HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

The words most frequently associated with this Fall's migration are "lackluster" and "disappointing." They refer mainly to the numbers of migrant landbirds encountered. Positive comments were reserved for raptors (especially those species which typically overwinter here), a few of the waterbirds and shorebird variety. This general summary is a repeat of last fall and echoes the landbird migrations for the past several years now, both spring and fall. Only the particular species associated with the few bright spots vary from season to season.

The weather this fall certainly could have had some impact on perceptions of the migration. September, normally the peak month for landbird groundings, was wet across the state, excepting Region 7, and cool in all but Region 1. In Region 1, tower kills were the lowest since monitoring began in 1967. October remained cool and turned drier in all but Regions 3 and 8. A freak, heavy snowfall hit Regions 4, 8 and 9 on the 4 Oct, causing lots of tree damage and knocking out power for days in some locales but had no discernible effects on birdlife. November brought a roller-coaster pattern all across the state, averaging warmer and drier than normal in most areas. Apparently there were few lingering migrants to seek in these late days of "Indian Summer," as departure dates nearly universally were very early.

We still lack a good quantitative database for numerical comparisons, so the assessment of this season's migration is mostly qualitative as is too often the case. The movement of loons and grebes along the south shore of Lake Ontario was about average, but with peak counts a bit low. Regions 4 and 5 did note some improvement in Pied-billed Grebe numbers over recent years. Among the herons, the fall "event" was Cattle Egret lingering from late October to mid November dates in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8. Waterfowl reports were mixed, Regions 1, 4 and 8 indicating "good", Region 2 below average, and Region 5 "poor" flights. Generally, the numbers don't appear very impressive. Canvasback and Greater Scaup numbers were high in Region 1; Wood Duck set a state record high in Region 5 and peaked very high in Region 3 at Montezuma NWR; Hooded Merganser counts were very high in several regions; and lots of Common Mergansers gathered in Region 6. Aside from these highs the rest of the numbers reported are not very good in historical context.

There were many notes of "good" raptor counts, but again it is not clear that overall counts rate very high. Region 9 is the only one from which summarizes some of the fall hawk watch data. Some of the peak

counts look very good, but without long-term averages against which to compare this year's results, this is hard to evaluate. Most of the other positive comments relate to winter raptors, of which high counts for N. Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, and Short-eared Owl are associated with an apparently widespread, vole population high. In addition, we find increases in Turkey Vulture and late reports for Osprey in several Regions. Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon were noted in nearly all regions, but in low numbers; Peregrine populations are impossible to assess without Region 10 data. Two negatives were very low numbers of N. Goshawk and Red-shouldered Hawk.

The shorebird picture was brighter Upstate with Lake Ontario levels down a bit plus habitat provided again at Montezuma NWR in Region 3. However, while variety was excellent, the peak counts reported for many species across the state were not very high, particularly among the "peep" sandpipers and Dunlin. Killdeer counts provided a contrast, with a state record high recorded in Region 5 and several other very high totals. Gull and tern reports were not very impressive, except at the Robert Moses Power Dam in Region 6, where increased coverage has documented a major, regular concentration of gulls and terns and numerous reports of rarer species.

Reports of passerines also are generally negative, though Region 1 notes many very high counts on the annual BOS October Census and several Regions note increases in species which have been expanding their ranges in New York from the south. Flycatchers were considered "poor," but so few normally linger into the fall in any numbers that this is hard to assess. Swallow counts were not particularly good, but again by September the peaks of most species except Tree Swallow, and very locally, Purple Martin and Barn Swallow have passed anyway. Common Raven, Winter Wren and the kinglets bring a bright note to this list with increased numbers. In contrast, virtually all comments on thrushes and mimids, except for Am. Robin, E. Bluebird, and N. Mockingbird, were negative, reinforced in the departure table data where all averaged disappearing much earlier than usual. Vireo and warbler reports continue the negative trend, with very few high counts reported anywhere and departure dates generally early. While a few high counts are reported, there are actually little really good numerical data for any of these species. There were some local good sparrow counts from Upstate, but also numerous reports of very low counts for most species. It is interesting to note the arrival of American Tree Sparrow across the entire state over a relatively brief time span, even though numbers were generally low this fall.

Winter irruptives included Snowy Owl in fair numbers across the state and N. Shrike in nearly all Regions by late October, but there

were very few Bohemian Waxwing and winter finch reports, except for very large counts of Pine Siskin. Numbers of the last species correlated with an excellent crop of E. Hemlock cones. Few half-hardy species remained by late in the season.

As usual, in contrast to the dismal broadbrush picture painted above, there are always local or Regional highlights — too many to list completely. A few of these may whet your appetite to search for more among the Regional Reports. There are continued very high inland counts of Double-crested Cormorant in Regions 1, 3 and 5, not necessarily a plus in everyone's eyes. Late *Plegadis* ibis reports from Regions 2 and 3, may have been the same bird. Records of Swainson's Hawk in Region 9 and Sandhill Crane in Region 5 are even more remarkable in the fall. A Solitary Sandpiper tarried very late in Region 7, a state record late date for Yellow Warbler was set in Region 5 and a very late Indigo Bunting was in Region 9. Other notable reports include a good scattering of late cuckoo reports, low peak counts for Common Nighthawk and high peaks for Chimney Swift, a "giant" starling in Region 7, Connecticut Warblers in Regions 3 and 4, and more evidence of the regular occurrence of Sharp-tailed Sparrow Upstate in Region 2 if the right habitat is searched at the proper time. The possible list of comments is limited mainly by one's interest in searching.

This fall's table of departure dates for species which occur relatively commonly across the state suggests some more quantitative tidbits, given the appropriate disclaimers. Departure dates are even more prone to the problem of poor reporting than are arrival dates, leaving the data highly variable. The problem occurs because one never knows if a given observation is a "departure" date until long after it has happened, in sharp contrast with an arrival *[see below — the Editor.]* With lots of Regional data, a Regional editor can sort them for the last report of each species. However, this data must first be submitted by individual observers, and too often observers either don't record all of their sighting data or simply don't go back to search for their personal last dates for each species to contribute to their Regional database. The problem is very similar to that of trying to assess numerical declines in species. Additionally, to draw conclusions from this fall's data, we must compare this year's dates with the table of 25-year averages (*The Kingbird* 37:12-15), which are still contaminated by data gathered under different guidelines. We also still lack a computation of the variance of the data in that table for assessing significance of the deviations from average. If one ignores the former problems and, I did this spring (*The Kingbird* 37:136-142), estimates the variance from the data in the recent "The Birds of Monroe County, New York Annotated List" (*Proceedings of the Rochester Academy of Science* 16: 1-64) and assumes that this measure is

similar for all Regions, then quantitative conclusions may be drawn. I first used the estimated variances of individual species' departure dates to compare the mean departure date of each species with its 25-year average, correcting the average a bit for the fact that the Region 10 data is missing from the current season's table. This analysis suggests that 23 of the 62 species in the table departed on dates averaging statistically significantly early across the state relative to their long-term averages. It is also interesting that of 10 species whose departure date averaged late, only one of these is statistically significant given the variance of the data. The early departures included Lesser Yellowlegs, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Great Crested Flycatcher, all of the thrushes and mimids in the table, 12 of the 20 warblers, Scarlet Tanager and Bobolink. Only White-crowned Sparrow departures averaged significantly late. It would seem that this ought to be telling us something about the data, the season or bird populations. Pooling the variance across species, we find that the overall seasonality for a Region must exceed 3.4 days early or late to be statistically significant. Using this criterion, all but Regions 1 and 2 showed an overall significantly early departure pattern for the season. I still have trouble deciding whether differences in the Advance column are real or are still strongly influenced by scanty data as some of the newer editors continue to establish their reporting networks. I would appreciate any comments, positive or negative, about these attempts at quantitative commentary based on these tables from you, the readers.

Over most of the state, this was a good season for finding rarities. Among the best are: Region 1 none!?; Region 2 Gyrfalcon, Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Brewer's Blackbird; Region 3 Flamingo, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 4 Black Vulture, "Krider's" Red-tailed Hawk, and Varied Thrush; Region 5 Sandhill Crane, Marbled Godwit, and Sabine's Gull; Region 6 Arctic Tern and Razorbill; Region 7 Harlequin Duck, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Black-headed Grosbeak and Brewer's Blackbird; Region 8 - Great Cormorant; and Region 9 Black Vulture, Swainson's Hawk, Loggerhead Shrike, "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler and Brewer's Blackbird. The BOTS Award goes to the Gray Kingbird in Region 3, one of very few ever and the first recorded so far inland in New York. Obviously, the decision would be much more difficult if the report for Region 10, which had at least one new bird for the state this fall, had been available this fall. (See elsewhere in this issue.)

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580

Fall Departures 1987

Species	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Region 7	Region 8	Region 9	Region 10	Average
Osprey	11 Oct	**28 Nov**	4 Nov	*8 Oct*	11 Nov	20 Sep	17 Oct	17 Oct	16 Nov		25 Oct
Broad-winged Hawk	4 Oct	30 Sep	23 Sep	18 Oct	20 Sep		30 Sep	20 Sep	10 Oct		30 Sep
Black-bellied Plover	25 Oct	14 Nov	2 Nov		1 Nov	7 Nov	9 Sep	20 Sep	4 Oct		18 Oct
Semipalmated Plover		16 Nov	5 Oct	3 Sep	31 Oct	20 Sep	29 Aug	30 Oct			6 Oct
Greater Yellowlegs	15 Nov	26 Nov	20 Oct	3 Oct	1 Nov	1 Nov	22 Oct	20 Oct	30 Oct		29 Oct
Lesser Yellowlegs	15 Nov	15 Nov	28 Oct	12 Sep	24 Sep	17 Sep	20 Aug	23 Sep			4 Oct
Spotted Sandpiper	18 Oct	23 Nov		5 Sep	11 Sep		30 Aug		28 Sep		29 Sep
Sanderling	18 Oct	12 Nov	22 Sep		25 Oct		11 Aug				5 Oct
Semipalmated Sandpiper	11 Oct	31 Oct	5 Oct	3 Sep	18 Oct	5 Sep	30 Aug				27 Sep
Least Sandpiper	26 Oct	3 Nov	5 Oct		24 Oct	16 Sep	8 Sep	15 Sep			5 Oct
Pectoral Sandpiper	24 Oct	19 Nov	17 Nov	26 Sep	1 Nov	24 Oct	14 Sep	3 Nov	**27 Nov**		27 Oct
Caspian Tern	13 Sep	17 Oct	2 Sep		26 Sep	27 Sep			16 Sep		21 Sep
Common Tern	15 Oct	1 Nov			29 Oct	19 Oct					23 Oct
Black Tern	10 Oct	3 Sep			14 Sep	4 Sep					15 Sep
Chimney Swift	14 Oct	1 Oct	1 Oct	26 Sep	24 Sep	16 Sep	2 Oct	24 Sep	11 Oct		29 Sep
Ruby-thr. Hummingbird	24 Sep	11 Oct	5 Oct	21 Sep	24 Sep	4 Sep	25 Sep	23 Sep	24 Oct		27 Sep
Eastern Wood-Pewee	11 Oct	8 Oct	19 Sep	22 Sep	24 Sep		13 Sep	6 Oct	30 Sep		27 Sep
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	20 Sep	20 Sep		12 Sep	17 Sep		4 Sep				14 Sep
Least Flycatcher	27 Sep	17 Sep		5 Oct	23 Sep		7 Sep	27 Sep			22 Sep
Eastern Phoebe	19 Oct	31 Oct	8 Oct	14 Oct	22 Oct	16 Oct	15 Oct	15 Oct	25 Oct		18 Oct
Great-crested Flycatcher	19 Sep	20 Sep	1 Sep	5 Sep	20 Sep		5 Sep	18 Sep	5 Sep		11 Sep
Eastern Kingbird	11 Oct	16 Sep	3 Sep	5 Sep	13 Sep	2 Sep	16 Sep	19 Sep	30 Aug		12 Sep
Tree Swallow	11 Oct	1 Nov	24 Oct	19 Sep	12 Oct	3 Sep	9 Oct	26 Sep			5 Oct
Barn Swallow	11 Oct	1 Nov	24 Oct	27 Sep	17 Oct	1 Sep	14 Sep				5 Oct
House Wren	12 Oct	10 Oct	26 Sep	8 Oct	11 Oct		28 Sep	20 Oct	29 Oct		10 Oct
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	5 Sep	14 Sep	**19 Sep**	4 Sep	6 Sep			8 Sep	22 Sep		11 Sep
Veery	27 Sep	24 Sep	9 Sep	18 Sep	13 Sep		31 Aug	27 Sep	9 Sep		15 Sep
Swainson's Thrush	19 Oct	9 Oct	19 Sep	4 Oct	27 Sep		12 Oct	10 Oct	*26 Sep*		4 Oct
Wood Thrush	11 Oct	9 Oct	9 Sep	26 Sep	4 Oct	15 Sep	2 Sep	15 Sep	1 Nov		27 Sep
Gray Catbird	11 Oct	24 Oct	11 Oct	12 Oct	28 Oct	20 Sep	10 Oct	15 Nov	19 Oct		16 Oct
Brown Thrasher	11 Oct	4 Oct	26 Sep	27 Sep	4 Oct		4 Oct	15 Sep	2 Sep		26 Sep

Species	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Region 7	Region 8	Region 9	Region 10	Average
Solitary Vireo	11 Oct	6 Oct	30 Sep	18 Oct	9 Oct	6 Oct	12 Oct	26 Sep	23 Oct		9 Oct
Yellow-throated Vireo		20 Sep	5 Sep		15 Sep			6 Sep	15 Oct		18 Sep
Warbling Vireo	21 Sep	3 Oct	17 Sep	15 Sep	20 Sep			19 Sep	17 Sep		20 Sep
Red-eyed Vireo	25 Oct	5 Oct	30 Sep	3 Oct	5 Oct	22 Sep	23 Sep	27 Sep	7 Oct		3 Oct
Blue-winged Warbler	18 Sep	18 Sep	15 Sep	14 Sep	21 Sep				6 Sep		15 Sep
Tennessee Warbler	11 Oct	1 Oct	3 Oct	24 Oct	2 Oct	22 Sep	19 Sep	6 Sep	11 Oct		1 Oct
Nashville Warbler	11 Oct	2 Oct	3 Oct	20 Oct	6 Oct	**8 Nov**	22 Oct	27 Sep			12 Oct
Northern Parula	20 Sep	17 Sep			6 Oct	3 Oct	8 Sep				22 Sep
Yellow Warbler	20 Sep	5 Oct			*'19 Sep*	3 Sep		8 Sep	23 Sep		18 Sep
Chestnut-sided Warbler	11 Oct	19 Sep	9 Sep	25 Sep	6 Oct	6 Oct	19 Sep		15 Oct		28 Sep
Magnolia Warbler	11 Oct	6 Oct	3 Oct	30 Sep	10 Oct		9 Oct	19 Sep	28 Sep		3 Oct
Cape May Warbler	11 Oct	9 Oct	3 Oct	8 Sep	1 Oct		23 Sep	19 Sep	21 Sep		26 Sep
Black-thr Blue Warbler	11 Oct	12 Oct	30 Sep	23 Sep	5 Oct	6 Oct	30 Sep		12 Sep		1 Oct
Black-thr Green Warbler	11 Oct	4 Oct	30 Sep	27 Sep	17 Oct	6 Oct	8 Oct	22 Sep	6 Oct		4 Oct
Blackburnian Warbler	11 Oct	2 Oct	12 Sep	15 Sep	24 Sep		6 Sep		15 Oct		25 Sep
Bay-breasted Warbler	11 Oct	30 Sep	30 Sep	15 Sep	24 Sep		8 Sep	17 Sep	15 Sep		22 Sep
Blackpoll Warbler	12 Oct	1 Oct	23 Sep	19 Sep	24 Sep			17 Sep	15 Oct		28 Sep
Black-and-white Warbler	11 Oct	30 Sep	30 Sep	4 Sep	26 Sep		6 Sep		20 Sep		22 Sep
American Redstart	12 Oct	17 Oct	15 Sep	27 Sep	24 Sep	2 Sep	17 Sep	20 Sep	22 Sep		24 Sep
Ovenbird	4 Oct	4 Oct	15 Sep	21 Sep	27 Sep	2 Sep	14 Sep	19 Sep	2 Sep		18 Sep
N. Waterthrush	12 Sep	30 Sep	12 Sep	13 Sep	14 Sep	2 Sep					13 Sep
Common Yellowthroat	16 Oct	4 Nov	9 Oct	8 Oct	17 Oct	27 Sep	21 Sep	1 Nov	12 Oct		13 Oct
Wilson's Warbler	11 Oct	1 Oct	5 Oct	8 Oct	24 Sep		16 Sep	4 Sep	24 Aug		22 Sep
Canada Warbler	22 Sep	29 Sep			15 Sep		7 Sep		2 Sep		15 Sep
Scarlet Tanager		30 Sep	30 Sep	26 Sep	21 Sep		23 Sep		29 Sep		26 Sep
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	11 Oct	1 Nov	22 Sep	28 Sep	25 Oct		24 Sep	29 Sep	4 Oct		6 Oct
Rufous-sided Towhee	22 Oct		1 Nov	24 Oct	17 Oct		10 Oct	17 Oct	5 Oct		18 Oct
Lincoln's Sparrow	10 Nov	21 Oct	30 Sep	2 Oct	31 Oct		22 Sep		12 Oct		14 Oct
White-crowned Sparrow	10 Nov	6 Nov	1 Nov	21 Nov	16 Nov		10 Nov	22 Oct	7 Nov		7 Nov
Bobolink	24 Sep	17 Sep	13 Sep	5 Sep	11 Sep		12 Aug	5 Sep	19 Oct		13 Sep
Northern Oriole		4 Oct		8 Sep	*6 Sep*		14 Aug		29 Sep		12 Sep

Bold Regional Record Late *Italics* also isolated later report(s).

Region	Species Reported	Seasonality (days)	Advance (days)
Region 1	58	-1.4	8.7
Region 2	61	-0.5	11.9
Region 3	53	-8.2	-2.0
Region 4	52	-4.9	-5.4
Region 5	62	-5.3	3.4
Region 6	32	-4.8	-9.8
Region 7	52	-5.1	-12.9
Region 8	43	-7.2	-4.7
Region 9	48	-10.1	2.7
Region 10	0		

Both this Fall's Highlights and the Region 7 report note that determining departure dates is harder than determining arrival dates. I knew this would be true when I initiated the arrival/departure dates project. In the spring, many birds announce their presence by singing but they remain here long after singing ceases. When you see the first of a species for the year, you know then and there that you have an arrival date. You can only tell that the bird you see today is the season's last tomorrow or the next day, after you have determined that you no longer can find that species. To participate in the departure dates project, you must keep some notes about what you see. Fortunately, the notes may be brief - a simple checkmark will suffice — but you should be prepared in advance to keep those notes.

I recommend the following easy way to keep track of departure dates. You will need two sheets of inexpensive, coarse (1/4 inch or larger grid) graph paper for each month. Orient the paper so you can write along the long (11 inch) axis of the paper. On the first line of each sheet, put "Species — *month*" along the left margin. Then starting at the right side of the first line and, going left, enter a number for each day of the month in reverse order, starting with 30 (or 31) and ending with 1, in a square of the graph paper. The finished line, say for October, will look like: Species – Oct. 1 2 3 4 ... 30 31

Refer to the departure dates table in this fall's Highlights, and copy the names of the species from the upper half of the table onto one sheet and the names of the species from the lower half of the table onto the other sheet. Now each day during month that you observe one of these species, check it off (or, even better, jot down how many you saw) in

the column for that date. At the end of the reporting period, your chart will give you all the departure dates at a glance. I will try to have a set of blank master charts available for your club's representatives and your Regional Editor at the upcoming annual meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs. You may duplicate and share them freely with whomever wishes to participate in this ongoing departure dates project.

Remember that observations of birds remaining late at feeders or in the field may be discounted by your Regional Editor. You might want to use a special symbol, such as an asterisk or a star, to denote such observations. You should report both the last unexceptional date and any unusual dates to your Regional Editor, explain what makes the latter unusual and provide details for the observation. To alert yourself to such observations, and to remind yourself of when departures normally occur, you may find it useful to add a column for average departure dates between the column for species name and the column for the first day of the month. You can obtain the average dates from *The Kingbird*, Vol. 37:12-15; 1986. Also remember that you may observe some species which depart in early September for the last time in August. You should report those dates with your other departure dates.

Even if you find only a few of these species, your observations are valuable. The more observations your Regional editor has, the more certain we all are that the dates published in *The Kingbird* are accurate. And if you have other observations to share with members of the Federation, include them as well. The Regional reports can reflect only the contributed data of those birders who take the time to summarize and share their observation with others.

The Editor

Standard abbreviations: county names are shortened to their first four letters and appear in UPPERCASE letters; months are shortened to their first three letters; ! — details seen by Regional editor; ad — adult; arr — arrival or first of season; I — Island; im — immature; *intro* — see introduction to report; j — juvenile; L — Lake; max — maximum; mob — multiple observers; NWR — National Wildlife Refuge; NYSARC — report to New York State Avian Records Committee; P — Park; Pd — Pond; ph — photographed; Pt — Point; Res — Reservoir; SP — State Park; spm s— pecimen; subad — subadult; T — Town of; Twn — township; WMA — Wildlife Management Area; y — young.