

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

The fall's weather produced an unusual degree of unanimity in the regional reports, albeit primarily in their weather comments. It was cold and wet throughout the state in September and October with periods of very heavy rainfall noted especially in Regions 4, 5, and 8. Regions 2, 4, and 6 commented on an interlude of sunny Indian Summer in mid-October. November generally returned to more nearly average precipitation levels. Snowfall was first noted mainly in mid-November, which also saw the first freezing of lakes and ponds, in spite of the earlier prolonged cold. Frost dates varied from mid-September to late October, where noted. A persistent lack of sunshine was noted by several editors.

While a wet fall produced by series of fronts interspersed with sun might have produced exciting waves and groundings, the continuously dripping, leaden skies of this fall resulted in very few of these and in more negative than positive commentary. Landbird numbers were noted as particularly poor. Many fall migrants passed on at relatively early departure dates with few half-hardies noted remaining by late October. Many winter visitors arrived relatively early, but were not expected to stay and had, in fact, mainly disappeared by the end of the season. The cause of some late departures and low feeder bird counts is variously attributed to the open, snow-free fall and to good wild food crops of some types. Other types of wild foods were greatly reduced by late spring frosts and by the summer's gypsy moth devastation (Region 9). Other indicators of the fall migration were mixed, with banding reports low in Region 10, yet excellent in Region 4. Tower kills were low again this year in Region 3, yet up in one location in Region 5. In the latter case, there had been some thought that the presence of microwave relay towers nearby had reduced the kill level at a TV tower. This fall's kill may indicate that the several years of low kill levels were due merely to fortuitous weather patterns.

Among the regional reports one can find a number of items which I found to be particularly interesting. From Region 10 there is the report of a new fall hawk watch location on the north shore of Long Island. Among the shorebird reports we have two large fallouts recorded amid the rains of early September; one in Region 3 with 400+

birds of seven species in a short time period on 2 Sept, and the other in Region 2, which included unprecedented numbers of Hudsonian Godwits, with 103 counted on 7 Sept. A detailed census of Jamaica Bay NWR by Tom Davis over the fall season revealed very low juvenile/adult ratios for several species. Could this be related to the weather patterns which produced the fallouts above and the large numbers of shorebirds noted late in the season in some areas? Also from Region 2, note the record number of Little Gulls, 75 adults and three nearly adult birds on 29 Nov. What could be the source of such a large group of adults with no accompanying young of the year? The Region 10 report includes tables from several fall hawk watches and a note on the fall pelagic trip. Observe for the pelagic, *NO* alcids, 50 Gannets, and 150 Black-legged Kittiwakes, the last noted with no fanfare, in contrast with the 15 in Region 5, a new regional high. In Region 4's report find an interesting, detailed record of a banding operation with some comparisons with former years. Finally, we have the reports of zero Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows from several regions and none reported for the fall. Having succumbed to an urge to make some comment on these, a zero report, under my regional editor's hat, I decided now to check a bit further. As it turns out, for these two species, only Grasshopper has been reported at all—once—after 1 Sept in the past 12 years in Region 2. Further, using departure date distributions for the region for the span from the early 1900's to 1970 we find that 25% of the time Grasshopper Sparrow has disappeared before 1 Sept and that for Henslow's Sparrow the number is about 70%. Maybe it isn't too surprising that there are no fall reports. Possibly also, not all of the general up, down, good, bad, and goose-egg comments are of equal value?

As the readers of last fall's highlights will recall, I am enamoured of the flights of fall. Once again, these provide many interesting contrasts across the breadth of our state. The loon and grebe flight found Common Loons good where expected, except in Region 10, Red-throated Loons and Red-necked Grebes very low, and Horned Grebes average to low. Waterfowl were generally considered low, where noted, particularly puddle ducks. Region 7's report of good numbers was an exception. Whistling Swans were good only from Region 1. Canada Geese apparently mainly passed overhead quickly and through the eastern 2/3 of the state. The Brant flight was excellent with counts of over 1000 in Regions 2, 3, 5, and 9. Puddle ducks provided no really large counts. Divers massed in very good numbers, especi-

ally: Canvasback in Regions 1 and 9; scaup in Regions 1, 2, and 6; and White-winged Scoter in Region 2. A table of peak counts is provided for Montezuma NWR in Region 3, as in past years. The fall raptor flight is concentrated in Regions 9 and 10, although Region 3 also reports most species up in numbers, several at new high levels. Region 9 reports a record Broad-winged Hawk count on 20 Sept. Gyrfalcons appeared in Regions 2 and 5. In Region 10 the beach flight was generally described as modest with a note that most data had not yet been received. The Red-shouldered Hawk remained low in all regions, 0-1 bird in six of the regions. The Bald Eagle, at about 27 birds, is up marginally. The Peregrine Falcon can not be assessed without the beach counts. Rough-legged Hawks arrived early in all but Region 10 and were present in modest to excellent numbers. Shorebirding suffered from high water and received many negative comments, yet 37 species were recorded including all "regulars" except Ruff. In Region 9 we find several local sites with record highs for species or numbers. Willets and Red Phalaropes were reported only from Region 2, though in the former case one must suspect that it was simply too common to note in Region 10. The inland jaeger flight was reported in good numbers from Regions 2, 5, and 6. The peak counts of 55 from Regions 5 and 6 on the same day must certainly represent the same birds, if not the same report. Gull numbers provided little excitement this fall, although all species expected, except Laughing Gull, were reported and Region 1's thirteen led for variety. White-winged gulls proved scarce again. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were reported from Regions 1, 8, 9, and 10; Black-headed and Franklin's only from Region 1; and Sabine's from Regions 1 and 5. Tern counts were generally low in number and their departure dates early. There was only a small flight of Snowy Owls with reports from five regions. Note excellent Common Nighthawk flights in Regions 3 and 9, both peaking at 1000+. The chickadee flight was good over most of the state with Boreal Chickadees reported from Regions 3-10. Tufted Titmice and Red-breasted Nuthatches were also present in good numbers in most regions mentioning them. Thrushes were generally reported as poor except in Region 2 and 4. The warbler flight, too, was reported as poor except in Regions 4 and 7 where good variety and numbers were noted. Of the regularly occurring warblers, all but Worm-eating were recorded. Blackbird comments all noted scarcity except for the report of 1,000,000 assorted blackbirds at Perch River WMA in Region 6, departing 24 Oct. Winter finches

appeared in full variety, except for Hoary Redpoll, in all but Region 10 by mid-season, but lacked persistence due to small cone and seed crops and were greatly reduced in numbers by season's end. Other northern invaders were also reported, with Northern Shrikes in seven regions and Bohemian Waxwings in Regions 1, 5, and 7. Most fall-flight sparrows, e.g. White-crowned, White-throated, Fox, and Lincoln's, were termed good in all but Region 10. I must admit that the Swamp Sparrow flight noted as missing in one region is a flight I had not yet thought of monitoring closely. It was ignored by nine of the regional editors, also.

Beyond the flight groups, there lies an abundance of species of special interest to different individuals or groups for any number of reasons. Herons were down a bit from last fall, but all expected species were reported. Both bitterns were very scarce. Ruffed Grouse numbers were up, Ring-necked Pheasants still low, a mixed bag for the upland hunters. Rails remained elusive. A lone Black-billed Cuckoo was the only representative for that family for the fall. The Common Raven was again relatively widely reported, appearing in Regions 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8. Winter Wrens and both kinglets ranged from "no change" to "considerably improved" in numbers. Eastern Bluebirds were reported up in Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9, but low in 5, 6, and 10. The Loggerhead Shrike remained low at three birds total in Regions 2 and 10. The fall warbler target species, Connecticut Warbler, was reported from five regions. Unreported were: Laughing Gull, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Alder Flycatcher, Short-billed Marsh Wren, Worm-eating Warbler, and Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows.

The climax of the fall report is again the rarities. As usual, it is difficult to winnow the crop to a manageable few of the best; the total flagged as rare over all the regional reports is 105. Selecting, perhaps arbitrarily, a few of the best from each region we have: Region 1—Black-headed and Sabine's Gulls; Region 2—Arctic Loon, Common Eider, Brewer's Blackbird, and Boat-tailed Grackle, with Brown Pelican and Fulvous Whistling-Duck noted with reservations; Region 3—LeConte's Sparrow, Barnacle Goose, and Monk Parakeet; Region 4—Snowy Egret, Boreal Chickadee, and Connecticut Warbler; Region 5—White-fronted Goose—a fall first for the region, Sabine's Gull, White-eyed Vireo, and Brewer's Blackbird, a regional first; Region 6—Whimbrel, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Boreal Chickadee; Region 7—Lark Sparrow and Northern Three-toed Woodpecker; Region 8—Snowy Egret, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Connecticut Warbler,

Orchard Oriole, and Dickcissel; Region 9—Black Vulture, Long-billed Dowitcher, California Gull, and Wheatear; and Region 10—Black Vulture and Black-necked Stilt, both new to Staten Island; Brewer's Blackbird, and "Audubon's" Warbler.

The BOTS award was relatively easy to select this season, Say's Phoebe, a regional first in Region 5, found 7 Nov and lingering through the season.

The total species count this fall was 309, virtually the same as the 312 total last year.

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

"When God sorts out the weather and sends rain,
Why rain's my choice." —James Whitcomb Riley

With little relief from the drought that began in May 1980 and persisted through this past summer, the generally wet fall was, indeed, our choice. Precipitation for September and October averaged 2.2 inches (5.6 cm.) above normal, with flooding in the Southern Tier 28 October. However, November returned to the old pattern with rainfall below normal by .7 inches (1.8 cm.). The fall was colder than usual by 1.1° F. (.6° C.) with small lakes iced in by mid-November, but Lake Erie still open at the end of the month. (Weather data: Wellsville Water and Light and WIVB-TV, Buffalo).

The disadvantage of many damp days combined with "no noticeable waves of migrants" hampered banding at Farmersville Station. Here, also, the scarcity of waterfowl and absence of the usual large red-wing and warbler flocks, along with the near desertion of feeders, made this Don Clark's "worst fall for birds ever experienced" and caused concern over pesticides and habitat destruction. The low feeder attendance, worrying many observers, may be partially due to an excellent wild food crop and the near absence of snow, which was a foot below normal by the end of the period. Abundant foods were sugar maple, birch, striped maple and hornbeam seed, and fruits of the gray-barked dogwood. Hemlock seed was in fair supply while red oak acorns and beechnuts were spotty (S. Eaton). At last, after some time, there's cause for celebration for birders, even if not for the birds in search of food so far south, as reports dribble in of a Snowy Owl or two, and good flocks of winter finches.

Positives for the fall include 1) a slightly improved loon flight, 2) excellent Great Blue Heron numbers, 3) a good Whistling Swan movement during November, 4) a fine representation of ducks with a record number of Canvasbacks,