

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SPRING 2003

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The weather in Spring 2003 was unusual in that it was quite consistent throughout all ten Regions. The brutal winter refused to release its grasp for the first half of March, with temperatures below average; Saranac Lake reached -20 F. A warm latter half of March resulted in monthly temperatures near average. The first half of April was cold for all Regions, especially the first week, with a widespread ice storm striking many Regions. It paralyzed Region 2 with loss of power for several days. The average monthly temperatures were below normal for the month in most Regions due to the cold first week. The precipitation for March and April was below average, with Regions 1 and 2 being the driest in 68 and 100 years, respectively. For all of the state, May was colder and, for much of the state, wetter than usual.

The weather delayed snow-melt, ice-out, shrub- blooming, and leaf-out. Often the weather, marked by northerly winds or cold temperatures, hampered weekend outings leading to few days of excellent birding opportunities, fewer observers, and few birds to observe. The arrival table had an unprecedented number of species, 38, nearly half, with > 2 standard deviation. Of these, 24 species were late, about one-third of the total. Still, 14 species were early by > 2 standard deviation, with 25 Regional record early dates. All Regions were consistently late compared with last year.

In the Winter 2002-2003 Highlights, DiCostanzo (KB 53:2) reported the start of a Red-necked Grebe invasion. As winter continued so did the invasion, excepting in northern New York. Birds seemed to find open water. 206 Red-necked Grebes found Dunkirk Harbor in early March. Region 9 reported an "incredible influx". Region 10 indicates numbers did not reach historic maxima but the editor was unequivocally impressed with the large numbers and especially with many fresh water sightings. A return flight was bound to occur, and it did. The BOS April Count coincided with a traditional time frame of the species' return and the Niagara Region reported a local record high of 1384 on 13 Apr. Region 1 compiler Mike Morgante remarked, "the sudden appearance of this species in March was related to the freezing of Lakes Huron and Superior, similar to 1994." This occurrence ought to be watched for in the future. Interestingly, the variance in Regional expectations our state is remarkable: Region 9 was content with 45, but the count of 175 on Cayuga Lake was just "high", and 726 and 976 on Lake Ontario were just part of a "few good days." Region 7 made no mention of Red-necked Grebes, but had the consolation of Western Grebe. Region 10 had both.

Double-crested Cormorant breeding increases. Great Egret was reported early in Region 1 and 3 and saw its earliest return to rookery in Region 1. The nest count there reached a new high. Glossy Ibis was reported in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9 and 10. The one in Region 8 was "exciting", the one in Region 9 was the first in Dutchess County in over a decade, and the five that lingered north of

Montezuma NWR on Armitage Road had several, raising hopes that they would remain to breed.

A fierce winter held back the waterfowl. When warmer weather and the right conditions came, waterfowl did not linger but moved on quickly to the breeding grounds. Region 1 reports a major movement of Tundra Swans, and Regions 1 and 3 noted massive movements of Canada Geese in short time spans. Region 5 reports large flocks of Snow Geese, including many in the eastern parts of the Region, but numbers were significantly down in Region 6, perhaps due to the wind conditions. Trumpeter Swans continue in central and western NY. It is now a seemingly well-established breeding species and regular winter visitant. Region 1 and 3 had decent counts of N. Pintail.

Region 10 notes a surprising gathering of over 10,000 Black Scoters off Montauk. It reminds me of the unexplained Black Scoter movement of 11,635 past Hamlin Beach on 7 Nov 1997 as documented by Ewald and Sherony in *Braddock Bay Raptor Research* of Nov 2000. Several Regions indicated odd locations or counts of scoters this season. Long-tailed Duck put in a good showing in many Regions, including smaller lakes in Region 5 and 7. Perhaps they were also being pushed out of traditional overwintering locales on the Great Lakes along with the Red-necked Grebes. The BOS April Count in Region 1 produced a Region-wide total of 15805 Long-tailed Ducks, a record high for NYS, but with the bulk of the count, 15,200, tallied across many miles of Lake Ontario shoreline rather than at a single locale.

On the hawkwatching front, Ripley seems to be contending with Braddock Bay and Derby Hill for variety and rarities. Ripley produced Black Vulture, as did Braddock Bay and Derby Hill, and two Mississippi Kites in late May. Derby Hill added Swainson's Hawk. It also produced a new season high for Turkey Vulture, which also put in good showings at the other two hawkwatches. Derby Hill, Braddock Bay, Hamburg, and Ripley all had good totals for both eagles. There was also a fair number of Bald Eagle sightings in Region 10. A Region 3 backyard had a single day tally of 12 Golden Eagles, and Ripley reported a subadult Golden Eagle on 30 May. The hawk flight at Derby Hill was the best since 1995 but had a poor volume of Broad-winged Hawks, especially considering that Braddock Bay had 12,450 in one day. Regions 8 and 9 concur with Derby Hill's low Broad-winged count.

Regions 8 and 9 reported low numbers of Common Moorhen. Sandhill Crane was well reported at the local hawkwatches and elsewhere in central and western NY. Regions 1 and 2 each had nine reports. Region 3 is now only reporting the first, last and maxima. Region 5 had seven reports, including one that lingered for two weeks adding to the hope it would remain to breed. The species was not recorded in the eastern part of the state.

Perhaps the most noteworthy family for the spring migration was the shorebirds, or should I say the lack of them. It is easily summed up in John M.C. Peterson's comment, "Shorebirds were scarce and late." Even common species were scant. This is reflected in the arrival table, which also shows a patchy shorebird picture. It however does not show the often times shockingly small numbers of shorebirds; one must read the Regional reports to get an idea. Regional comments again illustrate the varied Regional expectations across the

State. Morgante states, "notably few shorebirds reported in the Region this spring," yet Region 1 reported the highest number of species, 18. Likewise, Griffith writes "Shorebirdwise it was a horrible spring" yet Region 2 reported 16 species. The reasons for the lateness of shorebirds are unclear. Reasons for the low counts might include a few factors, but particularly relatively few mudflats. Snow cover remained late, ponds retained ice-cover, and streams and rivers were flooded and remained elevated in this rainy May. This produced flooded fields for habitat, which yielded the largest shorebird counts in Region 1 and 5. Peterson describes the problems shorebirds face when looking for flooded fields, including changing agricultural practices increasing numbers of tiled and drained fields.

A variety of scarcer gulls was tallied., Iceland, Lesser Black-backed and Glaucous gulls were widely reported. Region 2 had four Black-headed Gulls. Region 3 had both Franklin's Gull and Little Gull. Region 7 also reported a Black-headed Gull, its first. Region 8 had adult Franklin's Gull. Region 10 tallied adult Black-headed Gull, adult California Gull and an Iceland/Thayer's type, , among others. It is amazing to wonder how birds seem to discover and communicate information about erratic food sources. Be sure to read of the immense concentration of gulls attracted to a starfish kill and a clam wash-up in Region 10. An apparent overpopulation of shad in Dunkirk Harbor in Region 1 provided the food venue for impressive numbers of waterbirds, including gulls.

Caspian Terns were record early in Regions 1 and 2. Morgante suggests the reason for the arrival and numbers might be due to expanding numbers breeding in Ontario on Lake Erie. A Region 7 statement that four Black Terns is "encouraging" does not sound entirely convincing.

The Monk Parakeet population is expanding northward in Region 9; but the first ones since 1975 in Region 1 might not be Bronx/Westchester overshoots. Barn Owl was reported in Region 1, 3 and 10. However, the ones in Region 1 both ended the season as specimens. Short-eared Owl was confirmed breeding. N. Saw-whet Owl reports are encouraging, and they might be confirmed more often as a breeder if FNYSSBC were to coordinate "toot routes" to survey for this owl. The Northern Hawk Owl lingered to establish a NYS late date. The decades-old trend of declining Com. Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will continue.

Despite the West Nile Virus, Fish Crows seem to be doing well in Region 3, a high count of 18, and Region 5, where the "population seems to be maintaining itself". Purple Martin was record early in Region 2, though the birds are likely to have perished in first week of April. Region 5 has an alarming comment about declining numbers of occupied martin houses. Region 8 recorded "new breeding colonies of Cliff Swallow" and Region 6 estimated over 100 at the Massena power dam.

The Region 3 counts of Gray-Cheeked and Swainson's thrushes suggest that the peak arrival for many thrushes was late May. Incredible counts of Gray-Cheeked and Swainson's thrushes were made using the acoustic monitoring of avian night flight calls provided by OldBird Software (www.oldbird.org). It would be interesting to coordinate point counts in all ten Regions using this software. Few reports were received of Tennessee Warbler in Region 5 and none in Regions 7 or 8. Nashville Warbler was widespread, with good counts in Regions 3, 5 and 6. Pine Warbler was early, with decent counts attracting comments in several

Regions. Cape May Warbler was in “very low numbers” in Region 2, reported just once in Region 5, and unreported in Regions 8 and 9. Similarly, Bay-breasted Warbler was low in Regions 2, 7 and 8. Prothonotary was found in Regions 1, 5 and 10. Region 10 had a large number of very early warblers, which skewed some of the arrival table data in the landbird section, e.g. Ovenbird, which might have been an overwintering bird.

Clay-colored Sparrow was recorded in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9; a great showing this season. Perhaps foreshadowing breeding expansion in NYS?

Forced indoors by the April ice storms and general bad weather, many birders watched their feeders and found Fox Sparrows. Given that it was a statewide storm, it was not surprising to find excellent numbers in most Regions, though it was not mentioned in Regions 9 and 10. It is pleasant to see so many of these birds. In this case, a good day for Fox Sparrow watchers was probably a bad day for Fox Sparrows. At least feeders provided food. Other early migrants, such as Am. Woodcock, E. Phoebe, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, E. Bluebird, and Am. Robin and must have been especially hard hit by the same ice storm.

“Winter finch” reports were sparse, but this is not surprising given the few winter reports. In view of this, the scattered May reports of Pine Siskin in Regions 1, 2, and 8, despite the fact that they were not reported in March or April, is surprising. Regions 3, 5, and 8 reported high counts of American Goldfinch.

Best of the Rest

Pacific Loon was recorded in Regions 2, 3, and 10. Great Cormorant was found in Region 2. Snowy Egret appeared in Region 3, Cattle Egret in Regions 3 and 5, and Little Blue Heron in Region 9. Ross’s Goose was found in Regions 1, 2 and 3, where it is now almost expected annually; Barrow’s Goldeneye in Regions 6, 7 and 10; a hybrid male Common Merganser x Common Goldeneye in Region 6; and a Tufted Duck in Region 5. Gyrfalcon overwintered in Region 3. King Rail and Ruff were located in Region 10, Willet in Regions 1 and 3, and Sanderling and Western Sandpiper in Region 7. South Polar Skua, Dovekie and Atlantic Puffin were noted in Region 10. Eurasian Collared-Dove came back to last year’s site in Region 2. There was an Eastern Kingbird longevity record plus sightings of Loggerhead Shrike and Sedge Wren in Region 1. Common Raven, singing Bicknell’s Thrush, and Varied Thrush were found in Region 10. Bohemian Waxwing and Yellow-breasted Chat were noted in Region 3. And finally, 2 Blue Grosbeaks in Region 1, a Dickcissel in Region 5, an aberrant, “spectacled” Dark-eyed Junco in Region 7, and a Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 5 round out this list.

A large number of ‘minor’ rarities were recorded this spring, but no bird jumps out as an exceptional Bird of the Season (BOTS). Candidates would include: Region 1’s Monk Parakeets, Region 2’s Roseate Tern, Region 5’s first Chuck-will’s-widow, Region 7’s first Regional record of Black-headed Gull, Region 8’s lingering Northern Hawk Owl, Region 9’s Manx Shearwater or Region 10’s White Ibis. If forced on the issue, I’d give the nod to the **Chuck-will’s-widow** in Region 5, a bird found in the backyard by one of our youngest birders and enjoyed by many, thanks to her welcoming family.