

September, 1942, hundreds of Black Skimmers were found around our South Shore inlets, and a lingering flock of fifty to sixty stayed all fall. Some of these, in pathetic condition, were seen in snowy weather on the Jamaica Bay flats; the depleted flock was later observed skimming over the surface of the slips in New York harbor for such floating edibles as they might pick up. On the last day of that year the writer saw a long line of an estimated twenty to thirty slow-flying skimmers against the bright western sky as they passed down the Narrows. Through a 50-power telescope they were observed out in the middle, between Staten Island and Brooklyn, and seemingly headed for the New Jersey coast. These birds, low-flying and barely skimming over the surface of the water, appeared to be half-starved, weak, and thoroughly dejected. Evening again was the time of their departure, but by the calendar they were several months late. What a contrast to the properly timed, seasonal departure which produced the vivacious, high-flying Sloop Channel birds! — John J. Elliott, 3994 Park Avenue, Seaford, Long Island.

Virginia Rails in Winter in Columbia County: During the early morning hours of January 22, 1961, the temperature fell to 26 degrees below zero, but by early afternoon it was nearly ten above, and the day was otherwise breezy, sunny, and beautiful. The Stony Kill, a small spring brook that runs through Canaan in eastern Columbia County, was, for the first time in years, completely frozen over where it passes through our field. The snow which had fallen on the windy night of January 19-20 showed no signs of settling.

It was under such weather conditions that I received a phone call from an excited neighbor about two "dark, long-billed birds" which he had seen further down the brook. My immediate reaction was "probably Starlings," but fortunately my neighbor was a determined man.

The birds had been seen at an area where the brook, fed by the comparatively warm water of springs, passes under a road and enters a marsh. The brook has never been known to freeze at this point. Upon our arrival there no birds were immediately in evidence, but when a boy with boots jumped from the bridge into the brook, he flushed out the two birds. They flew upstream for a few yards, then circled to return, alighting in the shallow water nearly under the bridge. The birds were Virginia Rails. One was noticeably the darker, and as it picked its way along the stream edge, a very light patch was apparent under its short wedge-shaped tail. The other was much browner, and it appeared slightly larger. The darker of the two birds was probably a young of the past season.

Although there is enough animal life in the Stony Kill to keep fat a fair-sized trout population during the winter, this was a period of bitter cold. Night time lows averaged —17, with minimums of —26 to —30 on three nights. Snow covered many of the small branch streams and most of the vegetation. It was felt that supplemental feeding should be tried. Shrimp and minced clams were dropped into the brook in both silted and gravelly spots where the birds had been seen probing the bottom. Both birds were subsequently seen picking around in these places, and we think they ate some of this seafood, most of which disappeared.

In the several days after January 22 many Alan Devoe Bird Club members came to view these birds. This was the initial result of a recently instituted "bird alert" telephone system.

The darker of the two rails appeared much tamer than the other, browner bird. When seen, the birds were active, walking quickly over patches of ice and snow or alternately wading and swimming in the open water of the brook, probing the bottom in shallow places or picking among the stones at the edge of the water. Rarely one or both flew short distances upstream or downstream, but never away from the brook. Occasionally they stood still for a few minutes in the running water, which was, of course, many degrees warmer than the air. Six or seven times they were seen to select a spot in bright sun, on the sheltered side of the bank, fluff their feathers out, and settle into the light, soft snow for periods of ten to fifteen minutes. Several times, when observers arrived at the bridge, the darker bird was seen to emerge from a rocky crevice at the brook's edge. This was a hole half the size of a man's head.

The rails were not punctual, and one could not be sure of seeing them, except that on most late afternoons they were seen working downstream toward the swamp. This swamp covers an area of about thirty-five acres, growing the usual alder-willow-osier somewhat sparsely but with a rank growth of coarse grasses and weeds. A few small trees grow in drier spots, but the more predominant wet areas combine with clay-mud and unstable hummocks to make it a difficult place in which to walk.

Both rails were seen on February 2, and one was seen on the afternoon of February 3. That night the heavy blizzard began, and when we again looked for them on February 5, they could not be found nor were they seen during the much warmer weather that immediately followed. — Aden Gokay, Canaan.

A Mockingbird Congregation in Freeport: The squad of Mockingbirds I observed together in Freeport, Long Island, on November 6, 1960, is apparently unusual in the New York City region during a season other than that of breeding. The observation further underlines Ludlow Griscom's perplexity regarding the status of this southern species in the New York City area. "The Mockingbird," he declared, "is one of our local species which defies classification."

I discovered one Mockingbird in a pine tree after having heard a loud, thick chip note while I was inside my house. I summoned my wife Virginia to the backyard. While watching this one, we were amazed to see another alight in a flutter of white wing and tail patches. After seeing three flitting about in the trees, my discernment had been taxed too much to credit the quartet Virginia was beginning to believe she was seeing. Then three alighted in an oak in front of us. In a nearby tree another was perched. We saw four Mockingbirds at the same time.

They remained awhile that morning. They disappeared for a time but were seen later in the afternoon. I did not study them for plumage differences but did not notice any. I did not have much time to look for them again, but I did see two in a nearby hawthorne tree on November 14. Only one was observed after that and the last recorded date for seeing it is December 5. Actually it was observed for approximately a week later. It has not been seen there since.

It fed on the red berries of a thorny bramble hugging a wooden fence that abuts, at a right angle, a long hedge about seven feet high. Often the bird perched in a small wild cherry tree in that corner. It would be seen flying, headed apparently for the other side of the canal located across the street from my house.

The proximity to the beaches of the bay and the ocean (Freeport is about seven miles from the beginning of Jones Beach) may have had something to do with the Bird's presence. J. P. Giraud, Jr., writing in **Birds of Long Island** in 1844, points out that "at times it frequents the dry sandy beaches in the immediate vicinity of the sea." In recent years single birds (most reports from the New York region are of single birds except for those breeding) have come in great part from such places as Riis Park, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, Oak Beach, Jones Beach, Fire Island State Park and Montauk. John J. Elliott reported a Mockingbird visiting a feeding station at Oceanside (four miles from Freeport) since before Christmas through at least, as of this writing, February 25 — a bird that had survived last winter's severe cold and snow.

It certainly seems to be true that many more Mockingbirds have been reported of late. This, of course, may be due in part to an increased number of observers. But in the last four years there has also been a rise in the number of nesting and breeding records. Mr. Elliott, reporting a Mockingbird's nest at Roxbury in Rockaway Beach in 1956, said it was "believed to be the first authentic record for Long Island for many years" (KINGBIRD Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 104). Two Mockingbirds were observed at a nest with two nearly fledged young near Mecox Bay at Watermill in 1956. This was reported by Dennis Puleston and Gilbert S. Raynor (KINGBIRD Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 14). A probable nesting Mockingbird was reported for western Long Island in 1957 (KINGBIRD Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 104). Herbert Johnson, superintendent of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, told me he had a pair breeding there in 1959 and again in 1960.

Emanuel Levine, editor of the **Linnaean News-Letter**, published by the Linnaean Society of New York, in the June, 1960, issue lists the breeding Mockingbirds as part of a northward movement of southern species. However, 117 years ago