

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON 2002

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Weather Effects

As one might expect for this season, it started summery and ended wintery. Of course, rarely does the weather do what we expect. September averaged as much as 6.6 degrees above normal, making it the warmest in Buffalo and Rochester in over forty years. There were few significant groundings of songbird migrants with weak flight peaks noted on 15 and 18 Sep in Region 1. On the night of 3 - 4 Oct, a large movement of passerines was heard overhead in Region 1 while Region 3 noted a very strong thrush flight the same night.

While some western Regions were drier than normal, the eastern half of the state had enough rain to break that area's drought. Several Regions reported above average snow in November with a major lake-effect event in the Tug Hill Plateau of Region 6.

The Good and the Bad

Several Regional Editor's commented on the lackluster quality of the season. The loonwatch on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 had the lowest total in its ten-year history. There were few Rough-legged Hawks, jaegers, Northern Shrikes, or Red-breasted Nuthatches on Lake Ontario. Exceptions were the 10 Parasitics observed at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 on 27 Oct and the scattered reports of Pomarines and Parasitics from Regions 9 & 10. Winter finches were very scarce with only a single report of each crossbill, four Pine Siskin reports, and six of Evening Grosbeak. Not a single redpoll was reported. Bohemian Waxwings also drew a blank. Ducks were noted only in low numbers in Regions 2, 5, & 8, while Region 9's hawkwatch totals were disappointing. While the intensity of fall passerine migration seldom matches that of spring, diversity, the frequency of exciting finds is often better. However, this season proved disappointing in that regard as well!

The news is not all bad. Inland areas of Region 1 noted higher numbers of ducks, particularly Northern Shoveler and Ruddy Duck. Region 7 had one of the state's highest counts ever of Ring-necked Duck - 2800 to 3000. The annual Wood Duck count at Region 9's Bashakill Marsh again tallied well over a thousand. 7000-9400 Brant flying past Hamlin Beach SP on 21 Oct provided the main thrust of a decent showing of that species on Lake Ontario. Though some may argue that this is not actually "good" news, large numbers of Snow Geese were observed in Regions 5, 7, & 8. In fact another state record count of this species was made in Region 7 - 57,000! John Peterson shares with us the method used by the observer to come up with this number. As with identifying rarities, counting large numbers of birds should be done carefully and with thought given to the method. This record count of Snow Geese is exemplary in that regard. The

hawkwatch news was better at Franklin Mountain in Region 4 where above-average numbers for almost all species were tallied and a new fall hawkwatching site was discovered on Lake Ontario in Region 6. Lastly, the mild September provided an extended breeding season for some birds, as noted in Regions 1 & 7.

Now for some more bad news. West Nile Virus (WNV) and Type E botulism – the words should strike fear into the heart of every birder. With WNV, the focus of government health officials has been on the disease's potential harm to humans, in spite of the fact that one poses a greater risk to himself every time he gets behind the wheel of his vehicle! With birds, however, the effect of the disease is potentially devastating. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to get a handle on the mortality rate in crows, jays, raptors, chickadees, and a long list of other species. Type E botulism is a different matter. Hundreds of birds washing up on the shore of Lake Erie provide a sudden and quite visible consequence of this deadly toxin. Thousands more water birds perish and never wash ashore. The disease has clearly spread to Lake Ontario where the even higher water bird population there will now be under threat. Please read Mike Morgante's Region 1 report for more details.

Rarities

For those who enjoy the thrill of discovering a rarity, fall provides your best opportunity. As previously outlined the season was relatively disappointing, but there were still several birds to get excited about.

While Northern Gannet appears almost annually at Region 2's Hamlin Beach lakewatch, this season's total of 11 is most impressive. More unusual was the Northern Gannet reported over Lake Champlain, only the second record for Region 7. Numbers of "Richardson's" Canada Goose again were found at Iroquois NWR in Region 1 with a high count of 25, comparable with recent falls. Summer sightings of Brown Pelican were repeated this season in Regions 2 & 5, believed to be different individuals. Unfortunately unconfirmed, the reports of Brown Pelican on Cayuga Lake could have been the first ever recorded in Region 3. The only American White Pelicans in NY were found in Region 3 – a pair. No longer on the NYSARC review list, a Great Cormorant was only the second ever in Region 1. Considered by some to be over-reported and by others to be overlooked, a Pacific Loon was discovered in Region 2. Perhaps the best known of this season's rarities were the three (!) different juvenile Purple Gallinules found in Regions 3, 7, & 9. These birds were seen over several weeks, were widely reported on email list services, and were vigorously chased by birders from every corner of the state. An account of the Region 7 bird appears in *The Kingbird*, Vol. 52, pp. 327-329. A brief visit by a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Brooklyn could be NY's second or third but unfortunately, this single-observer sighting has not as yet been submitted to NYSARC. As many as four California Gulls were reported from the Niagara River in Region 1, although only two were documented for NY. This is the 11th straight year for the species on the river. "Good" gulls become even better (= rarer) when found away from the coast and Great Lakes. Region 3 tallied a Laughing Gull, a Black-headed Gull, and one of the rarest inland, a Black-legged Kittiwake. Another inland Black-legged Kittiwake was over Lake

Champlain, only the second for Region 7. Region 2's Eurasian Collared-Dove, first found in late spring, continued well into the fall season. Hot on the heels of last year's first state record (pending NYSARC review), another Calliope Hummingbird was reported in Manhattan. Unfortunately, this individual was not as accommodating as last year's bird. *Selasphorus* hummingbirds have become nearly annual in the state with most in Regions 9 & 10 near New York City. The pattern continued this fall with a Rufous in Region 9 and a "probable" Rufous in Region 10. Two Ash-throated Flycatchers in Region 10 continued the trend there in recent years. Cave Swallow has become annual in fall at Cape May, New Jersey with increasing reports elsewhere along the coast and even inland on the Great Lakes. This season saw record numbers (over 100!) reported in Connecticut with a spillover of five reports in Region 10. Region 2 reported this species for the third time in four years and the Niagara River was the site of Region 1's first, a bird that was seen perched and photographed. Identification of Bicknell's Thrush away from breeding territories is exceptionally difficult. Banders in Region 2 undoubtedly used measurements to aid them in identifying one this fall. Yellow-throated Warblers have shown a pattern of late fall occurrences in the state. November birds in Regions 1 & 8 reinforced that pattern this season. The Audubon's form of Yellow-rumped Warbler is a very rare find in NY – one was reported in Region 10 this season. A Western Tanager, seen briefly and photographed in Region 3, would be one of very few records upstate in NY.

Bird of the Season

For a few days this fall, a highly publicized bird at Jones Beach SP on Long Island was thought to be New York's first Hermit Warbler. Extensively studied and photographed, focus shifted to the possibility that this was a Hermit x Townsend's Warbler hybrid. West Coast birders, familiar with such hybrids which are not infrequent, were split on the identification of the warbler. A few felt it was pure enough to be called a Hermit, but others disagreed. Still others thought that the bird may not be a first generation hybrid but that it still had some genes from both Hermit and Townsend's warblers. Please see the lead articles in this issue for further coverage

It is rare when inland Regions get a shorebird that can lure coastal birders into making the long drive westward. However, that was the case this fall. A Region 2 birder had been diligently searching through flocks of Pectoral Sandpipers for years, trying to find a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. This season, he struck paydirt at Irondequoit Bay and a lovely juvenile of that species was enjoyed by many over the course of its four-day stay and photographs of the bird were shared over the Internet. A detailed account of this sighting appeared in *The Kingbird*, Vol. 52, pp. 330-333.

My choice for the bird of the season goes to these two birds - the warbler, whether a Hermit or a hybrid it is still a first, and the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper at Irondequoit Bay, New York's first inland record.

NOTES

The quarterly "Highlights" analysis of the previous season has been continuously presented in these pages by Willie D'Anna starting in Sep 1997 (Vol. 47 No.3). He had been the Region 1 Editor beginning with the first volume of 1995 and continued as such through Vol 48 No.1, pulling double duty until being replaced as Region 1 Editor in June of 1998. Willie has decided to take a well deserved breather and this will be his last contribution to this column. However, I am certain he will remain active in the field, and of course will continue in his capacity as a member of NYSARC.

The Federation owes Willie a huge vote of "thanks" for his incisive and thorough commentary on the previous season's happenings. His successor will have a hard act to follow.

Jane Denker Graves has relinquished her post as Region 8 Editor. Her first contribution in that job came in Volume 44, No. 1, Jan 1994, her last in Volume 52, No.4, Dec 2002, making for a total of nine years of selfless coverage. Her reports were always keenly analytical and all inclusive.

She is also currently the Region 8 Atlas 2000 Coordinator, in which capacity she will continue

The Federation would like to extend to Jane its appreciation for the many years of service to the organization and The Kingbird in particular. Thank you, Jane.

The Editor