

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK
GUEST EDITOR

Sunshine—beautiful sunshine—even on weekends, made it a “summer idyllic,” as Robert Spahn expresses it for Region 2. Not all was sunshine and roses, however. Nestlings were killed in Region 1 during the cold, windy spell in the second week of June, and upstate, not until the last week of the month was there promise of the later-realized hot and very dry season to contrast that of the three previous summers. Reversing things a bit, Region 9 had a warm, dry June and a cool, wet August, but Region 10 was “cooler and wetter than average,” after a late spring. Region 4, in the midst of it all, held steady with the weather just about perfect—not too anything. The dry season upstate produced “the best shorebird habitat conditions in three years” in Region 5, and promised exposed flats for fall in Region 7. Nevertheless, Region 3 found mudflats once more severely limited because of high lake levels and, at the same time, “dried-up” ponds and fields.

For a careful treatise on changing habitat and its effects on bird populations, note Dr. Scheider’s account for Region 5. This brings to mind the plight of the Eastern Bluebird which requires open areas and consequently relinquishes the abandoned farms to encroaching brush and trees. Encouraging our state bird are certainly the many faithfully maintained bluebird trails, from the single box to as many as time, energy and financial status permit. Across the state the species was variously noted as steady (1,4) or producing well (9), but scarce elsewhere. Of course, and more’s the pity, not all results from nesting boxes were reported. Like so many others, bird-banders and those documenting nests are already buried in paper work, and a special merit badge should be awarded those who do send out that “one more” bird-in-the-hand record to the regional editors. It is this sort of consistent drudgery that lends significance to the fun of birding.

Again, results from breeding bird surveys including several taken in Christmas Count circles, were used to help determine trends, but this year’s cold June in some sections made comparison with previous years almost impossible. It is good to note that in these, as well as most “Counts,” actual numbers of birds, not just a lazy checklist of species, are tallied. These provide a wealth of data, useful when carefully tempered with caution, of course, because of the numerous inevitable variables.

For the most part, migration was slow to normal, but with several late spring warblers and many early fall transients. Again this year Region 2 noted appreciable numbers of immature Red-tailed Hawks starting through in mid-August.

With five regions commenting on the low numbers, even though good variety, of birds, we wonder if the prophecy of "Silent Spring" is being fulfilled in our lifetime. Surely, nearly silenced were the American Bittern (1,2,10) and its little cousin, the Least Bittern (2,5). Some good news for the recently declining Pied-billed Grebe was the record high count in Region 1; however, in 2, 5 and 6, the usual low numbers prevailed. A first summer appearance for the St. Lawrence River was the Red-necked Grebe (6). Double-crested Cormorants were plentiful in 6, 8 and 10 but much fewer in lower Hudson (9). Although white herons were scarce in 1, 2, 3 and 5, a first nesting for the Cattle Egret was proven for 6 at Galloo Island, and it was also found in 2 and in "remarkable" numbers at a new location in 10. Black-crowned Night Herons either did well (1,9,10) or were noteworthy for their scarcity (2,3,5,6). The Mute Swan showed up in 1, was thought to be nesting in 7 and produced at least one youngster in 9. While some birders were rejoicing over the unusual numbers of Canada Geese summering here (1,5,6,7), in Palisades Interstate Park (9) the birds were so much "Everywhere!" that personnel from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were forced to trap some 500 and release them where they wouldn't foul golf greens and beaches. In defiance of well-publicized "absorption" of the Black Duck by the Mallard, good numbers of Blacks persisted in 3 and 7. The species is still in trouble in 1 and 4, and is so scarce in 6 that, next to the Mallard, the Gadwall is now the most common breeder. Wood Duck production was excellent except in Central Suffolk (10) where it declined significantly.

Accipiters were doing fairly well in only four regions, and a scattering of Red-shouldered Hawks was reported, including immatures, all across the state except from Region 10. The hawk breeding season was called "a disaster" in Region 1 where, in addition to natural calamities, human predators carried off a brood of Goshawk nestlings. As long as there are still among us those who are way behind the times in knowledge of the beneficial role of raptors in nature's scheme of things, as well as others who use such species for their own nefarious and often illegal purposes, continued caution in disclosure of such nestings must be exercised. The Marsh Hawk breeding popu-

lation was only fair in five regions, but was thriving in Region 6. While seven regions continue to see Ospreys, including good numbers in 6 and 8, apparently last year's phenomenal success for the species in Region 10 is joyously continuing and merits no special mention. How about that? In pure delight, we agree with Lee Chamberlaine (6) that so many eagles boggles the mind. Mostly Bald, but one Golden, being reported from seven regions across the state really is encouraging, whether from southern birds summering here or from hard-won results of the diligent breeding program.

The Spruce Grouse is dying out in 7 and Gray Partridges this year were not doing so well in 6. The Ring-necked Pheasant continues to decline, the "put and take" basis by the Department of Environmental Conservation, as Ted Mack states it (7), apparently having degenerated to too little "put" and too much "take." Whip-poor-wills 'tho scarce in 9 were at four locations in 7 and also appeared in 2, 3 and 4. Not until migration did the Common Nighthawk appear in fair numbers.

In general, with some variation across the state, most flycatchers were in dire straits, not even pulling out during the breeding season. A notable exception was the Acadian Flycatcher, identified in 1, found in high numbers in 3, suggesting breeding, and watched "in all areas" of 9 with many nests discovered—just bursting at the seams.

One rough winter was bad enough, but a second on top of it augmented the decimation among Tufted Titmice, most wrens, including the Carolina, and Brown Thrashers. Region 10 found Bobwhites also hard hit for the same reason. The Mockingbird, too, was absent or scarce in most areas but was holding its own in 10 and nesting in 3 and 5. With Cedar Waxwings bumper to bumper in 1, 4, 5, 7 and 9, how could Region 6 miss out with them? A family group of Loggerhead Shrikes was located in Carlton (2) but otherwise the species, like old soldiers, continues to just fade away.

White-eyed Vireos were called "alarmingly scarce" in 10. Prairie Warbler numbers were expanding rapidly in Region 1 where Clarence Klingensmith found the first active nest for the region near Alfred. More than usual of the species were noted also in Region 2. Worth watching is the Yellow-rumped Warbler population growth that has been going on gradually for several years in Regions 1 and 4. However, the high note for all the warblers was that first verified nesting for New York State of the Wilson's Warbler, found by Dan Nickerson near North Elba (7).

Careful reading of the regional reports which follow shows that several species, including the Scarlet Tanager, were less plentiful this season. Is this decline cyclic, is it a function of the breeding survey variables,—or will it continue? Although the vulnerability of the House Sparrow to severe winters is well known, they seem to recuperate during the following breeding season. Some are hoping it may be replaced by the thriving House Finch. Ed Treacy suggests the possibility that this latter species may also be ousting the Purple Finch (9). There seems little relief in sight for the sparrow family, except for the White-throat, which seems to be doing well and staying late in several areas, suggesting a wider breeding range.

The regional editors have all sorts of gems well worth searching out, such as a partial albino Solitary Sandpiper (3), a diaper-using Boreal Chickadee (7), a pioneering (?) Red-bellied Woodpecker (8), a “silver” Common Grackle (6), Ruby-crowned Kinglets (7) and Pine Siskins (1,2,3,8,10) so late as to lead to nest hunting, but without success, a sea-going House Sparrow (10), and an out-of-season Evening Grosbeak (2). This year Region 10 reports the first active Laughing Gull nest on Long Island since 1890. Here also, among other notables, are the results from the Cox’s Ledge pelagic trips. We join Region 10 in regret for the loss of naturalist S. Leroy Wilcox who will be greatly missed.

With the hope of arousing curiosity over the many exciting rarities for the season found across the state, only a few are included here: the White Pelican (3,6), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (2,10), Wood Stork (1), Black Vulture (10), Sandhill Crane (10 and “possible” 3), Ruff (1), Pomarine Jaeger (2), Thayer’s Gull (2), Laughing Gull (2—nesting in 10), Chuck-will’s-widow—all through the season (10), Acadian Flycatcher—noted above (1,2,9), “Brewster’s” Warbler—not so rare, but interesting to compare with its hybrid relative (1,3,5,6,9), “Lawrence’s” Warbler—that hybrid relative (5,9), Yellow-throated Warbler (9), Orchard Oriole—becoming established (1,3,9), “possible” Blue Grosbeak—more than probable in view of its tremendous range expansion southwest of us (3), Painted Bunting, “a female in mint condition”—first for the region (5), and Clay-colored Sparrow (1,4,7).

However, the best of all unusual summer finds is the Western Grebe discovered in Tupper Lake (7) by Charlcie Delehanty, observed by many, described and photographed. This documentation removes the species from the New York State hypothetical list and must certainly be given the BOTS award. Congratulations!

Amity Lake, Belmont, New York 14813