

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON 2002

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Weather Effects

It was another hot dry summer. July was the warmest in 47 years in Region 2 and it was the third driest summer on record at Buffalo in Region 1. In Region 10, the precipitation deficit for the first eight months of 2002 was a worrisome ten inches! Seventy forest fires blazed through the Adirondacks during the season. And I thought that was only a problem out west! Although the exceptionally cold and wet May weather continued into early June for most Regions, June ended very warm with this trend continuing through July and most of August. Region 6 was the exception in June with a warm dry start and a very wet finish that flooded streams and marshlands.

Atlas 2000

The middle year of this five-year breeding bird project was a particularly interesting one. In Region 10, Summer Tanager was confirmed nesting at a site where they reportedly nested before. However, that presumed first record was not accepted by the NYSARC. A Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, heard and seen in appropriate habitat in Region 7, is also not on the NYS checklist as a breeder. This bird, or possibly two birds, was present 30 Jul to 24 Aug. The species breeds not far away on the St. Lawrence River in Quebec.

Least Bitterns had a good season with birds found in every reporting Region, including five locations in Region 1, four locations in Region 5, and an impressive six adults at one location in Region 7.

Are more Wilson's Phalaropes be breeding in New York than suspected? The only known nesting site, a farm in Region 7, saw their return there this summer. In addition, three adults and a juvenile were found at another location not far away. Since Wilson's Phalarope is a late spring migrant, birders might assume that June sightings are of birds moving further north or west. Other June sightings this summer included a pair in Region 3, two in Region 2, and a single in Region 1. This is more than usual and *may* be an early indicator of a species that is expanding its breeding range. In any case Wilson's Phalaropes in summer should bear careful watching for possible breeding.

Sedge Wrens put in one of their best showings in years in Regions 1 & 2 and were also up in Regions 5, 6, & 7. Region 1 had their highest count of Henslow's Sparrows since 1967, unfortunately at a site that is threatened with development. Further tempering the good news was the complete absence of the species at the opposite end of the state in Region 8.

Some local first breeding records include Common Raven in Region 2, Common Loon on Skaneateles Lake (Region uncertain), and No. Parula in Dutchess County in Region 9. One recalls that last summer saw the return No. Parula to Region 10 after a long absence. Additional expansion of No. Parula should be looked for elsewhere in the state. Blue Grosbeak, a very rare breeder on Long Island, was confirmed at two sites and was probable at two others in Suffolk Co. in Region 10.

Yellow-breasted Chats are scarce breeders in the state, especially in inland Regions. Thus, the discovery of three singing males within close proximity in Region 1 was a major surprise. Ospreys were believed to have nested in Region 2 which will be a first there when confirmed. Sandhill Crane is still not on New York's list of breeding species but two at each of two locations in Region 2 this summer continues the intriguing possibility that breeding confirmation may not be far off.

I was stunned to learn that the number of birders helping out in Atlas 2000 is only a fraction of what it was in the first Atlas. Since there are many more birders now, it is difficult to understand. There are lots of good reasons to get involved. For starters, it is great experience which can help you to learn identification by both sight and sound. You get to see all sorts of interesting bird behavior as birds are never more animated than during the nesting season. Your observations make an important contribution to our knowledge and understanding and ultimately to conservation of birds and their habitats. Searching for "missing" birds on your list takes you to areas you might otherwise have passed by, areas that can often prove to be quite productive. And of course, there is always the chance for a surprise - like one of the many great finds discussed above. If you are an active birder, there many good reasons to get involved with Atlas 2000. Your help is urgently needed!

Miscellaneous

As usual, summer shorebirding was a mixed bag this season. One of the highlights was the number of Baird's Sandpipers, commented on by three Regional Editors. Region One's count of eight was its highest in 35 years and that was in addition to counts of seven and six at two other localities. Region 3 includes the often productive wetlands of Montezuma NWR, so the count of five at the refuge being the highest in five years is significant. Region 5 chimed in with a high count of six Baird's while Region 9 added two and Region 10 had its usual smattering.

A count of 30 Worm-eating Warblers in Region 9 makes it obvious where the stronghold of that species is in New York. Nesting at only a fractional percentage of what they used to, Common Nighthawks are now mainly watched for during their fall migration. Unfortunately, those numbers are also plummeting with very low maximum of 83 in Region 8.

Often highlighted in these pages for its declining trend, Black Tern did little to alleviate concern this season. Two major sources of disappointment were the complete absence of breeders in Region 2 and a very low maximum at a traditional Region 6 staging area. The news that most of the artificial nesting platforms placed in Region 6 marshes went unused is also disheartening. These negatives are only slightly countered by the high counts at Montezuma NWR. and the somewhat surprising breeding confirmation in Region 7.

Our Birds Under Threat

Not since the days of DDT have our birds faced such grave and immediate threats as they do now. The last two years have seen an alarming number of fish-eating waterbirds killed on Lake Erie, the result of an outbreak of Type E botulism. As Region 1 Editor Mike Morgante has documented in these pages, the diversity of species affected is surprising and even included one Red-tailed Hawk this season. Type E botulism has even spread to Lake Ontario where it was confirmed in a few gulls. Over 100 dead birds were found on Lake Erie this summer and with the knowledge that fall usually brings the greatest mortality, it is sobering to consider what may happen next season.

While we may have some idea of the number of birds affected by the botulism outbreak since many dead birds wash up on shore, determining the effect of West Nile Virus (WNV) is much more problematic. A few birders have commented to me on the greatly reduced number of American Crows and Blue Jays. While I have not personally noted a decrease in jays, it has *seemed* like there are fewer crows around. And while I am not ready to dismiss such casual observations, hard data is still necessary to determine the true effect upon bird populations. The fact that WNV has spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast in only three years is alarming. Let's hope that the birds can rapidly develop some immunity to this deadly disease.

Rarities

American Avocets are still on the NYSARC's review list, despite the increasing number of reports in the last 10 to 20 years. Unfortunately, without birders following through with documentation, that status may not change for a while, even if it is considered a "no-brainer" to identify. As many as 20 Avocets were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, & 10 with a most impressive ten at two localities in Region 3.

Birders turned up some greater rarities than normal for the summer season. Leading the way was at least one Brown Pelican moving around Lake Ontario which was a first for Regions 2 & 6 and Region 5's second. This species was also noted at several spots on the Canadian side of the lake. Formerly very rare, even on the coast of New York, Brown Pelicans have become annual in Region 10. A Bullock's Oriole in Region 1 will be the first for the Niagara

Frontier if accepted by NYSARC while a well-documented Least Tern, only the Region's third, was found dead on its fourth day there. The Eared Grebe capital of New York, the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant held an unprecedented four birds this summer. Continuing the trend of recent years, Region 2's Hamlin Beach Lakewatch recorded another Long-tailed Jaeger and a Black-headed Gull. Region 2's Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was even more unusual in spring while Marbled Godwit and Yellow-headed Blackbird are always good finds. One of the most bizarre birding events in recent years began with the discovery of a White-winged Dove in a rural area of Region 2. While looking for that bird, someone discovered an Eurasian Collared-Dove - the well-known "Patagonia picnic table" effect! These two Regional firsts were seen by many birders, often in the same yard, and both were frequently heard singing. Although the Eurasian Collared-Dove is not on the official New York State checklist, there have been multiple sightings on Long Island, where the possibility of escape is considered greater. The question now becomes, how will the NYSARC treat these two records? Both species are kept in captivity and their concurrent appearance in the same yard is somewhat suspect. At the same time, neither was banded and no captive source for the birds could be found. A King Rail in Region 3 was a great bird, made better by its occasional wanderings into view of birders over a three-week period. A most unusual for summer Pomarine Jaeger and two Cattle Egrets highlighted Region 5's list. The two American White Pelicans in Region 6 completed their sweep of North American pelicans this season. Region 7's Three-toed Woodpecker was not only a great rarity but a great Atlas find as well. Region 9's King Rail was reported from early June well into July, hopefully nesting, while the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow found in early June was undoubtedly a migrant. Pelagic species highlighted Region 10's list of rarities, include an albatross species and a South Polar Skua. With very few records in the state, two separate White-faced Ibises in that Region was an incredible discovery. The prairie-breeding Franklin's Gull that Region 10 had is a great summer find of this declining species. A Loggerhead Shrike there was their first since 1994 and the occurrence of one or two Common Ravens now means that all ten Regions have had recent records of the species.

My choice for Bird of the Season goes to two birds - Region 2's Eurasian Collared-Dove and Region 10's breeding Summer Tanagers. While the collared-dove may be considered suspect, which could preclude its addition to the state checklist, its occurrence along with the White-winged Dove certainly created some great excitement for New York's birders. Equally exciting in this mid-year of Atlas 2000, the nesting Summer Tanagers were reportedly documented with photographs and hopefully this time can be officially added to New York's list of breeding species.