

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SPRING 2005

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The Weather

The weather throughout spring was fairly consistent statewide. Most regions reported the same pattern: cool and dry in March, warmer and wetter in April, and cool and dry again in May. A number of Regional Editors lamented the persistent northerly winds that characterized the season. March arrivals and early May migrants seemed particularly affected. Waterfowl were either concentrated into available open water or moved on quickly. Upstate hawkwatches suffered from the poor conditions as well, with poor seasons at the long-standing watches at Braddock Bay and Derby Hill on Lake Ontario's south shore.

Spring Migration

The spring weather produced an odd pattern of migration, with long unproductive periods broken by bursts of migrants during brief windows of favorable weather. A number of regions commented on the late start to the spring migration due to the cold March conditions. Brief periods of decent conditions in early to mid April led to a number of early arrivals. The rest of April and early May continued to be poor, broken by good movements of migrants during 7-14 May. See the regional reports and the spring arrivals table for more details and analysis.

The most compelling event of the spring season was the tremendous incursion of southern-breeding birds into the state, including Yellow-throated, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Swainson's, Kentucky, and Hooded warblers, Summer Tanagers, and Blue Grosbeaks. These species were mostly noted in Region 10, although several of these species were also noted variously in Regions 1, 3, 4, 8 and 9. Please see the regional reports, particularly the Region 10 report, and the separate articles in this issue for further details and discussion.

Notable within this larger event were the high number of Swainson's Warbler reports in Region 10, where five reports were highlighted by a long-staying, cooperative, and well-documented individual at Forest Park in Queens from 12-17 April and a remarkably early Prothonotary Warbler on 30 Mar.

Other than consistent reports of good numbers of both species of cuckoos, there seemed to be little consensus on relative abundance of various migrants. Unusual migrants included Acadian Flycatcher in Region 1, Connecticut Warbler in Region 3, and apparent migrant Clay-colored Sparrows in Regions 2, 4, 5, and 7. An encouraging report from Region 5 noted increased numbers of Whip-poor-wills and Common Nighthawks, although the news wasn't as positive in Region 1, where Common Nighthawk was missed on the Buffalo Ornithological Society May Count for the first time since 1945.

Waterfowl/Waterbirds

As mentioned above, waterfowl migration was affected by the weather in different ways in different regions. In Region 1, frozen inland lakes and ponds led to a buildup of waterfowl along Lake Ontario, where, for example, "staggering" numbers of Canada Geese were the highest in recent memory according to veteran observers. Region 2 experienced good numbers but most waterfowl passed through quickly, departing by early April. The story was similar in Region 4, where dabblers especially were prompted to move on due to excessive flooding in early April; in Region 5, where the early departures of many species were attributed to frozen water; and in Region 8. Both Region 5 and Region 8 noted higher numbers of Snow Geese than in years past. Despite effects of the varying conditions, there were a number of good sightings across the state. Eurasian Wigeon was particularly widespread, found in eight of the ten reporting regions. Greater White-fronted Goose was found in Regions 1, 2, 5 and 10, and both Cackling Goose and Ross's Goose were reported from Regions 1, 2, and 3. Other good ducks were Tufted Duck and Cinnamon Teal in Region 2; Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 2, 6, 7, and 10; and Eurasian Green-winged Teal in Regions 9 and 10 (as well as an apparent hybrid Green-winged Teal in Region 10). The King Eider in Oswego Harbor remained from the winter season.

Eared Grebes appeared on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 for the fifth straight year. Red-necked Grebes staged a better than average showing on Lake Ontario in Region 1, but counts in excess of 100 in early April were still lower than in invasion years. Red-necked Grebes were also up in Region 3, as were Horned Grebes, both for the second consecutive year. Contrasting numbers of Pied-billed Grebes were reported from Region 2 and Region 8; the former reported a noteworthy lack this spring, while a dozen reports in Region 8 far exceeded the normal two or three. A recent trend of increasing Common Loon reports also continued in Region 8, with more reports in general and more from smaller bodies of water as opposed to larger lakes and rivers. American Coot numbers were noted down in Regions 2 and 3.

Sandhill Cranes continued their increase in the state; reports came from 7 of the 10 regions, with only southern and easterly Regions 8, 9 and 10 missing out. Notable reports included a migrating flock of 15 seen at two locations an hour apart in Region 1; a late May sighting in Region 1 suggestive of possible nesting; and the second Franklin County and sixth regional record in Region 7. Other notable waders included Glossy Ibis in Regions 2, 3 and 4.

Seabird reports from the South Shore of Long Island included mainly typical late spring species including Sooty and Manx shearwaters, Wilson's Storm-Petrels, and Parasitic Jaegers.

Raptors, etc.

Perhaps more so than any other single aspect of the migration, the spring hawk flight suffered from the season's weather. Along Lake Ontario, the totals at Braddock Bay in Region 2 were "far below normal" and in Region 5, Derby Hill recorded the lowest totals since standardized counting began in 1979. Farther west

in Region 1, the season started slowly but final totals were within normal ranges. Region 1's raptor highlight was a well-studied dark morph Swainson's Hawk, the third Regional record, observed in Wilson near Lake Ontario and tracked as it moved east. Two Black Vultures were also observed there during the spring. Black Vultures were also spring highlights in Regions 2, 3, and 5, and despite the overall poor season, Region 2 managed to tally three Swainson's Hawks—all light morphs, and therefore different birds than the one seen in Region 1. Along with a variety of other winter specialties (see below), Rough-legged Hawks lingered longer than normal this spring. Late sightings were reported from Regions 1, 3, 5 and 9, with several into May, the latest a 21 May record in Region 1.

Region 1 joined a lengthening list of regions with confirmed nesting of Merlin, with a pair nesting in a tall pine tree in a busy, residential area on the west side of Buffalo. Bald Eagles also continued to expand, with several new nests in the region, including the first on the Niagara River in more than fifty years. An Osprey nest on a platform at the Conewango Valley WMA in Cattaraugus County was the first nest in the region away from the Iroquois NWR or Alleghany Reservoir. The Binghamton Merlins in Region 4 had reportedly moved to a new nest site, although the status of this year's nesting isn't known. Elsewhere in the region, fledgling Merlins were discovered in the Cortland area in July. Peregrine Falcon nests were noted in Syracuse in Region 5 and Albany in Region 8, and the Binghamton pair in Region 4 was recorded in the same location but no reports of nesting were received.

Snowy Owls continued in low numbers from the winter season; there was a total of five reports from Regions 1 and 2. Long-eared Owls were reported only from Regions 1, 2, and 5, with a maximum count of 10 from Region 5 on 1 April. Region 1's reports included a nesting record in Amherst State Park, an unexpected location. There were scattered reports of Short-eared Owls. Regional maxima for the season included 26 in Region 1 and 7 in Region 3. Northern Saw-whet Owls were found in good numbers; reports from five regions included two in May on breeding grounds in Region 5 and a newly documented breeding location in Chautauqua County in Region 1. The only Barn Owl report statewide was of a bird being harassed by crows at Jones Beach in Region 10 on 1 May. Two rarities continued on from the winter season—Boreal Owl in Region 1 which departed on 18 Mar, and the long-staying Great Gray Owl on Cape Vincent in Region 6, which remained until the remarkable late date of 18 May.

Shorebirds

Overall, shorebird migration wasn't very impressive, as upstate areas in particular reported unfavorable conditions due to the dry weather. Even so, there were several good rarities found across the state. Whimbrels were highlights in Regions 1, 5 and 9, with birds appearing in the three widely scattered regions on 28 May or 29 May, possibly dropped down due to storm activity. Good numbers of Spotted Sandpipers and Least Sandpipers were reported from Region 2, and Semipalmated Plover numbers were up for the second consecutive year in Region 3. Region 5 also hosted an early May Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone and good

numbers of White-rumped Sandpipers and Short-billed Dowitchers. The same weather conditions that grounded Region 9's Whimbrel also dropped a flock of 300 Dunlin. Highlight rarities included Region 7's third record of Ruff, a female present from 21-23 May. Another Ruff was present for a single day at Jamaica Bay in Region 10. A Wilson's Plover in Region 10 in early May continued a recent trend of spring occurrences in New York and the Northeast. Interestingly, at least two and possibly three Wilson's Plovers were also present in Massachusetts this spring and summer, one or two were in Rhode Island, and another was at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Also in Region 10, a long-staying Black-necked Stilt in Montauk in May was enjoyed by many; three more were present for a couple of days at Jamaica Bay, at the other end of Long Island.

A late May storm led to a widespread fallout of Red and Red-necked phalaropes across the Northeast. The greatest numbers were found to our north in coastal Massachusetts, but the event did produce a scattering of land-based reports along Long Island's South Shore.

Gulls and Terns

The lingering cool weather was likely responsible for larger than normal concentrations of immature gulls through May along Lake Ontario in Region 1. Included were late sightings of Iceland, Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed gulls (21 May, 22 May, and 28 May, respectively). A late Iceland Gull was also found in Region 2 on 18 May. Franklin's Gull and Little Gull were highlights in Region 3. Another intriguing gull from Region 3 was a subadult small gull at Montezuma. The discoverers felt it might have been an immature Ross's Gull, although observations were hampered by distance. A number of birders followed up the next day and identified what was presumably the same bird as an immature Little Gull. Photographs taken the second day, on the whole, seem to bear out the identification as Little Gull. A Thayer's Gull was reported from Region 4 and two Lesser Black-backed Gulls were unusual finds in Region 5. Downstate, Glaucous Gulls lingered into March and Iceland Gull into April in Region 9; both species were unusually late in Region 10, occurring into early May. Bonaparte's Gulls were reported in unusually low numbers in Region 2 and Region 10. Point Lookout in Region 10, an historic staging area for Bonaparte's Gulls, hosted very few birds; daily maxima were often in low double digits and only occasionally exceeded one hundred birds. As such, it wasn't surprising that reports of Black-headed and Little Gulls were scarce in the region, with one and zero reports, respectively.

An Arctic Tern at Jamaica Bay in Region 10 was the best tern of the season. Forster's Terns seemed to be on the move this spring with good numbers in Region 2, unusual appearances in Regions 1, 5 and 9, and a wandering bird in Region 10 farther east than the species' normal breeding areas. Black Terns were reported from nine of the ten regions, with better than average numbers noted in several. The only region that missed out was Region 8, which, for the first time in 15 years, did not have any terns reported in the spring season.

Winter Finches

Low numbers of winter finches continued from the generally lackluster winter season. Several species were widespread, however; Common Redpoll and Pine Siskin were found statewide in generally low numbers, and Evening Grosbeak was reported in eight of the ten regions, with only downstate Regions 9 and 10 having no reports. Good numbers of Red Crossbills were reported from Region 7, and in late March and early April, Red Crossbills were on territory in Chenango County in Region 4. These birds were in the same general area where Red Crossbills bred in 2004, but appeared to be a different, smaller-billed subspecies. See the Region 4 report for more details. The only other crossbills reported were two Red Crossbills in Region 1; White-winged Crossbill was unreported for the season. Region 4 experienced an irruption of Purple Finches with higher than usual numbers. A number of other regions reported generally low numbers of Purple Finches, and the species was unreported in three upstate regions, although whether this was due to a lack of reports or just standard numbers isn't clear. One interesting note from the Region 7 report was the discovery of a Purple Finch banded in January 2004 in York, SC, unfortunately dead after striking a window. A Hoary Redpoll in Region 5 was the lone individual of the species reported for the season.

Other Winter Lingers

The cool March weather seemed to encourage a few species to linger later than normal. A very late American Tree Sparrow on April 29 in Region 8 was surpassed by a remarkable five in Region 1 in mid-May. Good numbers of Lapland Longspurs also tarried in Region 1 with flocks of 12 and 85 found in Somerset on May 5. Northern Shrikes were more on schedule, with the latest from the seven reporting regions departing in mid-April. Although there were no unusually high numbers reported, only three regions, 6, 9 and 10, were shrike-less.

Following the winter season trend, Bohemian Waxwings were generally scarce with one notable exception. Several regions reported individual or single digit sightings, including a second Chemung County record in Region 3. The most noteworthy report, however, was a flock of 600 in Peru in Region 7. This is the highest regional count and the second highest number recorded in the state.

Breeders

Interesting early reports of breeding or possible breeding species included Clay-colored Sparrows in Regions 1 and 3; in Region 4, Acadian Flycatcher and White-eyed Vireo, locally rare breeders; and territorial Palm Warblers in Herkimer County in Region 5. A Henslow's Sparrow was found in Region 3 on the Chemung Valley Audubon Society's annual spring census; no indication of potential breeding was reported. Other Henslow's were reported from Regions 2 and 6 but the species was missed in Regions 1 and 5. Sedge Wrens were found in

potential breeding locations in Region 1 and 6, but were unreported elsewhere aside from a very rare migrant in Forest Park, Queens in Region 10. The continued increase of Common Raven in the state was noted in several regions, including Regions 2, 4 and 8. Region 4 also noted a continued increase of historically southerly species such as Carolina Wren, Northern Cardinal, and Red-bellied Woodpecker, which, having become established in the region's valleys and lowlands, are beginning to colonize highlands. The same phenomenon may have led to two Red-bellied Woodpecker reports at the northern edge of their range in Region 7. Among waterbirds, reports included a returning pair of Trumpeter Swans in Region 6, which produced eight young, and from Region 3, a note on the benefit of May's dry weather there on nesting gulls in the Chemung River, where 800 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls and four pairs of Herring Gulls were nesting by the end of the month. Elsewhere, the effects of the season's odd weather won't be known until the summer reports are compiled. One early report from Region 7 was that Tree Swallows started nesting late and in reduced numbers in some areas.

Rarities

In addition to birds listed above, the spring season contained a number of good rarities on both a regional and statewide level. Region 1 hosted its first White-winged Dove, widely anticipated given the number of records in the state and the Northeast in recent years. On 12 April, Willie D'Anna's productive yard in the town of Wilson in Region 1 held a Townsend's Solitaire, the third regional record, and the first outside the winter months. Also in the region, the overwintering Lark Sparrow in Porter remained through 12 Mar. An American White Pelican first found on 16 May at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 was joined by a second bird on 30 May, possibly the same individual reported about a week earlier from Schuyler County. Region 3 also hosted its first Mountain Bluebird, an immature male found and photographed in Dryden 6-7 Mar. A second Regional Chuck-will's-widow lingered for about a week in Region 5. Also in Region 5, the Derby Hill feeders hosted a Harris's Sparrow and two Gambel's White-crowned Sparrows. Happily, all of these were photographed for documentation. Highlight rarities in Region 6 were a Gray Jay at a Watertown feeder on 7 Mar and two sightings of a white Gyrfalcon near Gouverneur on 20 Mar. The most interesting report from Region 7 was a sparrow described as consistent with Sooty Fox Sparrow visiting a feeder in Vermontville. Another feeder find was a male Blue Grosbeak reported by a birder visiting his parents in Athens in Region 8. Last season's overwintering Orange-crowned Warbler in Region 9 survived into the spring season. In Region 10, two White-faced Ibises made brief appearances at Jamaica Bay in May; an observer following up on the initial sighting of an adult bird didn't find it, but did locate a subadult in the same vicinity. Two inshore Common Murres were found, the first a dead bird on 28 Mar in Moriches and the second seen close to shore at Robert Moses State Park at the remarkable late date of 26 May. Also in Region 10 were two vagrant passerines more typical of late fall or winter – a Western Tanager at Forest Park on 12 May and a Townsend's Solitaire photographed at Jones Beach on 29 May.

Miscellaneous

The observers at the Ripley Hawk Watch were surely shocked by the sight of three Whooping Cranes flying past the watch on 6 April. These birds turned out to be lost individuals from the "experimental non-essential population" that the US Fish and Wildlife Service is attempting to establish on a Wisconsin-Florida migratory route. As such, this first documented New York occurrence of the species won't make it onto the official list, but it still must have been a real treat for the lucky observers.

As usual the Regional Reports contain a number of interesting comments on local events and locations. Region 4 editors Matt Young and Jon Weeks describe the exciting but underbirded Pharsalia Wildlife Management Area and nearby state forests. Region 7 editor John Peterson acknowledges the 30th consecutive banding season conducted by the Crown Point Banding Association at the Crown Point State Historic Site, and also discusses the habitat management conducted at the location which has benefited locally and statewide uncommon breeding species. Region 8 editor Will Yandik passes along a report that the region's expanding Common Raven population has begun to opportunistically prey on Rock Pigeons at a Schenectady County manufacturing plant. Will also discusses the ongoing balancing act between continued real estate development and habitat conservation and points out that birders have a vested interest in becoming involved at the local level where an accumulation of small decisions can have a major impact.

Finally, two European Goldfinches were reported this April, from Region 1 and Region 9. These presumed escapees are reminders that not all the birds that we run across have gotten here solely through their own efforts!

Bird of the Season

There were a number of good rarities across the state this season, including Cinnamon Teal, White-faced Ibis, Swainson's Hawk, Wilson's Plover, White-winged Dove, Townsend's Solitaire, Mountain Bluebird, and Boreal and Great Gray owls. In my opinion, the most interesting phenomenon this spring was the incursion of southern species into the state, the rarest of which was Swainson's Warbler. Most of these reports were similar to the bulk of previous sightings in the state—brief appearances observed by a limited number of people, with no opportunity for photographic documentation. My choice for Bird of the Season goes to the one record which stands out—the accommodating Swainson's Warbler which spent a week in Forest Park, Queens, in mid-April. Patient observers were able to get close views of this normally secretive bird as it foraged through the open leaf litter. Perhaps the only realistically chaseable Swainson's Warbler in the state in close to twenty years, it may have been seen by more individual birders than any prior New York occurrence.