

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SUMMER 2004

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THE WEATHER

Effects of the weather are obviously felt by birds throughout the year, but perhaps the most critical period is the summer breeding season, when adverse weather events can affect an entire generation. This year a common theme was expressed throughout most of the state: it was cool and wet. June was relatively dry in most areas, but temperatures in many Regions were a degree or more below average, with the extreme in Region 2 where the average was 3.1 degrees below normal, making it the 6th coldest June in the last 100 years. The cool weather continued into July, supplemented by extremely heavy precipitation in most Regions. A number of Regions reported precipitation totals close to or over double the monthly norm, and rainfall totals of 7" or more were reported from several. August reverted back to more typical rainfall across most of the state, although Regions 3, 4, 5 and 8 experienced above average precipitation.

BREEDING BIRDS

The unusual weather elicited commentary regarding the impact on breeding success from a number of Regional Editors, but, perhaps surprisingly, observers had a range of opinions on the overall impact. Bobolinks and Wild Turkeys were thought to be down in numbers in Region 4 due to the cool, wet weather. Conversely, several reports mentioned that the impact on breeding birds was less than might be expected. One possible reason discussed in various Regional reports was more readily available food due to increases in insects and fruit and seed crops; the wet weather may have helped grassland species in another way by delaying the cutting of farm fields. The latter phenomenon may have been responsible for an apparent uptick in Region 2's Bobolink population. Other grassland species noted in higher numbers were Vesper Sparrow in Region 2 and Sedge Wren in Region 6. The 14-23 male Sedge Wrens counted in Fort Drum, along with a few others elsewhere, added up to the best summer showing since 1997 in the Region, one of the state strongholds for this scarce breeder. Breeding Bird Atlassing efforts also led to observations of moderate numbers of grassland species in a few locations, such as Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows in Booneville in Region 5 and various species in Region 8's Saratoga County. Overall, however, the depressing decline of grassland breeders across the state continued this summer. As mentioned by Region 5 Editor Bill Purcell, the habitat required by these birds is often the first to be developed or converted to incompatible farmland. In the Region 8 report, Will Yandik also discusses the pressures on breeding birds applied by the continuing expansion of suburban sprawl, an issue across the state. Region 10 Editor Shai Mitra highlights some of

the same concerns, and notes that given the reality of limited conservation resources, any choice risks limiting other options; on Long Island this includes the relative neglect of declining woodland breeders as compared to the even more pressured colonial nesting waterbirds and shorebirds on the coast.

Understandably, given that Summer 2004 represented the final year of the state's Breeding Bird Atlas project, several Regional reports featured the results of last minute "blockbusting" efforts and in some cases preliminary comparisons between the current project and the previous effort twenty years ago. The Region 8 report in particular lists a number of changes, many of which mirror statewide trends, and also voices the hope that the information gleaned from the Atlas and similar "citizen science" projects, while not perfect, can be used to better understand long-term trends and drive current and future conservation efforts. Atlassing efforts surely led to a number of the notable breeding reports during the season. In Region 1, Yellow-throated Warblers fledged young in the same area of Alleghany State Park where the same observer had found a nest during the original Atlas project. Other noteworthy breeding records from Region 1 included Prothonotary Warblers at historic breeding locations in Tonowanda WMA and Iroquois NWR and the first confirmed nesting record of White-eyed Vireo in the Region. Region 2 hosted a nesting pair of Sandhill Cranes at Savannah, and there were four reports of five Sandhills in Region 3, including one where nesting activity was seen in the spring, although no positive confirmation of nesting was reported. Prothonotary Warblers also nested in Region 5. Boreal Chickadees were found in northern Herkimer County in Region 6 and somewhat out of normal range in Warren County in Region 8. Clay-colored Sparrows seemed to level off after recent increases, with birds noted at previous locations in Region 1, Region 3, and Region 6, but little evidence of further expansion. In several Regions, winter finches lingered long enough to be suspected of or confirmed as breeding; confirmations included Pine Siskin in Regions 4 and 5; Red Crossbills in Regions 3 and 4; and Evening Grosbeak in Region 5. An intriguing sighting was a singing male Common Redpoll in Region 7 on 5 Jun; this species has been recorded breed within a couple of hundred miles to the north in Quebec. Raptors were well represented with highlights including good numbers of Northern Goshawks in Region 1; Merlins in six Regions and widely reported Bald Eagles, with nesting anticipated for both species in new Regions and locations. The Region 10 report discusses the expansion of Cooper's Hawk as a breeding species. Turkey Vulture has also become fairly regular in summer in the Region, but given the lack of suitable habitat, breeding seems a remote possibility. A Saw-whet Owl first found in spring in Region 6 lingered until 2 June; also in the Region was a Long-eared Owl heard calling from a spruce plantation on 18 Jun. Both are possible breeders, but no nesting activity was reported. Trumpeter Swans were present in Region 2, where they nested, and for the tenth consecutive summer were at Perch River in Region 6. An increase in breeding Black Terns in Upper and Lower Lakes WMA in Region 6 was encouraging, although nesting numbers elsewhere in the state were low. Southern species nudging into the state included Blue Grosbeak and Summer Tanager in Region 10. A female American Three-toed Woodpecker was unusually accommodating virtually all summer at Ferd's Bog in Region 7, but no evidence

of breeding was noted during the season. Breeding species generally reported as down in numbers included Black Tern, Upland Sandpiper, Henslow's Sparrow, Common Moorhen, American Black Duck, Cerulean Warbler, Common Nighthawk, Whip-poor-will, and Red-headed Woodpecker; while on the positive side, Common Raven, Double-crested Cormorant, Pied-billed Grebe, and Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoos were generally up.

Perhaps the most interesting breeding reports were two spring records first reported this season. In Region 7, a hen Spruce Grouse was flushed from a nest with six eggs on May 27, and in Region 10, a May sighting of adult Common Eiders with young and active nests came from South Dumpling and Flat Hammock Islands in Long Island Sound; these islands were also the site of the state's first confirmed breeding records in 2000.

WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS

A number of lingering waterfowl were reported; it seemed to be an especially good year for unseasonal inland scoters, as the second Regional summer record of Black Scoter was found in Region 1 and the first Regional summer record of Surf Scoter was round in Region 6; the latter is perhaps the first inland summer occurrence since the 1946 record listed in Bull's Birds of New York. Black Scoter was also reported in Region 2 and White-winged Scoter was reported in Regions 2, 3, and 5. Common Goldeneyes were in Regions 2 and 3. Red-throated Loons were found in Region 2; Region 5, a first seasonal record; and Region 10. Horned Grebes were found in Regions 5 and 7, and Eared Grebes were present in Batavia, Region 1, for the fifth consecutive summer, with three there on 28 August.

Tubenoses were lackluster in Region 10, with only modest numbers of Wilson's Storm-Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters reported, as well as a few on-shore Manx and Greater Shearwaters; Cory's Shearwaters numbers were especially disappointing with only one report for the season. More exciting Regionally was the second record of Manx Shearwater for Region 9, on Long Island Sound in Rye. The autumn jaeger migration began on Lake Ontario with a bang on 30 Aug with two Long-tailed Jaegers at Wilson providing Region 1's first summer records; on the same day in Region 2 to the east a Regional high count of 30 Parasitic Jaegers constituted the bulk of the monthly total of 40. Dedicated lakewatching on Lake Champlain in Region 7 proved rewarding as well, with one Parasitic Jaeger and three Long-tailed Jaegers in the last week of August. Notable non-breeding gulls were typically lacking; a handful of apparently summering Lesser Black-backed Gulls were in Region 10 and a possible early migrant snuck into the summer period on 31 Aug in Region 3. Noblewood Park in Region 7 continued to be productive, with up to 750 Bonaparte's Gulls present during August joined by up to six different Little Gulls, with at least 1-2 present daily. Little Gull was also reported in Regions 1, 2 and 5. Caspian Tern numbers maxed out at Little Galloo Island in Region 6, with 600 adults and young counted. In Region 10, the highest count of Royal Terns was 60 along Dune Road in mid-August; Sandwich Terns continued their sporadic coastal appearances with single sightings in June and August. Outside of the Region 6 breeding areas, 33 Black Terns staging at Sandy Pond in Region 5 was the highest total.

SHOREBIRDS

Shorebird migration across the state didn't seem overly exciting; the wet weather decreased available habitat along lake shores and reservoir edges, but provided useful, albeit often temporary, habitat in flooded fields. In Region 1 a productive long-standing flooded field in Newfane held up to 200 shorebirds at times, including Wilson's Phalarope and a good Regional count of 23 Stilt Sandpipers; other highlights included Red Knot and Regional high counts of 9 Baird's Sandpipers and 13 American Avocets. The shorebird flight in Region 2 received "mixed reviews"; high points included a good count of 160 Whimbrel at Hamlin Beach on 22 August and the first Livingstone County record of the species. A state record early Buff-Breasted Sandpiper was found 29 July at the Geneseo Airport. Three of twelve Baird's Sandpipers at Hamlin Beach on 22 August were aged as adults, an unusual occurrence for this species which is typically represented in New York (and the East in general) only by juveniles. Montezuma NWR in Region 3 was typically productive; highlights there included Red Knot and Red-necked Phalarope and good numbers of most regularly occurring species, although American Golden Plover and Solitary and Upland Sandpipers were reported in lower than normal numbers. Tri-Cities Airport in Region 4 produced White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers, among others. Region 5 hosted a maximum of 9 Red Knots, the best Regional showing since 1992, as well as Western and Baird's Sandpipers, among others. Noblewood Park in Region 7 was productive again, with 16 shorebird species noted, including Whimbrel and Red-necked Phalarope. In Region 9 the Liberty Marsh impoundments at the Walkill NWR continued to provide good habitat; highlights there included two American Avocets, and Baird's and Stilt Sandpipers. The nearby Pine Island Turf Farm held American Golden Plover and Baird's, Pectoral, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Also notable in the Region was the first Dutchess County record of Whimbrel. Region 10's migrant shorebirds were mainly the expected species; the Regional report notes that an early summer report of widespread breeding failure among shorebirds led to increased scrutiny of the numbers of southbound juveniles. The general opinion was that numbers of juveniles were in fact down, but the extent of any decrease, on an overall or per-species basis, is difficult to gauge due to the lack of year to year breakdowns of adults versus juveniles by exact count or percentages.

SUMMER WANDERERS AND RARITIES

The usual variety of summer wanderers were present, mostly lingering migrants or nonbreeding strays, with the occasional appearance of true rarities. In the last category was the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Hamburg, Region 1, on 7 Jun, reminiscent of last year's spate of mid-summer reports; unfortunately, like those birds, this one also stayed only a single day. The Region also hosted another out-of-season flycatching vagrant with a Western Kingbird in Eden on 28 August. The shorebirds at Newfane were joined for several weeks by a Franklin's Gull. Additional rarities for the Region were Golden Eagle and Kentucky Warbler. There were reports in Region 2 of 1-2 American Swallow-tailed Kites and two

separate late August reports of Mississippi Kite; unfortunately, there was no indication that reports to the records committee are forthcoming for any of these. Also in Region 2, a Black Vulture at Manitou in early June was outside the normal early spring pattern of occurrence in western New York. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher banded at Kaiser-Manitou on 2 August could represent a southbound migrant or a non-breeding wanderer. In the latter category was an immature male Dickcissel defending a territory, and apparently a female Song Sparrow, for a week in Region 3. Similarly short-staying singing male Golden-winged Warbler, Northern Parula and Yellow-breasted Chat were also in the Region. Brief appearances were made by two Chats in Region 5 as well, where there was also a summer report of Bay-breasted Warbler, a possible breeder in that area. In Region 7 the rarity highlight was a Black Skimmer that spent five days at Westport, becoming the first Regional and Essex County record, and one of only a handful away from the coast. To the south, another out-of-place larid was the immature Laughing Gull found near the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers in Region 8, the 12th Regional record. Last season's Sedge Wren in New Paltz, Region 9, remained until 6 Jun. It was regularly singing and was seen building a nest, but there was no evidence of a second bird. Interestingly, on the last day of its stay, a pair of Sedge Wrens was reported about a mile away. In Region 10, the best reported rarity was a briefly seen flyover Long-billed Curlew on 15 Aug at Shinnecock Inlet on the south shore of Long Island; the bird was not relocated despite extensive searching in the area that day. Unfortunately, it appears that no documentation of this record was submitted to the Regional Editor or to NYSARC. A number of possible breeding warblers were reported from Shelter Island, Long Island in early June. These included Northern Parula, Hooded Warbler, and Canada Warbler, which rarely breed on Long Island, and Northern Waterthrush, which has never been recorded. Although no breeding was confirmed, future birds will hopefully be monitored for nesting activity, especially given the presence of breeding populations in New England, across Long Island Sound to the north. The wet weather seemed beneficial to the state's heron population, as both locally breeding species and wanderers were reported in good numbers. Stray waders included Little Blue Herons in Regions 2, 7, and 9; and good numbers of Great Egrets upstate, exemplified by the dozens noted in Region 8 over the course of the summer, compared to three reports last year. A Cattle Egret in Region 6 was the second summer record there; this species and Glossy Ibis were reported in both Region 3 and Region 9. American White Pelicans were scattered across the state. Region 2 hosted one at Braddock Bay on 26 Aug. Additional White Pelicans turned up to the east on Oneida Lake, where separate observers spotted two birds on the same day; in Region 6, where a breeding plumaged bird was seen near Little Galloo Island in eastern Lake Ontario, and in Region 10, where two birds seen sporadically in the vicinity of Captree State Park were followed by an individual that spent a month on the East Pond at Jamaica Bay. More expected is the annual incursion, in varying numbers, of Brown Pelicans in Region 10. This year's moderate influx began on 5 Jul, with several seen at Democrat Point, and ended in early August. Interesting observations included an unusual sighting off of the barrier beach in Oceanside, and an attempt to calculate the flight speed of a flying pelican, seen initially at

Robert Moses State Park and subsequently at Jones Beach to the west. Finally, a Eurasian Collared Dove was found at Jones Beach on 25 Aug. This species, which has been expanding in southern and western North America, has been reported several times in the state but as yet has not been accepted on the formal list due to continuing concerns about the possibility that at least some of the sightings may involve escapes of this commonly kept cage bird.

MISCELLANEOUS

Some oddities reported during the season included a melanistic Northern Rough-winged Swallow in Region 1 and an unusually plumaged Cerulean Warbler, singing a Northern Parula song, which initially the specter of hybrid origins (see article by Pooth and Johnson in the present issue of *Kingbird*). The Region 10 report discusses an interestingly plumaged subadult Little Blue Heron, which looked similar in some respects to Little Egret, including having two long head plumes. Some investigation, conducted partially through the "Frontiers of Identification" listserv, concluded that the bird was in an unusual molt status not pictured in field guides, highlighting the fact that almost every reference material is inherently limited and cannot depict all variations in even common species. A conjunctivitis outbreak in Purple Finches was noted at a Jenny Lake, Saratoga County banding station in Region 8. It remains to be seen whether this will be as widespread as the recent outbreaks in House Finches; hopefully, observations at feeders during migration and over the winter will turn up limited expansion of the disease.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

The Bird of The Season (BOTS) is usually a tough choice, often as a result of competing crowd-pleasing rarities, first state records, or other significant events. My decision this season is equally difficult, but for slightly different reasons. While there were a number of rarities of statewide or regional significance, there was a distinct lack of "megas" that would make obvious selections. Nor were there breeding records as noteworthy as some of the first state records in recent years, such as Common Eider, Wilson's Phalarope and Sandhill Crane. In addition, the few rarities that would rise to the level of a true BOTS were, unfortunately, either poorly documented or, to all evidence, not documented at all, making them unsuitable candidates in my opinion. My choice then is to offer in place a Birders, rather than Bird, of the Season—a grateful nod to the Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers, in particular the Regional coordinators, who have spent countless hours collecting and compiling the data required for the project.