

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON 1998

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WEATHER EFFECTS

Fall 1998 was warm and dry fairly consistently throughout the state, though Regions 6 & 7 had several bouts of highly changeable weather. Unlike some autumns there was very little snow during the season and what did fall melted quickly. Labor Day and Veteran's Day brought the fiercest weather of the period. The Labor Day storm is described in Region 5, but it also hit parts of Regions 1 & 2 near Lake Ontario causing comparable damage. Though a few dead American Robins, Blue Jays, and Mourning Doves were found in Region 5 from this event, it was the Veteran's Day storm that had the most noticeable effect upon the birds. This event could also be called the Franklin's Gull storm, for following its passage these birds rained down throughout the midwest and northeast. This gull is regular only on the Niagara River in Region 1, but the storm blew them into Regions 2, 5, & 10 as well. Still, the numbers found in New York paled in comparison to the totals found on Lakes Michigan, Erie, and Ontario and even in New Jersey (Lehman 1998).

DATE TABLES

A couple of Regional Editors felt that birds generally departed earlier than usual, despite the mild season. As a group the warblers conformed to this impression, with nearly all species leaving early and four significantly so (greater than two standard deviations). On the other hand six of eight shorebirds stayed significantly late. This can probably be explained by the greater amount of available habitat (i.e. mud flats and muddy margins) this season, caused by the dry weather after July in many Regions. Some years in parts of the state, there simply is not enough habitat to lure these birds to drop in, much less to stay late.

As the data set gets larger, we will see fewer Regional record dates. This season there were only four species that were record late in two or more Regions - Pectoral Sandpiper, Yellow-throated Vireo, Tree Swallow, and Nashville Warbler.

TRENDS

Expanding numbers of Snow Geese continue to elicit comment, especially in the more easterly Regions, though even Region 1 weighed in with a record-early arrival. Of the Regions sending in reports, all but Region 6 reported both Merlin and Peregrine Falcon, most with multiple sightings. A decade ago this would have been unheard of, but now it is hardly surprising. Merlins almost equaled American Kestrels at the Fire Island Hawkwatch in Region 10, a reflection of the former's health in the east as well as the latter's problems. As the forest cover has increased this century, so have the fortunes of the Ruffed Grouse. To this writer, who has only ever recorded one in his home county and who sees them only occasionally where they are common, reports of 50+ individuals in Region 5 seem incredible. Along with high numbers found in Region 6, this would seem to indicate that Ruffed Grouse has reached a peak in its population cycle in these Regions. It really was not that long ago that Lesser Black-backed Gull was a great rarity. This season it showed up in every Region that reported except the two northernmost. In some of those Regions it is no longer considered rare. There has been serious concern over the downward trend shown by Black Terns in recent years. That makes the count of 340 in Region 10 a big surprise, as this is the largest coastal count since the early 70's. Odds are that this count was an anomaly, but at least it gives us some hope.

HIGH COUNTS

1908 Red-throated Loons at the Hamlin Beach Lakewatch is another outstanding one-day count from that site. And how does one find 16 American Bitterns in the fall in Region 2? It is not like when they are calling in the spring! Multi-thousand counts of Snow Geese are becoming a regular occurrence. This season, Regions 7, 8, & 10 were in that category. Ruddy Duck numbers surged to an impressive 1400 in Region 1 and 500 in Region 9. 68 Black Vultures at the Mount Peter Hawkwatch in Region 9 is a remarkable seasonal total. Oddly, despite its increased status in Region 9, it remains a fine rarity in the rest of the state, as evidenced by a boldfaced report of one in Region 10. 150 Common Snipe in Region 3 matches the fall maximum listed in *Bulls Birds of New York State* (Marcotte 1998). Though inland birders may not be impressed, a count of 25 Caspian Terns in Region 10 is a coastal record. 20,000 Tree Swallows at the Montezuma NWR in Region 3, while not a record, is an impressive sight nonetheless.

FURTHER READING

As always, some special projects are found in the reports, which add their particular piece of important data to the birding puzzle. Look for results of the October Count in Region 1, a warbler study and the Hamlin Beach Lakewatch in Region 2, and banding data from Region 3. Hawkwatch results are given in the reports from Regions 8, 9, & 10.

RARITIES

Fall is the time when young birds, unsure of their migration route, stray from the time honored pathways to surprise and gratify some lucky and/or skilled birder. This season exemplified that axiom with the discovery of many exceptional rarities. In the discussion that follows, citations are from *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Though it is sad that Loggerhead Shrikes are now very rare, it is that same status that makes them such a pleasant surprise when they do appear. This season Regions 1 & 9 hosted the species. A young Purple Gallinule in Region 2 provided the sixth inland record and only the fourth immature (DiCostanzo 1998). Best of all, it was photographed at close range. Three American White Pelicans in Region 3 arrived in time for many of the Federation members at the Annual Meeting in Rochester to make a relatively short foray to see them. Although no Regional report was received from Region 4, there is an account of the Anna's Hummingbird there, a first state record which already appeared in *The Kingbird* (Grosek 1998). In Region 5 a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was an excellent autumn find while a Townsend's Solitaire in Region 6 would be only the seventh state record (Brock 1998). With no ocean and no Great Lake, Region 7 still managed a Northern Gannet, a first Regional record. In addition Region 7 added a Ross's Goose and a Cinnamon Teal. There have been only five to seven records of birds believed to be wild of the latter species (Sherony 1998). A Pacific Loon in Region 8 was carefully studied and, if accepted by NYSARC, will provide one of very few autumn records. As usual Region 10 weighed in with more than their share of remarkable sightings including a Swainson's Hawk (photographed), the Broad-billed Sandpiper staying over from the summer season, a Long-billed Curlew (only two records since 1938 (Feustel 1998)), and two Cave Swallows which were photographed, providing only the second record for the state. All of these sightings are subject to review by NYSARC and it is encouraging to note

that verification reports and/or photographs were submitted for most of them. Many other great rarities not mentioned here are laced through the Regional reports.

Every Region has their favorite birding locations or hotspots that always seem to draw in a rarity or two. This season the Chezy Riverlands in Clinton County in Region 7 was fantastically productive. Among the great finds there were Northern Gannet, Greater White-fronted Goose, Cinnamon Teal, American Avocet, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, and lesser lights Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Western, White-rumped, and Stilt sandpipers! Perhaps we need a new award - Hotspot of the Season. Clearly, the Chezy Riverlands would get my vote.

LITERATURE CITED

Grosek, R. J. 1998 Dec. Anna's Hummingbird in Binghamton, New York. *The Kingbird* 48(4):280.

Lehman P. 1998 Dec. South of the Border. *Birder's Journal* 7(6):292.