

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON 1996

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Overall the fall season was rated bland by most reporters, yet the event of the season in most Regions was driven by the passage of one or both of Hurricanes Edouard and Fran or the arrival of a major storm around 8 November, which produced widespread flooding and was in turn followed by the onset of winter and heavy snowfalls in some Regions. Looking at the weather in more detail, it was quite similar across the state, with few early fronts to drop migrants for viewing. Temperatures were average in September and October and COLD, 5-6°F below normal, in November. First frost dates were average to late in all Regions noting them. Precipitation was heavy in September in most Regions, particularly those touched by the hurricanes. October was closer to normal and more variable across the state. November was wet, with the major storm bringing record rainfalls to areas south and east, but totals at average or below to the north and west. Passerine fallouts were specifically noted for mid September in Regions 3 & 10 and for 25-26 October in Region 10. Elsewhere, they were flagged as poor, though both Regions 3 & 8 reported high counts of nocturnal migrants in September and October.

The biggest story of the season was the effects of the passage of Hurricanes Edouard and Fran. The former producing little birding news, the latter resulting in lots of fallout, particularly to the west. These events are well documented in the Region 1 & 10 reports, highly recommended reading, with Willie D'Anna of Region 1 providing additional context by including birds from nearby Ontario which may or may not have entered New York airspace, lacking detailed written notes for some. Fran moved rapidly west and north to Lake Erie just west of Buffalo on 7 September, then swung northeast back to the coast over the next several days as a tropical depression. It deposited many Black-capped Petrels in Lake Erie, with at least 15 specimens picked up dead along the north shore in Ontario within 40 miles west of Buffalo over the next three weeks. At least seven were detailed within Region 1 from 12 to 21 September and additional individuals were sighted in Regions 2 & 5 on 23 & 12 September, respectively. Several of these were brought in for rehabilitation; none survived to release. The storm also brought Long-tailed Jaeger to Regions 1 & 10; Laughing Gull to Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, & 10; Sabine's Gull to Region 1; Sandwich Tern to Region 10; and Sooty Tern to Regions 1, 2, 6, & 10. Additional effects probably not directly related to the hurricane, but associated with the arrival of any storm from the east at that date period were numbers of

shorebirds in Regions 1, 3, & 5. Hudsonian Godwit in five Regions, and good numbers of jaegers on the Great Lakes.

The Regional reports also include summaries from a substantial number of watches and special studies, including: hawkwatch data from Regions 4, 6, 8, & 10; lakewatches in Regions 1 & 3; an annual fall census in Region 1; banding station data from Regions 2, 3, & 8; and a detailed warbler count in Region 2, a shorebird survey in Region 3, and a Snow Goose collar study effort in Region 7. Each of these provide both interesting reading and population data.

Continuing the search for highlights, it is notable that much of this fall's commentary and many of the standout records were related to waterbirds, including about 69 of 87 citations of rarities. Record high counts, relative to Bull's *Birds of New York State* (1974), include: four Am. White Pelicans in Region 10; 1130 Double-crested Cormorants in Region 1; 2500 Tundra Swans in Region 1; 2000 Ring-necked Ducks in Region 8; 72 White-rumped Sandpipers in Region 3; 16 Black-legged Kittiwakes in Region 2; an unprecedented 18,000 Common Terns at Niagara Falls in Region 1 on 8 September; and 600+ Black Skimmers in Region 10. Additional good waterbird counts include: 3500 Am. Coot in Region 1; 500 Greater Yellowlegs in Region 10; and five Buff-breasted Sandpipers in Region 3. Jaegers produced another group of noteworthy records, with sightings in Regions 1, 2, 5, & 10, including: Pomarine Jaeger - 3 in Region 1, 40+ in Region 2, 9 in Region 5, and 9+ in Region 10; counts of over 20 Parasitic Jaegers in a day from Regions 2 & 5; and 139+ Parasitic Jaegers and over 260 total jaegers for the season from the Lake Ontario lakewatch in Region 2.

Scanning the waterbirds one more time, we note: the maximum of 3206 and total of 4373 for Common Loon past the Taughannock Park lakewatch in Region 3; good Pied-billed Grebe counts from five Regions; other grebes average to low: Snowy Egret in Regions 6 & 8; Cattle Egret in Regions 7 & 10; Tundra Swan early and in good numbers generally; Greater White-fronted Goose in five Regions; widespread good counts for fall of Snow Goose; Ross' Goose in Region 8; high counts for N. Shoveler in Region 1 and Gadwall in Region 6; good diver counts for Ring-necked Duck and Hooded Merganser in Region 8, Surf Scoter in Region 1, and Bufflehead and Com. Merganser in Region 4; and Ruddy Duck in eight Regions. On the negative side is note of the worst waterfowl and larid counts in 15 years from the Moses-Saunders Power Dam area of Region 6. Shorebirds were generally noted for poor numbers, especially Pectoral Sandpiper, Dunlin, and the dowitchers. The shorebird totals in the Region 3 report and a few good local notes for Regions 1, 5, 7, and 8 provide some positives. Gulls were notable mostly for the many rarities, including: the Laughing Gulls noted earlier; Franklin's, Little, Mew (including an individual identified as of subspecies *Larus canus canus*).

California, Thayer's, and Sabine's gulls in Region 1 and Sabine's Gull in Region 5. The white-winged gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gull were also well reported from many Regions. The usual array of seabirds, terns, and alcids was noted in Region 10, with Manx and Audubon's shearwater, Brown Pelican, a late date for Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Dovekie, and Black Guillemot of special note.

Moving through the rest of the checklist, we pause first at the hawks and pull in the owls as their nocturnal counterparts. Totals at the hawkwatches were off, with many species past the Franklin Mt. watch at 1/2 the expected number and Region 10 noting a long term drop in the small falcons passing the beach watches. Merlin totals were down generally for this fall. Rough-legged Hawks arrived at early dates in a few Regions, including a record early 19 September in Region 3. However, numbers were low, a first chance to note the general scarcity of all winter irruptive species this fall. Golden Eagle also arrived record early, also on 19 September, in Region 4. An exception to the missing irruptives was Snowy Owl, noted in most Regions and in good numbers in November. Other owl notes were the typical scattered few, with a N. Hawk Owl in Region 7 the only standout. The depressing totals and peaks for Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will are only partially offset by the good news of a cooperative Rufous Hummingbird at in feeder in Region 1 for a month, several October departure dates for Ruby-throated Hummingbird, good Red-headed Woodpecker counts in Regions 2 & 10, and a Three-toed Woodpecker in Region 3.

The passerine picture is generally one of low counts, with explanation sought in the few frontal passages to force groundings and in excellent wild food crops and bare ground resulting in no push to visit feeders. As usual, there are positives, including: good numbers of Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in several Regions; Acadian Flycatcher banded in Regions 3 & 4; note of high swallow numbers at Montezuma NWR in Region 3, including an estimate of 100,000+ Tree Swallows; Com. Raven and Fish Crow numbers and ranges increasing; a flock of 80 Bohemian Waxwings in Region 6 in spite of no invasion; Solitary Vireo record late inland in Region 5; good numbers of Blue-winged and Prairie warblers for fall; Orange-crowned Warbler record early on 3 September in Region 3; Cape May Warbler record late inland in Region 5; Connecticut Warbler in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, & 10; a count of 100+ Rose-breasted Grosbeaks in Region 3; six reports of Blue Grosbeak in Region 10; Am. Tree Sparrow record early on 28 September in Region 2; an unprecedented estimate of 10,000 White-throated Sparrows in one locale in Region 10; good counts of both sharp-tailed sparrow species in Region 10 and a good count for Boat-tailed Grackles also in Region 10. Unfortunately, there are also a substantial number of negatives which may suggest species to monitor more closely in future seasons, including: Carolina Wren still down after several bad winters; only a

single report for Sedge Wren, from Region 8; almost all comments on thrushes negative; Brown Thrasher numbers low; specific note of very poor Yellow-rumped Warbler counts, except for one note from Region 3; few Scarlet Tanagers; sparrow numbers generally off in most Regions; most blackbird counts relatively poor; and more news of House Finches with eye disease, including now Region 7. The lack of invasions by irruptive species is not really a negative, just a fact for this year, but nearly all stayed away, with no major chickadee or Red-breasted Nuthatch movements, only a faint echo of last year's N. Shrike invasion, and almost no winter finches.

The departure date tables are another source of potential interesting information. Over all species and Regions, this fall's dates averaged late relative to both last year and the 11-year average for which we have kept comparable data. From the summary table below you will note from Seasonality that Region by Region all were late relative to their 11-year averages, except for Region 6, where few observers led to only a small sampling of dates being reported. The column Advance shows a typical pattern for departure across the state, again except for Region 6 and possibly for the magnitude of lateness for Region 2. Comparing the last two columns in the full departure date table (at the end of this issue), species by species, you will note the preponderance of late departures this fall, with Spotted Sandpiper, Chimney Swift, Barn Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Am. Redstart, and White-crowned Sparrow significantly late. Notably early departures are for Osprey, Broad-winged Hawk, and Pectoral Sandpiper. I have no idea what these observations mean relative to populations. Several of the species are ones of some concern, others are not. There will be some influence on the numbers due to missing data for some species in many Regions and all from Region 9.

Departure Dates Seasonality and Advance			
Region	Species Reported	Seasonality vs 1986-1996	Advance (Days)
Region 1	60	0.38	4.85
Region 2	62	4.28	8.68
Region 3	61	0.99	1.50
Region 4	55	0.45	-5.32
Region 5	60	3.08	4.19
Region 6	33	-8.88	-14.61
Region 7	55	3.96	-8.95
Region 8	58	3.96	1.28
Region 9	-	-	-
Region 10	53	1.90	10.10

Seasonality measures the average difference (in days) between this year's departure and the long-term average dates for the same region. *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 year's number is early compared with the overall number.

Finally, as noted earlier, there were numerous rarities observed this fall. It would be useful relative to a few of the recent newer or less well understood species added by recent splits to read carefully Sy Schiff's comments in the introduction to the Region 10 report. As often, there are too many rarities to cite all here, and many are already noted above, so my choices of the "best" by Region are: Region 1 - Black-capped Petrel, Long-tailed Jaeger, Mew Gull (*L.c.canus*), Sooty Tern, and Rufous Hummingbird; Region 2 - Black-capped Petrel, Sandhill Crane (3), Piping Plover, and Sooty Tern; Region 3 - Little Blue Heron, Three-toed Woodpecker, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow; Region 4 - hybrid Greater White-fronted Goose x Canada Goose and Acadian Flycatcher; Region 5 - Black-capped Petrel, Harlequin Duck, Am. Avocet (3), Sabine's Gull, and N. Wheatear; Region 6 - N. Gannet, Snowy Egret, Sooty Tern; Region 7 - Greater White-fronted Goose, N. Hawk Owl, and Western Tanager; Region 8 - Ross' Goose, Gray Kingbird, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow; and Region 10 - Manx Shearwater, Audubon's Shearwater, Am. White Pelican, Long-tailed Jaeger, Sandwich Tern, White-winged Dove, N. Wheatear, and Bell's Vireo. This list, with its many extreme rarities, presents a difficult choice, but the B.O.T.S Award goes to the many Black-capped Petrels blown far inland.

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