HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

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As usual, weather, both this season's and prior, played a dominant role in shaping our bird reports. This season brought a common pattern to most of the state. September temperatures were average to a bit cool and rainfall fell short of the norm again, prolonging an extended drought in several regions, particularly to the south and east. October, with the tail of Opal, the only hurricane of the season to impact the state, brought heavy rains, up to two times normal and more, across the state. Temperatures ran 3-5°F above average. Finally, November turned cold a week into the month and averaged 4-6°F below the long-term average. Snow fell in most regions, including Region 10, and surpassed the records in at least four upstate regions. The major impacts of the weather were a lack of wild food crops due to the heat and drought of summer and changes from the expected migration patterns due to the details of storm tracking and timing for this season. The former led to the quick departure of most fruit and berry eaters, the latter to few fallouts and sharp contrasts in perceptions of the hawk flight and of the passerine migration.

The major highlights of the season which will be addressed can be separated into data collection, flights, irruptions, patterns, the departure date tables, and rarities. Jumping right into data collection, we touch a topic under active consideration by your editors and many others in the Federation - How can we best gather and assemble your data to make it of use to future "students of ornithology"? We would appreciate input from any interested parties and hope to gather many for discussions at the next Federation meeting in Albany. If you scan the regional reports, you will find a wide spectrum of reporting, from just interesting observations or selected highlights to virtually a compendium of all of the reports submitted with some attempt to summarize in numbers items which might be compared year to year. You will also see the gamut from only the rarest records attributed to individual observers to virtually all records appended with observers' initials. In both cases, the first approach cited reflects most closely the former and current editorial "policy". What would you prefer?

Searching the regional reports, this season you will find: a summary of one of several ongoing seasonal censuses in Region 1; a lakewatch, a banding project, and a detailed local census effort in Region 2; lake and loon watches, a shorebird survey, and a major banding summary in Region 3; hawkwatches and a banding effort in Region 4; regular reservoir coverage in Region 6; goose neckband observations in Region 7; reports from an ongoing banding effort and hawkwatch data from Region 8; and hawkwatch tables in Regions 9 & 10. Many of these efforts carried out over many years begin to allow us to look for trends, though often it is hard to identify causes or even to separate trends from local perturbations due to weather pattern impacts on birds and/or birders.

Many birders eagerly await the flights of fall, large scale movements of major groups of species. We will now wander down the checklist looking at a selection of these. The movement of loons and grebes is typically tracked on the Great Lakes and the coast. It is interesting to note generally low counts there for both loon species, but a very high peak count for Red-throated Loon, exceeding that for Common Loon, at the lakewatch in Region 2. For the past several years, Region 3 has mounted a loon watch on Cayuga Lake and this year hit the jackpot with nearly 13,000 Common Loon for the season and state record highs of 3337 on 22 Nov and 3364 on 29 Nov. There were also high counts inland for Common Loon in Region 1 and Red-throated Loon in Region 7. Comments on the waterfowl movement are dominated by notes of low numbers and by holes where there was no data interesting enough to report. Focusing on the positive we find: good Snow Goose movements in many Regions, with a record high 10-13,000 noted in Region 7, accompanied by an imm. Ross's Goose; a good Gadwall count in Region 6, record early Eurasian Wigeon (actually a summer date 13 Aug) in Region 10, good reports for Ring-necked Duck, a great movement of Common Eider off Region 10; good inland counts for Black Scoter in Regions 4 & 8, and Ruddy Duck more widespread and numerous than usual. In addition to the many species with poor counts, the major negative is the continued spread in occurrence and breeding of Mute Swan. The fall hawk flight was generally considered good at the inland watches of Regions 4 & 9, but poor on Long Island. Good news included good counts and late departure dates for Turkey Vulture and Osprey, high counts for Bald Eagle, including many reports - max six - from Central Park, record highs for Red-tailed Hawk at the

Franklin Mt. Hawkwatch in Region 4, very high Golden Eagle numbers, with a state record high 25 at Franklin Mt. on 9 Nov, and increasing numbers for both Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. On the negative side were low totals for Broad-winged Hawk and low Am. Kestrel tallies at the beach watches in Region 10. The shorebird passage was again generally dismal, but with a few comments about decent species variety. The reasons suggested range from the drought leaving bone-dry depressions in place of pools with muddy edges early in the season to water levels too high later in the season. The net effect was very low numbers reported for virtually all of the commoner species everywhere. Yet, there were bright spots, including state record highs of five for Am. Avocet in Region 10, later topped by six in Region 9 (same birds?), a passing flock of 50+ Hudsonian Godwit in Region 2, 80 Purple Sandpiper in Region 9, Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Regions 2, 5, 9, & 10, and Ruff in Region 8. Next, gulls as a "flight" may be a stretch, but they are eagerly awaited and studied at the "Gull Capital of the World" at Niagara Falls, and this was a banner year. You really should study the Region 1 report for the full impact, but, in summary, a record high 14 species was tallied on 25 Nov and rarities included Laughing, Franklin's, California, Thayer's, Ross', and several Sabine's over an extended period. Elsewhere, above average numbers of jaegers are noted in the Region 10 report; Lesser Black-backed Gull exploded, with reports from seven Regions, 12+ reports from Region 10 alone, and a max of eight in Region 1; and Black-legged Kittiwake counts were good in the Lake Ontario Regions. The tern passage is highlighted by extremely rare Least Tern reports from Regions 1 & 2; a Bridled Tern in Region 10; and late Black Tern reports from Regions 1 & 7. Many watch for the fall movement of Common Nighthawk in late August and early September, but peak numbers were again disturbingly low.

The passerine flight may well be the most highly anticipated. The general picture was again one of reduced numbers, very few days of fallouts, and sad comments from veteran observers, such as found in the Region 5 report. However, there were bright spots in the picture, particularly at banding stations in Regions 3, 4, & 8. These included some good counts and excellent banding totals for some species over a protracted period. Region 10 noted very high Tree Swallow counts of 10,000 and 20,000, the only really high swallow numbers reported. In general, thrush numbers were very poor, possibly affected by the poor

fruit and berry crop, with positives a one day total of 11 Gray-cheeked Thrush in Region 2; good Swainson's Thrush counts in Regions 4 & 8 and a record late departure of 18 Nov in Region 6; and very high Hermit Thrush numbers in Regions 4, 8, & 10. Among the vireos, we had two, rare for the Region, White-eyed Vireo banded in Region 2; very low numbers for Warbling Vireo; Philadelphia Vireo widespread, numerous, and late compared with the typical fall; and good Red-eyed Vireo counts from Regions 4 & 8. The warbler family provided fair variety, but generally disturbing news in numbers reported. Flagged as particularly poor in at least a few Regions were Tennessee, Cape May, Black-throated Green, and Black-and-white warblers, American Redstart, N.Waterthrush, and Ovenbird. Positives for the season included, Orange-crowned Warbler in seven Regions, N. Parula numbers, Black-throated Green Warbler counts in Regions 1 & 8, Prairie Warbler in Regions 2, 3, 4, & 8, Palm Warbler across the state, but particularly in Region 7; and Connecticut Warbler in seven Regions, with at least 13 total reports. Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak were both scarce. The sparrow scene is again one of low numbers, but with bright spots, including a good fall for Fox Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco locally abundant, late dates for Chipping Sparrow in five Regions, Grasshopper Sparrow in Regions 9 & 10, Savannah Sparrow feeding young on the state record late date of 10 Sep in Region 7 and lingering to Nov there, and many rarities to be covered later. The highlight of the blackbird group is the estimate of over 1,000,000 Red-winged Blackbird roosting in the Montezuma NWR marshes in Region 3.

The final flight group provides a lead into the irruptives. It was a great fall for irruptives in general and winter finches led the way with Pine Grosbeak and Common Redpoll moving into most regions. Crossbill reports were more scattered and numbers were smaller, as was the case for Pine Siskin and Evening Grosbeak. In many regions, the lack of wild food resulted in these birds moving on by season's end. Hoary Redpoll was recorded with the Common Redpoll only in Region 2. Other irruptive movements this fall included a weak push of Rough-legged Hawk, a few Snowy Owl reports from Regions 4, 5, 6, & 7, Black-capped Chickadee in Regions 8 & 9, Red-breasted Nuthatch in most Regions; Bohemian Waxwing in seven Regions, including good counts and state record early arrival dates in Region 7; and one of the **largest ever movements** of **N. Shrike**, touching all Regions, with a single day

max of ten reported in Region 5 on 19 Nov.

The topic of patterns of movement deserves some comment and reflection as we try to assess seasons with a strong component of bird migration. This fall we see phenomena such as the huge Common Loon passage in Region 3, but relatively poor totals on Lake Ontario and no really high coastal counts reported, the inland hawkwatches with exciting times, while, with no NW winds to speak of, the beaches were way off in numbers. However, buteos rarely seen at the beach watches weretallied there, along with rarely observed woodland species, and as is often the case, widely disparate views of the passerine migration from adjacent Regions. There is so much impact on local movements of birds due to the influence of food availability and weather in the current and preceding seasons that we need to use great care and possibly even wait to see an even broader picture - such as presented in *(Audubon Field Notes)*- before drawing strong conclusions.

The departure date tables (Pages 98-99) provide another means to try to summarize and assess the season. I remain somewhat discouraged in attempts to draw conclusions from this source due to the lack of uniformity and continuity in reporting of the dates. Possibly this will improve over time. In this season it was noted at the calculation stage that for all Regions, the 1961 - 1995 average was later than the similar averages for the 1986 - 1995 period for which we have focused on the data. For most Regions, departures averaged later this year than the recent 10-year baseline; Regions 2 & 6 were exceptions. The Advance column shows very large differences among Regions, some real, some driven by local decisions to include or ignore either very early or very late apparent "departure" dates.

Departure Dates Seasonality and Advance

Region	Species Reported	Seasonality vs 1986-1995	Seasonality vs 1961-1995	Advance (Days)
Region 1	60	2.49	0.54	5.26
Region 2	62	-1.54	-4.22	0.64
Region 3	60	4.07	2.24	2.58
Region 4	52	3.72	1.41	-4.36
Region 5	60	2.63	-2.06	1.68
Region 6	53	-2.44	-2.71	-9.06
Region 7	58	4.88	3.74	-9.94
Region 8	57	1.45	-0.22	-2.12
Region 9	39	5.11	2.02	5.53
Region 10	56	3.38	-2.14	9.83

Seasonality measures the average difference (in days) between this year's departure and the long-term average dates for the same Region. This season two values are given, one versus the average overall data going back through the 1961 issue of ***The Kingbird***, the other relative to just the data gathered over the past ten years of compiling this table. ***Advance*** measures the average difference between this year's departure dates in a given Region and the departure dates averaged over all ten Regions. Negative values mean this this year's number is early compared with the overall number.

The season was favored with a good selection of rarities appearing in nearly all Regions. Some of the best were: Region 1 - Pacific Loon, N. Gannet, Cattle Egret, Gyrfalcon, California Gull, Ross' Gull, Sabine's Gull, Least Tern, Boreal Owl, and Summer Tanager; Region 2 - Western Grebe, N.Gannet, Great Cormorant, Clay-colored Sparrow; Region 3 - Eurasian Wigeon, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Brewer's Blackbird; Region 4 - "Oregon" Junco; Region 5 - Black Vulture; Region 6 - Lesser Black-backed Gull Region; 7 - Ross' Goose, Gyrfalcon, Western Sandpiper; Region 8 - Ruff and a Regional first Sabine's Gull; Region 9 - Eared Grebe, N.Gannet, Eurasian Wigeon, King Eider, Am. Avocet, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Black Skimmer, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel; Region 10 - Magnificent Frigatebird, Bridled Tern, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Northern Wheatear, Western Tanager, LeConte's Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and a large number of lesser lights rare elsewhere in the state, but annual there. From this list, it is hard to choose a B.O.T.S., but the mantle this season falls on the Golden-crowned Sparrow in Region 10.

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