

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

SUSAN RONEY DRENNAN

David and Frederic, the brothers grim, got the fall 1979 season off to a lively, if not downright exciting, start. Like brothers, they were similar yet distinguishable. Both were born far out in the Atlantic; both peaked just before landfall. They followed similar paths, with Frederic curving farther westward than David. They both had lives of approximately two weeks, and they were both billion-dollar hurricanes.

The more blustering of the brothers, David, came ashore in the vicinity of Savannah Beach, Georgia, on Tuesday, September 4. By the next day, somewhat weakened but nonetheless potent, it moved through the Carolinas and up into Virginia. By this time several crackerjack birders in New York State anticipated some avian fallout and, with various degrees of finesse, disengaged themselves from assorted work-week responsibilities. On Thursday, September 6, they took to the beaches or riverbanks and were richly rewarded. That morning David veered northeastward near Binghamton, and its accompanying easterly winds and counterclockwise air flow provided fine conditions for bringing subtropical species north and to the coast, and for taking primarily coastal species inland.

An abbreviated summary of the weather-displaced species includes: disoriented Sooty Shearwater seen near Dobbs Ferry; two Gannets observed flying northwest out over Lake Ontario—probably hurricane residuals; Northern Phalaropes on the Hudson River, Mecox Bay and Shinnecock Inlet, Long Island; Parasitic Jaeger flying southeast over the Hudson; Long-tailed Jaeger spotted at Shinnecock; more than 1500 Laughing Gulls tallied in Regions 8, 9 and 10; Gull-billed Tern on Long Island; Forster's Terns on the Hudson; 110+ Sooty Terns in Regions 8, 9 and 10; fewer than 15 each Bridled and Least Terns and at most 5 Sandwich Terns observed on Long Island; several Royal Terns flying south over the Hudson and at Jones Beach; and small concentrations of Black Terns distributed along the Hudson and Atlantic shorelines.

Preliminary estimates of the damage Frederic caused in Alabama and Mississippi, with its 90-145 mph gusts, 5-12 foot storm tides, and 2-9 inches of rain, range from 1.7 to 1.9 billion dollars. By September 13, it had reached Tennessee but its energy was considerably dis-

sipated. It continued up the west side of the Appalachians and hurriedly passed through Pennsylvania and New York, dousing Buffalo with 4+ inches of rain. Frederic's remnants moved across northern New England on Friday, September 14. While this tropical storm deposited fewer exotics in New York, it did accommodate inland birders with rather remarkable concentrations of some species. A small group of Wilson's Phalaropes was observed in Westchester County. Two dark-phase immature Parasitic Jaegers, one each in Regions 6 and 7, may well have been storm-related. Nearly 3000 Bonaparte's Gulls, a Forster's Tern, and estimates of upwards of 10,800 Common Terns in Regions 5 and 6, along the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, are simply amazing and without precedent. A Sabine's Gull seen from Derby Hill September 15 may have been storm-associated. Frederic was probably responsible for a few lingering Bridled Terns in the Mecox-Shinnecock vicinity, as well as maxima of 3 Caspian and 17 Black Terns on Lake Ontario. The conclusion of such an enumeration is: Who says an ill wind blows no good?

DIURNAL RAPTOR MOVEMENTS

Accipiters in general were very showy, with every region recording a few or numbers of Goshawks, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks throughout the period. Pitzrick reports a single Goshawk in Region 1, where it is quite rare. Sharp-shins especially seem to have had a banner year as evidenced in Treacy's table and in Spencer's account of the coastal flight. Mack was unique in not having a single record of Cooper's Hawk. Buteos were not extensively commented upon; but, in total seem to have appeared in normal numbers. Rough-legged Hawks had been recorded in virtually every region by the end of the period. Bald Eagles are impressive creatures in terms of size and brilliance anytime; however this autumn they appeared in prodigious numbers and in every region except the Susquehanna (which fact itself is rather surprising). From 24-30+ individual birds were reported, 50%-43% of which were immatures, and 25%-33% of which were adult. Unfortunately, ages of approximately 25% of the total birds were undesignated. Golden Eagles were recorded in Regions 7 and 9. Marsh Hawk totals appear to be down statewide; of 402 reported, 263, or more than half, were recorded at hawk watches in Region 9. This species warrants monitoring. A total of 561 Ospreys was noted in nine regions, with none seen in Genesee. Of these, 75% (420+) were recorded in Region 9. Imagine a total of 73 Peregrine Falcons being reported from six regions this fall!! At the very least it is as-

tonishing and may even be indecent, considering its endangered status. All data should be submitted to regional editors when reporting sight records of this superb falcon. Of the total, 23% were adult, 47% were immature, and 30% were not designated. More than one-half of these birds were observed on Long Island.

SHOREBIRDS

In spite of some localized grumbling, 35 species of shorebirds were recorded throughout the state this fall, including such locally rare species as: Baird's Sandpiper (Regions 6 and 9), Curlew Sandpiper (Region 10), Buff-breasted Sandpiper (Regions 1, 2, 3, and 9), Marbled Godwit (Regions 3 and 10), and Hudsonian Godwit (Regions 2, 5, 8 and 10).

OWLS

Have birders become blasé about searching out and reporting owls after last winter's plethora, or is there in fact a real shortage? Two Barn Owls, one each from Regions 1 and 10; 20+ Screech Owls from Regions 1, 4 and 10; 9+ Great Horned Owls from Regions 6, 7 and 8; one Snowy Owl from Oneida Lake; 5 Barred Owls, mostly singles, from Regions 2, 3, 4 and 8; two Short-eared Owls, one each from Regions 6 and 10; and a total of 7+ Saw-whet Owls from five regions were reported. For a real surprise, contemplate that not a single Long-eared Owl was reported this autumn and that the Region 9 report contains no owl sightings and no comments on their obvious dearth.

LITTLE MONITORED MOVEMENTS

It would be fascinating to see more hard data generated on the Blue Jay migrations mentioned in the Region 5, 6, 8 and 10 reports. Neither the species nor its movements seem to have captured the general imagination of birders. Yet, by virtue of the species' extensive populations, easily recognized plumage and flight characters, and usual conspicuous behavior, its migrations would be relatively easy to document. Chamberlaine mentions a heavy movement of Common Crows along Lake Ontario in October and November and Spahn refers to a large flight of Black-capped Chickadees along Lake Ontario, north of Rochester. Certainly more purposeful coverage and sustained observations would be useful to investigators of these fascinating phenomena. Unsolved questions surrounding the combination of avian and botanical rhythms triggering migration and these species' actual routes, are only two of several potentially productive studies.

TROUBLESOME TRENDS

Admittedly there is no way of inferring reproductive or fledgling success from watching birds in migration; but scrutinizing the detailed reports should yield some approximate trends of certain species. The following are totals for wren species reported: House, 3 birds; Winter, 15+ birds; Carolina, 11 birds; Long-billed Marsh, 1 bird; and Short-billed Marsh, 4 birds. The figures certainly speak eloquently of a current precipitous drop. Totals of 12 Northern and two Loggerhead Shrikes reported through the period strongly suggest low population levels.

GYPSIES

The saga of the House Finch continues unabated. Comments like: "Everywhere," "... have become so common ..." "... continues to thrive," "... outnumbers House Sparrows," tend to make one think its survival success and dispersal rate must be at least equal to that of McDonalds or Burger King. Editors will probably stop mentioning them before too long.

MISSING IN ACTION

The following species were not mentioned in any of the ten reports, although we might have expected an incidental reference or two: Least Bittern, King and Clapper Rails, Piping Plover, Black Skimmer (strange, as this species is especially prone to storm-drift), Long-eared Owl, Hairy and Black-backed Three-toed Woodpeckers, Least Flycatcher, White-breasted Nuthatch, Prothonotary Warbler, Orchard Oriole, Seaside and Sharp-tailed Sparrows.

A SUMMING UP

The reports that follow have been compiled with the benefit of 369 named observers, one birding club, and two ornithological societies. Combined they report on 302 full species and one form (Snow Goose—blue morph), out of a possible 417 species, at which number the New York State list now stands. In other words, 72% of the birds recorded to date within the state were sighted and are included in one or more of the reports. This includes those species sighted at Block and Hudson Canyons, but not Cox's Ledge, as prescribed by the New York State Avian Records Committee. Space limitations prohibit a thorough analysis of migration patterns and rare sightings in the Highlights. However, such analysis is not inconceivable. My enthusiastic recommendation is that birders read and re-read all of the reports. Each is thought-provoking and edifying.