

The Stilt

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Birds use feathers 'to touch'

irds may use their feathers for touch, using them to feel their surroundings just as cats use their whiskers. The revelation that feathers have this hitherto unknown function comes from research on auklets, birds that sport prominent plumes on their heads. Auklets with bigger crests, that stick out further, bump into things less. A wider analysis suggests that numerous birds, from parrots, penguins, pheasants and hummingbirds, also use their feathers to feel their way. Details of the discovery are published in the journal Animal Behaviour.

Many species of bird sport elegant long feathers, either crests, beards or whiskers that adorn the head and face, or striking tail feathers. Many of these feathers are thought to have a sexual function, being used to advertise a bird's virility to potential mates. But Dr Sampath Seneviratne of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada and Professor lan Jones of Memorial University in St John's, Canada suspect they may also have a tactile function.



Bumping Heads

They explored why a group of birds called auklets have evolved such elaborate head feathers. Within the genus *Aethia*, a number of species have different shaped feathers, but both males and females tend to look the same.

The birds usually breed in dark, rocky crevices. The researchers placed individual auklets into a dark experimental maze, designed to resemble a natural crevice, and recorded how often they bumped into things. Both crested and whiskered auklets bumped their heads 2.5 times more often if their feathers on their heads had been artificially flattened.

Also, "without the aid of the crest, naturally long-crested individuals had more head bumps than short-crested indi-

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Save the Date and Register

12th Annual Great Salt Lake Bird Festival May 13–17, 2010
The 12th Annual Great Salt Lake Bird Festival announces that acclaimed author Terry Tempest Williams will be the Keynote Speaker on Saturday, May 15th. Registration for Great Salt Lake Bird Festival programs begins at 9 am, March 4th on-line at http://www.greatsaltlakebirdfest.com/index.php or by calling 801-451-3278.



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viduals," Dr Seneviratne told the BBC.

The two ornithologists then conducted a wider comparative analysis: checking which bird species sport long ornamental feathers against their lifestyles and where such birds live. What emerged was a striking pattern.

"Birds that live in complex, cluttered habitats and are active at night tend to have a greater probability to express such facial feathers," says Dr Şeneviratne. "We found a highly significant correlation for the observed trend."

Penguins to Parrots

The pattern held true across all non-passerine birds, which comprise about half of all bird species. The researchers did not include passerine, or perching birds, in their analysis. That means that various species of penguin, parrot, cormorant, owl, hummingbird, kingfisher, woodpecker and game birds such as partridge and pheasant, may all use

certain feathers for touch. Such ously called crests, beards, bital plumes.

Dr Seneviratne and Prof Jones such as the long streamers pin and forked tails of other speers on some birds' wings, may

Biologists have long wondered ornamental feathers. Many do so

"This provides a hitherto missing explanation for the origin of ornamental feathers" Dr Sampath Seneviratne University of British Columbia

suspect that similar feathers, found on birds of paradise or the cies, and even protruding feath-

species have facial feathers vari-

whiskers, rictal bristles and or-

and debated why birds have long for camouflage, as a warning to

fulfill a similar function.

startle predators, or to advertise their prowess. For example, "long facial feathers are generally thought to be 'sexy ornaments' used to seduce choosers and for assessment of the presenter," says Dr Seneviratne.

Cat Whiskers

But while such feathers may have acquired these functions, their original purpose may have been to provide a similar function as a cats' whiskers or a blind person's cane. By providing sensory feedback to a bird about its environment, such feathers can provide a distinct advantage, particularly to birds living in dark or crowded environments.

"Birds living in complex habitats are likely to encounter greater density of objects or clutter that they have to avoid." So such feathers could help birds avoid bumping into burrow ceilings, tree branches and undergrowth. Feathers around the face would prove especially useful, as they might stop a bird damaging vital organs, such as eyes, eardrums, nostrils and bill.

"We describe the first comparative evidence for this widespread but entirely overlooked sensory function of long facial feathers. We argue that this provides a hitherto missing explanation for the origin of ornamental feathers," says Dr Seneviratne.

—by Matt Walker Editor, Earth News BBC

Upcoming Events at the BRMBR

March 13

Tundra Swan Day

March 20

Sense of Wonder Day — Celebrating Rachel Carson

For more information, visit the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge's website at http://www.fws.gov/bearriver/,.



Audubon Calendar March 2010

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Board of Trustees Meeting: BAS Trustees meet at 7 p.m. at the Cache Valley Learning Center, 75 S. 400 West, Logan. Enter through the building's west doors. All are welcome to attend.

General Meeting; Wetlands — Recognizing, Appreciating, and Protecting Them: Join us at our same great location, the Cache Valley Learning Center (75 S. 400 West), as Cindy Johnson will describe the defining characteristics of wetlands and their important functions and values, with local examples. The current status of wetland regulations will be discussed briefly. The discussion will end with suggestions of what concerned citizens can do to help protect wetlands in and near our communities. The meeting will start at 7 p.m. Enter through the building's west doors. All are welcome to attend and refreshments will be provided by Crumb Brothers and Caffe Ibis. We hope to see you there!

Benson Birding: Join local birding expert Reinhard Jockel as he leads a field trip to the Benson area. This area is prime area for raptors. But, we'll be on the hunt for early Sandhill Cranes. Meet at 8:30 a.m. at the parking lot between Caffe Ibis and the Logan Fire Station. Bing binoculars and dress for the season. Beginning birders are welcome. Carpooling will be available. We will finish up around noon.

Hyrum Dam: Join local birding expert Reinhard Jockel as he leads a field trip to the South end of the valley, specifically Hyrum Dam. We'll be on the lookout for mergansers, loons and osprey in addition to the expected gulls, ducks and geese. Meet at 8:30 a.m. at the parking lot between Caffe Ibis and the Logan Fire Station. Bing binoculars and dress for the season. Beginning birders are welcome. Carpooling will be available. We will finish up around noon.



Osmia lignaria

arch is a good time to plan for pollinating our fruit trees using one of our native bees, the blue orchard bee (Osmia lignaria). Back in last April's Stilt, you learned that the blue orchard bee (BOB) is not social, that every female is fertile and tends to her own nest. Their single adult generation is in early spring. During fruit tree bloom, they busily make and provision their nests in linear tunnels in dry dead wood. Each female BOB progressively subdivides such a wood tunnel into a series of nest cells, each cell receiving a pea-sized provision of pollen moistened with nectar, followed by a single egg. Nest cells are partitioned, and ultimately capped, with mud, earning this kind of Osmia its other common name of "Mason bee". You can see pictures in my archived April 2009 Stilt article.

Now is the time to make preparations if you want to try initiating your own backyard population of blue orchard bees. They prefer a tunnel diameter of 5/16 of an inch, and at least 4 inches deep (6" is ideal). The easiest way to start is with a dry, seasoned round of conifer, cottonwood or aspen log. Drill 20 or more holes toward the center, as deep as you can, on one side of the round. Stand it on end, facing the side with holes southeastward. Females appreciate morning and midday sun so that they can warm in their nest entrance on chilly spring mornings. If female BOBs adopt your drilled nest tunnels, then you will see steely blue bees busily coming and going all day long during fruit tree bloom. They tote their loads of dry yellow pollen in a brush of hair beneath their abdomen, which as you will see, necessitates some charming acrobatics to unload. Once you attract a starting population of BOBs, successive generations will stick around to nest every April for you. Repeated nest reuse eventually leads to disease and parasite problems, which you can remedy using more formal nesting substrates (drilled wooden blocks with paper straw inserts, or cut lengths of thick-walled Phragmites reeds, to name two) described at my lab's website: http://www.ars.usda.gov/Services/Services.htm?modecode=54-28-05-00. There, under "products and service" we have had to cram such information for users. I'd be happy to answer your questions as well.

While you are logged on the computer and dreaming of spring, and if you want to plant flowers that feed other kinds of native bees, including good choices for the water-wise garden, an illustrated listing is available for reading or download at Gardening for Native Bees and Beyond in Utah (http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/factsheet/plants-pollinators09.pdf).

-by Jim Cane

"BirdsEye" Guides You to the Birds

Application helps bird watchers see more birds



irdsEye is the best invention for birding since binoculars," says Kenn Kaufman, renowned birder, author of the Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America and team member of a partnership that has created BirdsEye, a new birding app for the iPhone® and iPod touch®. "It's like having thousands of local birding experts in your pocket," Kaufman says. The application was developed by Birds in the Hand, LLC, of Virginia, and brings together content from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the Academy of Natural Sciences, and Kaufman. BirdsEye is now available on the App Store. "

If you are in search of a particular bird, BirdsEye will show you where it has been observed, and even give you directions. If you are new to birding or an experienced birder who is on the road, BirdsEye will give you a list of birds seen nearby and a map of birding hotspots for any location

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in North America (the contiguous 48 states, Canada, and Alaska). The application includes images and audio for the 470 species most frequently observed in North America. Additional content is available for more elusive birds—for a total of 847 species. Bird sounds come from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Macaulay Library archive, the largest collection of bird and animal sounds in the world. Images are from the VIREO collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences. Acclaimed birder and author Kenn Kaufman wrote text for each species account—with a specific goal in mind.



"Even when you're in the right location, it helps to know something about the bird's behavior and habitat in order to find it," says Kaufman. "Will you find this bird in flocks up in the treetops, or solitary individuals lurking in the thickets? Are you likely to hear it before you see it? I wrote each of these short accounts as if I were giving advice to a friend who was hoping to see this bird for the first time."

BirdsEye provides real-time access to bird observations submitted to the eBird database at the Cornell Lab. eBird, a joint project of the Cornell Lab and Audubon, receives 1.5 to 2 million bird observation reports each month from birders all over North America. Ability to submit observations to eBird directly from BirdsEye is already in the planning stage.



"It's amazing to have instant access to all the birds reported to eBird within a 30-mile radius of your location," says eBird co-leader Brian Sullivan at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "Anyone can step off a plane, turn on their iPhone or iPod touch to see what's been reported, target the locations showing the best birding potential, and head into the field!"

"Our goal is to give people more great birding opportunities," says Todd Koym, leader of the programming team and the person who first envisioned the power of building an iPhone app based on eBird. "BirdsEye is a means to an end—with the end being seeing more birds."

Team member Pete Myers, former senior vice president for Science at the National Audubon Society, as well as a former Audubon board member, says, "BirdsEye combines iPhone ease and elegance with some of the most trusted and authoritative names in birding, helping make everyone's birding experience richer and more fun. Experienced birders get a quick heads-up about opportunities to add birds to their life list. Beginning birders can quickly discover nearby hotspots to go birding."

Portions of BirdsEye sales go back to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to help support its research, education, and citizen science projects focused on birds, and to the Academy of Natural Sciences to support VIREO, the world's largest collection of bird photographs.

More Information:

BirdsEye: www.getbirdseye.com iTunes App Store: http://itunes.com/

app/birdseye

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: www.birds.cornell.edu eBird: www.ebird.org

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Local Bird Spotlight

Shrikes

or a bird I don't see that often, the shrike remains an enduring favorite. This is a songbird that thinks it's a hawk.

You don't want to be on the business end of a shrike's hooked bill, with which it kills and tears apart everything from insects to other birds, reptiles to small mammals. Both species in North America—

Loggerheads and Northerns-are deftly efficient killers. (There are 30 shrike species worldwide.) Shrikes are famous for impaling their prey. Thorns or barbed wire are surrogates for a strong grip, which shrikes do not have. So with the prey thus impaled, shrikes can rip it to pieces. Where there no thorns, shrikes will drape or wedge their victims among branches.

Sometimes thorns or barbed wire become, for shrikes, grocery stores. Shrikes will kill and impale their prey only to leave them for later consumption. They'll come back to dead-festooned thorns to eat the crucified. According to The

Birder's Handbook, shrikes typically have an epic memory; one study in Texas showed that eight months after creating a cache of dead frogs the songbirds returned to eat the dried remains. In his charming 1936 edition of Birds of America, T.

Gilbert Pearson writes that the caching behavior gives the birds a storehouse against "hunger resulting from adverse fortunes of the chase."

These are hungry birds. Over two months, one pair of parents and their youngsters (seven) eat the equivalent of nine kilograms of food, which, reports the definitive The Birds of North America, "equals about 75 birds...222 microtine rodents...and 394 bumble-bees."

Loggerhead Shrike, Tom Hince

Though they typically hunt from perches, shrikes will ground-hop to rustle up bugs and other prey, they'll hover like kestrels, Northern Shrikes will fly-catch like kingbirds, and they will even pursue and kill

other birds in flight as Peregrine Falcons do.

This is tough stuff for a bird whose size is comparable to the American Robin.

Northerns have been seen attacking mallard and grouse, birds that are several times larger, while one was spotted carrying a rock dove, far heftier than the shrike itself. Their young not only mock attack each other and stab at plants—

> they've been seen attacking moose.

Another, more clinical description of their hunting ways, comes from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology website, which says that Loggerheads "kills by biting prey in back of neck, cutting the spinal cord." Both types of North American shrikes are sleekly spiffy. Grayish backs, black wings with two daubs of white when the bird is perched-this becomes a conspicuous curved white patch in flight-and a whitegray underside. The dressiest feature is the black mask, which is narrower in the Northern, a bird that is larger than the Loggerhead. The Loggerhead's mask is bigger, perhaps because it has such a bulky head. There's a reason

why the Loggerhead has that name.

Not long ago I listened to recordings of a Loggerhead Shrike. Harsh high two-syllable tweets. A clustered whistly call, a trill of sorts. A burry, fast call that reminds me, appropriately, of a hawk. The Northern has whiny, fast, hawkish call and its own high-pitched, busy, abrasive clattering of notes and a spring song "suggesting that of the Cat-

bird," says Pearson. None of these sounds are especially fetching. But they get one's attention. They might also attract other species as shrikes will, some say, resort to mimicry to draw in birds the better to eat them. Then again, The Birds of North America claims that the Northern is "often tame and unsuspicious [and will] sometimes sings a feeble though pleasing and rhythmical song, even in winter..."

In Northern Utah, both Northerns and Loggerheads can be found in winter. Warmer weather sends the Northern to the north, while Loggerheads can be found throughout the lower 48 and Mexico year-round. Some Loggerheads also move north to breed and nest.

But loss of shrubby, woody, short-grass habitat, use of pesticides and the impact of vermin control are all reasons why, across the continent, Loggerhead Shrikes are in decline. (The only natural predators for adult shrikes are raptors.) According to Canada's Species at Risk Public Registry, "A study of the toxicology of road dust suppressant in Ontario found that it reduced songbird and fish viability and had a particularly pronounced impact on shrikes because they hunted insects attracted to the moisture on the road. The

Ontario Ministry of Environment subsequently banned the use of the chemical as a road dust suppressant." Because shrikes are near the top of the trophic ladder, chemi-



Northern Shrike, Tom Munson

cals concentrate in these birds over time. Nor does it help that shrikes nesting near roads can't intimidate cars. Nor that fragmented habitat favors predators like snakes that eat nestlings. A subspecies on San Clemente Island, off the California coast, is Federally endangered. In some states, Loggerheads are listed as endangered. Two Loggerhead subspecies are listed as threatened or endangered by Environment Canada, where for one subspecies they are successfully captive breeding. In Utah, Loggerheads are declining at an alarming 4-6% annually.

A species that is irruptive-moving a lot due to food availability-is hard enough to assess, but the fact the

Northern Shrikes making their breeding grounds in the vast and wild taiga and tundra country of high Canada and Alaska makes it that much more difficult to know

Perhaps not surprisingly, sources are mixed on whether this shrike species is declining or increasing; in some areas, the former; in others, the latter. Shrike migration patterns aren't well-studied either, for that matter. If I were to happen on a shrike's nest I'd leave it alone. I'd want to save my scalp from this

the population's status.

shrike's nest I'd leave it alone. I'd want to save my scalp from this stabby, fierce bird and not alert predators to the nest's location.
Loggerheads "make a great outcry when one disturbs the nest," T. Gilbert Pearson writes, "and will pop their bills in a manner that suggests grinding of teeth in rage." Such rage can be directed to other

threats, such as brood parasites like the brown-headed cowbird. I love birds that recognize the brown-headed cowbird's tricky habit of laying its own eggs on top of the eggs of the original nester.

That's yet another reason to cheer on Team Shrike–Loggerheads and Northerns–and provide for Loggerheads the chemical-free habitat they need to reverse population declines while making certain energy development does not impact the Arctic habitat of Northerns.

Christopher Cokinos chris.cokinos@usu.edu

Bird Brains: Reflections on the State of the Union

t hasn't snowed much lately. I decide to run up the canyon rather than ski. I am getting the knack of going uphill on the skis, but going down is a crap shoot. The sun is creeping north again. If I time my runs right, the sun perches on top of the Wellsville Mountains across the valley and beams directly up Dry Canyon. My body is elated to feel the sun on my back as we hike. We don't go very far up the canyon. Chico has been wearing his dog pack. I pack his water, some treats (for him and me), poop bags (just for him, but you never know), and a small square foam pad which I use as a seat in the snow, in his pack. About two miles in, the canyon narrows, some bigger boulders have been left behind by those having given up on eternity, and eventually, in a nice grove of big-tooth maples, I sit under a large doug-fir. I pull the water from Chico's pack, give him some treats, untie the foam pad, and sit down to write.

I tell Chico to stay close or a mountain lion will eat him. He usually doesn't wander too far. He stays within eye-sight and busies himself with sticking his head into the snow and tries to smell the ground far below. A bit of snow collapses off a juniper branch; in the silence, a small group of what to my untrained eye appears to be mountain chickadees flit upon the melting boughs. I don't know what a group of chickadees is called. It is a congregation of plovers—they run back and forth in worship with the ocean; it is a covey of quails, a quarrel of sparrows, a conspiracy of ravens, and a murder of crows. Sometimes they call them a congress of crows; after watching our own Congress, the word is unfair to the crows.

Perhaps, like finches, the chickadees are trembling; however, as they dart high above me in the doug-fir, they don't appear to tremble. Then, I hear the turning winds from a larger bird swooping though trees; I see just a glimpse of the spread rectrices as the mystery bird disappears down the canyon. Whatever the large bird was, if the chickadees tremble, they do it in silence.

In Alaska, I spent hours staring through binoculars watching the convocation of eagles as the tide poured into the lagoon. When I would fillet fish, they would sit in the distance and wait; the more daring birds like magpies and crows came close to steal what they could before the eagles staked claim. On warm days, hundreds of them take flight in the rising thermals off the hillside. They circle for hours and hours, high up into the air, and then disappear across the mountains. Sometimes, I watched, as Whitman called it, the dalliance of the eagles. Locked onto each other midair, they helicopter down towards earth. Could conception be perceived any better? Sometimes they crash into the water, copulation incomplete.

Because we don't own a television, we stream the State of the Union speech on the internet and watch it on my laptop. We go to the government's website. Of course, it freezes over and over again. I get angry because my favorite part is watching the people stand up to clap...or not stand up to clap. I really enjoy the outliers—the people who start to stand up and then sit back down, the people who look around to make sure everyone else stood up when they did. I think they call it a gaggle of congressmen/women.

In Chico, I used to go up above the park along the cliff edges as the sun was setting and watch the young turkey vultures learn to fly. It is a wake of vultures. And if you have ever seen a group of them sitting in a tree with their wings sunning in the first break of morning, you know why. They circle death. Perched in the digger pines on the south side of the canyon, they fall from the trees, catch similar thermals, and learn to ride them into the sunsets. Awkwardly, they crash down through the air to come to roost back in the pines. Tomorrow they look for carrion.

Welcome to BAS

New Members

Young Ben-Jacob

Steve & Jeanna Livingston

Shirley L. Rees

David Turner

Robert Atwood

Patricia Bahler

J. Boettinger

Stephen C. Bromley

Ms. June Callahan

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Rebecca S. Echols

Kurt A. Fornoff

David Liddell

Jaron Livingston

Mrs. Rosalie Mueggler

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Ms. Diana I. Toth

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Membership in the Bridgerland Audubon Society includes a subscription to *The Stilt*, as well as *Audubon* magazine. The editor of *The Stilt* invites submissions, due on the 15th of each month. Send to birdnerdut@gmail.com.

National Audubon Society Chapter Membership Application

Yes, I'd like to contribute to Audubon and receive the Bridgerland Audubon newsletter, *The Stilt*, and the *National AUDUBON magazine*, as a:

New member of the National Audubon Society and Bridgerland Audubon.

My check for \$20 is enclosed (this is a special first-year rate).

Name_____Address

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Please send all checks payable to National Audubon Society with this card to:

National Audubon Society PO Box 422250

Palm Coast, FL 23142-2250

Membership Source Code: COZW520Z

National Audubon occasionally makes its membership list available to selected organizations. To have your name omitted from this, please check this box.

Note to new National Audubon members: To get on The Stilt newsletter mailing list without the usual 8-week delay, contact Susan Durham, 752-5637, sdurham@cc.usu.edu.

Prefer the local newsletter only? Send \$20 (make checks payable to Bridgerland Audubon Society) and this form to: Bridgerland Audubon Society, PO Box 3501, Logan, UT 84323-3501 for a subscription to *The Stilt*.



Newsletter of the Bridgerland Audubon Society

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Ballot BAS 2010 Election of Board Members

Board of Trustees (Three-Year Term)

Vote for Four:

- ☐ Chris Cokinos
- ☐ Jack Greene
- ☐ Reinhard Jockel
- ☐ Ryan O'Donnell

Only BAS members may vote and each membership is entitled to one vote. To vote, clip this ballot and mail to Bridgerland Audubon Society, P.O. Box 3501, Logan, UT 84323-3501. Alternately, you may vote at the banquet in April. All ballots must be received by April 15, 2010.