

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SUMMER SEASON –2003

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The Weather

June was a cool and wet month across the state, continuing a trend begun in May. The average temperature statewide was the coldest in the past ten years, two degrees below average. Hand in hand with the cool weather was precipitation. Western and central regions reporting frequent light rain, while downstate Regions were hit harder, with, for example, 8" inches of rain in White Plains(R9), about 4.6" above normal, and a record 10.27" in R10. July temperatures were generally normal or somewhat cooler, although Regions 7 and 8 experienced warm spells. Four Regions reported below average precipitation and four others above. August was the second warmest and the wettest statewide in the last ten years. The western part of the state was drier, with the rain scattered. Many of the Regional reports have interesting observations on how the season's weather impacted breeding birds and food crops

Breeding Birds

As usual, much of the birding focus during the summer of 2003 was on breeding activity spurred by the fourth year of Atlas 2000. A significant highlight this year was New York State's first documented breeding of Sandhill Cranes, with a pair of adults and one chick found in the Town of Savannah in Region 2. The increasing occurrence of this species in western and central New York had led to speculation that breeding was imminent.

Always of concern is the status of grassland breeding birds, due particularly to the intense development pressure in many areas that results in habitat parcels too small to support viable populations. As a result, there has been a continuing long-term decline in many grassland species. Henslow's Sparrow numbers were again down statewide, with a single colony in Region 3, birds at two locations in Regions 1 and 6, and "a very poor year" in Region 2, the only reports. The extirpation of our breeding population remains a real concern, mirroring the disappearance of the breeding population in nearby Ontario, Canada..

Somewhat surprisingly, the wet weather early in the breeding season may have benefited certain grassland species in some locations. Region 4 Editor Spencer Hunt mentions that many fields couldn't be cut as early as usual, which may have led to the large numbers of Bobolinks reported there later in the season. Perhaps this also led to the breeding success of Savannah Sparrows, Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks reported by Region 8 Editor Will Yandik. Another encouraging sign was a count of 12-14 Sedge Wrens in Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties in Region 6, the highest count there since 1997.

A species definitely on the upswing in the state is Clay-colored Sparrow, with reports this summer from 7 of the state's 10 Regions, with 30+ singing males at Fort Drum and "unprecedented numbers" in Region 2. Prothonotary Warbler was reported from 6 Regions, with breeding confirmed in Region 5 and in somewhat out of range in Region 9.

Species continuing a decreasing trend in many Regions included Blue-winged Teal, Common Moorhen, Black Tern, Common Nighthawk, Whip-poor-will and Golden-winged Warbler. The long-standing Chuck-will's Widow colony at Jones Beach in western Suffolk County, where New York's first breeders were found in 1975, may have fallen victim to the fungus disease which has decimated the Japanese Black Pines along the barrier beach. No birds were reported from this location, although there were reports further east on Long Island. Wilson's Phalarope did not follow up on the breeding success of previous years, as no potential breeders were reported in Region 7, where breeding had been previously confirmed, or in Regions 1, 2 and 3, where possible breeders were present last summer. The Piping Plover nesting protection program at Jones Beach has benefited the plovers as well as a returning colony of Least Terns, this year up to an encouraging 450+ pairs. On a positive note, both species of cuckoos were widely reported in good numbers.

Raptors are always sought after breeders. An encouraging sign this summer is the continuing increase of Bald Eagles, which were reported from all but one Region, with new breeding areas in several Regions and a general increase in numbers widely reported. Only one active nest reported in Region 6 compared with six last year was a contrary note. Region 10's summering Bald Eagles come with a caveat. For the second time, NYC park officials, despite a lack of evidence that eagles had ever historically bred in the area, attempted to introduce eagles into the city, with four fledglings from Wisconsin introduced at Inwood Hill Park. Read the disastrous results of last year's attempt in the R10 report. Cooper's Hawks, on the other hand, after an absence of 50+ years, have moved back into Region 10 with no direct assistance, with breeding confirmed at three locations ranging from The Bronx to eastern Long Island. Merlin is also rapidly increasing in the state, breeding at two locations each in Regions 5 and 7, the first breeding record outside the Adirondacks in Region 4, and possible breeders in Regions 1 and 3 — an amazing increase given that the first firm confirmation of breeding in the state was as recent as 1992.

An intriguing possible breeding report from Region 1 began with a good record on its own merits. A Western Kingbird, unusual anytime away from the coast, and especially rare in summer, was found in Chautauqua County. Following its discovery, a nonbirding local resident reported having seen it nesting, but never saw its partner. A full account of this incident will appear in the March 2004 issue of *The Kingbird*.

A down note in the breeding season was the result of a habitat restoration program in southeastern Westchester County. A reintroduction program for salt-marsh grasses led to the destruction of a productive fresh-water area which had previously supported a pair of breeding King Rails, critically "Endangered" on a

state level, as well as breeding Least Bitterns, a state species of "Concern". The outcome is a reminder that in this age of human impact, even the best-intentioned programs may have an unfortunate local result.

Finally, the continued surveys documenting the avifaunal richness of Fort Drum in Region 6 give intriguing estimates of breeding populations of many species, such as 60-70 Common Nighthawks, greater than 200 Whip-poor-wills, 5-6 pairs of Red-headed Woodpeckers, increasing numbers of Prairie Warblers, 4-5 singing male Cerulean Warblers, the previously-mentioned 30+ singing male Clay-colored Sparrows, about 100 singing male Vesper Sparrows, about 35+ singing Grasshopper Sparrows, and 5 singing Henslow's Sparrows. These surveys lead one to hope that further documentation and preservation of the property will be ensured for the future.

Shorebird Migration

The summer season links the northward passage of breeding-bound shorebirds as well as the beginning of the return passage of south bound adults. As expected, the coastal areas of Region 10 hosted the widest variety, with locally uncommon American Avocet, Ruff and Red-necked Phalarope reported, although the former two in lower numbers than some recent years. Upstate areas reported mixed results, with Region 7 hosting a surprising variety, especially at the recently opened Noblewood Park, and Region 8 reporting uncommonly high local concentrations. Higher than normal water levels at many locations in Regions 1 and 5 resulted in a downturn in shorebird variety and numbers. Notable records upstate included late spring Willets in Regions 1 and 3, three American Avocets in Region 1, Red-necked Phalarope in Region 3, and high numbers of Baird's Sandpiper in Regions 1, 5, 7 and especially Region 3, with a state-record count of 22 at Montezuma on 26 Aug. In contrast to some recent years when Asian strays have provided the excitement, a Wilson's Plover present for two days in early June at Mecox Bay in Suffolk County was the season's rarity highlight.

Pelagic species

A wide variety of seabirds was reported from offshore in Region 10, with reasonable numbers of Cory's, Greater and Sooty shearwaters in June, and reports of Northern Fulmar and Manx Shearwater. The accumulation of evidence has shown that in the right season and conditions White-faced Storm-Petrel can be expected in low numbers, and an August trip to Hudson Canyon bore this out with a single bird seen well. Also seen on this trip was a single Audubon's Shearwater, another species that has come to be expected on late summer trips that reach warm water. Another summer specialty was a South Polar Skua seen on a trip south of Montauk Point. It was not a particularly good year for onshore (birds seen from shore) pelagics, other than the expected Wilson's Storm-Petrels, but the regular shearwaters were only seen in small numbers, and a scattering of Parasitic Jaeger sightings was supplemented by single onshore sightings of Pomarine and Long-tailed jaegers

Interesting Summer strays, wanderers and rarities

Region 1's Batavia Waste Water Treatment Plant again hosted 1-2 Eared Grebes. These now expected summer visitors leads to speculation that New York's first breeding record may be in the not-too-distant future. An unseasonal Great Cormorant provided the first summer record for that Region and only the third overall, while a Cattle Egret was the Region's first since 1989. *Oporornis* warblers were the highlight in Region 2. The Connecticut Warbler banded at Kaiser-Manitou Beach in August paled in comparison to the well-photographed adult male MacGillivray's Warbler banded there in early June, only the second record for New York State. Another Connecticut Warbler, this one banded in early June on Staten Island, was a rare spring record for the eastern part of the state. Wandering gulls included Little in Regions 2, 5 and 7 (six reported!); Black-headed Gull in Regions 7 (only the second Regional record) and 10; upstate Laughing Gulls in Regions 2 and 3; Lesser Black-backed in Region 2 and a highly unseasonal Glaucous Gull in Region 10. Aside from the breeding pair in Region 2, Sandhill Cranes were reported from four other Regions spanning the state, from westerly Regions 1 and 3, where the species is more regular, to the southeast in Region 10, and to the north, where a sighting in Region 7 was a first Franklin County record. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers staged a mini-invasion on 5 Jul, with an adult male in Region 7 and an immature in Region 9, first and second Regional records, respectively. Another was described by nonbirders in late July in Region 10. Single Golden Eagles were reported in Regions 3 and 5, the latter a first summer record for the Region. Region 5's first Chuck-will's Widow lingered from spring just into the summer season. Downstate, oddities from Region 9 included wanderers from the south, Blue Grosbeak and Summer Tanager, and one from the west, Rufous Hummingbird, which is more expected now in late fall and early winter than summer. Region 10 hosted a long-staying female King Eider at Jamaica Bay, an elusive White Ibis, and mid-summer Lark Sparrow, Evening Grosbeak, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

Miscellaneous

An early report of the western subspecies of Willet in R10 highlights that our knowledge of the species in NY is a work in progress. Their current ubiquity on Long Island's South Shore masks the fact that the eastern subspecies has only bred in NY since 1966. Historical fall maxima (presumed to be entirely the western subspecies) were typically in the mid-teens. Now, large late-summer congregations of Willets are regularly found. Do these represent an increase in "western" Willets, or the staging of the now larger breeding population of "eastern" Willets before heading south, as we see with Black Skimmers and Laughing Gulls? Future observations may shed more light on the situation, complicated, however, by the fact that the two subspecies may not always be separable in the field.

The R7 report discusses a Savannah Sparrow found where a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was last summer. It was heard singing a "hybrid" song, with

the typical Savannah beginning and a Nelson's Sharp-tailed's finish. The bird appeared to be a standard Savannah, so presumably hybridization didn't occur, but it's interesting to speculate on whether this is a case of a Savannah Sparrow learning part of its repertoire from the sharp-tailed present there last year.

Finally, perhaps in a case of "first highlights" anxiety, I find myself torn between two Birds of the Season. Therefore, I'll exercise editorial discretion, and in a nod to the somewhat dual nature of the season, award a "Breeding Bird of the Season" (BBOTS?) to New York's first breeding Sandhill Cranes, and a standard "Bird of the Season" to the second state record of MacGillivray's Warbler.