

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON 1998

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Weather Effects

It was the second consecutive season of well above-average warmth, which in turn had a tremendous impact upon the birds. Unfortunately, unlike the winter, the effect was one that most birders would rather forget about.

Often, in a given season, it is difficult to get a sense that the weather and/or the birds showed much correlation across the state. This spring, like the winter before it, the opposite was true. The consistent emphasis of the Regional editors was that it was very warm, vegetation was two weeks early, and there were no concentrations of birds. While in most Regions, birders struggled to see warblers and other late season migrants through the dense foliage, in Region 6 it was easier because of the winter's ice storm which knocked down tree branches and tree tops, opening up the canopy.

March continued the mild pattern of February, allowing waterfowl to move into the state and then right on through as open conditions were prevalent farther north as well. No concentrations were noted. March cooled considerably and, as a result, many Regions had their snowiest month of the winter. The snow was short-lived, however, as record warmth lifted temperatures into the 80s by month's end throughout most of the state. Several record and near record early arrivals were reported during and shortly after this period. Two of the best of these were an Eastern Kingbird on 31 March in Region 3 and a Palm Warbler on 27 March in Region 9.

April was unusual in that there was no snow. A few more record early arrivals were reported but weather systems over the state and to the south conspired to keep the neotropical migrants from making an early push before month's end. Despite a warm start to May, it was not until the 13th that conditions allowed for unhindered migration. Unfortunately, there was nothing now to stop the birds and produce the fallouts birders crave. Clear weather, tail winds, lush foliage and insect food farther north kept the birds right on moving. The only concentrations noted were brief and very localized.

Arrival Date Tables

Can the data in the tables be explained by the weather? To a large degree, I believe that it can be. Starting with the March waterbird arrivals, of which there are eight species, note that five arrived significantly early (greater than two standard deviations) and that all of these arrived during the mild weather before the 21-22 March snowstorm. This storm may be what kept the other three species, which have 11-year average arrival dates after 22 March, from also being early.

In all, 15 species with average arrival dates before 27 April were significantly early and none were late. Incredibly, after that date, there was only one significantly early arrival and 11 species were late. On the face of it, with May being the warmest of the three months relative to averages, this division seems peculiar. However, weather systems to the south probably are what kept the May birds from pushing northward sooner.

One species was early in every Region and exceptionally early on average – Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Two species were late in every Region and exceptionally late on average – Bay-breasted and Canada warblers.

Trends

Counts of 1000 or more Snow Geese were made in Regions 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, & 8. In a remarkable turnaround, this species now approaches Canada Goose in number in some Regions. Other species still on the increase include Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon, with new breeding locations added for both. Black Vulture was found in Regions 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, & 10 including a return to last year's nest site in Region 9. [Documentation of Black Vulture breeding in Region 9 last year has been reported to NYSARC. If accepted by NYSARC the species will be added to the breeding birds of NY State. E. Levine] Turkey Vulture set a seasonal record for the Ripley hawkwatch in Region 1 while Osprey shattered the record at Derby Hill in Region 5. Sandhill Cranes are not only regular now but many more individuals are being sighted, including a record single flock count of 11 in Region 2. It was also found in Regions 1, 5, & 6. Increasing at about the same rate, though from a very different source, the introduced Trumpeter Swan was found in groups of nine and eight in Regions 2 & 6, respectively. Other species, mentioned in at least two Regions for continuing upward trends, were Wild Turkey (now even in New York City), Fish Crow, and Common Raven.

American Kestrel has been a source of concern, expressed again by a record low total at Derby Hill. Contradictorily, Ripley had a record high count, though the history of this watch is much shorter. Black Tern numbers continue discouragingly low. Of the troubled neotropical migrant species, the spot-breasted thrushes (Veery, Wood, Swainson's, Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's thrushes) continue to elicit the most worrisome comments. House Finch numbers remain low as it attempts to rebound from conjunctivitis.

Winter Finches

After their strong winter showing, the winter finches were widespread again this season, providing one of the few highlights. Pine Grosbeaks were found in Regions 2, 4, & 5. Common Redpolls were located in all Regions except Region 10, Pine Siskin in all but Regions 2 & 10, and Evening Grosbeak in all but Region 2. The rare Hoary Redpoll was found in Regions 2, 5, & 7. The stars,

though, were the crossbills. Red was found in every Region except 4 & 6 while White-winged showed up in every Region.

[RegRepEd: This paragraph highlights a problem faced by all Season's Highlights editors. Their comments are merely analyses of the Regional Reports, which are themselves only highlights. Usually the problem lies with species which are common, thus not highlights in Region 10, but of special interest over the rest of the state. It may look like they were missed in Region 10. Here Pine Siskin and Evening Grosbeak are typical along the Lake Ontario shore in late May, thus not highlights in Region 2 and appear as misses to a regional report summary. There is no simple solution to this problem. RS]

Rarities

As in any spring, some exciting birds were found. Multiple Region rarities included Eared Grebe in Regions 1, 3, 5, & 9; American White Pelican in Regions 1 & 6; Great Cormorant in Regions 2, 7, 8, & 9; Cattle Egret in Regions 6 & 9; Greater White-fronted Goose in Regions 2, 5, & 8; Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 1, 2, & 3; Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 3, 5, & 10; Swainson's Hawk in Regions 1, 2, & 5, all at or near established hawkwatches; Thayer's Gull in Regions 2 & 10; Yellow-throated Warbler in Regions 1 and 10 and returning to last summer's site in Region 9; Summer Tanager in Regions 1 & 9 and a first for Region 6; Blue Grosbeak in Regions 8, 9, & 10; and Yellow-headed Blackbird in Regions 1 & 7.

Other good finds were: in Region 2, Tricolored Heron, a first Regional Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow; in Region 3, two California Gulls, probably continuing from winter, and a very late Gyrfalcon; in Region 5, Harlequin Duck, Laughing Gull, and a Black-legged Kittiwake, which possibly over-wintered on Lake Ontario; in Region 7, Ross's Goose; in Region 8, Laughing Gull and Harris's Sparrow; in Region 9, King Rail; and in Region 10, Leach's Storm-Petrel, "Black" Brant continuing from winter, "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal, Purple Gallinule (later died), American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Red Phalarope, "Pink-sided" Junco, and Dickcissel.

Virtually all of these sightings warrant verification, especially some of the more difficult to identify species and subspecies. I have made no attempt to "weed out" sightings, since most reports are included by the Regional Editors without indicating whether or not adequate documentation was provided.

Sometimes, all it takes is one good bird to make the most forgettable of seasons memorable. This spring, that one bird was a male Lazuli Bunting, delighting many at a feeding station in Region 1 to become the first record of the species for New York State.

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