

World Briefs

Early Beak Discovered

The fossil remains of a bird in China without teeth and with a true avian beak has added new fodder to thinking on bird evolution. Living around the time of the well-known *Archaeopteryx*, a transitional reptile-bird, about 147 million years ago, the newly named Holy Confucius bird (*Confuciusornis sanctus*) had a reptilian tail, vestigial forearms that ended in claws, and feathered wings that allowed it to fly. But it is apparently 70 million years older than the previously oldest known toothless bird found in Mongolia.

The Confucius bird offers evidence that birds evolving at several stages existed in different parts of the world at the time of *Archaeopteryx*. The discovery of the fossil last year was reported in the journal *Nature* by Chinese and American paleontologists in October. The researchers suggested that the bird was on a separate evolutionary branch of the bird family tree that eventually went extinct. The main line of adaptation in birds did not lose teeth and develop a horny beak until around 65 million years ago.

Happy Trails

The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail was launched in Rockport in September, promoting birding along the 500-mile Texas coast. Some 95 sites along the central coast section are the first to be developed in a three-phase program that will be completed in 1997 at a cost of \$1.5 million.

Birders driving from Beaumont to Brownsville will find it easier to take advantage of the bird-rich territory, with sites both on the coast and up to 100 miles inland. A free map from the Texas Department of Transportation, and nominally priced guide listing birds, sites, and local services and accommodations will be available when the project is finished. Road signs with the bird trail logo—a Black Skimmer—will alert birders to nearby sites.

Consultant Ted Eubanks, a board member of the National Audubon Society, said that 450 of Texas 600 bird species are found along the central coast portion of the birding trail. And local communities recognize the economic boon. Madge Lindsay of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department said her agency received more than three times the number of site nominations than expected.

The completed trail will include state and national parks, state wildlife management areas, and a number of private sites. The map and guide are not yet completed, but birders can get interim information and be placed on the mailing list by sending a post card to: The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744.

Wyoming Trumpeters

Seven Trumpeter Swans raised in captivity were released near Cora, Wyoming, in September, joining four other Trumpeters successfully released there last year. The cooperative project of the Wyoming Wetland Society, the Bureau of Land Management, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the United States Forest Service, and private landowners is designed to broaden the number of nesting colonies in the state. There is only one nesting colony there now.

"We're trying to spread them out so if a disaster occurs, there will still be Trumpeters left," said Bob McCarty, BLM wildlife biologist. The released birds were dyed pink on one wing and have green tag on one foot so that they can be tracked during migration. Sightings of the pink-winged Trumpeters should be reported to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department or the Bureau of Land Management in that state.

We Smell Sea Smells

Storm-petrels and other sea birds use the sense of smell to locate food in the vast tracts of ocean that they patrol far from shore. Dimethyl sulfide (DMS) is produced when krill and other zooplankton graze on plant plankton, and its odor signals the birds. Krill is a major food for seabirds.

The August issue of *Nature* reported on a study by scientists aboard a British Antarctic Survey ship. The scientists noted that Wilson's and Black-bellied storm-petrels, White-chinned Petrels, and prions were consistently attracted to oil slicks laced with DMS. These birds most often forage at night, when olfactory cues would be critical. Other seabirds, such as the large albatrosses and Cape Petrels, did not respond to the laced slicks any more than control slicks of vegetable oil. These birds most often forage by exploiting other feeding groups, such as whales, seals, and conspicuous sea birds.

The DMS odor, similar to rotting seaweed, is a byproduct of the decomposition of phytoplankton, and the process is accelerated when krill are feeding. Concentrations tend to surface in upwelling zones and shelves, which form an "olfactory map" for migrating sea birds.

Clapper Rail Recovery

The *Endangered* "California" Clapper Rail appears to be recovering in salt marshes south of San Francisco Bay, its last stronghold, reports *The New York Times*. Predation by red foxes during the 1980s had reduced the population from around 1000 to less than 250 in 1991, according to surveys by wildlife biologists.

Rail eggs and carcasses were found around fox dens and at buried food caches. The

United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game began a program in 1991 to remove the foxes and feral cats in the area. The foxes are not native to the area, and were thought to have escaped from fur farms.

This year 600 rails were counted around the south bay. The California Clapper Rail once was found along coastal marshes from Eureka in the north to San Luis Obispo in the south. But much of their habitat has been lost to development, agriculture, or commercial salt harvest.

Mexico Update

Most of the 40,000 migratory waterbirds that died at a reservoir in central Mexico last October and November were killed by botulism, according to findings done for a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) environmental commission inquiry.

Originally environmentalists had pointed to heavy metal poisoning as the likely cause of the bird deaths. The reservoir is downstream from tanneries and other industry near Leon. The panel did find that exposure to chromium, lead, mercury, and other heavy metals did play a role in the bird deaths, and could have contributed to the botulism. The panel suggested that explosives be detonated at the site to frighten away birds, and a feeding program at an alternate site. The National Audubon Society and two Mexican environmental organizations filed a request for an inquiry under the terms of the NAFTA environmental accord.

Christmas Bird Count

The National Audubon Society's 96th Christmas Bird Count will be conducted from Saturday, December 16, 1995, to Tuesday, January 2, 1996. More than 44,000 volunteers from Alaska to Argentina are expected to take part in the largest wildlife census in the world.

Every state and province in the United States and Canada, as well as parts of Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Bermuda, and several Pacific islands will count and record every individual bird and bird species seen during one calendar day during the period.

"Every Christmas bird counter is involved in a unique exercise in citizen science," says Susan Drennan, Audubon's vice president for ornithology and editor of *National Audubon Society Field Notes*. The data collected by each count are sent to the National Audubon Society, analyzed, and the results are published each year in the Christmas Bird Count issue of *Field Notes*. Individuals or groups interested in participating should contact their local Audubon chapter or Geoff LeBaron at (212) 979-3083.

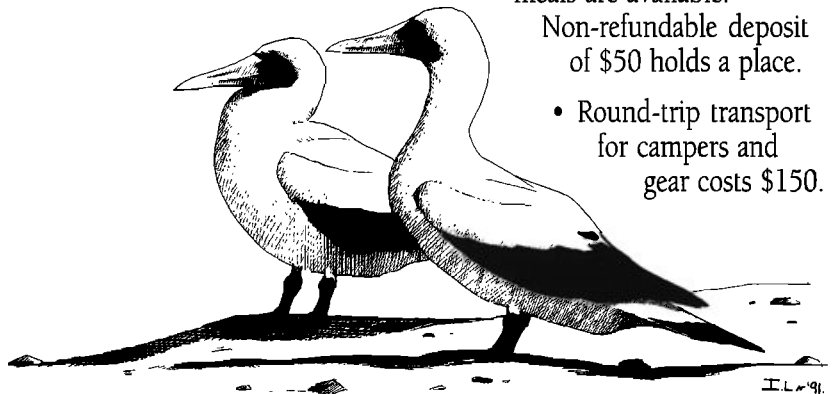
DRY TORTUGAS 1996 SHUTTLES

Great seabird spectacle, migrants, sometimes in dazzling numbers, and frequent rarities, all in an appealing setting.

- Three day trips in the spring of 1996 from Key West, Florida on the *Yankee Cpts.*
April 13 - 15
April 16 - 18
April 20 - 22
April 23 - 25
April 27 - 29
April 30 - May 2
May 4 - 6
- **WINGS Leaders** include
Shawneen Finnegan
Jeff Kingery
Paul Lehman
Michael O'Brien
Will Russell
Stuart Tingley
- Calm anchorages each night.
- Great snorkeling and swimming.
- Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy by the thousands; Magnificent Frigatebird by the hundreds; Masked and Brown Boobies; Audubon's Shearwater and Bridled Tern are likely; Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, White-tailed Tropicbird and Black Noddy are possible.
- Trips begin at 6 a.m. on day 1 and include a search for deep water pelagics on the way to the Tortugas, two mornings at Fort Jefferson, visits to Loggerhead and Middle Keys, unlimited small boat cruises around Bush and Long Keys and a return to Key West via deep water or Rebecca and Cosgrove shoals, arriving at 5 p.m. on day 3.
- Trip cost \$395/person. Ten percent discount for groups of 10 or more. Free berth available on board the night before departure. Food not included in the price but galley meals are available.

Non-refundable deposit of \$50 holds a place.

- Round-trip transport for campers and gear costs \$150.



For detailed information, please contact

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