

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON 2001

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Weather Effects

“Very warm and dry” summarizes the weather throughout the state this fall, with only very localized exceptions. November exemplified the season. It was the warmest November on record at New York City, the second warmest at Syracuse, and the fourth warmest at Buffalo with most Regions averaging over five degrees above normal. By the end of the period, Plattsburgh in Region 7 had received only two-thirds of normal annual precipitation and concern about drought and low reservoirs was expressed in Regions 4 and 9, respectively. Without any really cold air, there could not be much snow and none in Buffalo marked a first for the fall season in 122 years! The lack of snow was quite uniform: none in Albany, 0.1 inches in Rochester, and 0.7 inches in Syracuse. The warm conditions helped eight species to set new Regional record late departure dates in Region 3. However, it also prevented water bodies further north from freezing, providing late arriving waterfowl an opportunity to linger and thus probably causing the reduced numbers noted in Regions 3 & 5 this season. A lack of wild foods was noted in Regions 5, 7, & 8. As suggested by Regional Editor Peterson, this caused the unusual observations of Ruffed Grouse at feeders in Region 7.

Big Counts

Outside of Region 7 the highest count for Snow Goose was only “3000+” in Region 8 and less than 300 anywhere else. As suggested above these birds were lingering further north, specifically in Region 7 where a mind-boggling 45000 on 25 October were counted, apparently a new state maximum. Enormous counts of Wood Ducks have occurred before in central New York but a count of 1900 in Region 9 still is worthy of mention. It is reassuring to see that this beautiful species, a common breeder in the state, doing so well. The small race of Canada Goose known as Richardson’s has been documented with increasing frequency and numbers in the state. Region 1 Editor Morgante in particular has been receiving previously unheard of numbers of this goose at Iroquois NWR. This season’s high count of 33 is another record. Add in one each from Regions 7 & 10 and it seems that this small subspecies has established a presence during migration. Whether this is a recent change or the result of increased

birder awareness is unknown but it is interesting and hopefully their status will continue to be monitored.

Raptors

Excellent numbers of Northern Goshawk were noted in six Regions. Unfortunately, the ages of these birds were not recorded.. It is a rare event when No. Goshawks irrupt ,roughly every ten years, presumably due to population crashes of the snowshoe hare and grouse (Terres 1982). Age data should be recorded for this species as adults are much less common than immatures. Also, reported immature No.Goshawks are not infrequently misidentified Cooper's Hawks, presumably large females. This latter problem is not so much a concern at established hawkwatches with experienced counters as it is with less knowledgeable birders. However, even veterans should not attempt identification based only upon perceived size. We know more about accipiter identification than we did twenty years ago but it still is not a cut-and-dried matter.

Snowy Owls were also widespread this season, turning up in seven Regions with over twenty individuals. With a shorter cycle than that of the goshawks, about every four years, this species' irruptions are more closely tied to the populations of lemmings and mice (Terres 1982).

For hawkwatch junkies, there is a lot to read this season. Region 4 summarizes Franklin Mountain, which had record coverage. New highs were established for Bald Eagle and Cooper's Hawk and a daily record for the state was set for Golden Eagle (28). While on the subject of this species, readers are encouraged to check out the interesting *corrigendum* in the Region 7 report. Though fewer in number, the 54 Cooper's Hawks at Region 8's Camp Pinnacle Hawkwatch was actually higher on a percentage basis of all hawks than at Franklin Mountain. This species appears to be doing very well. The highest Broad-winged Hawk counts this fall were at Region 9's Hook Mountain, maxxing out at over 9000. In Region 5 a new hawkwatch had some fair counts despite very limited coverage.

Inland Shorebirds

We expect shorebirds from coastal areas but inland only Montezuma NWR, where the habitat is actively managed, has consistently attracted them. This season the dry conditions of summer and fall created ample shorebird habitat across the state. Although known more as the center of birders' attention during the dog days of summer, observers still sought out and found significant numbers and variety this season. But as is often the case with this group, success varied widely, with Regions 5, 7 & 8 lamenting the relatively few birds. Most impressive

were the reports totaling 11 Hudsonian Godwits in Regions 1, 2, 3 & 5 and 40 Long-billed Dowitchers in Regions 1, 2 & 3. Very uncommon lakeshore birds, like Ruddy Turnstone (8 locations), Red Knot (3 locations) and Sanderling (8 locations) were unusually widespread. In addition White-rumped Sandpipers were found in six locations with a record 66 in Region 1, Baird's Sandpipers in seven locations, and Western Sandpipers in Regions 1, 2 & 3. Only two Wilson's Phalaropes were found inland but 33 Red-necked in Regions 1, 2 & 3, and 10 Red in Regions 1 & 2 were very high total numbers. Even habitat-poor Region 4 got into the act with reports of Regional rarities American Golden-Plover, Semipalmated Plover, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. Other reports of note were Region 8's fourth Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Rockland County's (Region 9) first American Avocet, a count of 300 Dunlins in Region 3, and a Purple Sandpiper in Cattaraugus County in Region 1, one of very few inland in the state away from the Great Lakes and the Niagara River.

Winter Finches

Numbers of most species of winter finches showed in every Region this season. Although American Goldfinches were exceptionally numerous in Regions 4, 5 & 10, it was the normally scarce Pine Grosbeak that stole the show in most Regions. Flocks appeared in the northern two-thirds of the state with maximum counts of 66 in Region 1, 14 in Region 2, 3 in Region 3, 86 in Region 5, 24 in Region 7, and 30 in Region 8. This qualifies as one of largest movements in decades, if not of all time. Although in generally smaller numbers than Pine Grosbeaks, White-winged Crossbills staged a widespread movement, appearing in all Regions. It was particularly unusual that so many were seen at feeders, no doubt due to a poor cone crop in much of New York as well as in Canada, from where most likely originated.

Interesting Tidbits

From Region 7, banding recoveries since the first Four Brothers Islands birds were banded in 1984, are summarized. All but one were found along the Atlantic Coast and all were well south of New York. The horrific events of 11 Sep in lower Manhattan have caused the indefinite closure of one of New York's best birding hotspots – the EIC in Region 5. Gullwatchers near the power plants on the Niagara River in Region 1 experienced increased scrutiny. On the Canadian side of the river, one birder was questioned by the Ontario Provincial Police while this writer was almost kicked out of the Power Vista on the American side. However, the plant personnel quickly settled down after I explained my behavior and allowed them to look through my scope. No doubt, similar scenarios have played out across the country. Type E botulism was again a major source of concern on Lake Erie. Thousands of birds have likely been killed by this

outbreak. In Region 8 plans are being laid to disperse a huge crow roost in yet another human/bird confrontation. In Region 3 a wonderful concentration of swallows contained an estimated *one million* birds, mostly Tree. Apparently, this spectacle is an annual event in the Montezuma wetlands complex. Finally from Region 7, a most unusual observation of a Red Squirrel capturing and eating a Black-capped Chickadee!

Rarities

As usual Region 10 had the rarest birds this fall, it being difficult to compete with the coastal influence that area enjoys. However, the inland Regions turned in a remarkable set of exciting birds as well, including as many as five Eared Grebes (Regions 1 & 2), nine Cattle Egrets (Regions 1, 2, 3 & 5), four Greater White-fronted Geese (Regions 1, 3 & 5), 73 jaegers (Regions 1, 3, 5 & 7), 10 Sabine's Gulls (Regions 1, 2 & 5), eight Connecticut Warblers (Regions 1, 2, 4 & 9), Bohemian Waxwings in Regions 1, 2, 4, 5, 8 and several flocks in Region 7. Combined with the shorebirds mentioned above, these many discoveries indicates to me that (1) the weather was conducive to birders getting out into the field, (2) the weather brought birds to the state and tempted many of them to linger, (3) birders are getting more and more savvy at finding rarities, and most importantly, (4) we were just plain lucky!

In addition to all those just listed, there were many others. Region One's "gull capital of the world", the Niagara River, produced California Gull for the tenth consecutive year. Black-headed and Franklin's gulls were also found in that Region as well as in Region 2, where those diligent lakewatchers at Hamlin Beach S. P. not infrequently produce a seasonal list of gulls as long as the Niagara River's. Region 1's long overdue first Great Cormorant may have been at the expense of Region 5, where it was missed for the first time in six years. The second Regional Rufous Hummingbird and first Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows since 1983 rounded out a spectacular season in Region 1. Although many of Region 2's rarities are simply "fly-bys" on Lake Ontario, the following list of scintillating birds shows that that area has much more to offer. Last season's Bird-of-the-Season winners, the Wood Storks, lingered into the fall while Great Cormorant, an ibis species, Common Eider, Sandhill Crane, Barn Owl, White-eyed Vireo, and Brewer's Blackbird showed up. Enhancing their fabulous season were a banded Bicknell's Thrush, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, a very rare LeConte's Sparrow, and two Cave Swallows! There are only a handful of records of the latter in New York, with all but one being in the last five years. Region 3 added a Black Vulture, Sandhill Crane, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Their best, however, was a Piping Plover, one of very few found away from the ocean and Great Lakes in the state. The expanding numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in this country have been

widely documented. Sightings in two locations in Region 4, where this species is still quite rare, indicate a continuation of that trend. A Black-backed Woodpecker in that Region is much more remarkable, especially considering the September dates. Hopefully, this NYSARC review species (outside the Adirondacks) is well- documented. Black-legged Kittiwakes are good but not great finds on Lake Ontario. However, adults of the species are decidedly rare that three in Region 5 is very unusual. Gulls highlighted the Region 7 report, including Little and the second Regional Laughing Gull. Region 8 gets Great Cormorant with regularity and that trend continued this fall. A Black Vulture and a Snowy Egret rounded out their rarities. Better advertised on the Internet than Region 1's bird, a Rufous Hummingbird in Region 9 was well- photographed.

Finally, we have reached Region 10 where the paragraph could be as lengthy as for the rest of the state if I let myself get carried away! In short the list is long and it is remarkable. It includes four White-faced Storm Petrels, two individuals of the Great Blue Heron subspecies "Great White Heron" which may represent only the second and third ever in New York, an American White Pelican, a Barnacle Goose (origin is always open to question with this species), Northern Wheatear, Ruff, two Arctic Terns, "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler, an apparent "Pink-sided" Dark-eyed Junco, and another Cave Swallow, this one believed to be of the Caribbean race! In addition there was one more report for each of the following three species which have been found with amazing consistency in recent years: "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal, White-winged Dove, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. A reported Virginia's Warbler, identified after review and discussion, will undergo close NYSARC scrutiny as it would be a first for the state if accepted.

With the long and rich ornithological history that this state has enjoyed, finding first records is becoming more and more difficult. Perhaps the best way to achieve such a goal is to study the "common" birds and determine if they could actually be a much rarer but very similar "sister species". In the not too distant past, late hummingbirds and *Empidonax* flycatchers were usually assumed to be one of the common species (Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Least Flycatcher, for example). Today's birders are too savvy to accept that and they scrutinize anything that is in the least out of the ordinary, such as an unusually late individual. That was the strategy that worked with two western species in Region 10 this season, a Hammond's Flycatcher and two Calliope Hummingbirds!! Both species were carefully photographed and the latter birds were viewed by hundreds. If accepted by NYSARC they both will be additions to the state list and they are my choices for the BOTS award this season. Calliope Hummingbirds have become a regular and increasing fall and winter visitor to the southeastern United States during the last decade, with an accepted record from as close as New Jersey

I am aware of only three accepted records for Hammond's Flycatcher in the Northeast. One was a bird in Rhode Island in late November of 1995, one in Pennsylvania in 1996, and another in Pennsylvania in 2000 (see lead article this *Kingbird* issue for full documentation.) While the relative recentness of these Hammond's Flycatcher sightings could herald a change in status, I am inclined to believe that it is the savvy birders as much as the birds themselves that are the reason for the potential addition to the state checklist.

Literature Cited

Terres, John K. 1982. The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds. New York, NY : Alfred A. Knopf. P150

