

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON 1999

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WEATHER EFFECTS

The summer was hot and dry. Save for portions of Region 6, drought conditions were prevalent throughout the state. To illustrate the uniformity of the dryness, we can look at the geographic extremities of the state. Westernmost Region 1 experienced its third driest summer on record, northernmost Region 7 its fifth driest summer ever, and southernmost Region 10 its two driest summer months ever (June and July). In addition to the lack of rain, all Regions were well above normal in temperature in June and July. Region 1 experienced its third warmest summer ever, Region 7 had its hottest June ever, and it was the hottest July on record in the normally hot Region 10. In much of the state the drought was alleviated somewhat in August but in central New York, it remained very dry.

Effects of the drought on plants and insects varied widely. For example, some Regional editors stated that fruit and berry crops did well while others reported a poor crop. In Region 7 it was felt that the poor berry crop led to several incidents of bears and raccoons raiding bird feeders. Similarly, some editors believed the drought greatly reduced insects with Region 6 editor Long citing the early departure of some aerial insectivore bird species as a result, while others felt that the effect upon insects was not great or at least not enough to harm most nesting species which rely on bugs to feed their young.

Obviously, the effects of weather on our nesting birds are very complicated. Many editors stated that our breeding species probably fared well. However, in a drought year such as this, negative effects may be less obvious than during cold wet summers which tend to cause more rapid and dramatic destruction.

Marsh breeders and shorebird migrants are highly susceptible to water level changes. In several Regions, marsh habitat dried up and mud flats filled in with vegetation, pushing those birds out. The state-endangered Black Tern may have been hurt the most by the drought. Numbers were low in Regions 1, 3, & 5. In addition its breeding season was described as dismal in Region 2 and poor at Perch River WMA in Region 6, a stronghold for the species.

BREEDING BIRDS

Our nesting species are the major focus of the season. For colonial waterbirds, it can be a good time to assess their populations and surveys were made in Regions 1, 7, & 9. Great Blue Herons and Black-crowned Night-Herons were cited for good or excellent seasons in Regions 1, 5, & 7. Great Egrets continue to prosper at the Region 1 colony but were scarce as summer visitors to Regions 3, 4, & 5. In Region 6, a count of 48 Great Egrets was very high though they were believed to be from a colony in nearby Quebec. Away from its breeding areas in coastal Region 10, the Glossy Ibis is an annual visitor upstate. This year it occurred in Regions 3, 5, & 8 and in Region 7 the species did more than just show up - it raised a family, providing the first non-coastal breeding record in New York!!

Another group of birds that get extra attention in summer is the raptors, particularly Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and Osprey. From all accounts they had another fine nesting season although Bald Eagles were cited as scarce in Region 4 where they do not breed. Osprey was a real highlight with the first nests of this century in Regions 2 & 9. They also bred at new sites in Regions 5 & 10 and did well at relatively new sites in Region 1. Merlin has been forcing its way into that elite raptor group with breeding records in recent years in the North Country. This season, Regions 5 & 8 had their first breeding records.

A couple of very rare state nesters were reported. Northern Shoveler adults were seen with young at the Region 1 waterfowl hotspot, the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant. During the Atlas there were only three confirmed breeding blocks for this species, one in Region 3 and two in Region 10. Slightly more unusual, the state's second Blue Grosbeak nest was located near Riverhead, Long Island (Birol, 1999). Five young made it to fledging.

NONBREEDING BIRDS

Western Sandpipers are always a rare treat in the spring, when in their breeding garb. This year there were seven at two sites in Region 2 on 1 Jun. This is an outstanding, though not a record, spring concentration. Comments on Common Nighthawks were generally negative, not only as breeders but as early fall migrants. One remarkable exception was a count of 932 in Region 8, one of the highest counts in the last two decades. Numbers of Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were again banded in early June

at Braddock Bay in Region 2. I find this active nervous bird to be a difficult one at which to get a good look. Perhaps that is why it seems to be more frequently encountered in mistnets.

Birds that occur out-of-season can sometimes be as exciting as the rarities discussed below. In this group were Red-necked Grebes in Regions 3 & 9, Brant in Region 2, Surf Scoter in Region 1, and a gorgeous very accommodating breeding-plumaged Red-throated Loon on the Niagara River in Region 1. We end this section with a first July New York record of Fox Sparrow, seen at Montezuma NWR in Region 3, the report thankfully accompanied by a detailed description.

MISCELLANEOUS

Finding rare birds is not just a matter of luck. Observer effort plays a big role. Birders working on a Big Year in Region 2 proved that by turning up multiple great rarities.

Things to be on the lookout for in the Regional reports are summer counts in Regions 3 & 9 and a pelagic summary in Region 10. In an attempt to extract more out of the reports sent to him, Region 3 Editor Ostrander analyzed Regional population trends. His caveats about interpreting the data are appropriate for any analysis of randomly collected data.

RARITIES

There were a number of exciting finds this summer. As usual at this season the shorebirds comprised a large percentage of the goodies. Pretty much annual now, American Avocets were found in Regions 1 & 10. Marbled Godwits in three Regions (2, 6, & 10) might almost be considered an invasion while Red-necked Phalaropes in Regions 2 & 3 are about as expected. Other highlights were Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Region 3, Willet in Region 5, Long-billed Dowitcher in Region 6, and Black-necked Stilt in Region 10.

Although not the best season for gulls, a few strays are found every summer. This year, Little Gulls were found in Regions 2, 6, & 10, Franklin's Gull in Region 8, Laughing Gull in Region 2, and Black-headed Gull in Region 10.

The best of the rest, starting with Region 1, included a Tricolored Heron and a second consecutive late spring Western Kingbird. Region 2

added Great Cormorant, a good summer find , a late spring Mississippi Kite, King Rail, and a Yellow-throated Warbler in good breeding habitat but apparently unmated, and two very rare Long-tailed Jaegers. Region 3 chimed in with a Tricolored Heron and an American White Pelican. Region 4 also had an American White Pelican as well as a Cattle Egret. A Three-toed Woodpecker was at the same location where last found in Region 5 and a fall migrant Loggerhead Shrike provided that Region's first since 1994. The Trumpeter Swans bred again at Perch River WMA in Region 6 and that area also hosted a Cattle Egret. Region 8 had their first summer Dickcissel in 25 years while Region 9 added a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, found during a breeding bird survey. As usual Region 10 had several scintillating finds, including their own Mississippi Kite, the earliest fall sighting ever of Yellow Rail, two Arctic Terns, yet another White-winged Dove, and a LeConte's Sparrow.

My choice for Bird of the Season (BOTS) was not an easy one. The Long-tailed Jaegers in Region 2, Mississippi Kites in Regions 2 & 10, and Arctic Terns and LeConte's Sparrow in Region 10 are all close seconds to the White-faced Storm-Petrels found on a pelagic trip to Hudson Canyon off Long Island. There are only six records of this petrel for the state, all but one falling between mid-August and early October (Askildsen, 1998). This summer's sighting of two individuals, at least one of which was well photographed and videotaped, occurred on 28 August which falls within the "expected" time period.

LITERATURE CITED

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