

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON 2001

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Weather Effects

Drought is not a word that is used often in the northeastern U.S. However, away from the southeastern part of the state, that is the term that best characterized this summer. June started things off being considerably drier than normal and also warmer. The slight rains of June virtually evaporated the following month. July was the second driest on record at Plattsburgh in Region 7 and the driest in 68 years at Buffalo in Region 1. The drought started during the month and intensified by its end. There was only localized relief in parts of the state during August. A brief heat wave hit some areas culminating in a sweltering 103° F in Poughkeepsie (9 Aug) and New York City (8 Aug).

One might think that such extreme spells of weather would have a noticeable negative effect upon our breeding avifauna. Consider the relative lack of mosquitoes on the Lake Ontario Plain in Region 1. While delightful to the birder, this could make life difficult for songbirds trying to provide a protein-rich diet for their nestlings. Yet, negative comments from the Regional Editors were few and far between. Region 2's Kevin Griffith even speculated that there may have been fewer nesting failures due to the lack of inclement weather. Region 8 Editor Jane Graves agreed, suggesting it was "an excellent breeding season". However, Region 6's Mickey Scilingo noted that "aerial insects virtually disappeared in late June, which prompted an early departure of Purple Martins and other swallows at Holmes Point in Morristown, Lewis County". If nothing else, all this illustrates the difficulty in making broad generalizations about the effects of weather on breeding success.

Perhaps more noticeably affected by the drought were the waterbirds. Region 3 Editor Bill Ostrander suggested that low water levels in some areas may have been at least partially responsible for lower numbers of Green Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Wood Ducks, American Black Ducks, Mallards, Blue-winged Teals, and Hooded Mergansers.

Atlas 2000

After only the second year of Atlas 2000, multitudes of birders in the field are already providing information of how the distribution of our breeding birds has changed since the first Atlas. As usual, it is easier to see when species are increasing. Species on the decline will be more noticeable at the completion of the Atlas when maps of both surveys can be compared. Still, some species seem noticeably down. In particular, the endangered Black Tern is really struggling with a statewide drop this season as well as a very poor year in its Region 6 stronghold. Bringing this species back is proving to be very difficult. Other species on the decline for several years include Blue-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Common Nighthawk (a species that has virtually disappeared as a breeder from

most areas of the state), and Golden-winged Warbler.

In Region 1, Purple Martin was one of the top ten most frequently encountered species during the first Atlas. From the observations of Regional Editor Morgante and myself, I would wager that it will have difficulty cracking the top 25 this time around.

Birds like Canada Goose and Mute Swan are now remarkably prolific in some areas of New York. Formerly endangered species Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon have shown a well-documented recovery, with new nesting sites being found every year. Common Raven was on the comeback trail during the first Atlas and it has since spread into many new areas. Merlin was not found during the first Atlas but it has been confirmed breeding since. This season, Merlin sightings in Regions 1, 2, & 3 were not really suspected breeders but those in Regions 5, 6, 7, & 8 were, with confirmations in three of those Regions.

Because the Atlas seeks to map the distribution of breeding species and not abundance, it may not show the dramatic increase in the number of crows that many birders have witnessed. Some believe that the increase of this opportunistic and omnivorous bird is causing the decline of other species. Rising (*The Prothonotary* 1991,57:89), drawing on a report from Joseph Thill, reported two observations of crows predated the young of roof-nesting Common Nighthawks in a Buffalo suburb. The historically rural crow has adapted extremely well to city life and this suggests it may be a major contributor to the the virtual extirpation of roof-nesting Common Nighthawks.

Southern species continue to do well and I do not mean simply Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse, and Northern Mockingbird. Hooded Warblers are showing up in new areas of Regions 1 & 2 and perhaps other Regions as well. Northern Parula returned as a Region 10 breeder after a 50-year absence, and in Region 1, the species appears to be consolidating its foothold around the Allegheny Reservoir, while in Region 2 it was found in two locations near Lake Ontario. Other southern species considered to be numerous or in new areas were Pine Warbler in Regions 1 & 6, Prairie Warbler in Regions 1, 5, & 8, Orchard Oriole in all but Region 7, and Boat-tailed Grackle in Region 10.

One has to wonder if the apparent increase in Northern Saw-whet Owls, found in five Regions this summer, is real or is the result of more knowledgeable birders making a greater effort to find them?

The status of Clay-colored Sparrow seems less in doubt. This former great rarity is spreading from Ontario with a new colony found in Region 1, another colony plus a new location in Region 6, and sightings in Regions 3 & 5. In Region 1 this species is normally found in Christmas tree plantations. Thus, the discovery of one in an overgrown field was surprising. Yet, this species is quite the habitat generalist, so as it increases in New York we should expect to find it in new situations.

I urge the reader to check out the many other interesting Atlas discoveries sprinkled throughout the Regional reports.

Rarities

With so many birders in the field Atlassing, it is not too surprising that many "good" birds were found. Considered possible breeders according to Atlas

criteria ,adult Golden Eagles in Regions 1 & 6 raised hopes that this species might return to nest in New York some day. Eared Grebes at opposite ends of the state are more frequently seen than in Regions in between. The same can be said for American Avocets which also showed up only in Regions 1 & 10.

After a plethora of spring reports, a cautiously reported ibis species in Region 1 and Glossys in Region 7 were the only inland sightings this summer. Inland Laughing Gulls included one each in Regions 1, 2, & 3 and a remarkable 7 in Region 8. Away from Region 10, a Barn Owl is always a rarity highlight. One in Region 1 was an Atlas highlight as well. In recent years, Region 2 has had a lock on King Rail sightings. That trend continued with another report this season. The presence of Loggerhead Shrikes in Regions 2, 5, & 7 at least provides a glimmer of hope that they may breed again in New York. Long-tailed Jaegers are reported with increasing frequency. Up to four individuals in Region 2 and one in Region 10 fit the usual pattern of timing for this species – late August/early September. One hopes, however, that this species is identified by field characters and not by the date of its appearance. The occurrence of up to three Pomarine Jaegers, reported in July on Lake Champlain in Region 7, does not fit the timing patterns for any of the three jaeger species. The Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 2 was a very rare summer sighting, probably even rarer at that season than the Mississippi Kite also reported there. This profundity is no doubt due to the knowledgeable and diligent Region 2 observers who spend time looking for this southern raptor in June. Cattle Egrets away from the coast and the Four Brothers Islands colony in Region 7 were limited to a pair in Region 6. A Great Cormorant and a Rough-legged Hawk were unseasonal finds in Region 8. A Yellow-throated Warbler there was the only one found away from Region 9's Delaware River breeding birds . Inland Laughing Gulls were not the only good gulls this season. A very unusual-for-summer Glaucous Gull and a rare-at-any-season Franklin's Gull showed up in Region 10. A White-winged Dove there continued the trend of more and more sightings in recent years.

Summer is the peak shorebird season and the drought exposed lots of mudflats. Among many shorebirds discovered, the most unusual sightings were Region 5's first Piping Plover in 17 years and a Whimbrel in Region 7.

South Polar Skuas are rare enough in the pelagic zone off of Long Island. In the surf just off shore they are nearly unprecedented. One can only envy the exceptional opportunity for study afforded the observers of just such a bird at Democrat Point on Long Island 23 Jun.

Finally, my choice for Bird of the Season goes to the Wood Storks found in Region 2. Possibly driven by rising water levels in the deep south and an inability to compete with older birds, numbers of juvenile Wood Storks turned up in northern states and provinces. A record 16 individuals of this compelling species showed up to feed in the drying ponds around Clyde, New York. See Dominic Sherony's article in this issue of *The Kingbird* for the complete details.