

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON

ROBERT W. SMART

For once nearly all regions agreed on the character of the season. Winter would not give up and snow and ice lasted well into April even as far south as Region 9 and until mid-May in the northern highlands. Precipitation varied greatly from region to region, the "lake effect" from Lake Ontario and storms along the coast producing heavy amounts locally while parts of the state were dry during much of the season. As a result of this weather pattern, arrivals were very late. In March and April waterfowl returned to the larger bodies of water. Landbird migration was almost non-existent during this period, with scattered individuals of some species and many not being recorded at all. Until nearly the middle of May most observers rated the season as about two weeks behind. This lateness did work to the advantage of birders in one way, because when the dam finally broke on May 9th, the foliage was equally as retarded and the birds were therefore highly visible. The two principal waves occurred on May 9th-14th and May 19th-21st. Because of the lateness of the season the birds moved through very rapidly and it was all over in two weeks. The fact that these two good waves came on weekends partially made up for the frustrations of earlier in the season.

The last two severe winters have obviously taken their toll among a number of species. Some of these are southern forms that periodically extend their range northward; the most obvious of these are the Tufted Titmouse, Mockingbird and, most particularly, the Carolina Wren.

An even more interesting effect of the nationally bad winter was the apparent decrease of some species wintering in the southern states. Many observers commented on the scarcity of Eastern Phoebe, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Golden-crowned Kinglets and Winter Wrens. There are other species mentioned by some editors as having been affected; among these are the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Long-billed Marsh Wren, Hermit Thrush and Brown Thrasher. It is very easy for birders in northern states to overlook the importance of weather and habitat conditions farther south. It is possible also that some of the numerical decreases noted in the following pages are due to habitat destruction in tropical areas, where many of our breeding species spend the winter.

On the brighter side, raptors did very well, with good numbers of

Sharp-shins and Rough-legs. Greater-than-usual numbers of Marsh Hawks were very encouraging. Merlins were reported from all but one of the regions. The number of Broad-wings was low along the shore of Lake Ontario, but this was evidently due to local weather conditions rather than to a genuine decline in this species. The birds were spread out over the countryside rather than being concentrated at the edge of the lake.

Inland, shorebird migration depended on local water levels. Lake Ontario was very high, the water level at Montezuma was purposely kept high, and the lack of rain in many areas resulted in a paucity of flooded fields. In spite of these conditions, the spring produced some interesting records and good numbers. Notice particularly the reports from Regions 2, 5 and 9.

Ravens continue to increase in number and to enlarge their range; this season they were reported not only from the Adirondacks but also in Regions 2 and 3 to the west and from Region 9 to the south.

A few other items may be noted briefly. Many regions reported very late white-winged gulls. There was a heavy flight of Canada Geese, but note the warning given by Mr. Benning in Region 3. There were large numbers of cuckoos due to the heavy infestation of tent caterpillars. A migrant species not counted often enough is the Blue Jay; note the count of 10,000+ at Braddock Bay on May 12th and the count of 9,000 there on May 13th.

A number of odd-ball birds were reported. There was a Mallard that nested successfully atop a 40-foot spruce at Penn Yan, and a "goldpoll" at Ithaca. In Region 7 there was a white Crow with a black face, a White-throated Sparrow with charcoal-colored head, neck and bib (Could this have been a hybrid with a Harris' Sparrow?), a Vesper Sparrow with no white outer tail feathers, and, best of all, a Purple Sandpiper walking down the middle of Route 22 in Essex.

The list of rarities is far too long to present here in its entirety. One must remember too that a bird that is rare in one area may be common in another. I will just call attention to those that are of more or less statewide interest, and give the region or regions in which these were seen: White-fronted Goose (1), Sandhill Crane (1, 2), Wilson's Plover (10), Ruff (1, 5), Lesser Black-backed Gull (5), Thayer's Gull (2), Chuck-will's-widow (2), Varied Thrush (2, 8), Mountain Bluebird (9), Yellow-throated Warbler (9), Connecticut Warbler (2, 3), Western Meadowlark (2), Yellow-headed Blackbird (2, 9), Summer Tanager (2, 9), Lark Bunting (9), Clay-colored Sparrow (1, 5) and Harris' Sparrow (10).

Three species deserve special awards. The first, for the most confused, goes to the Purple Gallinule that landed in a yard in Queens and was taken to Jamaica Bay where it wandered around on the dry paths under the feet of the birders. The second, for the most obliging, goes to the three White Pelicans that had the good taste to land for a while in Region 5, soon moved over to Region 3, and from there made sorties into Region 2. But the Bird of the Season (BOTS) award must go to the two Townsend's Warblers; the photographs taken at Great Gull Island and at New Haven in Oswego County serve to remove the species from the state's Hypothetical List.

This is my last season as the Highlights editor, and I would like to thank publicly all the regional editors, who have been so cooperative. Their hard work has made mine easy.

[Eds. Note: The Editors would like to express their appreciation to Bob Smart for the superb job he has done as Highlights editor. His enthusiasm, and his knowledgeable comments and interpretations have greatly enhanced the Regional Reports, and have helped us all to see where an individual record fits into the overall picture of the birdlife of New York State.]

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

Backward, turned backward, was time in its flight—or so seemed the spring season as the virile winter, taking second place only to last year's as vilest of the century, persisted for a week into March, extending to 42 days the period when temperatures never rose above freezing. Although major flooding was feared as the above-normal snow cover melted, there was a beautiful dissipation of the snow. March and April were cold and dry with smaller lakes iced in until April 10, ten days past normal. Although May began cold and wet, a dry heat wave took over April 19, continuing to the end of the period. With few exceptions, "flights" were too weak to deserve the name, apparently most movements overflying the Region. The two-weeks-late season retarded migrants, delayed nesting and held back foliage, and before the last week in May when adequate cover finally developed, nests were built lower than usual or even on the ground. However, with the advent of hot, sunny weather, all nature surged to make up for lost time.

The spring's bright side includes: 1) larger egg clutches 2) a good flight of Turkey Vultures and Rough-legged Hawks, and a fair flight of other hawks—most resident raptors doing well 3) an abundance of field mice, protected by lasting snow cover—a good food source 4) fine reports of Red-bellied and Red-headed Woodpeckers 5) improved status for Horned Larks and swallows, except Cliff