

World Briefs

We Count

Birders' contributions can still be used in wildlife monitoring programs administered by the Department of Interior, thanks to a bipartisan House vote July 13. An attempt to outlaw "citizen scientists" in such activities as Breeding Bird Surveys and programs of the National Biological Service was soundly defeated.

In June several members of the House Appropriations Committee proposed prohibiting the NBS from utilizing volunteer services, despite that fact that these efforts save taxpayers millions of dollars annually.

It's All in the Feathers

With one Spix's Macaw remaining in the wild in northwestern Brazil, scientists hoped to release one of the known 31 captive birds to mate with the wild bird. But how to determine the sex of the macaw in the wild? Researchers who observed the bird thought it was a male, based on its behavior, but Spix's Macaws are sexually monomorphic. Researchers would determine the gender easily with live feathers having blood at their base. But they did not want to try to capture the bird, which has lived alone since 1987, for fear of harming it. Another bird died when the last pair was captured in 1987.

So scientists turned to DNA. Using some of the bird's discarded feathers, researchers at Oxford University in Great Britain looked for a genetic marker found in female chickadees and other birds, including a parrot closely related to the Spix's Macaw. When they analyzed the feathers of the wild bird, the female marker was missing.

Since then a female bird has been released and has been seen with the wild male.

The Spix's Macaw has been victim of the wild bird trade, where it would fetch \$60,000, and reduced habitat.

Black Gold Rush?

A Congressional proposal to lease the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife for oil and gas exploration has been added to the federal budget, and could be adopted this fall.

David R. Cline, Alaska Regional Vice President of the National Audubon Society, testified before the House Resources Committee against the proposal in early August.

"... since oil and gas development are totally incompatible with protection of the most superlative wilderness in the National Wildlife Refuge System, they should be prohibited," said Cline. In addi-

tion to large wildlife such as Porcupine Caribou, more than 300,000 Snow Geese stop to feed on the coastal plain before their fall migration south. Biologists have found the geese extremely sensitive to human disturbance at that point in their life cycle.

Looking at wildlife response to the development at Prudhoe Bay, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has determined that female caribou avoid or restrict movement in the area, meaning there is a functional loss of habitat, Cline testified.

"The Arctic refuge constitutes the only wildlife refuge in North America that protects a complete spectrum of Arctic landscape features and wildlife populations in near pristine condition," said Cline. "And, as the Department of Interior concluded in its resource assessment report of 1987, the coastal plain is the most biologically productive part of the entire refuge, and center of wildlife activity in the unit."

Pointing out that the refuge was created by law to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats and ensure water quality within the refuge, Cline added that oil field development did not fit in with such conservation purposes.

Not Hard to Swallow

Cliff Swallows that have begun to nest at a sewage treatment plant in the San Fernando Valley in California recently got a small boost from local government. The birds have been using the concrete eaves of the plant's administration building as a perfect spot for their mud homes. Rather than risk hostilities between swallow and humans, the head of the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant had workers install metal mesh over the eaves that shelter walkways, thus eliminating complaints about airborne wastes and excrement from nests. The remaining spaces, away from direct human contact, are free zones as far as the birds go. Tillman is surrounded by a lake and Japanese garden that attract so many of the insects that the swallows love.

Earth to Mission Control

Northern Flickers are not the only wildlife complicating the lives of NASA scientists these days, although the June 8 scrubbing of a space shuttle launch when one or two flickers drilled 195 holes into the outer insulation of Discovery's external fuel tank ranks up there as one of the most spectacular. The Kennedy Space Center is adjacent to the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, and it has seen everything from bats that fly into buildings to

alligators sunning on roadways used to move shuttles on the ground to Ospreys that built a nest on a construction crane, says a report in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Indeed, NASA does much more disturbing of wildlife than wildlife does in disturbing NASA. A Great Horned Owl and its chicks were killed during the March lift-off of the shuttle Endeavor. Habitat for the Endangered Florida Scrub Jay had been eaten up by development at the Space Center. And, in the most famous case, the "Dusky" Seaside Sparrow was in part driven to extinction because Kennedy Space Center engineers built dikes to control mosquito populations.

But cooperation is often the case. Boats that retrieve booster rockets use water jets instead of propellers, to protect the refuge's manatee population. And when 26 acres of scrub jay habitat was destroyed for building, NASA removed citrus groves and planted three acres of scrub for every acre lost. One Endangered jay population lives about a mile from a launch pad and landing strip, and biologists studying the population say the birds appear to be undisturbed.

The flickers' disruption of the shuttle launch caught NASA by surprise. So NASA workers formed BIRD (the Bird Investigation, Review, and Deterrent team) to make sure it doesn't happen again. While looking for reliable solutions, workers maintaining the shuttle Discovery tried everything from mock owls to silhouettes of a cat.

Conferences

The *Eastern Shore Birding Festival* will be held Oct. 9–10 on the Delmarva Peninsula. Migrating songbirds are a major attraction. Contact the Eastern Shore of Virginia Chamber of Commerce, PO Drawer R, Melfa, VA 23410, or call 1-804-787-2460.

Grassland Birds—Ecology and Conservation will be held Oct. 26–28 in Tulsa, OK. The workshop will look at the ecology, conservation, and management of grassland birds in the Western Hemisphere. It is hosted by the Sutton Avian Research Center and the Association of Field Ornithologists. Contact Dan Reinking, Sutton Avian Research Center, PO Box 2007, Bartlesville, OK 74005, or call 1-918-336-7778.

In Texas, the *Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival* will take place Nov. 8–15. There will be workshops alternating with field trips to San Ana and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges and more. Contact the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce, 311 East Tyler, Harlingen, Texas,

78550, or call 1-800-531-7346.

New Mexico's *Festival of the Cranes* will be held Nov. 16–19 in Socorro. Activities and field trips to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge will focus on the cranes, geese, and ducks that winter along the Rio Grande. For information, contact the Socorro Chamber of Commerce, PO Box 743-B, Socorro, NM 87801, or call 1-505-835-0424.

Parrot Project Falters

An effort to reestablish Thick-billed Parrots in Arizona has been suspended. The released captive-raised birds—intended to supplement a small wild population—have not been able to survive in the forests, with most becoming fodder for raptors.

The parrots were released in the Chiricahua Mountains from 1986 until 1993. Starvation and diseases killed some birds. But many were eaten by hawks within 48 hours of their release, according to *The New York Times*. While a wild population of parrots dwindled after a drought in the late 1980s, released birds lacked the instincts to survive. They did not flock, a behavior that often helps outwit predators. The parrots also foraged for pine cones in non-pine forests. An effort to teach the birds to forage, done in cages with other wild birds, did help improve those skills. But the captive-bred birds still did not learn to flock.

Reintroduction programs, though popular in the public imagination, are not often successful. Only about one in ten projects using animals raised in captivity work, Benjamin B. Beck of the National Zoological Park in Washington told the *Times*. Ornithologists involved in the program will work with conservationists in Mexico to study the wild population there; the Mexican Thick-billed Parrots faces habitat loss from logging. If there is a sizeable, healthy group, the Arizona effort may be renewed, using captured wild birds from Mexico.

Peru's Urban Reserve

Twelve miles from downtown Lima, Peru, a 667-acre freshwater marsh adjoining the Pacific Ocean has long been known as a oasis for birds, including North American migrants and local specialties. But supporters of the Pantanos de Villa nature reserve, bordered by *pueblos juvenes* (shantytowns) on one side and the expectations of real estate developers on the other, fear for the reserve's future.

Native species, such as the Great Grebe, Puna Ibis, and Andean Duck, mix with migrant shorebirds and seabirds. Grassy habitat along a roadway contains skulkers

like the Wren-like Rushbird and Many-colored Rush-Tyrant. On a sunny day in December an Osprey flew high over a lagoon, while grebes, egrets, and a parcel of shorebirds cast a glance upward. A column of terns and gulls whirled busily around the perimeter.

But while many locals are proud of this important piece of nature, others seek to use the land for other purposes. Many poor residents use the streams feeding the wetlands for laundry, causing pollution from detergent and bleach. Children swim in channels where grebes sometimes dive. Until recently, poaching was unchecked. Crime, including armed robbery of visitors, was so rampant that in 1991 President Alberto Fujimori ordered soldiers to protect it.

But it is development that has conservationists most worried. Villas was declared a sanctuary by the government in 1977. But economic and social chaos during the 1980s meant little government attention, and builders and squatters began to take land. More than 25 percent of the wetlands are in litigation, its ownership contested by conservationists on one hand and builders and residents on the other.

There is good news. Possibility of a formal agreement of technical cooperation between Peruvian and Florida's Everglades National Park officials could mean training for the reserve's Peruvian staff. A decrease in poaching has meant an increase in some resident birds. Park officials are building laundries with water treatment plants in the nearby shantytown. Regular surveys by Peruvian ornithologists may help build a case for the area's importance. And, say local conservationists, environmental education is teaching a new generation of Peruvians to take pride in their natural heritage.

This column is devoted to conservation notes concerning birds and birding. The format will vary—some issues will include briefs of interest, others will focus on one single 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, summaries of conservation victories. Please send any contributions to Susan Roney Drennan, Editor-in-Chief, National Audubon Society Field Notes, 700 Broadway, NYC, NY 10003.