

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON 2000

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Weather Effects

The winter season ended mildly with this pattern continuing well into March throughout the state. Several species averaged over a week early statewide including Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Common Snipe, American Woodcock, Eastern Phoebe, Tree Swallow, and Chipping Sparrow. April reversed the trend with wet weather and below average temperatures. A nor'easter on 8 Apr hit hardest in Regions 4, 5, 7, 8, & 9 dumping several inches of snow. Chipping Sparrows, Field Sparrows, Fox Sparrows and Juncos congregated at feeding stations while American Robins and Hermit Thrushes sought food along road shoulders, producing a notable count of 60 of the latter species in Region 9.

Like so many Aprils of recent years, adverse winds reduced raptor totals at the Great Lakes hawkwatches this spring.

The first half of May was mild allowing neotropical migrants to pour in and producing birder ecstasy. Species that are often not recorded until the second, third or even fourth week of May, were found within the first ten days. Good migrant flight days were noted for 30 April, 2 & 5 May in both Regions 9 and 10. May was also very wet which raised water levels and reduced edge habitat for shorebirds.

Arrival Date Tables

Okay, advocates of the global warming theory, here is more ammunition; for the second consecutive year, first arrivals averaged early in every Region and perhaps more extraordinary, they were even earlier than last year in all but Region 9! An amazing 42 of the 93 species tabulated (45%) were significantly early (greater than two standard deviations) versus the statewide 14-year average. More than half, 50 species were record early in at least one Region. Interestingly, however, only one species, Tree Swallow, was record early in more than two Regions. This reflects the growing database which should make record-setters harder to come by over time. Ten species of waterbirds and eight species of landbirds were more than a week early. Indicative of the weather which was conducive to migration in March and the first half of May, seven species were significantly early in the former month and 19 in the latter. Only two species arrived

significantly late in those two months. Despite April's weather being less friendly to migrants, significantly early arrivals bested latecomers 15 to 6. I attribute this, in part, to the weather in March, which allowed our April arrivals to get much closer to the state than they normally would have by that time.

The date tables are loaded with fantastically early dates. Unfortunately, few are indicated as being documented. Given that caveat, the following reports were compared to *Birds of New York State* and to *Bull's Birds of New York State*.

A Great Crested Flycatcher on 16 April tied the state inland record and a 21st April Yellow-throated Vireo was the earliest ever inland, both in Region 3. A Pectoral Sandpiper 27 February in Region 2 was a state record as was a Solitary Sandpiper 18 March in Region 3. The Solitary was record early by nine days!

Waterfowl

This group was considered unremarkable in Regions 1, 2, & 5, due in part to ice-free conditions reducing concentrations and the very mild weather with open water further north allowing birds to quickly move on. Contrarily, Region 4 noted that variety and numbers were up and Region 3 remarked on heavy concentrations of divers and dabblers at Montezuma N.W.R. Although Snow Goose numbers were considered lower in some Regions, they reached a high maxima of 20,000 in Region 7. Another goose increasing of late, the Greater White-fronted, was a much tougher find this season except in Region 1 where it occurred in no fewer than five locations. Ross's Goose continued its annual trend with one in Region 3 and two in Region 5. A count of 13,600 migrating Canada Geese in Region 4 is one of the highest recent counts made by an individual that I know of. Brant showed well in several Regions while a count of 32 Black Scoters in Region 1 was very unusual for an inland location. Ruddy Duck numbers were generally unimpressive but the species continued its upward trend at opposite ends of the state, in Regions 1 & 10.

Raptors

Results from two of the three Great Lakes hawkwatches continued the general trend of lower numbers for several species. The highest one-day Broad-winged Hawk count was only 5405 at Ripley on Lake Erie. 1358 Broad-wings at Region 9's Hook Mountain, a traditional fall lookout, was intriguing. Record seasonal counts for Ripley included 11 Northern Goshawks, 38 Merlins, and 30 Peregrine Falcons. They also had a record one-day count of 2215 Turkey Vultures. Derby Hill on Lake Ontario reported a record one-day count of 25 Golden Eagles. Except for the N. Goshawk, all of the record-setting species are continuing previously noted trends. Formerly a great rarity away from the hawkwatches, multiple Golden Eagles were found in six Regions and singles in two others. Though

not setting any hawkwatch records this season, the Osprey is still doing well as evidenced by early arrivals in Regions 1, 5, 7, & 10.

While not a raptor, Sandhill Cranes are more frequently encountered at hawk-watches than elsewhere. This year they were found in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 5 including a record 15 at Ripley. Conspicuously banded birds included four in Regions 1, 2, & 3 and three in Region 5. A little digging has revealed that the four cranes in Regions 1 & 3 and possibly the birds in Region 2 also, were the same individuals and were part of Operation Migration (OM). OM is an attempt to see if the species can be taught to follow a new migration route with the hope that lessons learned can be applied to Whooping Cranes. If successful, OM plans to "reintroduce" Whooping Cranes in Wisconsin and teach them to migrate to Florida.

Sparrows

The first ten days of April saw some remarkable sparrow counts in Region 5. These included 32 Vespers, 250 Savannahs, 400 Songs, 23 Fox and 125 White-crowns. Fox Sparrow also had a count of 12 in Region 3, at least 30 individuals in Region 7, and was cited for high counts in Region 2 and for being widely reported and having a protracted migration in Region 8. After a strong winter showing Lapland Longspurs continued with high counts of 90 in Region 1, 75 in Region 3, and 25 in Region 2.

The Rest

A Least Bittern was record early in Region 2 and it showed well with five individuals in Region 1 and a remarkable 15 in Region 8, encouraging news for this marsh-dweller. With their eggs destroyed in Region 6 last summer, Double-crested Cormorants may be planning to exact revenge in other Regions. Large numbers were in Regions 1 & 3 and a new colony has developed in Region 7. The presence again this spring of multiple Snowy Egrets at the Motor Island rookery in Region 1 has lead to speculation that this species may soon join the Great Egret there as a new inland breeder in the state. The Wild Turkey is not only in New York City now (see *The Kingbird*, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 118-130) but also well out on Long Island. It was a poor season for shorebirds with Pectoral Sandpipers singled out as being particularly scarce. The occurrence of shorebirds depends on habitat availability and weather conditions as these strong fliers are capable of flying right over the state. 25 Solitary Sandpipers in Region 8 is a high count and one of the few highlights in that group. Caspian Terns continue to prosper with a record April census count of 107 in Region 1, a high count of 136 in Region 5, and a record early individual in Region 2. Record numbers of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were caught by banders in Region 2. There were also high numbers at a Region 8 banding station and record early individuals in Region 3 and

three counties in Region 7. A dead juvenile Northern Saw-whet Owl in Region 2 was evidence of very early breeding. Olive-sided Flycatchers have shown declines in the last two decades so their good showing in most Regions this spring was encouraging. Of concern in recent years has been the low numbers of Cape May Warblers which continued to be scarce this season. Formerly very rare, six "Lawrence's" Warblers were found in five Regions as Blue-winged Warbler genes continue to swamp Golden-wingeds. American Tree Sparrows lingered into May in Regions 1 through 5 and 8. After a strong winter showing, numbers of Common Redpolls were again found this spring, accompanied by Hoaries in Regions 1, 2, 5 & 7.

Rarities

As usual Region 10 had several stellar finds but this season inland Regions also tallied some scintillating birds. White-faced Ibis, Wilson's Plover, Swainson's Warbler and Painted Bunting were the big thrills in Region 10. Region 9 added American White Pelican, Mississippi Kite, Black Skimmer and White-winged Dove. The dove's origin was questioned but the species has been expanding its range with numerous records in the Midwest and East, including New York, in recent years. A third Regional Least Tern, a Loggerhead Shrike, and the first White-eyed Vireo since 1991 were Region 8's highlights. Region 7's rarities gave the Adirondack-Champlain Region a southern flavor with Fish Crow, Carolina Wren, and Blue-winged Warbler. Rarely found in migration, a Sedge Wren was a highlight in Region 5 along with Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, and Barnacle Goose. As with most occurrences of the latter species, its origin is unknown and subject to question. A fifth Regional Cattle Egret, Cerulean Warbler, and Kentucky Warbler were in Region 4. A Little Blue Heron, American White Pelican and singing Bicknell's Thrush and Western Meadowlark were in Region 3. A briefly seen Sprague's Pipit at the Western Meadowlark site in Region 3, has been reported to NYSARC and would be a state first if accepted. In Region 2, birders found a Glossy Ibis, Hudsonian Godwit, Loggerhead Shrike, and "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler. Region 1 provided a rufous-morph Red-tailed Hawk, even rarer for not having been seen at a hawkwatch, Black Vulture, Swallow-tailed Kite and Swainson's Hawk, the latter three all at the hawkwatch at Ripley. In addition, a Lark Bunting in Region 1 was the second ever there and only the fourth upstate record. Although pretty much annual, Yellow-headed Blackbirds in Regions 1 & 2 and two in Region 10 were more than usual. Due to the great number of rarities found this season, only the most unusual have been mentioned here. Read the Regional reports to hear about more birds that will get your pulse racing.

My choice for Bird Of The Season (BOTS) goes to the Yellow-nosed Albatross found in Region 10 by out-of-staters, and non-birders at that! If accepted by

NYSARC this will be the third accepted record for the state. See the Comprehensive article in this issue, page 223.

Every Region has a favorite birding hotspot. Some are fortunate enough to have several. A few birders I know cover their favorites on a near daily basis during the peak periods of migration. That strategy would have worked well this spring at the Energy Information Center's (EIC) grounds of Region 5's Nine Mile Point nuclear plant on Lake Ontario. A remarkable collection of rarities was assembled there. They included Long-eared Owl, Sedge Wren, Yellow-breasted Chat, several Clay-colored Sparrows, a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (third Regional spring record), a Harris's Sparrow (first Regional spring record), a Blue Grosbeak (third Regional record), and an Orchard Oriole. The EIC is the hands-down winner of the Hotspot Of The Season (HOTS) award this spring.

