

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

Once again, we find ourselves with a season of contrasts. The general impressions of the migration run from Joe Thill's, "In spite of the insalubrious weather, the migration was generally one of the more memorable spring passages of the past five years . . ." to Paul DeBenedictis', "All observers, and the spring banding operation at the Noyes Sanctuary along Lake Ontario, were unanimous that this spring's migration was one of the worst ever." Surely we can all find a position somewhere between these. Personally, sandwiched between their two regions, I observed long stretches of dismal, empty woods punctuated by a few dates with some of the best spring birding in years. Far off to the southeast, we note Region 10 also with an overall average to good spring with relatively few dates with major movements. Consolidating the impressions of all of the regions, the major theme of this spring is "late." However, if you look closely, this may mean species or families late in one area of the state were average to even record early elsewhere. It may mean that most species due in a particular time period, *e.g.* late March or early May, were late, while others whose arrivals fall near a frontal passage arrived at average or even very early dates. It may mean that, while the "arrival dates" were average, the bulk of the populations of many species arrived very late. You will find these variations of the late theme developed in the various regional reports.

This spring's weather was relatively similar across the state. The overall trend was cool and wet, with April a bit closer to normal temperatures and the other two months colder. Snowfall for the season typically ended with significant storms upstate in mid to late March. The major storm path swinging south, then up the coast deluged Regions 9 and 10 with rain in May, particularly from the 28th to the 31st, 9" and 5+", respectively. Major weather-driven movements noted in a number of regions across the state occurred on 3/15-20, 4/26-30, 5/11-13, and 5/19-23.

Looking through the regional reports we can find widespread, consistent evidence of the effects of these major pushes spaced by long stretches of weather unconducive to migration. As examples we find: southern herons better represented than in the past several years; waterfowl generally having started early with February's warmth and somewhat scarce through spring; raptors staging a great spectacle in late April with over 40,000 recorded at both Braddock Bay and Derby Hill between the 26th and 30th April, and each location with high days

the 27th and 28th April over 20,000. This movement was also reflected in good counts on these dates in Regions 1, 7 and 9; a Laughing Gull and Roseate Tern inland in Region 3 on 4 May; rare spring occurrences or numbers of Sandwich Terns, Gull-billed Terns, and Royal Terns late in the month in Region 10; many southern passerine rarities across the state, including 16-18 Yellow-throated Warblers reported, highlighted by confirmation of that species as a new breeding bird for the state in Region 8.

Developing the theme of contrasts a bit further, we find: generally poor shorebirding cited in most regions, yet record high counts for Dunlin, 2,000 on 10 March in Region 10, and inland for spring for Black-bellied Plover, 40 on 28 May in Region 3; the 10th regional record for Wilson's Phalarope in Region 5 and 10+ of that species reported by Big Day groups on 20 May in Region 2 (though some of the sightings were actually in Region 1); there are the generally poor banding results cited in Regions 5 and 7, yet good banding reports for owls in Region 5, warblers in Region 1, and hawks near Braddock Bay in Region 2; Common Nighthawk is flagged low in Regions 1, 6 and 9, while in Region 2, 300 were sighted over one pond on 30 May; flycatchers are generally noted as late, yet Region 10 recorded four record early dates for the state with Eastern Kingbird on 4 April, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on 2-5 May, Acadian Flycatcher on 6 May, and Great Crested Flycatcher on 6 April, and Region 5 recorded Alder and Willow Flycatchers on 6 May. Similarly, vireos are often noted as late and low, but with normal dates and good numbers in Region 10. Finally, warblers are generally reported late with unexceptional numbers, yet there are two record early dates, Yellow-throated on 11 April in Region 9 and Cape May on 19 April in Region 10, and high counts of 200+ Bay-breasted on 23 May and 22 Hooded on 20 May, both in Region 2. For almost any positive or negative note one can find an opposite in another region, sometimes distant, often neighboring.

All is not contrasts. Among the reports one can find many observations or trends which are quite uniform across many regions. Among these are: Red-throated Loon and Horned Grebe very low in regions where good numbers are expected; bitterns still generally low; good counts of Snow Goose across the state, peaking at 20,000 in Region 3; American Black Duck, *low*; many scattered late dates for lingering diving ducks; Ruddy Duck, *scarce*; Sandhill Crane back in the news in Regions 1, 2, and 9; cuckoos late and *low* across all regions noting them at all; Common Raven reported in six regions; Winter Wren, *low*, Sedge Wren, *none*; no red flags for kinglets after many years of recovery; thrushes flagged as low in Regions 1, 2, 3 and 4; Loggerhead Shrike, *none* in Regions 1, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10, 1-2 in Regions 5, 7 and 9, and still

at about 10+ reports in Region 2; Blue-winged Warbler increasing at the expense of Golden-winged; about 18 reports of Prothonotary Warbler scattered across the state; good counts for Kentucky Warbler; American Tree Sparrow lingering in many regions, to a record late date of 20 May in Region 2; Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrows, *low*; a flood of Yellow-headed Blackbird reports, nine in six regions; and Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks late into May in most regions.

Additionally, one can wander about among the various regional reports and, as usual, find numerous interesting morsels to chew on. I'll point out a few. In Region 3 we have a report of many unexpected visitors taking up residence in bird houses. Region 4 reports the probable loss of many Northern Rough-winged Swallows due to culvert flooding in late May, a reminder to atlasers of places to look for used nests to CO that species. Similarly, Region 9 expected heavy losses of ground nests due to heavy rains on 5 April and again on 28-31 May. In the Region 8 report we find good Big Day counts in spite of the weather and a second new regional nest record, Clay-colored x Chipping Sparrow. Back to Region 6, we stumble across 500 Bohemian Waxwings - most of us rush about to turn up one straggler among the Cedars in widely spaced years! In Region 7 there is the retrap of a Yellow Warbler banded there on 5/17/79, old for one of the tiny ones. Back into the Region 9 report there is an intriguing Great Cormorant report, suggestive of the European continental subspecies, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*; then the Common Moorhen leg under a Great Horned Owl nest, the closest one observer has come to locating that species in coastal Westchester Co. in years of birding. Finally, one can wander into the Region 10 report and drool away for hours. This listing could go on and on, but the reader should be left with a little work and study.

Once more, the rarities have been saved for last. The list this spring is not overwhelming, but the selection is of good quality. Among the best from each region are: Region 1: Northern Gannet, Greater White-fronted Goose, Barnacle Goose - origin?, American Avocet, Yellow-throated Warbler, Summer Tanager, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 2: Greater White-fronted Goose, Barrow's Goldeneye, Black Vulture, Ferruginous Hawk - 3rd regional record, Sandhill Crane, American Avocet, Summer Tanager, Lark Sparrow and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 3: Roseate Tern, Laughing Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Common Raven, and Western Tanager; Region 4: Painted Bunting and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 5: Fish Crow - regional 1st, Black Vulture, Swainson's Hawk, Piping Plover - 1st since 1978, Summer Tanager, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 6: Cattle Egret, Ross' Goose - 2nd state record, Greater White-fronted Goose, Peregrine Falcon, and Great Gray Owl; Region 7: Eared Grebe, Northern Bobwhite -

1st in about 90 years, Prothonotary Warbler - snatched in full song as a Sharp-shinned Hawk meal, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 8: King Rail, Yellow Rail, Sandhill Crane, Varied Thrush, Yellow-throated Warbler - CO, Summer Tanager, and Clay-colored Sparrow - CO; Region 9: Tricolored Heron, Greater White-fronted Goose, Black Vulture, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; and Region 10: Sandwich Tern, Great Gray Owl, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

There is one more new to the New York State list, the undisputed BOTS Award winner for the season, the Brambling of Region 9, viewed by few from 1-27 March as it unfortunately settled at the feeder of a birder with no interest in putting up with the horde that would descend if the find were broadcast.

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580

REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

JOSEPH F. THILL

It is commonplace that spring on the Niagara Frontier is, on average, a dreary time with winter seeming to linger almost until June and pleasant, sunny days so rare after the vernal equinox that they can be counted on one hand. Although meteorological data presents a much less pessimistic assessment of the months of March, April and May, there is no doubt that the spring of '84 was a miserable period even for this area, which is not remarkable for its pleasant weather. March was abnormally cold with the average temperature at Buffalo of 27.1° F, 6° below normal for that month, which ended with an early spring blizzard dumping up to 24 inches of snow on the Southern Tier on the 29th. Even at Buffalo, where precipitation measured only 1.77 inches in March, 1.20 inches below normal, snowfall was four inches above average. The weather in April was generally mild with temperatures averaging more than two degrees above normal, but the thermometer did not reach the 70° mark until the 26th when a large mass of warm Gulf air, ushered in on southwest winds, precipitated a huge movement of migrants into the region, including the first significant wave of passerines. On 30 April, early morning rains preceded a weather front accompanied by gale force winds, gusting up to 72 mph at Buffalo, which caused some flooding and property damage from uprooted trees and downed power lines. This front brought a mass of unseasonably cold air in its wake and May was a cloudy, wet and chilly month with the average temperature of 52.9° F, 3.2° below normal. Again, no temperature in the 70° range was reached until 21 May and five days later another cold front pushed the thermometer down to end the period on a decidedly chilly note.

Fortunately for area birdwatchers, there seems to be little correlation between bird migration and pleasant weather. In spite of the insalubrious weather, the