

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – FALL 2003

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The Weather

Unquestionably, the weather event – and in many ways the birding event – of the season was Hurricane Isabel, which roared through western New York on 19 Sep following landfall in North Carolina the previous day. Although the center of the storm actually passed just to the west of the state, its effects were observed in every Region. The strong winds associated with the system were felt as far east as Lake Champlain in Region 7, where southeast winds gusting up to 60 mph resulted in 8-foot waves. More on Isabel's birds below.

Apart from Isabel, September was warm over much of the state, and for the most part dry, except for downstate Regions 4, 9 and 10, which would have had above average precipitation even without Isabel's contribution. Several Regions noted that winds lacked a northerly component and were unfavorable for migration. October tended toward cool and wet. November's temperatures rebounded and were unseasonably warm in many locations.

The Hurricane's Impact

While every Region noted a meteorological affect from Isabel, the story was a bit different regarding the avian impact. Southeastern Regions 4, 8 and 9 experienced mainly "light rain and high hopes", in the words of R8 editor Will Yandik. In Region 9, a Black Skimmer and Parasitic Jaeger were possibly storm-related. Coastal Region 10, despite a phalanx of observers lined along the South Shore of Long Island, produced little west of Shinnecock Inlet, where 1 Bridled Tern and 2 Sooty Terns passed by on the 19th. A possible Sandwich Tern there on the 20th preceded three Sandwich Terns further east at Mecox Bay on the 24th.

The real excitement was upstate. Prior hurricanes have shown that most storm-driven birds are found to the east of the storm's center, so anticipation was especially high in Regions 1, 2 and 3. The storm did not disappoint. Highlights from post-storm birding included Wilson's Storm-Petrels in Regions 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7; Bridled (a Regional first) and Sooty Terns in Region 2; two Black-capped Petrels, Brown Pelican, Black Skimmer and Royal Tern (a Regional first) in Region 5; Arctic Tern in Region 3; and scattered reports of Parasitic Jaeger, phalaropes, and Laughing Gull. Perhaps most exciting is a possible New York State first Band-rumped Storm-Petrel from Region 3. Thankfully, reports have been submitted to NYSARC for their review and evaluation. Isabel was especially notable for transporting Wilson's Storm-Petrels, as evidenced by records covering the breadth of the state, including three Regional firsts (R3, R5&

R7) Full coverage of Isabel is found in Willie D' Anna's excellent article Hurricane Isabel (September 2003) in New York in this issue – KB 54:14-19, plus additional details in the individual Regional reports.

Although the occurrence of a hurricane is an exciting event for birders who get the chance to see rarely-occurring species, the excitement is tempered by the awareness that these events are devastating to the birds involved. The dead storm-petrels picked up along Lake Erie and the Wilson's Storm-Petrel seen being caught and eaten by a Ring-billed Gull in Region 5 are grim examples of the fate of most of these storm-driven birds.

Waterfowl

Many Regions noted lower than usual numbers of migrating waterfowl, perhaps due to delayed or prolonged migration due to the warm weather extending into November. Loons and grebes were noted as appearing in particularly low numbers; for example, both loons and Horned Grebe declined in Region 3, the second such drop for Common Loon, and Pied-billed Grebes were unreported in Region 6. On the other hand, the latter made a good showing in Region 7, with a high count of 40 on the Chazy River. Three hundred Ring-necked Ducks was an impressive gathering at Highlands Forge Lake, albeit a small fraction of the approximately 3000 at the same location last year. Recently, Region 7 has reported the highest concentrations of Snow Goose in the state, and this fall was no different, although there were no firm estimates approaching the state record 45,000-57,000 counts of the last two falls. For the fourth consecutive year, there was an outbreak of botulism along Lake Erie and now Lake Ontario in Region 1. Fewer dead birds were found by NYSDEC surveys this year, with Red-breasted Merganser mortality sharply down. Whether this is due to decreased susceptibility or fewer birds in the area during the outbreak is unknown. A positive note from Region 10 were reports of a high number of young Brant in returning fall flocks, indicating a very successful breeding season.

While general numbers seemed to be down, unusual waterfowl appeared in many Regions. Region 1 again hosted a flock of "Richardson's" Canada Geese at Iroquois NWR; these "small race" Canadas have become annual here in fall. Birders searching for Richardson's or other small races should be cautioned that goose size is influenced by available food during fledging and there can be significant variation within a given subspecies. As with many identifications, a suite of characters – plumage as well as structural – should be used, and not all birds can be safely categorized. Another rare goose squeaked into the period in Region 1 when three Greater White-fronted Geese were found on 30 Nov. Two more Greater White-fronted Geese turned up in Region 3, which also hosted a Eurasian Wigeon at Montezuma NWR. Two separate sightings of two Tundra Swans each were the first in Region 4 in years. A scattering of unusual ducks in Region 7 was noteworthy for being away from Lake Champlain, including a number of significant county records and high counts. The waterfowl highlight in Region 8 was an unfortunate immature male King Eider that was seen alive only by the hunter who shot it. The dead specimen,

the Region's fifth record, was examined and photographs were taken and submitted to NYSARC; the event prompts a discussion from Regional editor Will Yandik on whether hunting regulations for vagrant waterfowl and other "game" birds such as rails should be updated. Four Barnacle Geese spent a few days in late October in Region 9, and another was in Region 10. As usual with such birds, their origin is an unanswerable question. Greater White-fronted Geese also appeared in Region 10, with a total of seven reports of 4+ individuals. The exact situation has become difficult to assess in recent years with the continuing presence of a few hybrid type geese, most likely between Canada Goose and some sort of domestic goose, which share some features with White-fronts and can trap the unwary. Other uncommon waterfowl in Region 10 included 2 "Richardson's" Canada Geese in Calverton, 3-4 reports of Eurasian Wigeon, and a scattering of Harlequin Ducks.

Other Waterbirds

Other than the excitement induced by Isabel, the rest of the season was for the most part uneventful. Hamlin Beach State Park in Region 2 produces some of the highest fall jaeger counts in the state, but this season was poor. A total of 21 Parasitic Jaegers was reported in Sep and 4 in Oct, and a few Pomarines were seen. At the other extreme, farther east at Region 5's Derby Hill, 17 Parasitic Jaegers passed by on 15 Oct, the best flight day since 1987. Only one non-Isabel jaeger, a Parasitic on 21 Oct, was reported in Region 1. One Pomarine, and a handful of a Parasitics were reported in Region 10. Increased focus on lake watching on Lake Champlain resulted in some unusual sightings, foremost being three separate juvenile Northern Gannets, as well as two Parasitic Jaegers and five Black-legged Kittiwakes. Region 8 also hosted a Northern Gannet, the third Regional record, at Saratoga Lake. These gannets occurred during a fall in which none was reported from Lake Erie or Lake Ontario, where inland gannets most commonly appear. A Magnificent Frigatebird provided excitement on 3 Oct at the Fire Island Hawkwatch in Region 10 – the date, two weeks after Hurricane Isabel, raises the question of what influence the storm may have had on this bird's movements.

It was a fairly mediocre season overall for gulls. Franklin's Gull, formerly annual in Region 1 and occasionally seen in Regions 2 and 5, was unreported in the state. Little Gull was sparsely reported, including normal fall strongholds Regions 1 and 2. Sabine's Gull was unreported other than the Region 1 hurricane-related bird. The only Black-headed Gulls were singles at the extreme western (Lewiston, on the Niagara River) and eastern (Mecox Bay in Suffolk County) ends of the state. White-winged gulls began trickling into the state in November. The Niagara River did host California Gull, for at least the twelfth consecutive season. The state's prime Royal Tern gathering site, Robins' Island on the North Fork of Suffolk County, Long Island, had a maximum count of 60 on 25 Sep. A decent number of pelagic species was reported early in the season in Region 10, including Cory's, Greater, Sooty, Manx and Audubon's shearwaters, most of these from offshore trips.

Hawk Migration

Early season results were disappointing in many locations, presumably due to the lack of favorable fronts and, in many places, high precipitation. Counts at the coastal Fire Island Hawkwatch were described as “dismal”, and sightings at Camp Pinnacle Hawkwatch in Region 8 were down by a third. There was no big push of Broad-winged Hawks, which in ideal conditions can result in single day counts approaching five digits. This year the highest single day count for that species listed in the Regional reports was 593 at the Mt. Peter Hawkwatch in Region 9. Things did pick up later in the season, no more so than at Franklin Mountain Hawkwatch. Long the premier location in New York for Golden Eagle migration, this year saw a record-breaking single day total on 20 Nov, when 51 Golden Eagles were counted passing the watch. Amazingly, this same total, an eastern North America single day high, was matched three days later by a hawkwatch in eastern Pennsylvania. For the season, 201 Golden Eagles were tallied at Franklin Mt. A Golden Eagle on 24 Oct at Floyd Bennett Field in Region 10 was an unusual coastal sighting. Turkey Vultures showed impressively in a couple of locations, with counts at record levels at Franklin Mountain and also an impressive 168 on 7 Nov over Central Park, NYC.

Shorebirds

Many Regions noted that the season was poor for migrant shorebirds. Scarce habitat was mentioned as a contributing factor in Regions 2 and 5. Region 1 noted an improvement over the lackluster summer season but fall was still below average. A high point was a lingering Willet at Bird Island Pier in Buffalo. Purple Sandpipers were noted inland in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5. Sixteen Hudsonian Godwits reported from Region 2 was a high count for recent years. A Ruff at Montezuma NWR was seen by a single lucky observer, in contrast to a Western Sandpiper, occasionally reported but only rarely documented in the Region, which was seen by many there. In a poor fall for American Avocets, two spent the month of September at Mecox Bay. Massapequa Preserve in Nassau County, Region 10, is well known as a reliable location for wintering Long-billed Dowitchers, so fourteen there on 27 Nov wasn't a surprise. However, a record-late Wilson's Phalarope found with them was. Region 9 bucked the scarce habitat trend as new wetland habitat was created at the Wallkill River NWR. Shorebirds found at the new impoundment included American Golden-Plover, Whimbrel and Dunlin.

Without a doubt, the highlight shorebird was an adult Pacific Golden-Plover in fading alternate plumage, a state first record pending acceptance by NYSARC, located by sharp-eyed birders at Mecox Bay on 1 Sep. Luckily, the finders were well armed with a digital camera, and took a series of documentary photographs. Unluckily for birders following up the sighting, the plover spent only a few hours at the site before heading off for parts unknown. For a detailed article refer to: New York's First Record of Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) Kingbird 53:307-312.

Passerine Migration

With one notable exception, there was little mention in the Regional reports of major migration events. Among the species reported in good numbers in various locations were Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, swallows, Hermit and Wood thrush and Rusty Blackbird. Red-breasted Nuthatch rebounded from last year's poor showing with good numbers statewide, including an estimated 150 at Hamlin Beach on 23 Oct. Some winter finch movement was evident, with good numbers of Purple Finch and Pine Siskin reported, and Common Redpoll and Evening Grosbeak appearing before the end of the period.

The notable exception to the generally lackluster season was a major coastal migration in Region 10 on 7-8 Nov, consisting primarily of a huge push of American Robins along the entire South Shore of Long Island, and out of the state, extending down at least as far as Cape May, NJ. Estimates on the second day ranged up to 400,000-500,000 individuals moving through Riis Park to Breezy Point. With similar numbers counted in Cape May, it is likely that in excess of a million American Robins were migrating along the northeast coast. See the Region 10 report for additional details.

Rarities

Fall migration is anticipated for the chance of finding a true rarity. This year, four potential first state records were reported. Unlike last fall's highlight vagrants – Irondequoit Bay's Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and three separate Purple Gallinules, all of which were clear-cut identifications, stayed multiple days and were seen by a number of observers – none of this year's standouts was as accommodating. In addition to the previously mentioned Band-rumped Storm-Petrel and Pacific Golden- Plover, two more possible state firsts were reported. An orange-billed tern spotted on the Lake Erie shoreline on 15 Oct was thought to be an Elegant Tern, which would be a New York State first, and one of very few records for eastern North America. Identification of vagrant Elegant Terns is extremely difficult, and even well-studied and photographed cases have generated contro-versy – see, for example, discussions held on the "Frontiers of Identification" Internet listserve regarding reports in recent years from Massachusetts, Florida, England and Ireland (archives available at <http://listserv.arizona.edu/archives/birdwg01.html>). Royal Tern is the primary species of concern, but other large red, orange and yellow-billed terns should be carefully considered as well. The fourth potential state first was a White-throated Swift described from the Mt. Peter Hawkwatch in Region 9. This western species has occurred as far east as Michigan only once. It's pleasing to note that reports were sent to NYSARC in all four cases. Although the standard for acceptance for first state records is by nature high, all reports have value, even if not accepted, and add to our knowledge of the state's avifauna.

A host of lesser rarities was found throughout the state. In Region 1, Eared Grebes in Batavia were holdovers from the summer season, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows were reported for the third consecutive year, and a Brewer's Blackbird was found at a feeder with Red-winged Blackbirds. It was "quite a fall" for American White Pelicans in Region 2, with an unprecedented count of eight birds at Braddock Bay on 4-5 Oct. Cave Swallows, once regular in the northeast only at Cape May, NJ, have become more widespread. This year there were several reports at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 (only one, a report of 5 on 24 Nov, was documented) and two sightings in Region 10. Western Kingbird was also reported in these two Regions, with one at Hamlin Beach, and at least seven reported in Region 10. Cattle Egrets were again scarce, with single individuals in Regions 3, 5 and 10. A Great Cormorant appeared in Oswego Harbor for the first time in three years, and also in Columbia County, on the upper Hudson River, where they have become annual. Sandhill Cranes made a number of appearances this fall, with multiples in Regions 1, 5 and 10, and a probable sighting in Region 9. Two immature *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, now expected in small numbers annually, turned up in Region 10. As usual, separation of Rufous and Allen's was difficult. Allen's has been recorded nearby but not in New York. An individual in Georgia was thought to most likely be a subadult female Rufous, while the second bird, in Orient, was cautiously identified to genus only. Lark Sparrows made a good showing in Region 10 with seven reports. An early November *Empidonax* in Region 4 was thought to be a Yellow-bellied; any late season "empi" should be carefully scrutinized and documented since various western species have shown a propensity for turning up in the northeast in late fall. An exotic Orange Bishop was reported from Region 8; this species has been encountered annually during fall migration in recent years, most often downstate, and can cause confusion as unwary observers attempt to assign an identity based on North American field guides. Additional unusual passerines around the state included a pair of Yellow-headed Blackbirds in Region 7 and one in Region 10; single Dickcissels in Regions 7, 8, 9 and at least seven in Region 10; "Gambel's" White-crowned Sparrows in Regions 9 and 10; Ash-throated Flycatcher, Varied Thrush and Yellow-throated Warbler and Prothonotary Warbler in Region 10.

The Dreaded "H" Word

One of the difficulties occasionally encountered in birding is caused by the fact that birds don't always fit into the neat species categories that we have assigned them. One source of confusion is hybrids (the "H" word) – the young (or more distant descendants) of a successful mixed-species breeding pair. This issue is commonly encountered in waterfowl and gulls, less so in passerines. An example from New York's recent past is the probable hybrid Hermit x Townsend's Warbler found at Jones Beach in Fall 2002 (see Kingbird 53:2-4 & Kingbird 53:5-8) for a discussion of this record. This fall, a bird understandably identified at first as a Western Kingbird was found in Livingston Co. in Region 2. Several sharp-eyed birders, after seeing the bird live or looking

at photographs on the web, noticed that some features were “off” for Western Kingbird, and suggested that it could possibly be either a Tropical or Couch’s Kingbird, both of which have a history of vagrancy to the northeast. After extensive discussion and analysis, general opinion settled on Couch’s x Scissor-tailed hybrid, a combination previously unrecorded anywhere, but perhaps becoming more likely due to range expansion of the two species. For the full story and excellent photos see the lead article in this issue of *The Kingbird* “A Probable Couch’s Kingbird x Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Livingston Co., New York” by Kevin McGowan and Bob Spahn.

Bird of the Season

With so many storm-brought vagrants, potential first state records, and a possibly unknown-to-science hybrid combination, the Bird of the Season is a tough choice. My sentiments lean initially toward the *Tyrannus* hybrid in Region 2, given the fascinating discussion that it generated, and the pursuant reminder that birding constantly presents opportunities for learning, regardless of experience level. In the end, though, I am persuaded that the BOTS should be awarded to the Mecox Bay Pacific Golden-Plover. Although the splitting of the two North American golden-plovers has led to a vast increase in awareness of main identification criteria, applying these to real life field identification is still in many ways a cutting edge exercise. The circumstances of the Mecox bird are in my mind a distillation of many of the things that are exciting about birding – the knowledge and foresight to choose a prime birding spot, the luck to be there when a major rarity appears, the careful scrutiny to notice the small differences which eliminate a more common possibility, the presence of mind to be forearmed to obtain documentary evidence, and, not least, the reminder that even in this modern age of constant communication with cell phones and e-mail, our hobby is still governed by the whim of the birds we seek. This last part is somewhat bittersweet on a personal level, since I was one of the unfortunates who was just close enough to miss the plover by an hour or so – but what fun would birding be if every bird was guaranteed?

