

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SUMMER 2010

Shaibal S. Mitra

Biology Department, College of Staten Island
2800 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, NY 10314
shaibal.mitra@csi.cuny.edu

All Regions reported that summer 2010 was warmer than average. Much of the state was wetter than average, especially during June, but southeastern Regions 8, 9, and 10 were drier than average.

The flock of five **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks** at Oneida Lake on 31 May, the day before the summer season began, focused local attention on this species, which has been occurring far north of its usual range in eastern North America with accelerating frequency for more than a decade. Those birds were followed this summer by two more New York State records: a bird found by Anne Lazarus and Isabel Conte on 31 July at Jamaica Bay in Region 10, and one found by Paul Hess and others on 11 August at Tonawanda WMA. Although these records have rightly exerted a powerful influence on many people's attitudes regarding natural vagrancy in this species, it is worth recalling that apparently wild Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have been recorded at least twice previously in New York: Floyd Bennett Field, Kings County 19-20 May 1992 (John Fritz, NYSARC 1994); and Bridgehampton, Suffolk County, 8-18 May 2002 (P.A. Buckley et al., Schiff and Wollin KB 52: 280-286). Conversely, it should not be forgotten that demonstrably non-wild birds have been documented from time to time, including one with a clipped wing photographed by Sean Sime at Camman's Pond, Nassau County on 30 Oct 2006 (Lindsay and Mitra KB 57: 86-94), and another found by Richard Crossley at Broadalbin, Fulton County in June 2008 (Yandik KB 58: 391-394), which was found to have a small plastic band on one leg when studied closely. Evidence for this species' regular and increasing natural occurrence in northeastern North America has been growing for more than a decade now, and it will be interesting to learn where and when Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks might come to be expected in our state.

After tantalizing suggestions of breeding last summer, three **Mississippi Kites** were observed tending a nest at last year's site in Root, Montgomery County, and Rich Guthrie videotaped fledglings being fed. That New York's first nesting record should come from a site well north of the state's southern borders mirrors recent nestings in Connecticut and New Hampshire and illustrates that range expansion, like vagrancy itself, often proceeds via leaps and bounds rather than smoothly and continuously. Additional Mississippi Kites were recorded in Regions 2, 9, and 10. Two other ascendant raptors, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin, were noted as increasing in several Regions, with multiple nests of both species in Region 1, indications of breeding by both in Region 4,

continued expansion of Merlin noted in Region 6, and a juvenile Merlin that lingered for five days during mid August in a Long Island backyard.

Increasing statewide trends continued for Trumpeter Swan, American White Pelican, and Sandhill Crane, all three of which were reported widely around the state. It is a credit to Region 3's savvy cartographers that the crane's breeding range was proven finally to have bulged southward from its Montezuma strongholds into Region 3. All three of these species remain scarcest in southeastern New York, so it was impressive that there were at least four June reports of Sandhill Crane in Region 9, and that even Region 10 recorded multiple American White Pelicans. *Plegadis* ibises were noteworthy in Regions 3 and 5, and the Region 3 bird was suspected as possibly being a **White-faced Ibis**. Other notable waders included a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Dunkirk Harbor in Region 1 and both Snowy Egret and Little Blue Heron in Region 8. The latter Region also reported an invasion of Great Egrets, with as many as 24 in Albany and 39 at Vischer's Ferry.

Region 10 had its usual assortment of lingering and summering waterfowl, but the presence of both Common and King Eider along Region 9's Westchester coast in mid June was exceptional. Further offshore, the most exciting news came once again from John Shemilt, whose fishing trips out of Shinnecock Inlet toward Block Canyon have been revolutionizing our understanding of seabirds in New York. His trips this summer yielded plenty of NYSARC-reviewable birds: **Audubon's Shearwater**, **White-faced Storm-Petrel**, as many as **53 Leach's Storm-Petrels** in a day, **Bridled Terns**, and **Long-tailed Jaeger**. The last of these was a first-summer (yearling) bird recorded on 12 June, these details being relevant to an age/date theme amplified at some length below.

American Avocets were noted in Regions 1 (a count of **nine!**), 2, and 10. "Western" Willets were recorded in Regions 1, 4, 7, and 10, arriving on 30 June on Long Island, where this taxon is most numerous in New York, but also as early as 3 July in Region 1. It was an excellent year for godwits, with a rare northbound occurrence of three Hudsonians at Montezuma NWR and southbound reports before season's end at Montezuma again, and from Long Island. This species has been very scarce along the coast in recent years, so several reports there this season, including a brief visit by a flock of **12**, were very welcome. Remarkably, the site chosen by this flock was a mudflat also occupied at the time by an exceptionally large and long-staying group of **10** Marbled Godwits.

Among the scarcer shorebirds, Baird's Sandpiper was very well reported, including a number of July records of adults. Long-billed Dowitchers made early appearances in Region 10 (29 June, then **nine** on 23 July) and Region 2 (31 July), followed by an exceptionally early juvenile at Jamaica Bay, Region 10, on 16 August. The Region 10 report lists many exceptional counts of the commoner shorebird species. Even if these were largely attributable to intensive effort and diligent record-keeping by energetic observers like Doug Gochfeld, they are welcome results.

Although summer is not traditionally associated with gull diversity, observers at opposite ends of the state once again produced some very

interesting records in this part of the checklist. Little Gull was reported from Regions 1 and 2 in June and July, small flocks of Lesser Black-backed Gull were found during June and July in Regions 1 and 10, and a Laughing Gull made a rare early summer appearance in Region 1. Most of the individuals involved in these observations were immatures, most often first summer birds about 12 months old, although some of the Lesser Black-backs were two and three year-olds. The increasingly popular practice of scrutinizing summering flocks of teen-aged larids—"scope-a-dope"—has proven so consistently productive that it hardly seems remarkable that two of the summer's three **Arctic Terns** and one of its two **Sandwich Terns** were found together on the same Long Island mud flat on 6 June. The next frontier for these sorts of field studies should be extended beyond the mere detection of rare species to detailed evaluations of molt, phenology, and status for poorly understood age and plumage classes of common species, such as first summer Common, Forster's, Least, and Black Terns.

Another sort of unusual age/date combination, this one recalling the very early juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher mentioned above, was furnished by a juvenile Black Tern that appeared on Long Island on 20 July, about three weeks earlier than expected. A juvenile Ring-billed Gull that reached Long Island on 10 July, not long after upstate colonies fledge vast hordes of such birds, but weeks in advance of their general arrival along the coast, fits in here also, and raises questions concerning how post-breeding dispersal is related to conventional southbound migration in this group of birds.

By late August, a month or two later than the tarrying Little Gulls discussed above, another series of intriguing larid reports emerged from the Lake Ontario shore. On 16 August, Jim Pawlicki and Dave Wheeler recorded a juvenile **Long-tailed Jaeger** at Fort Niagara, Region 1's first August record, and one of very few records there ever. This was followed by another at Hamlin Beach, in Region 2, on 21 August. Five days later, along the shore of Cayuga Lake, in Region 3, Chris Wood identified yet another Long-tailed Jaeger, this one also almost unprecedented Regionally. In the meantime, Chris and Jessie Barrie had recorded an adult **Sabine's Gull** along Region 2's Lake Ontario shore on 22 August! Clearly, these juvenile Long-tailed Jaegers represent a very different mode of occurrence compared to John Shemilt's mid-June yearling far offshore (the latter fitting better with the Little Gull/Arctic Tern model). Coincident with the rare late August migrants upstate were two reports of Black-headed Gulls at Region 2's Hamlin Beach, on 27 and 28 August. Described as "immature" in the Regional report, it is intriguing to consider whether these were perhaps loafing yearlings, in the manner of June Little Gulls (but significantly later than expected), or possibly hatching-year birds—in which case they were about two months earlier than that age class' usual arrival on Long Island.

Turning to landbirds, Region 2 hosted its second **White-winged Dove** and continued as the epicenter of **Eurasian Collared-Dove** activity in New York. Multiple individuals of this expanding invader were reported from two sites, one of which yielded internet reports of fresh juveniles, albeit after the summer season ended.

A rare “spring” record of **Western Kingbird**, even more exceptional because it occurred upstate, came from Webster in Region 2 on 19 June. In addition to the well known pattern for western North American landbirds to stray east during late fall, the days surrounding the summer solstice have also proven to be surprisingly productive for these sorts of birds: of New York’s ten or so records of Western Kingbird outside the usual August-January period, no fewer than four have occurred from 16-21 June.

Region 4 hosted the state’s only **Loggerhead Shrike** this summer. This species has essentially withdrawn from its former breeding haunts in the Northeast. Sedge Wrens were reported from three sites in Region 1 and single sites in Regions 2, 6, and 8. Only Fort Drum (Region 6) hosted a large number of birds (18 males), and Jeff Bolsinger offered some interesting notes describing the eccentric manner in which these birds arrive and use this site from year to year. Henslow’s Sparrow, another species whose best days in New York State are long past, was unreported in Region 1 for the third consecutive year; statewide it was reported from just one site in Region 2 and two sites in Region 6. In contrast, Clay-colored Sparrow continues to enjoy the opposite sort of demographic momentum; the species was observed almost throughout the state this breeding season, going unreported only in three Regions along the southern edge of the state (3, 9, and 10). Other positive news regarding open country birds came in the form of territorial Dickcissel and Blue Grosbeak, the latter paired with a female, occupying the same field in Region 9 this summer.

Akin to these Blue Grosbeaks, other Carolinian Neotropicals garnering attention this summer were a Prothonotary Warbler in Region 3, two Cerulean Warblers in Region 4, Louisiana Waterthrushes confirmed nesting in Region 6’s St. Lawrence County, and a Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 8’s Saratoga County.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

Consider for a moment some of the worthy candidates for this summer’s bird of the season award. Although not even on the New York State checklist, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck occurred in two Regions, and Mississippi Kite was finally confirmed nesting in New York this summer! But to me, these birds’ glory is diminished when we recall that the ducks tramped behind the unclipped halluces of others this spring (and at least a couple of others from previous years too), and that the breeding kites were helped at the nest this summer by an immature bird that was probably the first of its species to fledge in the state—last year. Also, in pondering the gravitas of first breedings, a spirit of fairness would dictate that Eurasian Collared-Dove should be given comparable consideration. If so, fairness for me must be a blade that cuts two ways and excises kite and dove both from consideration for the honor.

At the opposite pole of the demographic continuum, perhaps Region 4’s Loggerhead Shrike deserves some nostalgic sentiment, as this species will almost surely be rarer here in the future than any of the three species just discussed. But, after due consideration, I simply can’t find a particular

individual bird that deserves the BOTS award purely on the basis of its rarity or novelty. Instead, I'm inclined to choose a species whose members collectively made a distinctive impact on New York ornithology during the summer of 2010. In this vein, the contenders might include species such as Trumpeter Swan, American White Pelican, Sandhill Crane, and Clay-colored Sparrow, but none of these seems to stand out above the others. Searching further, let me return to the theme of age-related variation in the modes of occurrence among the long-winged birds in the middle of the checklist.

The usefulness of seeking out and studying first summer larvae during early summer has been discussed in great detail for several years at least, most explicitly in the summer reports for Regions 1 and 10; it was a major theme in a recent re-evaluation of the status of Arctic Tern in New York (KB 59: 2-11); and I've taken pains above to show how these lessons paid off once again this summer, from the Niagara Frontier to Long Island's coastal inlets and beyond, to New York's offshore waters. Similarly, I've tried to show that, if adequate care be taken to document age and species identification, records of exceptionally early juveniles can be used to tackle some fascinating questions regarding variability within and among species in terms of pre-migratory behavior. For instance, among abundant and familiar species that typically delay southbound movements for significant periods, owing to a lengthy staging period to our north (e.g., Dunlin and Bonaparte's Gull), it's easy to recall that a few extremely early outliers can be expected from time to time. Curiously, these earliest birds are frequently juveniles. Perhaps this summer's unusually early juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher, Ring-billed Gull, Black-headed Gulls, and Black Tern represent similar examples of individual variation. In any case, these examples illustrate the usefulness of recording age and plumage data, and of carefully documenting species identification, for even the commonest species, so that the birds' various potential modes of occurrence can be discerned.

These considerations lead quite clearly to summer 2010's bird of the season: **Long-tailed Jaeger**. Sophisticated lake-watchers in Regions 2 and 5 have, in recent years, provided a model for when, where, and how to find this species in upstate New York during southbound migration. In late August 2010, they demonstrated this once again in Region 2—but this season the model was also extended beyond there to furnish the first summer record for Region 1 and the second ever record for Region 3. Far to the south and east and two months earlier, the status of this challenging and mysterious species (just 16 acceptable records statewide as of 1974) was further clarified when a yearling Long-tailed Jaeger was detected, identified, and photographed near Block Canyon, validating a rather different, but also relatively new-found, model for finding rare birds in New York.