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Abbreviations

ABC: American Bird Conservancy
 FWS: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 NMFS: National Marine Fisheries Service
 USDA: U.S. Department of Agriculture

**Bird Calls is the Newsletter of
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 the Bird Conservation Alliance.**

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**Bird Calls is partially funded
 by a grant from the
 International Affairs Division of
 the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service**

Seabird Mortality Up in Alaska – Not Just Longlines to Blame

Newly released figures reveal that the numbers of seabirds killed by longline fishing in Alaska took a dramatic rise in 2003. More than 5,000 seabirds were incidentally caught on longline hooks, still down from a decade-long average of over 13,551 birds per year, but up by 40% over 2002.

The 2003 mortality included 179 Laysan and 176 Black-footed Albatrosses. Part of this increase is likely due to a 28% jump in the number of hooks set in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands fishery, where over 90% of the Alaskan longline seabird mortality occurs.

Meanwhile, a group of 705 scientists from 83 countries, supported by 230 non-governmental organizations from 54 countries, has petitioned the United Nations to implement a moratorium on all longline fishing in the Pacific Ocean to prevent the extinction of the leatherback sea turtle. While ABC believes that seabird mortality can be mitigated without such measures, a ban would clearly also benefit albatrosses and other seabirds.

Of recent, growing concern to conservationists is the substantial mortality in the Alaskan trawl fishery. The federal government estimates that between 8,000 and 29,000 seabirds were killed in 2003, primarily in collisions with cables behind the boats. This includes 365-432 Laysan Albatrosses. The data indicate that seabird mortality in the Alaskan trawl fishery may exceed that of longlining, and needs to be aggressively addressed and mitigated.

On February 10, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council voted to extend an existing ban on bottom trawling in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea to an additional 370,000 square miles of ocean around Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Though a major conservation victory, the ban is designed to protect coral beds and other sensitive marine habitat, and will likely not have a significant impact on seabird bycatch, as the bulk of the billion dollar bottom fish harvest occurs further out to sea. Contact: David Fischer, ABC, <dfischer@abcbirds.org>.



Laysan, Black-footed, and Short-tailed Albatrosses (above) are killed on longlines in Alaska. Photo: FWS.

International Migratory Bird Day 2005

International Migratory Bird Day, organized by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, will be held on May 14 this year, with the theme of "Bird Collisions." Organizers will promote awareness of the large-scale avian mortality at buildings, communication towers, and other human-made obstacles during migration. Events and festivals will be held, and education materials made available through IMBD's Website: www.birdday.org. This year's IMBD artwork (right) is by noted author and artist David Sibley.



ABC and the Corps of Engineers: Dredging for Birds

Operations by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are a major force shaping bird habitat along the coastlines and waterways of the United States. As the federal agency responsible for maintaining navigable waterways and for shoreline protection, the Corps dredges and relocates over 250 million cubic yards of material each year. Coastal dredging and disposal operations have tremendous, and often unrecognized, potential for bird habitat creation and management.

In recognition of the potential benefit to bird populations, ABC and the Corps have initiated a partnership to explore ways of integrating the conservation of priority bird species into the planning and execution of large, coastal, engineering projects. For example, sediments from the routine maintenance dredging of the Atlantic Intra-Coastal Waterway have been used to create productive near-shore and offshore island nesting habitat for many species of terns and for Black Skimmers.

Without the regular placement of sand on dredged material islands, terns and skimmers are forced to nest on mainland beaches where increased



Shorebirds such as the Western Sandpiper benefit from dredge-deposit habitat. Photo: FWS.

disturbance from human recreational activity and predators such as raccoons and cats can significantly reduce nest success. With increasing development along the entire U.S. coastline, there will be a much greater need for the creation and active management of suitable nesting, foraging, and roosting habitats for coastal birds.

In January 2005, ABC and the Corps held the first of four regional

workshops on dredging, beach nourishment, and bird conservation at Jekyll Island, Georgia. Emphasis was placed on the importance of maintaining productive, low-energy, inter-tidal habitats around inlets and estuaries for nesting and wintering Piping Plovers and other migratory shorebirds. Best management practices for large dredge disposal sites that can produce highly productive foraging or roosting habitat for migratory birds were also proposed. For example, seasonal management of water levels at seven disposal sites near the Savannah Harbor attracts tens of thousands of migratory shorebirds each year. In total, over 288 bird species have been documented at the site.

ABC will provide expertise to the Corps on the needs of priority birds, in coordination with the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan, the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, and the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture. Proceedings from the Jekyll Island workshop and information about future regional workshops on dredging, beach nourishment, and bird conservation will soon be available online at: <http://el.ercd.usace.army.mil/training.cfm?Topic=Workshop&List=05feb-dots>. Contact: Casey Lott, ABC, <clott@abcbirds.org>.

Study of Rare Birds in Colombian Oak Forests Encouraging

The Eastern Andes of Colombia is a priority area for bird conservation due to its high level of endemism combined with a lack of protected areas and limited knowledge about its biota. Of particular interest are stands of the endemic Humboldt oak, many of which have been logged. ABC, under its William Belton Small Grants Program, provided funding to ProAves Colombia to study the status of four oak forest

birds, ranked by IUCN-World Conservation Union as globally Endangered or Critically Endangered.

The four species, Mountain Grackle (Critical), Black Inca (Endangered), Rusty-faced Parrot (Endangered), and Gorgeted Wood-Quail (Critical), depend at least seasonally on oak forests. However, between 66% and 85% of their historic ranges have now been converted to agriculture. Yet despite this dire habitat situation, the investigators turned up some encouraging results. From 151 counting points at five sites in the area, the team observed Black Inca at 27 localities, seven of which were

previously unknown; Rusty-faced Parrot was found at 29 localities; Mountain Grackle was found at 22 localities; and Gorgeted Wood-Quail was detected at 20 localities – more than were initially expected.

The study concluded that all four species should be reclassified as Vulnerable. Care is necessary, however, as downgrading a species ranking can impact the attention and funding it receives. The goal of evaluating the status of species is to use the best available information so conservation can be prioritized for the species most in need. Contact: Robert Chipley, ABC, <rchipley@abcbirds.org>.