

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – FALL 2004

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The Weather

There was widespread consensus across the state that fall 2004 was warmer, and generally drier, than normal. September was particularly warm, with all regions reporting above average temperatures; western regions were especially balmy, relatively speaking, with several recording average temperatures more than three degrees above normal. The remnants of three major hurricanes – Frances, Ivan and Jeanne – resulted in heavy rainfalls in various parts of the state. Region 9 suffered the most as all three storm paths crossed the region, resulting in an amazing 14.1” of rain recorded during the month. Other regions felt the storms’ impacts to varying degrees. October and November were for the most part slightly warmer and drier than normal. Several regional editors commented that conditions were generally not favorable for observing migrants, especially passerines, and often placid conditions may have resulted in a somewhat faster than normal departure of migrants from the state.

Waterfowl/Waterbirds

One of the most interesting aspects of the season’s birding was that it provided New York’s birders with the first opportunity to seek out, as such, Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*), recently elevated to species status. The American Ornithologists’ Union announced this summer that Canada Goose had been divided into two species, with the large forms remaining Canada Goose and the small forms designated Cackling Goose (see *The Kingbird* 54:3, p. 205). Even prior to this taxonomic change, there had been increased interest in recent years in the identification of the various subspecies of “white-cheeked” geese, with many New York birders attempting to sort out what large and small forms may occur in the state. It’s important to note that this scrutiny has already produced a number of records of the now-nominate *hutchinsii* subspecies in the state.

The exercise is complicated by, among other things, the presence of feral geese of uncertain provenance (“local park geese”), remaining questions on the amount of variability within forms and how the various forms and subspecies can be distinguished from each other, and the fact that lack of food on the breeding grounds can result in “runting” of any of the forms. This is in many ways a cutting-edge identification exercise and many of the criteria are not yet firmly established. Complicating issues is the somewhat unfortunate choice of common name for the new species, as “Cackling” Goose had previously been popularly used for one of the subspecies (now *B. h. minima*) included in the newly split

species, but *not* the one most likely to occur in New York. This has caused some confusion as *minima*, the smallest and darkest of the small forms, looks substantially different than the nominate form of Cackling Goose (*B. h. hutchinsii*, or “Richardson’s” Goose) which is the form most likely to appear in the state.

If this fall is any indication, the possibility of finding another species of goose will spur even more observers to spend time scrutinizing superficially uniform flocks of Canadas. Region 1 has historically been the stronghold of *hutchinsii*, particularly at Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, where they were found again this year for the sixth straight fall, although in smaller numbers than in prior years. Perhaps reflective of increased scrutiny there were reports from three other locations in Region 1 as well as from Regions 2, 3, 5 and 7 (see especially the discussion in the Region 7 report).

On a less positive note, for the fifth straight year Region 1 experienced a botulism outbreak on Lake Erie and Lake Ontario; NYS DEC estimated over 5,100 birds were killed on Lake Erie as a result. Notable waterfowl counts in Region 1 this fall were 915 Common Loons on Lake Ontario 15 Oct; impressive waterfowl totals at Chautauqua Lake in late November, including 550 Hooded Mergansers and 2,500 American Coots; and good numbers of Ruddy Ducks and Northern Shovelers at Batavia WWTP, which also hosted its regular contingent of 2-3 Eared Grebes through at least 27 November. Good numbers of Common Loons were also reported in Regions 2, 5 and 8. Red-throated Loons on the Great Lakes were mixed as Region 2 reported lower than numbers than recent years while counts were up in Region 5. Region 2 noted early arrivals of several species including Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, and Surf and Black Scoters. Ducks in general were down there, however, particularly both Scaup and Redhead. Blue-winged Teal, though declining as a local nester, was up in numbers, and King Eider was a welcome sight at Hamlin Beach. Region 3 noted generally higher numbers of waterfowl than last year, and hosted Greater White-fronted and Ross’s Geese and Eurasian Wigeon. Regions 4, 5 and 6 noted generally low numbers of waterfowl overall. Good variety in Region 4 included Red-throated Loon, Tundra Swan and Long-tailed Duck. A large flock of 350 Wood Duck in Chenango County there was notable, and Regions 4 and 5 shared in a fairly widespread Black Scoter movement in late October. Region 5 hosted several rarities including three Greater White-fronted Geese, Ross’s Goose and Eurasian Wigeon. A surprising observation in Region 6 was a family of Trumpeter Swans, possibly the first regional nesting record away from the species familiar Perch River WMA location; whether these birds dispersed from Perch River or from releases elsewhere is unknown. Contrary to reports of low numbers to the west, several species were reported in good numbers in Region 8, although here too Canvasback and Redhead were conspicuously absent. All three scoters made inland appearances in Region 9, where three reports of Greater White-fronted Goose included two separate single birds and a pair in Westchester that remained through the end of the period. The most notable reports in Region 10 were unusually high numbers of Surf and Black Scoters, with flocks numbering tens of thousands of each noted in eastern Long Island during November.

As typical, the Niagara River in Region 1 was the focal point for gull activity. California Gull was found on the river for the 13th consecutive year; additional gulls reported there included several Thayer's Gulls, three reports of Sabine's Gull, and a good showing of Black-legged Kittiwakes, including a rare regional adult bird. Just to the east in Region 2, low numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls were offset by another good showing of Kittiwakes, as well as a Black-headed and two Sabine's Gulls. Little Gulls were reported in relatively low numbers; reports came from Regions 1, 2, 5, and 7. Region 5 also had good numbers of Kittiwakes. Notable gulls in Region 10 included an unusual on-shore Black-legged Kittiwake on Staten Island's Wolfe's Pond and a very early juvenile Iceland Gull on 23 October at Democrat Point, Fire Island. Terns were somewhat lackluster – Black Tern was not noted in any of the regional reports. Region 10 reports included four Sandwich Terns at Pike's Beach, Suffolk County, and good numbers of Royal Terns, with a high count of 65 at Shinnecock on 23 October and as many as 12 at Georgica Pond, Suffolk, on 2 November.

Parasitic Jaegers were noted in good numbers upstate, with several good days in Region 5, a single day count of 8 in Region 2, one on Cayuga Lake in Region 3, and a regional high count of 15 in Region 1 on 31 October. Two Parasitics were also seen in Long Island Sound in Region 9 and there were several reports from Region 10. Much rarer, single Long-tailed Jaegers were found in Regions 1 and 7 inland, and offshore in Region 10. Only two Pomarine Jaegers were reported, one each from Oswego Harbor in Region 5 and offshore Region 10.

Highlight waterbirds during the season included a possible returning bird and two regional firsts. In Region 10, a Western Grebe found on 14 November on Staten Island continues a recent string of records from that general vicinity, although the date was a change from the early spring timing of previous sightings; a series of Western Grebe sightings from nearby New Jersey waters were perhaps an indication that the bird had relocated there for the winter. A regional first Northern Fulmar was spotted independently by two observers in Region 2. Region 2 also had a good year for Northern Gannet with three reports. Cayuga Lake in Region 3 hosted a remarkable vagrant, a Black Guillemot that was seen sporadically over the course of a month from late October to late November. Not surprisingly, this was a Regional first. Northern Fulmars offshore in Region 10 were more expected. Other tubenoses reported in Region 10 were Manx Shearwater, Greater Shearwater, and late Sooty Shearwater and Wilson's Storm-Petrel on 29 October.

A number of regions noted Sandhill Cranes during the fall season, indicative of their expansion across the state. This fall sightings away from the species stronghold western and central regions included sightings in both Regions 7 and 8. Four Glossy Ibis at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 were a good number upstate, and another was in Region 5. Several regions commented on higher than usual Great Egret numbers, and single Cattle Egrets were reported in Regions 3, 8 and 10.

Raptors

Fall hawk migration was a bit of a mixed bag, with somewhat better than average results in western and central regions and lackluster totals in the east. Unusual reports included two different western subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk, with the dark subspecies *calarus* represented by one report in Region 1 and two in Region 2, and a single *kriderii* also reported from Region 2. Numbers of most species were up in Region 3, including a second straight year of increased Broad-winged Hawk numbers. Golden Eagles were highlights at opposite ends of the states with three in Region 1 and one in Region 10, but as usual the best numbers were at Franklin Mountain in Region 4, where daily counts of 19, 27 and 45 contributed to a new seasonal high count of 229. Other species fared well at Franklin Mountain, too, as all species were at or above their 16-year averages and Broad-winged Hawk reached a new seasonal total as well. The story was different in Region 8 and Region 9, where most species were reported in lower than normal totals. Region 9 editor Michael Bochnik speculates that the hurricanes which affected the region's weather in September may have forced southbound raptors further west than usual. Several species were noted in increased numbers in multiple regions, including Merlin, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Cooper's Hawk. Additional interesting observations from Region 1 were a regional late date for Osprey which lingered through 30 November, and a banded Bald Eagle which was determined to have been hacked in Manhattan in June.

Shorebirds

Although Hurricane Frances failed to deliver any pelagic birds to upstate New York, as Hurricane Isabel did in 2003, Frances produced significant shorebird fallouts in Regions 2 and 5. In Region 2, good numbers of American Golden-Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Baird's Sandpiper and Buff-breasted Sandpiper were reported, but the most remarkable counts were for White-rumped Sandpiper, with a high of 484 on 10 September, a record inland count for the state. The same weather produced similar fallouts, with smaller totals, to the east in Region 5. Region 2 also hosted an October Ruff. To the west, Region 1 didn't share in the hurricane phenomenon; the lackluster season there was highlighted by two reports of Whimbrel and a probable Long-billed Dowitcher. Region 3 highlights included a flock of 70 American Golden-Plovers, Western Sandpipers and Red Knots. Purple Sandpipers were notable in Region 4, on boat docks at the south end of Otsego Lake, and in Region 6. Region 8 hosted several locally rare shorebirds including Hudsonian Godwit and Western and White-rumped Sandpipers. Region 9 again benefited from the new wetlands in the New York section of the Wallkill NWR; observations from this location and nearby turf farms included Baird's and Buff-breasted Sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitcher. In Region 10, a late Curlew Sandpiper at Orient Point was difficult to relocate after the initial report; a single, similarly plumaged Dunlin at the same location created confusion. A September Ruff in Montauk was especially notable as one of only a few juveniles ever reported in Region 10, a remarkable fact given that the species occurs annually on

Long Island. Also on Long Island, birders continued to scrutinize Willets in an attempt to clarify the status of the eastern subspecies, *semipalmatus*, and the western subspecies, *inornatus*. Conventional wisdom holds that *inornatus* is more common in the fall, and several observations during the season follow this pattern, although *semipalmatus* apparently occurs later in the year than previously thought. More study, including a focus on ageing, would be useful in further clarifying the issue.

Landbird Migration

There seemed to be a widespread consensus that the fall migration was lackluster overall. There were few major migration events mentioned for the season, and Region 6 editor Jeffrey Bolsinger's description of the migration as a "steady trickle" seemed emblematic of the general tone of the commentary. Beyond the general commentary, species that were reported in lower than usual numbers included Common Nighthawk and Chimney Swift, and several regions referred to lower than usual numbers of warblers and vireos. Some regions also noted either early peaks and earlier than usual departures of common migrants, or both. Perhaps also symptomatic of the poor season was that there was little consensus from region to region on which species occurred in above-average numbers. As usual, however, the flow of commoner migrants was spiced with a number of highlights. One migrant that was reported in good numbers from multiple regions was Red-headed Woodpecker; their numbers were particularly notable in Region 10, where the species staged the largest coastal flight since 1998. Region 10 also hosted good numbers of other uncommon September migrants such as Western Kingbird, Clay-colored and Lark Sparrows, and Dickcissel; Regional editor Shaibal Mitra postulates that the generally low overall volume of passerines made it somewhat easier for birders to find these, without having to sift through hordes of commoner species. Region 1 highlights included two White-eyed Vireos and a Regional-late Eastern Kingbird on 18 September. Region 2 also hosted White-eyed Vireo; this species has become expected in the Region, as has Bicknell's Thrush, particularly at the Kaiser-Manitou Banding Station. The identification of the latter species is facilitated by in-hand measurement, although even with this aid many thrushes are classified as "Gray-cheeked/Bicknell's" since they fall into the overlap zone, highlighting how difficult the field separation of the two species can be, particularly on non-singing birds.

Winter Visitors

Saw-whet Owl migration was evidenced by a total of 57 birds captured in two banding operations in Region 1, including four "retraps" of birds banded earlier in the month in Ontario, Canada. Snowy Owls were reported from seven regions, some fairly early; these, coupled with a widely discussed invasion of northern owls in Minnesota, led to speculation that more northerly owls would also be found. As of the end of the reporting season, however, such an invasion had not

occurred, and even Snowy Owl numbers dwindled. Good early reports of Northern Shrikes also raised hopes that it would be an invasion year for the species, but there was little evidence that this was the case as the season progressed.

The only winter finch reported in good numbers was Pine Siskin, which was reported from multiple regions. There were only scattered reports of other species, including White-winged Crossbill in Region 1, Red Crossbill in Region 4, and both species in Region 7; low numbers of Common Redpolls and Evening Grosbeaks were reported in a few regions. The only Pine Grosbeaks were in Region 7. After last winter's widespread invasion, Bohemian Waxwings were only reported in low numbers in Regions 1, 2 and 7; only one of the two Region 7 reports, a flock of 50, broke into double digits.

Rarities

Although the migration was described in less than glowing terms, especially for numbers of passerine migrants, there were a number of highlight species across the state not mentioned previously. Region 1 did not produce any extreme rarities, but good sightings included a still-rare-in-fall Black Vulture, Greater White-fronted Goose, Bohemian Waxwing and Dark-eyed "Oregon" Junco. Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows were observed in the Region for the fourth straight year, in the same locations as previous sightings. Expectations are that local birders, with experience gained in the species' habitat preferences and migration timing, will turn in annual or near-annual sightings.

Cave Swallow has become more expected in the state; this year's invasion of the Northeast by the species included reports in Regions 2 and 10, which have hosted them before, and a Regional first occurrence in Region 3. One of the Region 2 reports, on October 31, was outside the emerging window of occurrence in New York State. The rest of the reports were during the more expected time frame in late November, including two separate sightings of one and four individuals in Region 2, three on Cayuga Lake on 24-25 November in Region 2, and multiple sightings during 25-27 November of one to five birds along the Jones Beach-Fire Island strip in Region 10.

Among good numbers of Lapland Longspurs in Region 2 was a regional first Smith's Longspur on 22-23 October. This, which would be a second state record pending acceptance by NYSARC, was unfortunately difficult for follow-up observers to relocate. Additional highlights in Region 3 included Clay-colored and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Dark-eyed "Oregon" Junco. Good sightings in Region 4 included uncommon migrants such as Olive-sided Flycatcher and several scarce warblers. Yellow-breasted Chat was the highlight passerine in Region 5. Region 6 hosted no truly unusual passerines but reports of Rose-breasted Grosbeak on 4 and 25 November came on late dates. Region 8 briefly hosted its third ever Say's Phoebe; unfortunately, this bird, found in Florida, Montgomery Co. during a hawk banding operation, was only seen on the day of its discovery. In Region 9, a dead Clapper Rail found in Dutchess County on 30 August was at a highly unusual location for this coastal species. The highlight rarity of the season in Region 9 was another Regional first, a Calliope

Hummingbird that frequented a feeder in Larchmont for a few days in early November. A third state record pending acceptance by NYSARC, it was unfortunately not brought to the attention of local birders until after its last feeding on the day it departed, and was identified subsequently by digital photographs taken by the homeowners. In addition to the spate of uncommon western migrants found in Region 10, there were a number of notable late records this fall. A Broad-winged Hawk and a Wood Thrush, unexpected after mid-October in New York, lingered in Central Park through the end of the season. Also in Central Park, a Mourning Warbler on 24-27 October established a new state late date; the observers are commended by Regional editor Shaibal Mitra for recognizing the need to carefully document the record and rule out the possible late fall vagrant MacGillivray's Warbler. An Acadian Flycatcher on 10 September was also late for that species, and highlights the difficulty of sight identifications of silent *Empidonax* flycatchers and the need to copiously document any such unusual records. Two notable rallids in the region were both discovered on 13 October. The first, a Yellow Rail flushed by a lucky observer at Mount Loretto Park, Staten Island, was not surprisingly seen just that once, while the second was a long-staying and crowd-pleasing juvenile Purple Gallinule that lingered in Prospect Park through 22 October. A *Selasphorus* hummingbird was found in Central Park on 30 November; subsequent careful study and photographs enabled the bird to be identified as a Rufous Hummingbird. The season's only Ash-throated Flycatcher remained in Prospect Park from its discovery on 23 November into December. Another highlight rarity from Fire Island was a Mountain Bluebird at Robert Moses State Park from 20-30 November.

Miscellaneous

Possible hybrids reported during the season were an odd duck from Region 7 and a *Pheucticus* grosbeak from Region 10. Observers of the apparent hybrid duck felt it may have been a Mallard x Northern Pintail hybrid. Although some hybrid waterfowl combinations pose real challenges in eliminating look-alike rarities, the grosbeak in Region 10 posed a greater challenge in this regard. Already notable for the late November date of the sighting, interest was piqued by several characters suggestive of Black-headed Grosbeak, including underparts and bill color. The extensive coarse streaking on the underparts was deemed more consistent with Rose-breasted Grosbeak, but whether the apparent mix of features represents an extreme in variation of that species or was evidence of mixed parentage is unknown.

Two coveys of Gray Partridge found in the Massena area in Region 6 were of questionable origin. This is at least the third consecutive year Gray Partridge have been found in this area after an absence of reports for nearly 20 years. With the dramatic apparent decline in the species in Cape Vincent it is possible that the species is in danger of extirpation from New York State.

Bird of the Season

A number of rarities are good candidates for the Bird of the Season, including the occurrence of five Regional first records. All of these – Northern Fulmar and Smith’s Longspur in Region 2; Black Guillemot and Cave Swallow in Region 3; and Calliope Hummingbird in Region 9 are notable, as are highlight finds such as Purple Gallinule, Yellow Rail and Mountain Bluebird in Region 10. My choice for the BOTS is the Black Guillemot in Region 2. The species is hard enough to come by even on the coast, and this bird, only the second inland record for New York State, was typically hit-or-miss during its stay on Cayuga Lake; it did manage to stick around long enough that a number of birders were able to eventually see it.

