



SWAROVSKI BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN SWAROVSKI BIRDING COMMUNITY

Information, communication, and inspiration on birds, wildlife, and nature

March 2005

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GREETINGS!

Welcome to the eleventh of our "Swarovski Birding E-bulletins" for North America. This communication is appearing every month, and it is intended to keep friends and associates informed about news and developments in the area of birds, birding, and bird conservation.

We continue this year with our new partner in producing and distributing this E-bulletin, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). You may also wish to refer to the Swarovski-sponsored birding pages on the NWRA website for a simple introduction to birds and the birding world:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/birding1.html>

This E-bulletin is longer than usual, but there was a lot of important information to share this month!

We welcome your distribution of all or parts of this E-bulletin, only requesting mention of the material's origins.

If you have a friend who wants to get onto this E-bulletin mailing list, that person can contact either of us:

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RARITY FOCUS

Last month we mentioned that there were a number of marvelous birds being seen in southernmost Texas, so many in fact that it would be difficult to decide which species to profile for the month. At this writing, the birding spectacle in the Lower Rio Grande Valley continues. Among the wonder-birds seen in that region are Roadside Hawk, Elegant Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, White-throated and Clay-colored Robins, Flame-colored Tanager, Golden-crowned Warbler, Blue Bunting, and Crimson-collared Grosbeak (the last actually profiled in our December 2004 issue).

It is the White-throated Robin, also known as White-throated Thrush (*Turdus assimilis*) and not to be confused with the White-throated Robin (*Irania gutturalis*), a Middle Eastern Old World Flycatcher, that will receive our focus here. This species, is an olive-brown robin-like thrush with a white crescent below a streaked throat. The bird normally ranges from northern Mexico to northern South America. The species was first seen in the U.S. in 1990, with a bird accompanying a small group of Clay-colored Robins at a location at Laguna Vista, Texas. A few more individuals appeared in the early months of 1998 at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

This winter, however, the Valley has witnessed a number of sightings of this species. The year started with one found at the Frontera Audubon property in Weslaco on 2 January. Soon others were found, including one at the Sabal Palm Sanctuary near Brownsville, at least three cooperative individuals at Santa Ana NWR, and single birds at Bentsen, the Canon Road rest stop, and at the Inn at Chachalaca Bend. There may be more!

What brought the White-throated Robins and the other essentially Mexican birds into the U.S. this season? Although there have been other impressive incursions of Mexican birds in recent winters (e.g., 1985-86 and 1987-88), none can approach the scope of the last few months.

Some observers have speculated that the Mexican birds arrived following a pre-Christmas freeze in Mexico that brought the first snowfall in many decades. The hypothesis is that several rainy years in succession in northeastern Mexico may have sufficiently increased regional food supplies to encourage an expansion of local bird populations. Then, in response to the unseasonably cold weather in Mexico, birds from this expanded population flew northward seeking food after the vegetation die-off in the aftermath of the cold weather in Mexico.

Regardless of the actual causes, the robins and other Mexican specialties have entertained thousands of visiting birders in the Valley, week in week out, since the birds first began appearing.

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NEW WHSRN SITE IN SOUTH TEXAS

Since we're discussing the Lower Rio Grande Valley in this E-bulletin, it is appropriate to mention that a new internationally significant shorebird site has just been recognized there.

On 22 January, there was a dedication for a recently designated Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) site at the South Texas Salt Lakes, the La Sal Del Rey Tract of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, near Raymondville, Texas.

The site received recognition in view of its use as a nocturnal roost for over 2,200 Long-billed Curlews. This constitutes over 10 percent of the estimated world population of the species. The salt lakes are also important for other species, with over 6,000 Wilson's Phalaropes and over 10,000 eared grebes having been documented there.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR now joins its sister refuge, Laguna Atascosa NWR, as a WHSRN-designated site.

For background on WHSRN see these pages: <http://www.manomet.org/WHSRN/what.htm>

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YEAR OF THE OWLS

Our rarity focus this month might very well have been the Great Gray Owl, a species undertaking a major invasion into Minnesota, Wisconsin, and neighboring southern Canada. In fact, Minnesotans have called this "The Year of the Owls." The invasion continues to enthrall birders from the region even as we write. The Minnesota Ornithologists' Union (MOU) and Audubon Minnesota have been carefully cataloguing the record-breaking numbers of Great Gray Owls and other owl species in the state this winter. As of the last week in February, Peder Svingen, MOU Records Committee Chair has tallied reports of nearly 2,500 Great Gray Owls, more than 300 Northern Hawk Owls, and more than 400 Boreal Owls in Minnesota. This compares to last year's more typical Minnesota totals of 35 Great Gray Owls, 6 Northern Hawk Owls, and 1 Boreal Owl. The numbers for this season represent the highest number ever documented in the state in a single winter season for each of the species listed. In Canada birders in Ontario and Quebec are also reporting increased numbers of Great Grays and other owls.

Birders in Minnesota and Wisconsin are continuing to work with state and federal wildlife agency and university biologists to collect data on these owls. The phenomenon in Minnesota was even featured in a report on the NBC Nightly News on 8 February, a story you can access at: <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6935774>

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CRP AND GRASSLAND GROUSE IN MINNESOTA

And here's more news from Minnesota.

As reported by the Wildlife Management Institute, recent studies in Minnesota have shown that Greater Prairie-Chicken nesting success on Farm-Bill-promoted conservation reserve program (CRP) lands now approaches that of the species' nesting success on native grasslands. In the early years of CRP (the mid- and late 1980s), prairie-chicken nesting success on those farm-bill set-aside acres was in the vicinity of 33 percent. Over time, however, with more lands in CRP, an increase in cover crops, and recovery of native flora, nesting success now approaches 46 percent. Land managers at The Nature Conservancy indicate that predators may have an increasingly difficult time finding prairie-chicken nests in the relatively dense planted grasses, and that there is an increased supply of food compared with vegetative conditions in the early years of the CRP.

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HALF A CENTURY: WATERFOWL SURVEY

Each spring and summer for the past 50 years, teams Fish and Wildlife Service pilot-biologists have taken to the air to survey North America's waterfowl breeding grounds. Flying more than 80,000 miles, crisscrossing the country at low altitude, the biologists, along with colleagues on the ground, have recorded the numbers of ducks, geese, and swans, and assessed the quality and quantity of waterfowl breeding habitat.

The Waterfowl Population Survey Program represents a half century of standardized cooperative surveys performed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, state and provincial biologists, and non-governmental cooperators. The 50-year survey program being celebrated this year is believed to be the most extensive, comprehensive, long-term, annual wildlife survey effort in the world.

The Waterfowl Population Survey is critical in determining the status of North America's waterfowl populations. The survey plays a role in setting annual waterfowl hunting regulations, and it helps guide the decisions of waterfowl managers throughout North America.

For more information, see these pages: <http://waterfowlsurveys.fws.gov/>

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LIGHTS OUT: CHICAGO

For the last two months, we have mentioned the issue of bird-collisions, International Migratory Bird Day, and the conference in Chicago to be held early this month on the subject of bird-collisions.

There is now a website that provide tools to replicate Chicago's Lights Out Program - a cooperative venture between Audubon Chicago Region, the City of Chicago, and the Building Owners and Managers Association of Chicago. The Lights Out Program in Chicago encourages most of the city's tall buildings to turn off all their decorative lights during spring and fall bird migration. An expanded national effort has the support of the

International Building Owners and Managers Association, Audubon, and Partners in Flight, and is receiving funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Doug Stotz, ornithologist at The Field Museum in Chicago, estimates that the Lights Out program saves the lives of over ten thousand warblers, tanagers, thrushes, and other migratory birds each year in Chicago. His studies show that turning out lights reduces bird mortality due to collisions by 80 percent. Simply dimming or turning off the lights on the upper stories during the weeks that birds move through the Chicago metropolitan area can apparently help birds migrate more successfully through the urban area.

For details on the new Lights Out site: www.lightsout.audubon.org

For details on the "Birds and Buildings: Creating a Safe Environment" conference to be held on 11 March, find details at: <http://www.birdsandbuildings.org/index1024.html>.

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AN ARCTIC SOURCE FOR WEST NILE SPREAD?

First identified in the West Nile region of Uganda in 1937, West Nile virus (WNV) has been identified as a virus that affects human populations. Mosquitoes have been identified as the major vector for the spread of the virus, and migratory birds as the major transport agent for the virus. Most researchers in the Old World have implied that the most important source of the virus in Europe has been Africa. However, Reuven Yosef and his colleagues at the International Birding and Research Center in Eilat, Israel, have encountered some interesting variations in the WNV experience, findings which may refute the African-source theory.

Through sampling of Little Stints migrating southward to Africa in autumn, over 10 percent recorded positive for WNV, and the overwhelming majority of these individuals were first-year birds; in other words, those that had recently fledged in the high Arctic, making their first journey southward.

Based on the data, and the lack of any other studies on the species or other tundra breeding birds, the researchers suggest that the Arctic has a greater capacity for the transfer of WNV than has previously been thought. They suggest that future WNV studies not blindly assume that the virus is out of Africa alone.

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FINCHES AND DISEASE IN THE WEST

In California, a West Nile Virus hotline has received numerous calls from concerned residents reporting dead Pine Siskins in forested areas and suburbs throughout the northern portion of the state.

As it turns out, it wasn't WNV at all, but rather was salmonellosis, a bacterial disease not related to WNV.

The California Department of Fish and Game announced the finding in mid-February and asked Northern California residents to remove bird feeders from their property for at least a month to help slow an outbreak of the avian disease.

Salmonellosis is spread from bird to bird, and the largest die-offs often occur in winter when birds are stressed from the cold and congregate at bird feeders. Feces contaminate the feeders and infect other birds. Humans are less likely to become seriously ill from an outbreak of salmonella among birds, a strain that is similar to that found in uncooked poultry. Nonetheless, people should be cautious and are advised to wear gloves and wash their hands after cleaning birdfeeders. Salmonella is most often ingested through contaminated food products, but can be transmitted through unsanitary hand contact with the face.

Elsewhere in Alaska there were reports of dead Common Redpolls at household bird feeders in Fairbanks and vicinity. This winter season Common Redpolls arrived early and in full force in Alaska. Usually not seen in the Fairbanks area until January or February, record numbers were being seen as early as October. The Christmas Bird Count documented 8,231 redpolls in this year's annual tally, surpassing the previous record of 7,164 redpolls counted in 1997.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) suspected that the redpolls were also dying of salmonellosis bacteria, but investigations actually led to E. coli. Like salmonellosis, the E. coli bacteria is passed at feeders as birds congregate. Feces left in, on and around the feeders will infect other birds, and the disease can spread rapidly. The previous Common Redpoll die-off in Fairbanks occurred about a decade ago and was a result of salmonellosis.

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BIG OIL BACKING OFF OVER ARCTIC REFUGE?

And while we're considering Alaska, it's time to revisit the ongoing drilling issue at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

In an article on 21 February in THE NEW YORK TIMES, major oil companies were viewed as losing interest in

In an article on 21 February in THE NEW YORK TIMES, major oil companies were viewed as losing interest in drilling on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. ConocoPhillips, ChevronTexaco, and BP, once prominent in advocating for Alaska North Slope oil development, have already pulled out of Arctic Power, a pro-drilling lobbying group financed by the state of Alaska. At the same time, lease sales on the North Slope have averaged about \$53 per acre. Despite this reality President Bush's budget assumes that lease sales in the Arctic Refuge will fetch more than \$3,300 per acre.

A Senate showdown over drilling at Arctic NWR is expected perhaps within a few weeks as supporters of drilling plan to use a budget measure to overcome strong opposition over oil drilling in the protected area. The refuge's coastal plain, of course, is a breeding ground for caribou, home to polar bears, and a site for countless nesting and migratory birds.

Although some companies may be backing off, the Bush Administration is still pressing hard for drilling on the North Slope.

For more details, and to take action, see this page on the NWRA website: <http://refugenet.e-actionmax.com/showalert.asp?aaid=1068>

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PRESIDENT'S PROPOSED BUDGET INCHES FORWARD

Although conservation interests were disappointed with President George W. Bush's proposed FY 06 budget on such issues as the Arctic NWR (highly optimistic lease sale projections), the \$450-million cut from the Environmental Protection Agency's budget (with \$300 million eliminated from the Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund), a reduction of endangered species programs by \$3 million, and disappointing figures for the Land and Water Conservation fund (especially the zeroing out of stateside figures), there are still reasons to be optimistic..

The five most important concerns of the Washington-based Bird Conservation Funding Coalition (BCFC) received favorable treatment in the President's proposed budget. What the President proposed actually approximated the initial goals of the funding coalition.

The five major bird-conservation concerns and the related numbers recommended by the Administration are as follows:

North American Wetlands Conservation Act
\$49.9 million (\$12.5 million above FY05)
State Wildlife Grants
\$74 million (\$5 million above FY05)
Division of Migratory Bird Management (USFWS)
\$26.6 million (\$3.1 million above FY05)
Joint Ventures
\$12.9 million (\$2.6 million above FY05)
Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act
\$4 million (identical to FY05)

Despite what you may have heard about other parts of the President's budget request, these are very positive figures, approaching what the BCFC has requested in the past. The difficulty now is to make sure Congress supports these figures - and ideally raises a few!

Of course, minor increases are usually necessary just to "stand still," given cost-of-living, inflation, fuel costs, etc. And there is concern that one of these items - the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act - will expire at the end of this September unless it is reauthorized.

Readers of this E-bulletin should also be concerned with the Refuge System budget. That item squeaks ahead with a \$12.4- million increase proposed. Unfortunately, it will take closer to a \$16-million increase for the Refuge System to simply "stand still." Current recommendations do little to address the Refuge System's daunting deficit, a burden that exceeds \$2 billion.

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NEOTROP NUMBERS

As we mentioned last month and indicated above, the fate of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act rests with the 109th Congress. The Act will expire after 30 September 2005 unless reauthorized.

Fortunately, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act of 2005 was introduced in the House as H.R. 518 on February 2, 2005, by Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI) and Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD). It is the same proposal as the measure that passed House and Senate Committees last Congress but never made it to the floor.

The original legislation would also be improved, including increasing the funding level to \$10 in FY08 and \$15 million in FY09, adjusting the fund-matching requirements from 3-1 to 1-1, and allowing for increased participation within Canada.

Right now, the clock is ticking, with the Neotrop Act's future in question.

For details on the bill, type in "H.R. 518" on this page: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

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BIRD SURVEYS IN HAITI

To investigate one example of why Neotropical support is so necessary, we draw your attention to a recent report of particular interest. An expedition last month to Haiti's Parc National La Visite was conducted by the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS), along with local cooperators from Hispanola. The intent was to survey the critically endangered park, along with assessing its birdlife and conservation status. From Bicknell's Thrush and Western Chat-Tanagers, to Black-capped Petrels, the birds were determined to be seriously in need of preservation. In the words of Chris Rimmer, VINS director of Conservation Biology, "the trip proved a real success on one hand, but a sobering vision of a disintegrating ecological future on the other."

To access the short but enlightening report by Chris Rimmer, see this page:

<http://www.vinsweb.org/assets/pdf/Visite2005informal.pdf>

You can also access more VINS/Hispanolan information here; < a href="http://www.vinsweb.org/cbd/hispaniolaconservation/index.html">
<http://www.vinsweb.org/cbd/hispaniolaconservation/index.html>

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BANKING A SAVANNAH SPARROW?

Have you seen the "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow, perhaps in southern California? You may soon be able to "bank" that bird as a "new species."

In an article in the February 2005 issue of THE CONDOR, "Mitochondrial DNA Variation, Species Limits, and Rapid Evolution of Plumage Coloration and Size in the Savannah Sparrow," authors Robert M. Zink, James D. Rising, Steve Mockford, Andrew G. Horn, Jonathan M. Wright, Marty Leonard, and M.C. Westberg compare sequences from two mitochondrial DNA genes in Savannah Sparrows. Populations from Baja California, San Diego, and Sonora formed a clade which the authors assert merits species status (proposed to be named *Passerculus rostratus*).

This saltmarsh population of Savannah Sparrows, with its unique size, plumage color and pattern, and vocalization is now that much closer to species status.

And before you ask. . . No, "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow did not make the grade.

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LAKE APOPKA RECOVERY?

Lake Apopka, Florida's fourth-largest lake, has been a mess for many years. The lake, which lies northwest of Orlando, has been abused over the years by sewage-treatment plants, citrus processors, and "muck farms" carved out of the lake's shoreline wetlands. The rich shoreline soils grew robust vegetables, but had to be continuously drained via pumps, the drainage going directly into the lake. More than a half-century of this mistreatment has been catastrophic.

Among the efforts to restore the 50-square-mile lake, the most ambitious was the \$100-million buyout of 13,000 acres of farmland in the late 1990s. In late 1998, however, almost 700 birds were killed at the lake by concentrated pesticides. Among them were American White Pelicans, Wood Storks, Great Blue Herons, and even Bald Eagles.

After years of investigation, officials confirmed last month that they finally had determined out how to clean up the lake, making it potentially safe for birds and other wildlife. Even so, of almost 10,000 acres of idle farmland at the lake's north end, between 2,200 - 7,000 acres have pesticide levels capable of injuring or killing birds.

Before the reclaimed land around the lake can be permanently flooded as lakeside wetlands, pesticide concentrations must be proven nontoxic or reduced. The cost could be anywhere from \$6.7 million to as much as \$62 million. Varied plans for soil and water treatment are in the works, ranging from clean-dirt cover, to mixing semi-tainted soil, to isolation. Regardless of the specific cause of the 1998 deaths, the water authority has taken a safe course by setting pesticide limits for farmland at levels far lower than what might deliver a dose lethal to waterbirds or disruption of their reproduction.

Investigations continue. For background information from the Friends of Lake Apopka, view these pages:
<http://www.fola.org/conc/concernf.htm> <http://www.fola.org/news/newsf.htm>

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ERNST MAYR: A CENTURY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

On Thursday, 3 February, Ernst Mayr, one of the world's leading evolutionary biologists, synthesizer and promoter of evolutionary ideas, and accomplished ornithologist, died at the age of 100. Mayr built upon Darwin's theories of evolution and reconciled them with new findings in laboratory genetics and in field work on varied animal populations. Mayr also created the field of history and philosophy of biology, an effort he launched almost single-handedly.

His work reached far beyond the halls of the American Museum of Natural History or Harvard University. A dedicated bird enthusiast and field naturalist his entire life, he also described over two dozen new bird species and 400 subspecies.

For more information, you may wish to read this excellent obituary from THE ECONOMIST:
http://www.economist.com/people/displayStory.cfm?story_id=3644451

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BIRDERS' EXCHANGE CLOSE TO FINISHING TRANSLATION PROJECT

As you probably know, Birders' Exchange is a project designed to collect and distribute new and used birding field-equipment to researchers, teachers, land managers, and other bird-oriented counterparts in Latin America

and the Caribbean. Currently run by the American Birding Association, Birders' Exchange has recently taken on the ambitious project of translating into Spanish John Kricher's highly acclaimed book, A NEOTROPICAL COMPANION (Princeton Press). The translation itself - over 400 pages - was finished last month, in less than 10 months from start to finish. The translation team comprised a total of thirty-seven volunteer translators and a volunteer proof reader/editor. Alvaro Jaramillo, senior editor of the project, will try to complete the final editing by June, with a projected completion date sometime in October.

This effort has been a huge success. The next big step will be to finish raising enough money to print several thousand copies of the book in order to distribute copies free of charge to universities, libraries, field workers, and other individuals who would benefit from using a Spanish-language version.

For more details, see these pages: <http://www.americanbirding.org/bex/news/index.html>

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KAUFMAN GUIDE EN ESPANOL

On a similar theme, Kenn Kaufman's "Focus" guide on North American birds (Houghton Mifflin) will be released next month in a Spanish-language version. This pioneer effort, GUIA DE CAMPO A LAS AVES DE NORTEAMERICA, has been an ambitious and admirable endeavor. The intent is to provide a unique resource, useful for Spanish-speakers through much of the Western Hemisphere. The education implications are clear; the conservation consequences potentially profound.

Look for the book's release in April.

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HOLT COLLIER: LATEST NWR

On 22 February, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dedicated a new National Wildlife Refuge near Hollandale, Mississippi, making the 1,439-acre Holt Collier NWR the first refuge to be named for a black person.

Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS) and Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), who cosponsored legislation to establish the Holt Collier NWR, were present to honor Collier, an expert marksman and freed slave from Greenville, who is best known for guiding Theodore Roosevelt through the Mississippi Delta on a bear hunt in 1902.

Beside the 1,439 acres already designated by the legislation, the Holt Collier NWR will gain an additional 633 acres from the Army Corps of Engineers. The refuge is eventually expected to total about 18,000 acres.

The Refuge provides habitat and resources for more than 250 bird species, including many herons and egrets, White Ibis, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Prothonotary Warbler. Plans are underway for further habitat restoration, including increasing bottomland hardwood trees.

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The Holt Collier NWR is managed with six other refuges, known collectively as the Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuge Complex, in the Mississippi Delta.

For more details: http://southeast.fws.gov/news/2005/r05_010.html.

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A couple of months ago, an interesting report on global climate change and wildlife was released, and we did not draw your attention to it. This three-year study released by the Wildlife Society (and distributed in cooperation with the National Wildlife Federation) technically reviews climate change's impact on North American wildlife. The report is a distillation of hundreds of peer-reviewed scientific reports reviewed by a professional panel, and there is ample evidence that wildlife species are "responding" to warming, with animals and plants exhibiting "discernible range changes consistent with changing temperatures." The study indicates that warming has already altered migration routes, blooming cycles and breeding habits of animals and plants across the continent. The review committee included some thoughtful bird experts.

You can download the report here: http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/20784/climate_change_technical_review.pdf

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NATURE OF LEARNING GRANTS AVAILABLE

The National Wildlife Refuge System, along with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Keystone Center, the National Conservation Training Center, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association is offering environmental education grants under "The Nature of Learning," a new National Wildlife Refuge System environmental education initiative.

The Nature of Learning seeks to use National Wildlife Refuges as outdoor classrooms, encourage an interdisciplinary approach to learning, utilize field experiences and student-led stewardship projects, and involve partnerships.

It is ideal for schools, refuge Friends groups, cooperative and interpretive associations, conservation organizations, bird clubs, and nature centers.

Grants in the amount of \$5,000 for start-up projects, and \$3,000 for continued support, are being offered on a competitive basis. The grant application window closes on 15 June 2005. For more information on this creative program or to obtain application forms visit: www.nfwf.org/programs/tnol.htm.

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We welcome your distribution of all or parts of this E-bulletin, only requesting mention of the material's origins.

For a growing archive of previous E-bulletins, see this page on the NWRA website:

<http://www.refugenet.org/birding/birding5.html>

If you have a friend who wants to get future copies of the North American Swarovski Birding E-bulletin, have them contact:

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