

World Briefs

Save America's Bird Science

With the National Biological Service and most of the United States government's avian research, inventorying, and monitoring programs in danger of extinction by budget cutters, the National Audubon Society recently sponsored National Bird Science Day.

Volunteer field ornithologists and birders from across the country sent a message to Congress May 24: The loss of avian research and large-scale monitoring projects conducted by the NBS would cripple bird conservation in North America.

The NBS was created in 1993 to collect information about the nation's biological resources, to monitor wildlife populations, and to make the data available to government agencies, universities, industries, and private landowners to assist in making land and resource management decisions. Key elements of the NBS at risk include the Bird Banding Laboratory, which maintains a database of over 31 million bands recording information about age, sex, location and date of banded birds; the Breeding Bird Survey, the only continent-wide bird population monitoring program, could also lose funding; and a wide range of other critical bird research and monitoring activities, such as hawk migration counts, research on neotropical migrants, and seabird and shorebird studies.

Members of Congress have targeted the agency for dismantling in the upcoming 1996 federal budget, which begins October 1995. The House was scheduled to decide the fate of the NBS by June 1 and the Senate will determine the NBS funding level by August 1. Birders are urged to continue the momentum of Bird Science Day by contacting their representatives and key members of the Senate.

Mexican Catastrophe

An estimated 40,000 waterbirds, many migrants from Canada and the United States, died this winter at a reservoir near León, Mexico. Twenty-two species—including Eared Grebes, White-faced Ibis, Gadwalls, Northern Pintails, Cinnamon and Green-winged teal, Ruddy Ducks, and American Avocets—were among the casualties. Local residents, who use the water to irrigate crops, water their livestock, and to hunt the ducks that feed there, also reported symptoms consistent with ingestion of toxic materials.

Mexico's National Water Commission suggested that an agricultural pesticide, Endosulfan, was responsible. Others question that verdict. Autopsies indicated that

many birds suffered heavy-metal poisoning from chemical plants and tanneries that release wastewater. A rescue station, set up and supervised by the Fundacion Ecologica de Guanajuato, saved some 1300 birds, but the ultimate fate of the those birds cannot be known.

The reservoir was drained in February, and small numbers of waterfowl were still dying in early March. An agreement to clean up the local water system was reached between the Mexican environmental ministry and some state and industry representatives. But, according to observers, the agreement lacks teeth, specifically in the area of enforcement. Monitoring of the agreement by a Mexican non-governmental organization indicates that it has produced few concrete results and, further, that the devaluation of the Peso has discouraged many of the local industries from making major renovations of wastewater treatment systems.

The National Audubon Society, its Mexican chapters, and two Mexican non-governmental organizations have filed a petition with the North American Commission on Environmental Cooperation, set up under the North American Free Trade Agreement to monitor environmental problems in the three signatory nations. The petition asks the commission to investigate the incident and the Mexican government response, and to focus resources on the cleanup.

Siberian Cranes

Endangered Siberian Cranes were once again absent from their historic wintering grounds in Keoladeo National Park in India this year. As recently as 20 years ago, 200 cranes completed the two-month journey from the far north near the Arctic Circle over seven countries, which now includes several war zones. By 1992-1993, only five returned to India. For the past two winters, no wild cranes have completed the migration.

Dangers along the route include hunting or capture by peasants who use cranes as watch animals. Even more threatening to the Siberian Cranes is habitat loss on their breeding grounds from domesticated herds of reindeer and proposed oil drilling in the frigid north.

There are an estimated 3000 Siberian Cranes in the wild; two other populations winter in China. Alternate conservation plans for the Indian population have included the introduction of captive-bred Siberian Cranes and possible "teaching" of the ancient migration routes using ultralight air craft (*see AFN 48:3 article on "Ultrageese"*).

Florida Waders

Wading bird numbers in the northern Everglades hit a 10-year low in January, according to a survey by the National Audubon Society's Tavernier Science Center. Tavernier is conducting standardized aerial surveys for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The areas are contained within impounded marshes called Water Conservation Areas and have been surveyed by Tavernier research biologists since 1987. The current set of surveys will be conducted through June 1995.

An analysis of the January survey revealed the lowest estimated numbers of wading birds for any dry season survey, with 5825 birds using an area of roughly 3600 square kilometers, reported Audubon biologists Rick Sawicki and Wayne Hoffman. The previous low estimate for a January survey was 32,000 birds in 1993. The highest January estimate was 126,000 in 1990. Overall, the highest population estimate ever recorded was 229,000 in March 1990, while the lowest dry season (December-June) estimate was 15,000 in February 1993.

The low numbers are likely due to record-high water levels, partially a result of very heavy rainfall during the previous summer through mid-winter period. Compounding the heavy rainfall, however, has been diversions of huge volumes of water from Lake Okeechobee and the sugar cane agricultural lands immediately north of the Water Conservation Areas.

Canadian Guides

Two new miniguides to birds in the Northwest Territories have been published. *The Birds of the Northwest Territories*, by Jacques Sirois and Doug McRae, provides both a complete checklist divided into four geographical units and a short synopsis of habitat, resident and migratory birds, abundance, and where to bird. It was published by the government of the Territories, and will be used to promote conservation and biodiversity there.

The miniguide, in booklet form, is available for free from the Department of Economic Development and Tourism, Suite 210, Government of the Northwest Territories, PO Box 1320, Yellowknife, NT Canada X1A 2L9.

Sirois authored *The Birds of Great Slave Lake*, also in the Northwest Territories. This "miniguide to a megalake" contains a list of 237 confirmed species near the lake, as well as highlights and curiosities of what is probably the most birded region of the Territories. It is available for \$3 from Ecology North, 4807 49th St., Suite 8, Yellowknife, NT Canada X1A 3T5.

Newsletter

Partners in Flight—Aves de las Americas has initiated a semi-monthly newsletter, La Tangara, on activities of its international working group, as well as news, meeting announcements, and publications relating to the conservation of neotropical migrants. The newsletter, written in Spanish and English, is distributed by e-mail, fax, or post. To receive it by mail, send a mailing address to Borja Mila, Redwood Sciences Lab, 1700 Bayview Dr., Arcata, CA 95521. To begin a fax subscription, fax 707-822-5628. E-mail subscribers should contact borjam@aol.com or ralphc@axe.humboldt.edu.

Eat Your Figs!

Tropical frugivores eat a significant number of figs in their diet, and scientists have sought to find out what makes the fruit important to these birds. A field project by the Wildlife Conservation Society may unlock the mystery: Measuring key minerals in figs eaten by hornbills and primates in Sulawesi, workers found that figs may be an important source of calcium. All 24 *Ficus* species analyzed contained calcium levels higher than the minimum daily requirements for growing primates, and several types provided enough calcium for hens laying 300 eggs a year, according to Wildlife Conservation.

Awards

The 1994 Forktail-Leica Award was won by Chinese ornithologist Wen Xianji for work on the Green Peafowl in south Yunnan. The Oriental Bird Club/In Focus conservation Awareness Award was given to Rinekso Soekmadi and his Biodiversity Conservation Indonesia Foundation for training teachers. The Oriental Bird Club has funded more than 70 conservation projects in Asia since 1987.

Manomet Observatory has named Paul E. Allen of Cornell University as recipient of the 1995 Kathleen S. Anderson Award. His work was on the feasibility of nest boxes as a conservation tool for the Bahama Swallow.

Guy Tudor was awarded The Academy of Natural Sciences' Gold Medal for Distinction in Natural History Art.

Birding Internet

More resources for data-hungry birders are flourishing on the information superhighway. Some of the latest are data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey and access to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service data library. The

National Audubon Society has also inaugurated a home page.

A home page for the BBS includes such information as distribution maps, relative abundance on BBS routes, population trends, and a graph of the survey-wide annual indices. It is available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.im-nbs.gov/bbs/bbs.html>. For information, contact Bruce Peterjohn at peterjohn@mail.fws.gov.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is available on World Wide Web at <http://www.fws.gov/>. For computer users with only e-mail text capabilities, there is a separate "dial-a-file" library server. Send a message to R9IRMLJM@mail.fws.gov. On the subject line, type SEND HELP, and a user's guide will be sent.

The Great Escape

Winter birders in the New York/New Jersey area kept their eyes peeled for exotic South American seabirds this winter. An aviary at the Bronx Zoo in New York City collapsed February 4, and 33 of the more than 100 seabirds flew or were blown out of the structure. One Gray Gull and an Inca Tern were recovered, but 31 other seabirds remain missing. The Harry de Jur Aviary was built in 1899 and was one of the first exhibits to open at the zoo. In the 1980s it was reconstructed to recreate the terrain of Patagonia. The exhibit also included Magellanic Penguins and Guanay Cormorants. The zoo plans to rebuild and reestablish the seabird colonies as soon as possible.

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.