

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

As is true for many migration seasons, the highlights of the Spring of '83 are intimately tied to the season's weather patterns. In contrast to many other years, this season's weather and general flavor of the highlights were much the same all across the state. The mild winter continued well into March, leading many to the belief of an early spring; then the other shoe dropped as the official arrival of the spring season was accompanied by plummeting temperatures, and the first of the multitude of storms which were to dominate the remainder of the season. April was generally cold and wet with Regions 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10 reporting the wettest or second wettest Aprils on record; an incredible 14.01" of rain falling in Region 10, to add to the 10.54" in March. Snowfall in April, particularly in the period around 18-20 April, made that month the snowiest for the "winter" in some regions, and in Region 4 brought Binghamton the Golden Snowball Award as snowiest city in the state. May continued the cold, wet pattern with late frosts reported in several regions and tornadoes tossed in for good measure in Regions 1 and 4. The overall patterns were such that many regions noted precipitation on at least one day of nearly every weekend in the season beginning with the vernal equinox, putting a damper on birding activity.

General migration patterns were really very much what one would predict from a reading of the weather data. Waterfowl, which had begun moving in February, moved in and often through quickly, with the balmy weather of early March. The storms of the vernal equinox approached from the south and brought a number of birds on record early dates, especially in Region 10. The cold and wet (or snow) of late March and most of April slowed migration to a trickle with only a few surprising early arrivals. Intervals of good weather during this period swept in bursts of migrants with record counts being noted in several cases. The dramatic snowfall of 18-20 April seemed to have little effect other than to drive large numbers of birds to road edges or feeders. Region 5 reports a roadside census run by Dorothy Crumb on 20 April, with numbers recorded similar to a count she ran under similar conditions in 1976. While birders may have been dampened by all the rainfall on most weekends, the pattern was perfect for "fallouts" and the experiences of several regions are well summarized by Paul DeBenedictis: "The generally rotten weather produced one of the finest spring passerine migrations in years, with many record highs being set." Century Runs or Big Days on the weekends

of 14-15 May and 21-22 May recorded good numbers of species and individuals. Perhaps surprising for a migration which often seemed so slow was Region 5's note of few stragglers after 31 May. Stopping to think about it, I would echo that for Region 2; how about elsewhere? Maybe we'll see in the summer reports.

Typically it is difficult to extract trends from migrations, but the crazy weather of this spring has made the situation even more impossible. So let us just scan the checklist several times, extracting interesting observations. First, a look at families whose passage is watched annually. Loons and grebes, particularly Horned Grebes, were scarce. On Lake Ontario, a good bit of this impression may be again due to near shore disturbance by the hordes of sport fishermen as noted in Region 5. Except for Great Blue and Green-backed Herons, the picture for the other widespread heron breeders looks dim, most being poorly reported. As noted earlier, waterfowl appeared early and passed through rapidly with peak counts; where reported, generally low, especially in Regions 1 and 5. Exceptions were very high counts for Canada Goose over most of upstate and a fantastic 30,000 Snow Geese in Montezuma NWR on 18 April. Region 3's report again contains a table listing peak migration counts at Montezuma which may be compared with similar tables for past springs. The hawk migration is well summarized by tables for Braddock Bay in Region 2 and Derby Hill in Region 5, with additional good numbers on specific dates from a watch at Pinehurst in Region 1. Record high totals for the season were set at both major hawk watches, with several highs for individual species both for the season and for peak dates. As an example, the 1,166 American Kestrels that passed Braddock Bay on 14 April eclipsed all previous yearly totals for the species there. All raptor species appear to be doing at least marginally better, with Osprey noted in all ten regions and flagged as doing particularly well, with only Red-shouldered Hawk and Peregrine Falcon lagging and Golden Eagle apparently slipping. Shorebird reports were generally unspectacular, a case of too much water in their typical habitat in several regions. All expected spring species plus a few surprises were recorded, but numbers were generally low. A notable exception was the unusual variety and very large numbers for some species reported from Cayuga Pool at Iroquois NWR in Region 1 due to a complete drawdown of that pool. The data typically gathered following such drawdowns at appropriate times should make us aware of the numbers and variety of shorebirds which are passing undetected in "normal" times. Gull and tern reports were very low, with the exception of the reports of Four Brothers Islands census in Region 7. The few rarer species were

not unexpected. Most of the tern species warrant more careful monitoring. The caterpillar invasions seem to have eased a bit this season, and with their decrease cuckoos were flagged as low in virtually all regions. Owls typically receive inadequate attention, thus you should find interesting the report in Region 5 of an owl banding project with 33 Northern Saw-whet and 5 Long-eared banded and a Boreal Owl heard calling during one session. Both Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will have been flagged as very low in nearly all regions noting them. The passerine migration proceeded in spurts, with the overall impression ranging from "average" to "the finest—in years" to just plain "confused, confusing, and somewhat erratic." You will find varying reports for swallows across regions, with the exception that Purple Martin was generally noted as low. Wrens as a group appear to bear watching; many regions report one or more wren species of concern and all wren species are red-flagged in at least one region. Most thrush comments were positive, even for Eastern Bluebird, for which 56 young had already been banded on just one trail in Region 9. Warblers and vireos provided exciting birding in several regions, with many regional and state high counts recorded, particularly in Regions 2, 5 and 10. A concerted banding effort is summarized in the introduction to Region 5's report, along with some sighting totals for nearby observers on the same days. It seems that too few observers really bother to make detailed counts or that such data too often fails to reach the regional reports. Among the warbler reports, note in Region 9 that the Blue-winged/Golden-winged ratio has reached three or four to one where only a few years ago it would have registered the inverse. Sparrow reports were quite variable and represented little change from the reports of the past several years, with the possible exception of Vesper being recorded in a bit higher numbers. The numbers of all winter finches were very low across the state, as expected from last fall's and winter's low counts. Yet nearly all species were recorded with only White-winged Crossbill and Hoary Redpoll being missed.

Next, let us examine the status of some of the species particularly under observation over the past several years, but not covered above. Double-crested Cormorant continues to increase, with the largest gains apparently at the east end of Lake Ontario, but with breeding imminent in both Regions 3 and 7. Cattle Egret numbers remain disappointingly low with the exception of Regions 9 and 10. In Region 2, where they have bred, none were reported until a single appeared after season's end. Bald Eagles were reported in nine regions, underscoring the success of the hacking program which will see another 22

released in the Adirondacks this summer. Of course, one of the premiere stories of the season is the two pairs of Peregrine Falcons nesting on bridges in the New York City area, with at least three of the four birds known to be releases from the Cornell Peregrine program. Ring-necked Pheasant was generally reported up a bit, but still very low. Wild Turkeys were reported in eight regions with the population expanding both naturally and through further releases. Belted Kingfisher demonstrated both the concentrating effects of the season's weather patterns and the potential for significant contributions by interested observers in a count of 280 that passed Braddock Bay in Region 2 on 14 April, a day of warm south winds after six days of unfavorable breezes. This count contrasts sharply with the previous maxima of nine in the spring and ten for the fall in John Bull's *Birds of New York State*. Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, and Tufted Titmouse all appear to be slowly continuing their range expansions to the north. Common Raven was reported in eight regions, with six of these recording multiple sightings. Both kinglet populations were reported in good shape and increasing. Loggerhead Shrike remains critically low with only Region 5 reporting increased numbers of reports. Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers all were reported in better than usual numbers, possibly as a result of overshoot conditions occurring with just the right timing relative to the peak of their movements. Yellow-breasted Chat was reported in eight regions, but in low numbers. Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows both bear continued careful monitoring. Purple Finch numbers were good after several seasons of worried comments. House Finch continues to expand both in towns and out into the countryside. Finally, American Goldfinch appeared in large enough numbers for special comment in most up-state regions.

As usual, in addition to the numerical data, there are many simply interesting comments; a few here may pique your interest in searching out others. There are several reports of color variants, with albino American Robins in Regions 1, 3, and 8, American Crow in Region 3, and Brown-headed Cowbird in Region 2; a melanistic Downy Woodpecker in Region 3; and, most interesting, a xanthochroid Evening Grosbeak in Region 8. Region 1 notes a discussion of the potential logging of parts of Allegany State Park and a temporary closure of Tifft Farm due to illegal dumping; large, remote conservation problems can suddenly touch home. A Japanese race of the Cedar Waxwing (orange tail tips) was again recorded, this time in Region 1. Banding reports were less detailed than for many springs past, but

data does appear in the reports for Regions 1, 5, 7, and 8.

As usual, the rarities are saved until last. Once again, there are many exciting finds in nearly every region but, on close inspection, almost none are really unusual on a statewide scale. Virtually all rarities recorded this season are birds whose numbers of sightings have been increasing, birds which are short-range vagrants from established populations, or birds really long expected and awaited. As examples we have: Northern Gannet in Regions 1 and 5, American White Pelican in 1 and 10, Greater White-fronted Goose in 1, 5 and 9; Sandhill Crane in 4, 5 and 9; Stilt Sandpiper in 2, 5 and 10; Lesser Black-backed Gull in 1 and 9; Laughing Gull in 5 and 9; Western Meadowlark in 2, 5 and 9; Yellow-headed Blackbird in 1 and 4; Dickcissel in 2, 3, 8 and 10; Painted Bunting in 3 and 10; and Summer Tanager in 2, 9 and 10, with an incredible 30+ sightings in Region 10, by far the most ever in the state for a given season or even year. You will find many other rarities recorded in single regions and generally listed near the beginning of each regional report. Three more of special note are the returning Brewer's Blackbirds in Region 2 (3rd year); two Mississippi Kites in Region 10, and the first report of Prothonotary Warbler northward into the heart of Region 7.

This season the B.O.T.S. Award, both a first and a second place, falls to Region 9. In second place is their Ross' Goose, more or less awaited after appearances in two consecutive fall seasons in neighboring New Jersey. (Start scanning those 30,000 Snow Geese, Region 3.) First place by a landslide goes to their Black-shouldered Kite on 26-27 April. Both of these species are *first* state records.

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580

REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

This was a spring almost as mixed up as the new AOU Check-list of North American Birds. The unusually mild weather of the winter continued, bringing Silver Maples into bloom along the Allegheny River 7 March, the earliest in thirty-four years, and freeing most lakes and ponds of ice by the next day, nearly a month early and the earliest on record for the last thirty years in Cattaraugus County (Eaton). Taking advantage of the southerly winds and good weather, swans and geese were slightly early too, flooding through on 4 to 6 March, with 1,000 of the latter a common daily estimate. There was no mistaking these Canada Geese for other than true migrants, rather than some of the increasing numbers staying north all winter encouraged by rich gleanings of corn fields.