

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON 2000

WILLIE D'ANNA

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension, Niagara Falls, NY 14304

WEATHER EFFECTS

The wet spring continued into June in most Regions, with temperatures near normal. July was also wet in Regions 6 through 10 but more notably, it was much cooler than average throughout the state. It was the third coolest July ever at Buffalo, the second coolest at Rochester, the coolest ever at Syracuse, and the tenth coolest at Albany. This made for more pleasant field conditions as multitudes of birders explored the state in the first year of Atlas 2000. The trick, of course, was in trying to stay dry. August weather varied more across the state than the other months. In Region 10 it was three degrees warmer than average but in Region 8 it was over four degrees cooler. In most Regions the temperature and precipitation were near their long-term averages. The fall passerine migration, which can be substantial in late August, was barely noticeable this season.

ATLAS 2000

The second statewide effort to document the breeding birds of New York State got into full swing this season. Atlas 2000 had been eagerly anticipated by many but perhaps no more so than by the birders who worked on the first Atlas. They already knew about the joys of exploring new areas, learning (or relearning) the songs of our breeders, intimately studying nesting activities, and, of course, making a surprising discovery or two. Region 1's Mike Morgante put it best, "...the project is very rewarding, albeit difficult in some cases, and is a great learning experience for beginner and expert birder alike."

Most of the following information is from birders working on Atlas 2000. Least Bitterns were found in six blocks including a nest with young in Region 1 found by DEC personnel. Despite being a common species, it is rare to find an unfledged juvenile Turkey Vulture, as happened in Region 5. Finding their nest is even more of a challenge. For the sixth straight year, Trumpeter Swans bred at Perch River WMA in Region 6, raising four young. Redheads are rare breeders in the state. Three broods at Iroquois NWR in Region 1 are doubtless the result of releases in recent years. I would suspect that is also the reason for six broods in Region 6, where recent breeding has not been noted.

Mainly positive remarks were made for Osprey, Bald Eagle, Peregrine

Falcon, and Merlin but the news was not all rosy. Wet weather may have contributed to a poor year for Bald Eagle in Region 7. Osprey returned to Region 2 after last year's first nesting there in a century. After their initial Region 8 nesting last year, Merlin did not return to the same site but may have found a new spot in the Region. It was heartening that the Upland Sandpiper, threatened in New York, was found in all ten Regions.

Without the Atlas getting birders into the field, it is hard to imagine that Long-eared Owls would be found in three Regions, as they were this season. Acadian Flycatcher was deemed to be coming back after the first Atlas was completed. Reports from Regions 1 and 3 seem to indicate that they may still be increasing. Barn Swallows nested on a ferry that crossed into three different Atlas blocks – to learn which block got the "CO" read the Region 5 report. Again, probably due to the extra effort of atlassers, Sedge Wrens were found in five Regions. This is a tough species to confirm and no confirmations were reported this season. In the category of most ambitious I would nominate the Golden-crowned Kinglet feeding a Brown-headed Cowbird in Region 5.

Pine Warblers have been suggested previously as increasing in Region 1. This season, Regions 1, 2 & 5 noted the same trend. Found in five Regions, Clay-colored Sparrow apparently has increased as a breeder since the first Atlas. The threatened Henslow's Sparrow was still found in good numbers in its Region 6 stronghold along with more than usual in Region 3 and a new colony outside of Buffalo in Region 1. While this is certainly good news, the latter location is an area of rapid development and highlights the fragile status of the species in western New York, especially with the knowledge that they have already been extirpated as breeders in adjacent Ontario.

RARE BREEDERS

With the first breeding season of Atlas 2000 essentially completed, it is interesting and exciting to look back upon the numerous rare breeders turned up this year. The state's first inland nesting of Great Egret occurred in 1995 in Region 1, where the species continues. The second inland site was discovered this year in Region 7. At the same Region 1 rookery with the Great Egrets, three Snowy Egrets lingered for over a month but showed no stronger evidence of breeding. A fledgling Red-breasted Merganser in Region 6 would represent one of very few confirmed breedings, if correct. It needs to be remembered, however, that juveniles of Common Merganser are very similar to that species. Despite increasing in New York, Great Black-backed Gull has not shown a great desire to breed here. Thus, nesting in Region 7 this season is noteworthy. Adult Short-eared Owls feeding young in Region 5 is, unfortunately, a much rarer sight than formerly for this endangered species in New York. Still, it was a first for Region 5. A pair of Ruby-crowned Kinglets in July in Region 9 was most intriguing but further evidence of breeding was not obtained. Two Palm Warblers in late June

in Region 8 were likely not migrants and thus, were a major surprise. Dickcissels were confirmed breeding in Region 1. This very rare breeder in the state was not recorded during the first Atlas. Fledgling Pine Siskins were found in Regions 8 & 9, confirmed breeding according to the Atlas criteria. White-winged Crossbills feeding young in Region 7, August sightings of the species in Regions 5 & 8, and an abundant spruce cone crop lead to hopes that it may try to nest in other Regions of the state, perhaps even this fall.

MISCELLANEOUS

Confrontations between people and birds are nothing new but in this enlightened era, surely things must be getting better, right? Although the methods are not the same, the results often are, with the birds on the losing end. This season in Region 6, the controversial Double-crested Cormorant population control program on Little Galloo Island continued with eggs of over 4300 nests oiled by the NYSDEC. Now comes word of the disruption of a large Great Blue Heron colony in Region 6, which contained almost 600 active nests in 1999. About one-third to one-half of these birds relocated to another nearby island where the owner, who had a permit, used harassment measures to reduce the number of successful nests down to only 10-20% of the original number.

West Nile virus, first detected in coastal areas, has now been found in widespread Regions 1, 4, 7, & 10 and even in very young birds. Since the young birds could not fly far and probably were raised in the vicinity, the virus must now be considered as having gained a solid foothold throughout the State. While the politicians and media have created a lot of hype about the dangers to humans, the virus' effect upon our birds is likely to be far greater.

RARITIES

Despite concentration on the Atlas this summer, a good number of rarities were found. Leading off with Region 1, two Eared Grebes and two American Avocets continued the tendency of both these species to occur in our westernmost Region. Western Kingbird is much rarer inland than coastally. Thus, two in Region 2 were a great find. A Black-headed Gull there, always a good find, was even better in the summer. The only Loggerhead Shrike this season was one in Region 3. Likewise, a Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 4 was the sole report in the state, and a Dickcissel there was the Region's first since 1988. White-winged Doves have been found in the east in ever increasing numbers, but in New York, those sightings have been almost all coastal. This year one turned up in Region 5. Region 7's Western Tanager was a first for the Region and was found by someone working on an Atlas block. A Summer Tanager in Region 8 was the first there since 1984. Three Roseate Terns were Region 9's first in 25 years. In Region 10, a trio of rare shorebirds was the highlight. These were Red-necked Stint with only five previous records, Little Stint with only two or three, and Sharp-tailed

Sandpiper with only one other acceptable record.

I have selected only the most unusual species to discuss here. The Regional reports contain many other sightings of great interest. In this, the first season of Atlas 2000, it seems appropriate that my choice for Bird of the Season goes to the Common Eiders found nesting in Region 10, the first ever recorded breeding in New York.

