

World Briefs

Mexico Hawk Watch Seeks Volunteers

Every fall an amazing "river" of raptors flows over a narrow width in the Mexican state of Veracruz between the Sierra Madre mountains and the Gulf of Mexico. It is perhaps one of the most important migration corridors in the world: Over two million raptors annually have been recorded in recent years. Now the Veracruz River of Raptors program, sponsored by Mexican environmental groups and Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association, Kempton, PA, is looking for experienced hawk counters for migration research between Sept. 10 and Oct. 22, 1996 at the central Veracruz site.

"Applicants must be prepared for hard work, long days in the sun, intense heat, and incredible flights," says Laurie Goodrich, staff ecologist at Hawk Mountain. Spanish is helpful, though not required. Volunteers must provide their own optics. Housing and food will be provided, and, pending funding, the program may be able to assist with air fare. Send a letter of interest, resume, and two letters of reference to: Ernesto Ruelas Inzunza, Pronatura Veracruz, A.P. 399, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico 91000. Phone/fax: 28-12-88-44. Email: pronaver@speedy.coacade.uv.mx.

Mail-order Disaster

A powerful pesticide available through the mail has been implicated in the deaths of raptors and some passerines in more than a dozen cases over a decade. Marketed as an answer to so-called "pest birds" such as European Starlings and Rock Doves, Rid-a-Bird is a poisoned perch coated with fenthion, which paralyzes a bird's nervous system. Though the product is currently illegal in the state of New York, it can be mail ordered. This past December, a dairy farmer in upstate New York's Dutchess County used the perch to get rid of starlings in his barn. He then dumped the bodies in a field while spreading manure, and other scavenging birds — from American Crows to Red-tailed Hawks — were then poisoned as the fenthion spread up the food chain.

The president of the Iowa-based company that produces Rid-a-Bird told *The New York Times* that secondary poisonings do not occur if the product is used properly. Users are instructed to search for bodies within 100 yards of the perch, and then to bury or burn the carcasses.

Fenthion has been banned in at least one state, where there were similar incidents. In New York, the permit for the product was withdrawn when the company did not provide proper information

on its effect on wildlife. The company is reapplying. Fenthion is currently being reevaluated by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, expected to completed late this summer.

Parrot Trafficker

A bird breeder who had championed conservation of endangered parrots pleaded guilty to federal charges of bird trafficking early this year. Tony Silva had been charged with conspiring to smuggle birds and other wildlife worth \$1.3 million into the United States.

Silva had written articles in popular caged-bird magazines denouncing the illegal trade in endangered birds, and authored a book entitled *A Monograph of Endangered Parrots* in 1989. In 1991 he wrote that illegal trafficking had brought the Hyacinth Macaw to the "brink of extinction and unless this situation is reversed, we will see its demise within our lifetime." Among the charges was that he conspired to import dozens of Hyacinth Macaws, which is critically endangered in South America and protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). He was also charged with conspiring, as early in 1986, to smuggle other protected birds, such as Golden Conures, Vinaceous Amazons, and Yellow-shouldered Amazons.

Custom Tools for Crows?

A paper in *Nature* in January argues that the *Corvus moneduloides* in New Caledonia islands of the South Pacific make "tool kits" to pry and extract worms and other prey from holds in trees and dead wood. Gavin R. Hunt, a biologist at Massey University in New Zealand, studied the crows for three years. He wrote that the crow tool manufacture had features never before seen in nonhumans, and which appeared only in early human tool-making after the Lower Paleolithic: "a high degree of standardization, distinctly discrete tool types with definite imposition of form in tool shaping, and the use of hooks."

Other scientists remain skeptical of highly intelligent behavior in animals, and in a comment in the same issue of *Nature*, a zoologist questioned whether the tools observed were truly planned or merely shaped by trial and error for specific tasks

New Wildlife Refuge

Missouri River flood plains are being returned to nature in the newly created Big Muddy National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. Born in the wake of the catastrophic floods of 1993, the federal government began buying flood-prone lands

from landowners with flood disaster funds. The refuge could eventually comprise 60,000 acres stretching in natural pockets from Kansas City to St. Louis.

The Least Tern and Piping Plover are two bird species which have been adversely affected by human development along the Missouri. Land brought into the refuge system would be returned to its natural state, benefitting both fish and wildlife, including birds. Currently 1600 acres have been purchased, and another 10,828 is being considered.

Happy Birthday!

The Massachusetts Audubon Society turned 100-years-old in February. The first Audubon Society was started in Boston in 1896 when Harriet Lawrence Hemenway decided to take on fashion: the ornate hats covered with feathers worn by women. Today the state organization runs 18 nature centers with 24,000 protected acres in Massachusetts. Research by staff has resulted in important legislation that has become models for federal laws.

Costa Rica

The Tortuguero Biological Field Station in Costa Rica is gearing up to monitor resident and neotropical migrant birds as a training and research initiative. Some 330 species of birds (220 resident and 110 non-resident) are found in the immediate area of Tortuguero National Park in the northeastern Atlantic/Caribbean coast of the country. The proximity of coastal plain, rain forest, buffer zones, ranch, and croplands near the Tortuguero Conservation Area make a good base for scientific studies, as well as to train local and regional researchers and volunteers. The project is being developed by the non-profit Caribbean Conservation Corporation, in collaboration with local, national, and international agencies associated with Partners in Flight.

Modeled after a successful volunteer turtle-tagging program, the monitoring program will be coupled with a workshop for which participants, such as North American birders, will pay a fee. The goal is an ongoing, financially self-sufficient program, with an eye toward incubating similar projects throughout the Latin American and Caribbean region. Additional information is available at 800-678-7853 or by email at CCC@atlantic.net

IBA Update

The National Audubon Society continues to expand its Important Bird Areas program with the hiring of Jeff Wells as coordinator of the New York State IBA project.

Wells comes from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, where he has been research associate in the Bird Population Studies Department. Wells received a Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology from Cornell University. He has authored and co-authored several dozen articles in scholarly and popular journals. He will be based in Ithaca, New York, at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, as a result of an offer of cooperation from the Lab.

The IBA Program is a joint Audubon initiative with the American Bird Conservancy to identify and conserve areas of critical importance to birds throughout the United States. National Audubon has launched state IBA projects in Pennsylvania, where Gary Crossley is the Coordinator, and New York, and is preparing to start projects in Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, California, and elsewhere.

Laguna Madre to be Studied

Environmentalists applauded a recent decision by the Galveston (Texas) District United States Army Corps of Engineers to prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on the Gulf Intra-coastal Waterway, which extends through the wildlife-rich Laguna Madre in south Texas. The National Audubon Society is one of several partners that have mounted a legal challenge over dredging in the bay. An extensive study recently showed that the annual dredging of the Laguna Madre is responsible for a 40% decline in seagrass there.

National Audubon Society created one of its first wildlife sanctuaries at Green Island in the Lower Laguna in 1921, home to the world's largest colonies of Reddish Egrets.

The portion of the Waterway below Corpus Christi is a little used spur that has caused extensive habitat loss in the Laguna Madre, among the most naturally productive fisheries in Texas.

"In addition to its huge economic benefit to Texas, the Laguna Madre is critical to entire populations of birds as both a wintering and breeding area," said Scott Hedges, manager of Texas' Coastal Sanctuaries for NAS. "Eighty percent of the world's Redhead Duck population depends on the laguna as their prime winter habitat, and the world's largest concentration of Reddish Egrets maintains a year-round dependence on the Laguna. We still have a chance to avert the ecological system breakdown in this priceless bay, which we are cashing in with the ruinous dredging."

The Laguna Madre is home to about 40% of wintering Endangered Piping Plovers, one of many shorebird species

that use the bay margins. Also tied to the Laguna is the Peregrine Falcon, a migrant that needs concentrations of ducks and other shorebirds for successful hunting.

Murrelet News

A federal appeals court in early May upheld a plan to block logging in the Owl Creek old-growth forest in northern California that is home to the Marbled Murrelet. At the same time, it overturned an order barring timber harvest in a nearby forest that environmentalists said was also important habitat.

And in Oregon and Washington states, several wildlife biologists offered a Marbled Murrelet surveyors' training program in key national forest habitats. The programs, designed to help verify murrelet occupancy of land slated for timber sales, were sponsored by the National Audubon Society, local Audubon chapter and other local environmental groups. Although murrelets have been located in these lands using scientific protocol developed by the Pacific Seabird Group, recent court ruling discounted those findings. The new volunteer surveys could be critical to meet the more restrictive interpretation of the "known to be nesting" language in the court's ruling. The surveys began May 1 and will supplement United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management surveys slated for later in May.

This column is devoted to conservation notes and announcements concerning birds and birding. 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 items to Susan Roney Drennan, Editor-in-Chief, National Audubon Society Field Notes, 700 Broadway, NYC, NY 10003.1004