

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

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GUEST EDITOR

There rarely seems to be consensus among the ten regions of this state as to the dominant theme of a season. This time that was not a problem; mild, dry and *dull* were the adjectives repeated in almost every report. Concentrations of migrants were virtually nonexistent throughout the season. What causes such a migration? It could, of course, be due to a scarcity of birds, but there is little evidence to support such a hypothesis. Rather, such vapid seasons from the point of view of the ground observer are quite predictable when dominant weather patterns are of the kind that prevailed this fall. The weather throughout the state was predominantly mild and under the influence of stable high pressure. These conditions provided night after night of clear skies and light winds, ideal weather for migration. Absent were the stalling cold fronts and low pressure storms that cause large concentrations of grounded migrants and TV tower kills. In a real sense, the conditions that are optimal for migratory flight are the worst for the observer on the ground; migrants are dispersed and unlikely to remain long at any stopover locality.

This phenomenon has long been known to students of nocturnal migration. There is often little or no correlation between the amount of migration passing over an area and the number of birds observed on the ground. That was certainly the case this fall. Near Albany, we monitored nocturnal migration with radar and visual observations. Many very large flights occurred, and judging from their calls, thrushes were very well-represented. Whereas observers in several regions reported scarcities of these species, a nighttime walk would have probably revealed large numbers, as in Regions Five and Eight.

Another peculiarity of this migration, noted both by our direct observations and by field birders, was that strong winds from the northwest were relatively rare. This was, of course, because of the relative paucity of frontal passages, and its influence on the direction of migration was noticeable. Near Albany we often observe very heavy flights toward the southeast on strong post-frontal winds. Night after night this fall, we saw large numbers of birds moving between south and southwest on the light northerly or northeasterly winds that predominated. The effect of this was particularly evident in Region Ten where coastal concentrations of drifted migrants were virtually non-

existent. Birders who confined their activities to Riis Park this fall had a dull season.

Several interesting population trends are evident in the reports. Most noteworthy was the unprecedented influx of Tufted Titmice into the New York City area. Jamaica Bay had its first record and over 75 were recorded in Central Park. The effects of this dispersal were felt as far north as Region Eight where birds appeared at localities where the species is not resident (*e.g.* at 1500 ft. elev. in the Helderberg Plateau, Albany Co.). It is also apparent that the surge was confined to the eastern part of the state. Regions Four, Eight and Ten had titmice in large numbers and/or unusual localities; further west no such trend was noted and Regions One and Five specifically mentioned that numbers were low.

Other signs of increase were evident in the hawks. Most encouraging were the numbers of reports of Cooper's Hawks, with 64 at Hook Mt., 20 at Mt. Peter, and 13 reports in Region Eight. Reversing recent trends, the species outnumbered Goshawk in several areas and in Region One, Cooper's was reported to have outnumbered Sharp-shinned! Bald Eagles were reported in all but Region One and the total of 27 records included at least 17 immatures, an encouraging sign. Peregrine Falcon numbers were also heartening with Region Ten reporting the best numbers in recent times.

On the negative side, Loggerhead Shrike continues to decline everywhere except Region Ten; most reports no longer even mention it. Several species, apparently adversely affected by the recent harsh winters, are still down: Winter Wren and both kinglets, Carolina Wren (with the possible exception of Region Three), and Mockingbird (especially in the western part of the state). Although birders will likely shed no tears, there was widespread agreement that Ring-necked Pheasants have declined dramatically, having become a "disappearing species" in Region Three. This trend was paralleled by the Bobwhite in upstate areas where it still occurs (*e.g.*, Region Eight).

Northern Shrikes, Rough-legged Hawks and Snowy Owls appeared early and in good numbers. Shrikes reached northern areas in mid-October and spread to the coast about a month later. Region One had 11 reports and 14 were seen in Region Five. Rough-legged Hawks entered northern and western areas during the last half of September, but most seemed to pass through and numbers declined in Regions Five and Six by the end of the period. Snowy Owls arrived in Regions One and Seven in October and Region Two reported

an invasion in November. By the end of the period there had been only one coastal report.

Whereas the irruptions of northern rodent predators gave hope of things to come, except for the Evening Grosbeak, finches were largely absent. Region One had some numbers of White-winged Crossbills, the only ones reported, but elsewhere scattered Common Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks were the rule. Evening Grosbeaks were evident in higher than normal numbers in many areas.

Most regions had a list of rarities, although some appeared a bit strained. Merlin, Glaucous Gull, Saw-whet Owl, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Orange-crowned and Connecticut Warblers and House Finch are hardly extraordinary in most parts of the state. However, there were enough really exciting birds to add spice to almost every region. The famous Western Grebe remained at Tupper Lake until October 7. Also lingering, was the Montezuma White Pelican (until September 24); another appeared briefly in Region Nine. A Wood Stork, perhaps one of the August birds, was near Geneva on September 12. Snowy Egrets were in several areas, with an exceptionally late bird in Region Eight. Gyrfalcons were found early in Regions Two and Ten and then another Gyrfalcon, a white bird, was reported at Hamlin in November. Piping Plover (Region Five) and Marbled Godwits (Regions Five and Six) made news upstate. An adult Sabine's Gull was a treat for the pelagic birders who ventured to Baltimore Canyon. A Dovekie buzzing past Braddock's Bay on October 23 was a surprise. Two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were found in Region Ten. In the absence of any dispersal from known breeding areas, one wonders what a Boreal Chickadee was doing atop Slide Mountain in the Catskills. There were two extralimital records of Common Ravens, including a belated report of the first recorded nesting in Herkimer County. Downstate, a female Boat-tailed Grackle at Riis Park and a LeConte's Sparrow at Montauk were noteworthy.

This season, it is no problem to perpetuate the BOTS awards begun by Bob Smart. Berna Weissman's first state record California Gull that obligingly appeared daily at Rockland Lake through most of the period is the hands-down winner.

As a first-time author of this column I would like to urge all observers to report details of unusual records to the New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC), formed last year. Amateurs have traditionally played a large role in ornithology. Increasingly, the production of accurate distributional works such as state books

or the AOU Check-list depends on the sight records provided by the legion field birders. As the number of birders and sight records increases it becomes more important than ever to treat these records as the important scientific data they are. The most important function of NYSARC is not to accept or reject individual records, but to preserve the written or photographic documentation of sight records for future evaluation by ornithologists. Without these documents it will be impossible to evaluate many sight records twenty years hence. Birders have a unique opportunity to make a real scientific contribution through their hobby; it is an obligation we should all heed.

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As this issue of *The Kingbird* goes to press, the Editors have learned with sorrow that Robert W. Smart died suddenly in Ocean City, Maryland, on February 3, 1979. Bob Smart was a long time friend and field companion of many Federation members and was until recently the Editor of the Regional Reports and "Highlights of the Season" in these pages.

REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

Once more the season was governed by the whimsical jet stream, which this fall remained well north in Canada, pulling the storm centers along beneath it. Although the resulting persistent southerly winds blowing into these lows gave birders lovely gentle weather, the migration, with but few bright exceptions, was a dismal void. Even expected late-lingering species were few and far between despite a superabundance of wild fruits, including the best beechnut crop in some seven years (Eaton). About the only complaints in the food department were an absence of acorns and a shortage of rabbits.