

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING SEASON 2001

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WEATHER EFFECTS

March was cold and snowy, with only Region 10 missing out on the white stuff. It was the snowiest March in 65 years at Buffalo, the fifth snowiest on record at Rochester, and the second snowiest at Syracuse. Ithaca experienced its wettest March since 1879 with much of the precipitation in the form of snow. The snowstorm on 4-6 Mar was one of the 20 biggest winter storms in over 100 years at Albany and the biggest March storm ever in Region 7, with about three feet of snow in much of the Adirondacks. Even Region 9 had areas that received over two feet of snow for the month. The persistently adverse weather had a noticeable effect upon waterfowl, which arrived and peaked much later than usual. April's mild, benign weather permitted them to move quickly on and allowed many passerines to arrive on record early dates, most notably in Regions 1 and 2. Even where records were not set, the list of warblers present in late April and early May was impressive, with 15-20 species in mid-latitude Regions and 34 in Region 10. The traditional warbler peak in mid-May, however, was generally disappointing with few concentrations of significance. No doubt this was due in part to the continued fine weather during the first half of May, allowing birds to proceed quickly to their breeding grounds well ahead of schedule. One notable exception was in Region 5, where record numbers (according to *Bull's Birds of New York State*) of Magnolia (170) and Wilson's (75) dropped down on 24 May, along with high numbers of Canada Warblers (50) and Lincoln's Sparrows (20). Another exception was in Region 7 on 12 May when the Crown Point banders were besieged by Yellow-rumped Warblers - 87 found their way into the nets.

SNOW GEESE

The burgeoning population of Snow Geese reached new heights in New York this spring. According to *Bull's Birds of New York State* the highest count was 30,000 at Montezuma NWR on 18 Apr 1983. That record was shattered by the 80,000 reported there this spring on 29 Mar. In all, six Regions had counts of 2000 or more. Region 5 had a count of 17,000 and Region 6 had counts of 22,000 and 14,000 at separate locations on the same date, 3 Apr.. In Region 1 a few dozen is a normal high count but this season even they reached a maximum of 450. And, along with the Snow Geese came more than the usual smattering of Ross's Goose reports - two were in Region 1, one in Region 2, and five in Region 3, the latter including a group of three at the Montezuma wetlands complex. One last thing to ponder about Snow Geese - the predominant form this spring, even in western New York, was by far the white morph. Traditionally, high counts of this species in Region 1 (>75) have consisted of a substantial percentage of "Blue Geese".

Flocks with several "Blue Geese" are a tip-off that you are looking at the western nominate subspecies *caerulescens*, since this morph is common in that race and very rare in the eastern race, *atlanticus*. The presence of large numbers of "Snows" and very few "Blues" on the other hand, likely indicates that most of the birds seen in New York this spring were of the larger eastern race, even the birds in Region 1.

RAPTORS

As with many other species in April, Broad-winged Hawks arrived early. This species was surprising, however, in the strength of its early push - four on 8 Apr in Region 5; one on 9 Apr in Region 9; one on 10 Apr in Region 1; 59 in Region 1, 8230(!) in Region 2, and one in Region 3, all on 12 Apr. In addition peak counts were very good at the two Lake Ontario hawkwatches - 17,855 at Derby Hill in Region 5 and 22,800 at Braddock Bay in Region 2. Both counts were on 23 Apr after a warm front passed through the state. These are great counts, the highest in over ten years at Derby Hill. However, to the veteran Lake Ontario hawkwatcher they represent what the numbers "should be". It was a long wait to return to normal. Will it last?

Other significant counts at the hawkwatches included a record 5834 Turkey Vultures at Braddock Bay on 8 Apr and 23 Golden Eagles at Derby Hill on 23 Apr, just two short of the record there. Away from the hawkwatches a count of 55 Short-eared Owls in Region 2 was an excellent tally. The count was made at the Nations Road grasslands, a designated Important Bird Area (IBA). Returning to Golden Eagles, a pair of adults was observed engaging in courtship display, including talon-grasping and rolling in Region 6. The last known nesting attempt in NYS was in 1979 in Hamilton County (Peter Nye in *Bull's Birds of New York State*). This spring's sighting occurred over Fort Drum on the suspiciously late date of 29 May, when adults of this species are almost unheard of in New York.. The sighting was not near any historical breeding sites. However, the species has recovered well in the East during the post-DDT era, so nesting does not seem out of the question. The major problem, according to Peter Nye, may be the availability of the proper habitat (generally open country) well away from possible disturbance by human beings. With farms reverting to forest and development creeping into every corner of the state, this majestic bird may need to develop a tolerance for people if it is to breed once more in New York. As for the birds at Fort Drum, they were not seen again after the initial sighting.

MISCELLANEOUS

Something appeared to be going on with Glossy Ibis this spring. Record counts for Jamaica Bay Wildlife Reserve in Region 10 were made during the second week of April. Normally a rare bird away from coastal areas, six other Regions reported the species, including four with more than single birds (Regions

2, 3, 5, & 7). Of these, Region 5 had groups of four and two birds while Region 3's group of 12 birds tied the second highest inland count ever per *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Interestingly, in the Regions with multiple birds, the initial sightings occurred around the second week of April, when the peak counts were being made at Jamaica Bay. It seems likely that the coastal and inland ibises all originated from the same general wintering area and migrated north at the same time, with more than usual going off-track into inland Regions. Perhaps the same weather factors were responsible for the 30 Laughing Gulls in Region 3 (see the Rarities section) since they appeared around the same time and winter in the same areas as the ibises. If these birds came from the Texas/Louisiana region, the possibility of a White-faced Ibis among them would increase. Let's hope the observers considered that possibility!

There were not many high counts this spring. Most of the record-setters have already been mentioned. Another is the amazing count of 600 Song Sparrows at Nine Mile Point in Region 5 on 5 Apr, a record for one location according to *Bull's Birds of New York State* and *Birds of New York State*. Other noteworthy counts were: 500 Green-winged Teals in Region 1 on 22 Apr; 1150 Ring-necked Ducks in Region 3 on 1 Apr, 150 Caspian Terns in Region 5 on 5 May; and 900 Snow Buntings in Region 1 on 18 Mar, the latter no doubt concentrated by the heavy snows.

The breeding activities of White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins noted in the winter season continued this spring and spread out from the central Adirondacks. Region 6 Editor Long called it "the largest incursion in several years". Evidence of breeding (Possible, Probable, or Confirmed) was obtained in Regions 3, 5, 6, & 7 for the crossbill and Regions 1, 3, 5, 6, & 7 for the siskin. Even Purple Finch was getting into the act in mid March in Region 7, exceptionally early for that species. The coincidence of this invasion with Atlas 2000 is certainly fortuitous!

Although most observers do not notice an obvious change in numbers of American Crows in New York through the year, there is a sizeable migration that occurs, most noticeably along the Great Lakes in spring. Thus, it is not too surprising, though still interesting to hear about a crow, banded in Ithaca on 13 March, that showed up in Region 7 less than a month later.

RARITIES

There are probably more people out birding during spring in New York than at any other season (Atlas years perhaps notwithstanding). As a result many rarities are discovered and this season there were several that were exceptional. The following discussion is mostly limited to the rarest species, nearly all of which require documentation to the New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC).

Swainson's Hawks are now of near annual spring occurrence in New York at one or more of the Great Lakes hawkwatches. This year two were found

at Braddock Bay and one at Derby Hill. The bird in Region 5 was a dark morph seen on the same date as a dark morph in Region 2. This color morph is exceptionally rare in the state. The times of the sightings leave little doubt that the same individual passed both hawkwatches. Of the regular herons in New York, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is the rarest inland. That makes the sighting in Region 2 of particular note. Another great find in Region 2, especially for an inland Region, was a Bullock's Oriole. Due to the possibility of hybridization with Baltimore Oriole, identification as this species requires careful documentation. A super bird was the Boreal Owl at Braddock Bay, lingering for four days. Another Boreal Owl at Buffalo in Region 1 was not only the first record of a live bird in the Region but the first record in the western half of New York away from the Lake Ontario Plain (*Bull's Birds of New York State*). In addition, this record-setting owl was also the latest ever in New York, occurring on the remarkable date of 6 May! Black Vultures have increased to the point where they no longer require a NYSARC report. However, away from southeastern New York and the Great Lakes hawkwatches, they remain very rare. Thus, the sighting in Region 3 was very noteworthy. Inland Laughing Gulls are good finds in the state though not quite the caliber of most of the birds in this paragraph. However, the report of 30 in Region 3 is absolutely startling, especially without a tropical storm to bring them inland. Surprisingly, this is not an inland record count - that remains the 50 birds seen in Otsego County on 25 Nov 1950, following the passage of a "great storm" (*Birds of New York State*). Prior to 1997 there was only one record of Lewis's Woodpecker in New York. Since then there has been a spate of reports from New York as well as Ontario. Another provided the first record for Region 6 this spring, staying three days but at a difficult to access military reservation. Hudsonian and Marbled godwits are both very rare spring migrants. Thus the discovery in Region 7 of a group of five Hudsonian and a Marbled (not together) is remarkable. My search of *Bull's Birds of New York State* and *Birds of New York State* did not turn up any inland records of multiple Hudsonian Godwits in spring. Though this species is not on the NYSARC review list, this report cries out to be documented. In a non-invasion year, there were only two reports of Common Redpoll this spring, with the one in Region 8 the only one found away from the Adirondacks. A Ruff, believed to be a female or Reeve, was a fine highlight in Region 9. A Swallow-tailed Kite on 13 Mar on Long Island is likely the earliest ever for this great rarity. Remarkably, there was another report of this species over a month later. An alternate-plumaged Curlew Sandpiper in Region 10 must have been a real beauty! Region 5 had a stellar season at its Lake Ontario hotspots, with sightings of Lark Sparrow (second Regional record), White-winged Dove (one of very few away from coastal Regions), and a Eurasian Collared-Dove. There have been reports of the latter species on Long Island, but in such a heavily populated area there is the concern that those sightings could involve escapes. In Region 5, at a well-known migrant trap, the chances of acceptance by NYSARC would appear to be better. Could this at last become the first accepted record in New York of this rapidly expanding species?

Several of the above are worthy of the Bird-of-the-Season (BOTS) Award. In particular, I am thinking of the five Hudsonian Godwits in Region 7, the 30 Laughing Gulls in Region 3, the Lark Sparrow, White-winged Dove and, especially, the Eurasian Collared-Dove in Region 5, the Bullock's Oriole in Region 2, the Boreal Owls in Regions 1 & 2, and the Lewis's Woodpecker in Region 6. However, there is one light that shines brighter than the rest. One bird, not yet mentioned, has everything going for it. This bird was cooperative, being regularly observed and well-photographed for 13 days. It was both elegant and colorful and, if accepted by NYSARC, will provide the first record for New York State. I am referring to the splendid Black-tailed Godwit (*Kingbird* 51:572) that graced the South Shore of Long Island and my choice for the BOTS Award this season.

CORRECTION

In last season's Highlights I mentioned that there were no regular wintering sites for Golden Eagle in New York State, which I considered somewhat surprising (*Kingbird* 51: 601). Thanks to Barbara Butler and Otis Waterman, I now know that that is not the case. Apparently, a small number of Golden Eagles have been wintering in Dutchess County in Region 9 for many years. If I had only checked *Bull's Birds of New York State*, that error would not have happened!

