

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON 2000

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Weather Effects

With one notable exception, the weather of Fall 2000 was uneventful. There were none of the usual tropical storms. The average temperature and precipitation were not far from the norms in any of the three months. November was slightly cooler and both October and November slightly drier but deviations from the norm tend to be much more pronounced than those of this season. Thus, one could say, the weather was abnormally normal. Most Regions received just a little more snow than usual but Region 1 was pummeled by the greatest 24-hour November snowstorm in Buffalo's history with, a narrow lake-effect snow band off of Lake Erie dumping 25 inches on 20 Nov. In reality such a storm is not that unusual for the Region but they normally hit the snow belt areas south of Buffalo. As Region 1 editor Mike Morgante noted, as paralyzing as the storm was for automobiles and people, its impact upon birds was quite localized. While many cold fronts were noted in Region 3 this season, only Region 1 mentioned unusual concentrations of birds associated with them. It is of interest that the warbler migration peaked in both Regions 1 & 10 on 24-25 Sep. This is somewhat late for Region 1 but I suspect more on time for coastal areas.

It was the weather of the previous seasons that had an impact in Region 5. There, the wet spring/early summer rains kept the barge canal full enough so that there was little need to draw down Delta Lake. This normally annual occurrence is highly anticipated by birders as the shallows and mudflats thus exposed can attract large numbers of shorebirds, waterfowl, and raptors seeking prey.

Regions 7 & 8 noted a bumper crop of wild foods. While some birders thought that the snowy November would encourage half-hardies to leave, an abundance of food could mean just the opposite. From the winter reports I have seen so far, it appears the latter has held force. More about that will appear in next season's reports.

Waterfowl

There was another impressive Brant migration this fall. The flight was widespread, early, and prolonged, as well as strong with counts of 200 or more from six of the nine reporting Regions. Snow Geese still appear to be on

the increase. A mammoth 35,000 were reported in Region 7. Its smaller cousin, Ross's Goose, totaled eight individuals in Regions 3, 7, & 10. Because of these increasing reports, NYSARC is concerned that some sightings may represent hybrids with Snow Geese and thus still requests documentation for this species. Birders are urged to carefully study any possible Ross's Goose for hybrid indicators.

Bull's Birds of New York State mentions only two specimens in the state of the small form of Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis hutchinsii*). Last fall, there was an unprecedented report of 32 at Iroquois NWR in Region 1. This season there were 25 reported in Region 1, plus two in Region 5 and one in Region 7. Is this subspecies on the increase? Morgante suggests that birders are simply paying more attention to this race. Even though I often hear and read that birders are interested only in their lists, which includes only full species, I think he may be right. According to the web site of the Canadian Wildlife Service (www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/canbird/goose/cgtgp.htm), this subspecies' population (referred to as the Tall Grass Prairie population on the web site) has remained stable over the decade from 1986 to 1996, so increased observer awareness makes a lot of sense. Due to different migration corridors, it is more likely to be seen in fall than spring, as backed up by the recent sightings. As an advocate for reporting recognizable forms, it is good to see the increasing number of reports of this small Canada Goose.

In previous Highlights I have remarked upon the higher numbers of Green-winged Teals being reported in the state. That trend continued with a very high count of 680 in Region 1. I note, however, that a former stronghold for the species, Montezuma NWR, had a maximum of only 81 reported this season. There were a few high scoter counts with 1213 Black in Region 2 and a Regional record 1600 White-winged in Region 5, both from Lake Ontario. 200 Black on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 and 200 Surf flying over the Hudson River in Region 9 were high counts for inland areas. Likewise, Region 7's record counts of Black and White-winged scoters on Lake Champlain were particularly noteworthy.

Other Waterbirds

Despite continued population control measures on Little Galloo Island in Region 6, Double-crested Cormorants were found in record numbers in Regions 1 & 3. They were considered down slightly in Region 2. Good counts of Common Loons were noted on Lake Ontario in Regions 2 & 5 and over 1000 were counted in one day at Cayuga Lake in Region 3. Though fewer in number than at the established sites, the counts of Common and Red-throated loons and of Horned Grebes on Lake Champlain this season were outstanding for that location.

It was another good year for jaegers on Lake Ontario, where they are expected. However, an unidentified jaeger on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 was a big surprise. Exceptionally difficult to identify, today's birders are more prepared than ever to tackle the jaegers, but there will always be some that must be called "jaeger species". A very rare Long-tailed Jaeger in Region 5 and another on Lake Erie in Region 1 were highlights in that group.

The first North American Gull Conference was held in Niagara Falls, Ontario on the last weekend in November. The now annual California Gull on the river has become almost ho-hum for the local birders. Just do not say that to the gull conference attendees who scoured the area in vain that weekend. A Black-headed Gull on Lake Ontario was the first ever documented from that water body in Region 1. However, the species is relatively frequent on the lake in Region 2 where the persistent Hamlin Beach Lakewatch found two immatures this season. Interestingly, the vast majority of Region 1 reports, which are from the Niagara River, are of adults. It was a good year for Sabine's Gull with sightings from Regions 1, 2, and even inland Region 3. Two Franklin's Gulls in Region 2 were the only ones found in New York this fall. The species was annual on the Niagara River until recent years.

Miscellaneous

Bald Eagles set seasonal records at two Region 9 hawkwatches. Franklin Mountain in Region 4 set records for Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons and tied the record for Merlins. Bucking the trend of recent years, Golden Eagle was cited for low numbers at that site but still elicited positive comments in Regions 5 & 9. Owls staged a significant movement this fall. Statewide, there were 20 Snowys reported, 7 Long-eareds, 41 Short-eareds, and 20 No. Saw-whets. Thirteen saw-whets netted in one night by a Region 1 bander may not seem to be many but it could well be the most ever in fall away from Long Island. As with some other secretive species, banding is the best way to measure their status in New York.

A count of 52 House Wrens in Region 5 was a notable concentration and especially in the fall when they are not singing. One of the declining spruce-budworm warblers, the Bay-breasted was noted in only low numbers through most of the state. One exception was in Region 1, where a remarkable 46 were counted in a single tree.

Rarities

Due to the persistent coverage at the Hamlin Beach Lakewatch in Region 2, Northern Gannets are recorded almost annually. This year they had at least two but the two in Region 5 were the first there since 1983 and the one in

Region 7 was only their second ever. Lesser Black-backed Gulls are no longer exciting in much of the state but sightings in Regions 4 & 7 are still of interest. Birders have been discussing the possibility that Dickcissel might be regular inland as well as near the coast. Lending evidence to this were sightings in Regions 2, 3, & 5. Cattle Egret, Barn Owl, Summer Tanager, and three "Oregon" Juncos complemented the Niagara River gulls in Region 1. Another Arctic Tern showed in Region 2 as did a pair of Western Kingbirds, a Bicknell's Thrush(banded), and a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Again in Region 2, a briefly seen Townsend's Solitaire was the Region's first and would be only about the seventh for New York if accepted by NYSARC (per Brock in *Bulls Birds of New York State*). Region 3 also had a Western Kingbird as well as a Connecticut Warbler and a White-eyed Vireo. A Purple Sandpiper in Region 4 was the first in at least 20 years if not a Regional first and a Golden-winged Warbler was only the second since 1984. Three Greater White-fronted Geese were reported this season, one each in Regions 5, 8, & 10. Region 5 was also graced by a Barn Owl, a first Regional *selasphorus* hummingbird species, Loggerhead Shrike, White-eyed Vireo, and "Oregon" Junco". Little Gull and Stilt Sandpiper were two of the highlights in Region 7 while a Black-legged Kittiwake provided their first record. In Region 8 a Sandhill Crane was their first in ten years and they also had a possible Boreal Owl. The latter was heard only but the report seems credible and I commend the observer for his caution in not pasting a stronger adjective on his identification. A Sedge Wren and two Clay-colored Sparrows were the highlights in Region 9. Region 10 produced three Sandwich Terns, remarkably none of which were associated with tropical storms. In addition they had another "Black" Brant report. Birders should also keep in mind the possibility of "Dark-bellied" Brant", which was recently documented in Virginia for a first North American record(Illiff in *North American Birds* 54(3):269). Other birds of note in Region 10 were a *selasphorus* hummingbird species, four Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, LeConte's Sparrow, and three(!) Ash-throated Flycatchers. With the rapidly increasing number of sightings for the latter species, hopefully the 29 November report of a Great Crested Flycatcher there was considered very carefully.

Two birds stood out above the rest this season. One was an Atlantic Puffin that was picked up in Region 7 and taken in for rehabilitation but later died. According to Lolya in *Bulls Birds of New York State*, there is only one other inland record in the state (Dutchess County 27 Sep 1963) and he considered that one to be suspect. My choice for Bird of the Season (BOTS) goes to a potential first state record (if accepted by NYSARC) and one of very few ever found in the east – the Cassin's Sparrow at Jones Beach, Long Island, 7-11 Oct.