the Regional Reports in *National Audubon Society Field Notes* has followed the fortunes of migratory waterfowl in the Great Plains. Spring 1994 was the most successful breeding season for waterfowl in the mid-continental United States and southern Canada since the 1950s and 1970s. Now the United States Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that over 70 million ducks made the southern migration to wintering grounds in the South this fall, according to *Discover*—11 million more than in 1993.

Two successive wet years after a long drought doubled the number of ponds and puddles in the prairie pothole region, a boon to the waterfowl. But the conversion of millions of acres of farmlands to grassland reserves and wetlands through the Conservation Reserve Program was critical in restoring lost or degraded habitat. While many are touting the highly successful spring breeding season as a hopeful sign, few are willing to state that duck populations have turned the corner. In particular, the future of the CRP could impact waterfowl as much as cyclical natural events such as dry seasons and increased predators.

### Conserving Farms and Birdlife

The Conservation Reserve Program, a federal soil conservation program, has been a significant factor in population increases in grassland birds and waterfowl throughout the Great Plains. Now the National Audubon Society has joined with other conservation groups to urge that wildlife habitat preservation through the CRP be made a priority in the 1995 Farm Bill.

The program provides farmers with payments in exchange for planting grass or trees on highly erodible cropland over 10-year periods. The goal of CRP is to reduce federal costs, regulate production, and stem soil erosion. The beneficial effects on wildlife have been a significant bonus. Research done by Purdue University at the request of the National Audubon Society documents the dramatic improvement in habitat in the central United States due to the CRP.

For example, over half of the enrolled land has been restored to grasslands and wetlands habitat. Benefits also include improved water quality and flood control for the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and less wind and water erosion for farmers. There are other pluses: Birding and photography adds an estimated \$4.1 billion to the economy, and small game and waterfowl hunting adds \$4.5 billion.

"The CRP has been a winner for wildlife and United States farmers, and this combination of benefits must be preserved," says Donal O'Brien, chairman of the board of the National Audubon Society.

### Awards

President Jimmy Carter was awarded the 1994 Audubon Medal by Audubon President Peter A.A. Berle at the Society's biennial convention Nov. 13. Carter, an ardent birder, was noted for his achievements linking conservation and energy policies, and for the work of his administration. Berle cited the Alaska Lands Act of 1980, which protected over 100 million acres of wilderness.

Two women who co-founded Audubon El Salvador were recipients of the Audubon/Bausch & Lomb Conservation Award. Zoila Esperanza Perez Molina and Milagro Cristales de Harrouch helped build a successful program of environmental activism in a war-ravaged country with significant ecological problems, few environmental laws, and grinding poverty that pits conservation against daily survival.

The two women recognized that deteriorating environmental conditions could only make things worse for a struggling nation. One of their largest projects has been to create youth brigades in

defense of rare wildlife and threatened habitats. Bausch & Lomb and Audubon members joined to donate 25 pairs of binoculars, two Spanish-language guides books, and educational materials to the Audubon El Salvador group, and Audubon members also contributed optical equipment to send to the chapter.

Audubon also gave Earth Defender Awards to 12 Audubon chapters for excellence in environmental protection efforts. Projects ranged from the defense of riparian habitat along the Platte River by the Murie Audubon Society of Casper, Wyoming, to a Louisiana coastal wetlands workshop educating community leaders sponsored by the Orleans Audubon chapter.

### Chickadee Smarts

When cold weather arrives in October in the Northeast, Black-capped Chickadees are confronted with a rapidly dwindling pool of insects on which to feed. They switch their diet to seeds, forage over a much wider area and join larger flocks with other hungry chickadees. Further, each bird must cache the seeds in a variety of locales to assure winter survival, and then remember where those stashes are located throughout the severe season.

How do they do it? The foraging chickadees, apparently, get smart. Research by Fernando Nottebohm of Rockefeller University and Anat Barnea of Tel Aviv University, reported in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, shows that the hippocampus area of the brain—responsible for memory storage and spatial learning—bursts with new growth in October, new cells replacing dying old cells. The effect is to keep the chickadees' foraging skills and territorial maps current, according to the authors. Captive chickadees provided with seeds have only half the neuronal turnover as their free-foraging counterparts. The dramatic changes in the hippocampus at the same time as changes in the bird's environment is too closely linked to be coincidental, says Nottebohm.

*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.*