

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SPRING 2004

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THE WEATHER

March provided a gentle welcome to the spring season, with above average temperatures recorded across the state. Precipitation was generally low, although Regions 1 and 2 recorded notable snowfalls. Warm spells in late March proved favorable for a good push of early migrants in many areas. April's temperatures were more typical in western Regions, while eastern New York experienced extremely high temperatures in the third week, including highs of 81°F in Region 7, 89°F in Region 8, and 91°F in Region 9. This southerly flow also apparently contributed to some early migrant arrivals. May varied a bit across the state, but most regions experienced warm spells during the first half of the month. May was also very wet statewide, with Regions 2 and 5 recording precipitation on 19 and 24 days during the month, respectively; in Region 5 this added up to the second highest May precipitation total since 1903. Region 1 similarly recorded the fourth wettest May on record.

WINTER LINGERERS

A number of interesting winter birds lingered from the previous reporting season into March and April. In Region 2, the Sodus Bay Gyrfalcon was last reported on 7 March. Another Gyrfalcon was at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 on 12 April. Fourteen Long-eared Owls in Region 9 constitute a good early spring count. Northern Shrikes were reported in March or April in all regions except downstate Regions 9 and 10, the last on 7 April in Region 1. Bohemian Waxwings carried on from the winter's strong showing, with reports from Regions 2, 4, and 6, where the largest concentration of the season was 250 in Adams on 8 March. A Pine Grosbeak in Region 4 was the only report for the season. Common Redpolls were reported in all ten regions, with a maximum of 540 in Region 3, with two on the late date of 21 May in Region 2. The winter's Hoary Redpoll invasion also carried into early spring, with reports from Regions 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Evening Grosbeaks were reported in all but Region 10, though numbers were described as low in Regions 1, 2, and 4. A late American Tree Sparrow was at Braddock Bay in Region 2 on 9 May.

SPRING MIGRATION

Some of the earliest spring movement is seen when ducks and geese follow opening water north. Warm weather in March seemed to accelerate the northbound waterfowl migration especially in northern and western regions. The most spectacular phenomenon this spring was the appearance of unprecedented numbers of Snow Geese, especially in central and western New York. Regions 1,

2, 4, 5, and 7 recorded excellent numbers of migrating Snow Geese, including maxima of 1400 in Region 1 and 5800 in Region 2. These counts, however, were dwarfed by the numbers of Snow Geese in Regions 3 and 5. Derby Hill in Region 5 experienced a “spectacular” Snow Goose flight when, after several days of already high counts of 15,000 – 20,000 geese, an estimated 530,000 Snow Geese flew past in an hour on 26 March. Even this count was surpassed by an estimated 1 million plus Snow Geese on Cayuga Lake—a remarkable count, approaching 40-50% of the eastern Arctic breeding population of Lesser Snow Goose. Both the Region 3 and Region 5 counts, which likely involve at least some overlap, greatly exceed the previous high counts for the state. See the Region 3 report for further details on the sighting there and how the numbers were estimated. The increase in Snow Goose numbers has been paralleled by an increase in Ross’s Goose reports; this spring Ross’s Geese were in Regions 1, 2, and 3. A Snow Goose x Ross’s Goose hybrid was reported in Region 3’s Savannah Mucklands; intermediate-type small white geese are also on the increase, and can cause problems for observers trying to identify Ross’s. Reports of “Richardson’s” Goose came from opposite ends of the state—groups of nine and ten birds were found in Region 1, and a single bird was found in Montauk in Region 10. Interest in these geese will no doubt increase now that the American Ornithologists’ Union has revised North American goose taxonomy, with Richardson’s Goose, among other forms, now in the Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) species complex. The Mucklands in Region 3 also hosted a high count of 6000 Northern Pintail. Cinnamon Teals in mid-May in Region 1 and in March in Region 2 were the rarest waterfowl for the season. Region 1’s was the fourth regional record, and first since 1977; Region 2’s was a regional first. Other rarities included Greater White-fronted Geese in Regions 1 and 2; Barnacle Goose in Region 8; “Black” Brant in Region 10; Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 10; Barrow’s Goldeneye in Regions 1, 3, 6, and 7; Harlequin Duck in Region 6; Tufted Duck in Region 5; a female eider in Region 4; and Green-winged “Common” Teal in Region 2. Additional waterfowl hybrids reported were a Barrow’s x Common Goldeneye in Region 7 and last season’s lingering Green-winged x “Common” Teal hybrid in Region 10. A rare dark morph Ruddy Duck was reported from Braddock Bay in Region 2. Maximum counts of Tundra Swan were 661 in Region 1 and 450 in Region 3, and the recently-created impoundments at the Wallkill NWR in Region 9 hosted up to eighteen, a good number for downstate.

In Region 10, a basic-plumaged Pacific Loon was found on the ocean near Shinnecock Inlet on 18 May, and a Western Grebe was at Staten Island for a month from early March to early April—the third consecutive year the species has been found in that general vicinity. Red-necked and Horned Grebes were in good numbers in Region 2, including a maximum of 1487 Red-necked Grebes on 3 April at Hamlin Beach. Eared Grebes appeared in Regions 1 and 3. Four adult Great Cormorants flying past Hamlin Beach were a Region 2 high count. As expected, genuinely pelagic species were limited to Region 10, where a 23 May trip from Barnegat, NJ into the New York waters of Hudson Canyon produced Northern Fulmar; Cory’s, Greater, Sooty and Manx Shearwater; and Wilson’s and Leach’s Storm-Petrels. Most intriguing was a bird off of Moriches Inlet on 23 May, which was identified as a Yellow-nosed Albatross. Although the written

description posted to the internet did not firmly rule out other species, the report brings to mind the recent onshore occurrences of Yellow-nosed Albatross, possibly the same individual, in various northeastern states, including one photographed standing on the beach on Fire Island.

Hérons and allies made a decent showing across the state, with Glossy Ibis upstate in Regions 4 and 8; Cattle Egrets in Regions 1, 3, 5, 6 and 10; both Snowy Egret and Tricolored Heron in Regions 2 and 3; Little Blue Heron in Region 2; and an adult White-faced Ibis at Jamaica Bay in Region 10, this last bird only seen briefly on 16 May before being flushed by sirens on nearby Cross Bay Boulevard. A Least Bittern in a leafless tree in Prospect Park on 9 April preceded the earliest record in *Bull's Birds of New York* by a week.

Region 10 hosted a Black Vulture at the eastern tip of the state, Montauk Point. Black Vultures have become annual in spring at western New York hawk watches, so two at the Hamburg Hawkwatch in Region 1 and singles at Braddock Bay and Derby Hill were not unexpected; one in Elba, Region 2, was more of a surprise. Turkey Vultures were noted to be increasing in Regions 1 and 10; the Region 10 editors discuss a possible correlation between Long Island's increasing deer population and the increase in vulture numbers.

The south shore of Lake Ontario is generally the focal point of spring hawk migration in New York, as northbound migrants move along the lakeshore rather than heading out over the open water. Highlights of this spring's hawk watches included two Swainson's Hawks and a Gyrfalcon at Braddock Bay in Region 2 and a Swainson's Hawk at Derby Hill in Region 5. Four Golden Eagles migrating past Wilson in Region 1 on 11 April were a good count there. The maximum single-day Broad-winged Hawk count was 11,639 at Braddock Bay on 19 April. A record single-day count of Bald Eagle and a record seasonal count of Peregrine Falcon were also noted at Braddock Bay.

Sandhill Cranes also made appearance at various upstate hawk watches, highlighted by the remarkable 59 counted passing the Ripley Hawk Watch in Region 1. Seventeen Sandhill Cranes were also reported for the season in Region 2.

There was a good showing of spring shorebirds across the state. High numbers of Whimbrel were noted in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7, with a record count of 216 on 23 May at Hamlin Beach in Region 2. Willets were noted upstate in Regions 1, 2 and 3. Wilson's Phalaropes were found five regions across the state, and Red-necked Phalaropes were found in Regions 1, 4, and 5, the latter a first spring regional record. Ruffs were reported from Montezuma NWR in Region 3 and Shinnecock Inlet in Region 10. Region 10 also hosted a Black-necked Stilt at Jamaica Bay. A sighting of three American Golden Plovers in Region 3 was the only spring report for the state. Western Sandpipers, now known to be very rare spring migrants, were reported from Region 3 and Region 5. Even rarer in spring is Baird's Sandpiper—this species typically occurs in eastern North America only when southbound juveniles appear in the fall; prior to this year, there have only been two confirmed spring records in the state. Four Baird's Sandpipers at Sodus Bay in Region 2 are therefore highly noteworthy, and this single occurrence exceeds the previous number of spring individuals combined. Hopefully a report will be sent to NYSARC to document this important record. Wilson's Plover is a

rarity at any time, especially upstate, so it's no surprise that an individual at Sandy Pond was a first Region 5 record. Interestingly, Wilson's Plovers were also found inland this spring and early summer in Ontario and Missouri. The highlight shorebird of the spring was a Bar-tailed Godwit at Mecox Bay in Region 10 on 28-30 May. This is the sixth record for the state and the first since June 1985. Reminiscent of the spring of 2001, when a Black-tailed Godwit appeared in Connecticut shortly after New York's first disappeared from its temporary haunt in Moriches, it seems that the Mecox Bar-tailed was also seen to north. On 5 June what was very possibly the same bird, based on comparison of photographs posted to the internet, appeared at South Beach in Chatham, Massachusetts (remarkably, the *third* different Bar-tailed Godwit in that vicinity this spring). See Ken Fuestel's article on this sighting on page 190 of this issue.

Notable gulls included Black-headed Gull—a single in Region 1 and multiple reports in Region 10; Lesser Black-backed Gull—a late individual on 29 May in Region 1 and Region 2 high counts of five at two locations; a late Glaucous Gull in Region 3; and Thayer's Gulls reported in Regions 2 and 4. Region 5 hosted two Laughing Gulls and a Franklin's Gull. A Little Gull at Edith G. Read Sanctuary in Region 9 was a noteworthy regional record; Iceland, Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were also recorded there during the season. Terns made a good showing, with highlights including Arctic Terns—a notable rarity, especially in spring—in Regions 7 and 10, and two Sandwich Terns and a Royal Tern in Region 10. Black Terns were fairly widely reported, but were noted to be decreasing or absent as breeders in Regions 2 and 5. Caspian Terns were newly found to be breeding in Region 7, close to Noblewood on Lake Champlain, where they have been seen in good numbers in recent springs.

Good numbers of both species of cuckoos were reported in Regions 3 and 4, and Black-billed Cuckoo arrived early in Region 8 on 15 April. Common Nighthawks were down in several regions, including only a few reported in Region 4, and one of the worst springs in years in Region 8, where the maximum count was four. An injured Great Gray Owl found in Region 5 on 16 April and taken to a rehabilitator is notable not only for its rarity, especially following a non-invasion winter, but also for the late date. Saw-whet Owl counts in Region 1 seem to be an example of the difficulty sorting out early breeding species from migrants; breeding atlas surveys in early March turned up nine Saw-whets in appropriate breeding habitat, while a month later, nine were also located at a lakeshore migrant location. A Red-bellied Woodpecker at the Boquet River in Region 7 was a good find there.

The warm weather in late April and early May brought a number of somewhat early passerines, particularly flycatchers, many warblers, and migrants such as Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting. In Region 1, thirteen warblers species had arrival dates in April, the highest such count in ten years. Similarly, nine of the twenty-eight warbler species recorded during the season in Region 7 arrived in April. Interestingly, an overall analysis of arrival dates showed that migration in Regions 1-7 was early compared to historical averages, but was later than average in Regions 8-10. Birders in several regions commented that the early warm weather also led to earlier than normal leaf-out, making later migrants more difficult to observe.

An Olive-sided Flycatcher on 30 April in Region 1 was the earliest ever in NYS. Region 1 hosted Loggerhead Shrike and Sedge Wren, two species of concern in NYS. A particularly cooperative Sedge Wren put on a good show in New Paltz in Region 9 from 16 May through the end of the season.

A Cerulean Warbler on 18 April in Region 10 was the earliest ever in NYS. Blackpoll Warblers were noted occurring in high numbers in several regions, while Tennessee, Bay-breasted, and Cape May Warblers were down—the latter unreported in Regions 5, 8, and 9. Unusual warblers included multiple Kentucky Warblers in Regions 2, 9, and 10; Yellow-throated Warblers in Regions 1, 2, 5 and 10; and Prothonotary Warblers outside normal breeding areas in Regions 2, 4, 9 and 10. Connecticut Warblers are rare in spring, but based on previous history, Region 2 is the most likely area for them to occur, so the two found there are not unexpected. Even rarer were two warblers found in Region 10. A Swainson's Warbler singing in a residential area on Staten Island on 20 May was unfortunately only seen during the original observation. A MacGillivray's Warbler seen and photographed in Forest Park, Queens on 7 May will be the second or third record for New York State, pending NYSARC acceptance; this bird was only slightly more cooperative, present for several hours after being found but disappearing overnight.

Summer Tanagers were reported in excellent numbers in Region 10, and a singing bird was found on 15 May at Marshlands Conservancy, Rye in Region 9.

Clay-colored Sparrows, increasing as breeders in the state, made a good appearance during migration, with reports from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 10. Besides those mentioned above, rarities in Region 1 included Harris's Sparrow and the third regional record of Painted Bunting, a male at Tifft Nature Preserve on 12 May. Another Painted Bunting was found at the opposite end of the state, at a feeder in Southold in Region 10. The identification of this bird was confirmed by photographs after it had already departed. Rare icterids included a heard-only Western Meadowlark in Region 1, a Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 5, and an upstate report of Boat-tailed Grackle at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 on 19 April. Extremely rare even short distances from its normal Atlantic coast range, Boat-tailed Grackle seems like an unlikely candidate to make an appearance upstate. Hopefully a report will be sent to NYSARC to document this record. One concern in identifying out-of-range Boat-tailed Grackle is eliminating the very similar Great-tailed Grackle, which has been expanding its range in interior western North America, and is a candidate for vagrancy to New York.

BREEDING BIRDS

Breeding activity increases throughout the spring season, beginning with early nesters such as Great Horned Owl and crossbills, through to the end of May, when most local breeding birds have arrived on territory. Last winter's incursion of winter finches, and diligent observation by birders, led to the discovery of breeding activity by Red Crossbills in nine Breeding Bird Atlas blocks in Region 4, where two juveniles were found, and in six blocks in Region 5. White-winged Crossbill appeared in three blocks and one blocks, respectively, in these two

regions; Pine Siskin was even more widespread, and breeding was confirmed in both regions. Grassland breeding birds continue to be a concern; examples from this spring include only one Henslow's Sparrow report for the state this season—three arriving at a known breeding colony in Region 1, only two Upland Sandpipers reported from Region 2, and an on-going decrease in Grasshopper Sparrow breeding habitat in Region 10. Regions 2 and 5 noted that Sedge Wren was unreported for the season. Other downward trends noted were low numbers of Wood Thrush and Veery in Region 2 and declining Canada Warbler in Region 4. On the positive side, Great Egrets continued to increase at the Niagara River rookery in Region 1. In Region 2 there were reports of new Cliff Swallow colonies; also there, Carolina Wren numbers continue to be good. Region 4 noted a continuing increase of Hooded Warbler and "southern" birds such as Tufted Titmouse, Northern Cardinal, Carolina Wren and Red-bellied Woodpecker. Increasing as well in the region are nesting Common Ravens, which in recent years have expanded into pine plantations from the traditional cliff-side nest locations. Also see the Region 4 report for a description of interesting breeding activity in the extensive Pharsalia Wildlife Management Area. White-eyed Vireos exhibited breeding activity in Regions 1 and 4; additional individuals were found in Regions 2, 3 and 5. Prothonotary Warblers returned to traditional breeding spots in Regions 1 and 5. Sixteen pairs of Palm Warblers at Massawepie Mire in Region 6 matches counts of twenty years ago. In Region 7, a Green Ash thinning project has helped numbers of birds which favor more open conditions, such as American Woodcock, Brown Thrasher, and Field Sparrow. Also in Region 7, a male Wilson's Warbler found on 29 May was possibly territorial. Two Brewster's Warblers and three Lawrence's Warblers in Region 9 are evidence that the area's Golden-winged Warbler population remains at risk of genetic swamping by Blue-winged Warbler. Region 4 noted a good number of confirmed breeding raptors, including two nesting pairs of Merlins. In Region 10, two new breeding pairs of Peregrine Falcons were noted on the coastal plain of Nassau County, leading one to wonder what impact there might be of these avian predators on the area's colonial nesting terns and shorebirds. The Region 8 report contains an interesting discussion of the impact of the spring's wet weather on breeding Spotted Sandpipers.

FAREWELL AND MANY THANKS

With this issue, long-time regional editors Seymour (Sy) Schiff and Alvin (Al) Wollin announce their "retirement" from producing the Region 10 report. Compiling the data and producing write-ups for four regional reports a year is a time-consuming, and, I suspect, largely thankless task. Reading *The Kingbird*, it is easy to take for granted the information in the regional reports, which, along with NYSARC reviews, provides the substantial basis for New York's avian history. Many thanks to Sy and Al for their years of service, and hopefully they enjoy their new status as *Kingbird* contributors!

BIRD OF THE SEASON

Several birds are good BOTS candidates—Region 1 and 10's Painted Buntings, the Wilson's Plover which provided Region 5 its first record, the MacGillivray's Warbler in Region 10. My choice for the Bird of the Season, however, is the Bar-tailed Godwit that spent a few days at Mecox Bay in Region 10. Godwits are among the most spectacular shorebirds, and this individual was no exception. It is also notable as only the sixth record for the state, and for the long-overdue reappearance of the species in New York after an absence of almost twenty years.

