

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON 1997

WILLIE D'ANNA

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension, Niagara Falls NY 14304-4522

It was another delayed spring across the state. The effect was most noticeable on the May passerines, which some editors stated were up to two weeks late. The average temperature each month in every Region was below normal except perhaps Region 9, which had "near normal" temperatures. It was, indeed, a cold cold spring prompting Region 10 editor Sy Schiff to remark that there was "no spring to speak of". Precipitation was up in all Regions in March with more snow than normal in several, especially Regions 7 & 8. April followed with even colder temperatures, relative to averages, but was drier than normal everywhere except Region 4. May was exceptionally cold, as much as six degrees below average, with frequently adverse winds. Like last year, the migrants stayed bottled up to our south for long periods. When they finally made a push, numbers were not nearly as impressive as last year, which was, after all, exceptional. Some Regions experienced only minor concentrations but most had at least a couple of good days, notably 3-4 May in Region 9; 19, 24, and 31 May in Region 1; and the week of 19-26 May in Region 5.

Starting at the top of the checklist, the Red-throated Loon migration began early in Region 1 with reports from six Regions and good numbers in Region 5. Though short of last year's records, Red-necked Grebes again reached high numbers in Regions 1 & 2 and were also found in every other Region. A very rare Pacific Loon in Region 2 and Eared Grebe in Regions 2 & 10 were the best finds of the loon/grebe group. Two very successful pelagic trips bookended the season in Region 10. Among the many highlights were numbers of Northern Fulmar, Dovekie, Razorbill, and Atlantic Puffin as well as two South Polar Skuas, two Manx Shearwaters, an Arctic Tern, and all three jaegers. American White Pelican appears to be regular now with reports from Regions 1, 5, & 10. The Double-crested Cormorant expansion continues with a high count in Region 5 and early individuals in Region 7. In Region 1 the cormorants moved from an unsuccessful colony to a more productive site where they pose a threat to an important heronry. A Great Cormorant in Region 8 was a good find and a Magnificent Frigatebird in Region 10 must have been exhilarating to see. Down more than up of late, it was nice to see Least Bittern in seven Regions and more reports of American Bittern as well. A Great Blue Heron nestling in Region 1 was probably a record early date and, at the same colony, Great Egrets nested for the third straight year. All the "rare but regular" herons put in an appearance away from the coast this spring with a Little Blue Heron in Region 2, Cattle Egret in Regions 2 & 3, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in Regions 7 & 9, Glossy Ibis in Regions 5, 7, & 9, a *Plegadis* ibis species in Region 1, and a Tricolored Heron providing the second record for Region 5. Mute Swan has

spread from its Long Island stronghold to a record count for Region 1. A pair of Trumpeter Swans, undoubtedly spillovers from stock introduced into the province of Ontario in recent years, returned to their nest site in Region 6. One of the biggest stories this spring was the unprecedented numbers of Snow Geese in central New York, with counts of up to 100,000 in Regions 3 & 5 and lesser but still high numbers in Regions 4, 6, 7, & 8. Recent articles on the damage the exponentially increasing numbers of this species can do to the fragile arctic tundra presaged this event. Greater White-fronted Goose continued the recent trend of being regular with sightings in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 8. Is Ross' Goose next? They were found in Regions 3, 5, & 8 including an exceedingly rare blue morph reported in Region 8. Canvasback and Redhead eased recent concerns. Numbers of the former were up in Regions 1, 3, 4, & 5; the latter had high counts in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 5. Ring-necked Duck and Greater Scaup were also in good numbers with an impressive 15,000 of the latter in Region 6. The Common Eider concentration off Long Island continued through March and the state's only King Eiders were also in Region 10. Hooded Merganser was noted as abundant in Region 7, though average elsewhere. Other waterfowl highlights were Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 5, 7, & 9. Tufted Duck in Region 10, and Harlequin Duck in Region 2. A Barnacle Goose in Region 7 was found on too late a date to inspire confidence that it was a wild bird.

The hawkwatches on Lakes Ontario and Erie had dismal seasons. Turkey Vulture was an exception at the hawkwatches and on Long Island where an increase in spring sightings has taken place. The much rarer, but also increasing, Black Vulture was noted in Regions 2, 3, and 9, where a flock of six in Region 3 is unprecedented upstate. The other big black birds, Bald and Golden eagles, received favorable comments in several Regions with Golden's showing up in seven of them. Merlin and Peregrine Falcon continued the pace of recent years with multiple sightings in many Regions but note the nest failure for Peregrine in Region 1. Unusual hawks included Swainson's Hawk in Region 2 and Gyrfalcon in Regions 6 and, to a late date, in Region 1. Like Wood Ducks, female Wild Turkeys will sometimes "dump" their eggs in the nest of their own kind. In Region 4 one very confused bird chose the nest of a Ruffed Grouse instead. Speaking of confused, or maybe a better word is opportunistic, how about a Sandhill Crane at a feeder in Region 2! Now regular in spring, it was found in four Regions with the possibility of breeding raised in Region 2. The idea is not so far-fetched as they have bred in Ontario forty miles west of New York. Among the secretive rail family, a King Rail in Region 9 and a Black Rail in Region 10 were good finds. For those Regions with the habitat, it was an excellent season for shorebirds. There were high counts of both yellowlegs in Region 1, Short-billed Dowitcher and Common Snipe in Region 2, and at least 21 Wilson's Phalaropes statewide, most noted in Regions 1 & 2 and a pair returning to nesting territory in Region 7. Rare in spring were American Golden-Plover in Regions 1 & 2, Stilt Sandpiper in

Region 1. and Western Sandpiper in Region 2. Rare at anytime were Ruff in Region 1, Hudsonian Godwit in Region 7, Wilson's Plover in Region 10, and an amazing Spotted Redshank in Region 2. Gulls also made positive news with high counts in Regions 1 & 10 and an excellent variety in Regions 2 & 10. Thayer's Gull was reported in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 10. Iceland in seven Regions. Glaucous Gull in eight, and Little Gull in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 10. A Black-headed Gull in Region 2 and Laughing Gulls in Regions 2 & 3 were rare but a Lesser Black-backed Gull of the *Larus fuscus intermedius* subspecies in Region 10 was exceptional. The expected *L. f. graellsii*, was found in Regions 1, 2, 3, 8, and, with a probable state record count, in Region 10. Among the terns, Caspian Tern continues to surge with high counts in Regions 1, 2, & 5.

Most birders felt the migration was late to very late. However, the Region 3 & 8 editors, considering the date table for their own Regions, stated that it was average and early, respectively. Read editor Steve Kelling's suggestion for what may be a better indicator of the migration than arrival dates. Considering the state as a whole, the date table did fit the expectations, at least for the late April and May migrants. Among this subgroup there were 19 species that were significantly late, statistically (> 2 standard deviations), and none that were early. On the other hand, those birds that migrate in March and the first three weeks of April had eight species that were significantly early and only three that were late. Of interest are the species which were recorded early in three or more Regions. These were Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Brown Thrasher, Pine Warbler, Palm Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow, all early to mid-April migrants. A few species reportedly arrived earlier than the state record or nearly so. Without details, however, these data only serve to pollute the entire database. Details for these "less exciting" reports are just as important as for a rarity.

Except for the regular Snowy Owl, none of the northern owls were found this spring. Short-eared Owls staged what was termed "an invasion" in Region 6, with nesting there and possibly also in Regions 2 & 7. Common Nighthawk continued scarce but high numbers of Chimney Swift were found in Regions 1, 2, & 4 and an exceptionally early migrant in Region 5. Few trends were noted for the woodpeckers but a Three-toed Woodpecker in northernmost New York in Region 7 is always a great find.

Like the other May migrants, most of the flycatchers were late. Upstate, there was a big push of *Empidonax* species near the end of the month resulting in a spectacular 31 Yellow-bellied Flycatchers banded on 29 May in Region 2, possibly a state record. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Region 1 and another in Region 9 were the rarest of this group. Among the swallows there were high counts of Bank and Barn swallows in Region 1, Tree in Region 5, and Cliff Swallow in Regions 6 & 8. Common Raven continues to gain ground in the state with sightings in every Region except Region 10. The only sighting of Fish Crow away from breeding areas was in Region 2. Among a couple of

southern species. Tufted Titmouse was holding its own or increasing but Carolina Wren was still down in most Regions with a positive note only from Region 3. A Sedge Wren in Region 5 was a rarely found migrant but another on territory was early, especially considering the late season. Eastern Bluebird was up in Regions 3, 6, & 8 and down in Region 4. In most Regions this species hardly elicits comment anymore, possibly because it has such a solid footing now. Among the thrushes, Wood Thrush was of concern again in Regions 4 & 6 and, with fewer numbers in the state, a migrant Bicknell's Thrush was found in Region 5. Much easier to identify, a Varied Thrush was a highlight in Region 2. A high count of Cedar Waxwing was made in Region 3 and a late but strong movement of Bohemian Waxwings was noted in Region 7. One Loggerhead Shrike in Region 7 is about average now for spring. Another shrike in Region 8 could not be identified to species though the date suggests Loggerhead.

A count of 120 Warbling Vireos in Region 6 is a phenomenal indicator of how adverse weather can lead to spectacular concentrations. A Bell's Vireo in Region 2 was one of very few ever for the state. The impression of the eagerly anticipated warbler migration was mixed across the state. Regions 2, 7, & 10 felt it was good. Regions 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, & 9 had disappointing seasons. However, when it was over, species diversity had been quite good. Most agreed, the bulk of the warblers arrived very late. The following uncommon warblers were found in better than average numbers: "Brewster's", "Lawrence's", Orange-crowned, Worm-eating, Kentucky, Connecticut, Yellow-breasted Chat, Hooded, and Cerulean. Prairie, Palm, and Yellow-rumped warblers were up this spring in several Regions but Tennessee Warbler was of concern in Regions 1, 2, & 4. Rare possible breeders, staying late in appropriate habitat, included Wilson's Warbler in Region 7 and Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 9. A Worm-eating Warbler on 5 April in Region 2 was state-record early.

With the cold May reducing insect activity, many birds utilized feeding stations with impressive counts of Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Region 1. Other uncommon feeder birds this spring included Baltimore and Orchard orioles, Indigo Bunting, Scarlet Tanager, and Black-throated Blue Warbler. The Indigo Bunting that overwintered in Region 9 was followed by another in that Region on 15 Mar, truly remarkable. Impressive numbers of Scarlet Tanagers were noted in Region 10, with Summer Tanagers in Regions 2 & 9. Dickcissels in Regions 1 & 10 were unusual. Vesper Sparrow was scarce in Regions 2, 4, & 6 but two other grassland sparrows, Grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows, were found in numbers at Fort Drum in Region 6. High sparrow counts included Chipping Sparrow and Song Sparrow in Region 5, White-crowned Sparrow in Regions 2 & 5, and an incredible 60 Lincoln's Sparrows in Region 2. Rare were Clay-colored Sparrow in Regions 2 & 8, LeConte's Sparrow in Region 5, and "Oregon" Junco in Regions 1, 5, & 6 but

the most bizarre sparrow sighting would have to be the hybrid White-throated Sparrow X Dark-eyed Junco found in Region 7. While quite rare, that hybrid combination is not unprecedented. Among the rare blackbirds, there was only one Brewer's Blackbird and no Yellow-headed Blackbirds this spring. Orchard Orioles were widespread with one in Region 7 the most unusual. Purple Finch continued in high numbers following the winter and Red Crossbills were noted in six Regions with two subspecies reported in Region 7. White-winged Crossbills were found in four Regions but only a single Common Redpoll, in Region 6, was noted. Outside the Adirondacks, Evening Grosbeak was very scarce and Pine Siskin only slightly more numerous, bringing to a close another disappointing finch season.

The many rarities of this spring have been sprinkled throughout the text above. My choice for the Bird of the Season is a toss-up between the Spotted Redshank in Region 2, only the fourth state record with the first two records almost certainly involving the same individual, and the *L. f. intermedius* subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gull in Region 10. I wonder if anyone guessed I might choose a gull?

As always, interesting behavior was noted in several Regions. Among the items that caught my eye were a Northern Shrike carrying a prey species, Red Crossbill, which is rare in most of the state, the near-death experience of a Red-winged Blackbird in Region 6, and the unusual tastes of a Baltimore Oriole in Region 4 and several species in Region 1. Read on to get the full stories.

=

Departure Dates Seasonality and Advance			
	Species	Seasonality	Advance
Region	Reported	vs 1987-1997	(Days)
1	92	1.08	-1.59
2	93	0.04	-4.50
3	89	0.49	-2.11
4	87	1.38	3.02
5	92	-0.10	-2.61
6	88	-0.65	4.77
7	90	2.25	7.75
8	89	-2.45	-2.08
9	82	2.21	0.15
10	79	1.23	-2.79