

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON - SUMMER 2005

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### THE WEATHER

Statewide, summer 2005 was the second hottest on record since the National Weather Service began tracking temperature data in 1895, trailing only the summer of 1949, which was a tenth of a degree warmer. The average temperature for the period was 70.5°, almost 4° above the 111-year average. June was particularly hot and was the second warmest on record (behind, again, June 1949). Both July and August were well above average statewide and ranked in the top ten warmest such months. The overall trend was noted virtually statewide, with most regions reporting record or near record temperatures. Only coastal Region 10 enjoyed near normal temperatures in June and July, although August there was about 4° above normal. Precipitation trended slightly above average statewide in each of the three months, although there was some regional variance. Much of the precipitation occurred in strong storms, noted particularly in Regions 7 and 8 in July, and in the remnants of Hurricanes Cindy in July and Katrina in August. Several regions commented that it was a good year for fruit and nut crops, although in some cases persistent drought withered fruit crops during the season.

### BREEDING BIRDS

Typical for the season, breeding birds were a focus in many of the regions, although there was a decrease in reports compared to the past several years due to the winding down of coverage for the Breeding Bird Atlas 2000 project.

One of the most interesting phenomena this summer was the increased presence of several grassland breeding species, particularly Dickcissel and Sedge Wren. These two species were both noted in good numbers in Regions 1 and 8, and high numbers of Sedge Wrens were also present in Region 6. Sedge Wrens were reported at four locations in Region 1, the highest number of reports in many years, and were "unusually common" at Fort Drum in Region 6, the second consecutive year that good numbers have been reported there. Interestingly, in the last two years territorial birds arrived at Fort Drum in June, rather than in late July or August typical of the recent past. Sedge Wrens were also noted in northwestern Region 8, where young were successfully fledged. Small colonies of Dickcissels were noted in Regions 1, where up to five singing males and a female were noted, and at the same location as Region 8's Sedge Wrens, where at least five adults were present and four young fledged. Birders flocking to Region 8 for these species located at least three Henslow's Sparrows nearby, in a location not previously known for the species. The increased numbers of Dickcissels and Sedge Wrens might be due to early season droughts in their core breeding range in the Midwest, as noted in the Region 1 report; a number of Midwestern states experienced below average or well below average precipitation this spring.

In Region 6, increased coverage due to two grassland bird research and monitoring projects was credited for this season's higher than usual reports of Henslow's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Upland Sandpiper. Apart from coverage related to the projects, these species remained scarce elsewhere in the Region. Upland Sandpipers were notable elsewhere in the state as well. The first Essex County record for Atlas 2000 was recorded in Region 7, while last-minute Atlas-ing in Region 8 contributed to an excellent number of sightings there, including many from previously unreported locations. Sadly, as noted in the Regional report, many of these welcome records of grassland breeders are from unprotected lands, vulnerable to the same development pressures that led to the demise of the Upland Sandpiper populations in the Cocksackie Flats region of Region 8, once a stronghold. Beyond the reports mentioned above, Henslow's Sparrow continued to decline; there were small numbers, and fewer than last year, reported from Region 1; only one report in Region 2; and none, again, in Region 5.

A singing Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was found in Region 7; a report of this unusual mid-summer record has been submitted to NYSARC. Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows were both reported from Dutchess County in Region 9. Clay-colored Sparrows are becoming more regular, and therefore somewhat less newsworthy, but were still well-reported over most of the state, with records from seven of the ten reporting regions. Fort Drum continues to host the highest numbers; up to 16 singing males were reported there in June. In Region 1 and Region 2 Clay-colored Sparrows were apparently paired with Chipping Sparrows, not very surprising considering the rapid expansion of the breeding population over the past several years.

Breeding warbler highlights included a pair of Yellow-throated Warblers which fledged two young at Alleghany State Park in Region 1, the first Region 5 breeding record of Palm Warbler, and the first Sullivan County breeding record of Northern Parula in Region 9. It was a good year for Yellow-breasted Chats in western New York. Region 1 had chats at five separate locations, the most reports in many years, and an adult with a brood patch was accompanied by two hatch-year birds in Region 2, an unusual breeding record for the Lake Ontario plain.

It was an excellent year for both cuckoo species, although the ratio between Black-billed and Yellow-billed varied across the state. Good numbers were attributed at least in part to outbreaks of tent caterpillars.

There were scattered finch reports this summer. Outside the main breeding range in Region 7, small numbers of Pine Siskins were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3 and 6. There was at least one report of Red Crossbill from each of Regions 1 through 8; breeding was noted in Region 4. The Region 8 report details some interesting observations that may represent different subspecies, a determination that can only be made with some difficulty. Single Evening Grosbeaks were reported outside the Adirondacks in early June in Region 5 and late August in Region 9. In Region 7, a female was recaptured at a banding station eight years after being banded in the summer of 1997.

Breeding Bird Atlas work in Region 6 turned up a good numbers of boreal breeding species, including American Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Philadelphia Vireo, Gray Jay, Palm Warbler and Lincoln's

Sparrow. Apart from Gray Jay and Palm Warbler, most species were well represented in the Tug Hill region, including the sole American Three-toed Woodpecker in the Region. On a down note, despite coverage of historical breeding sites for Spruce Grouse, none were found this summer. As usual, the only Spruce Grouse reports were from Region 7. Ruffed Grouse barely kept pace in the regional report count, as the species was only mentioned in Region 4. Of course, it occurs in a number of additional regions, but is declining in many areas, and it's difficult to tell where the lack of reports represents unreported birds as opposed to absent birds. For the third consecutive year, Gray Partridge was not reported anywhere in the state. From Region 8 comes a cautionary tale of the confusion caused by releases, intentional or otherwise, of Northern Bobwhite, a species which hasn't occurred wild in the Region for a number of years. Similar confusion can be caused even in the species' remaining breeding range on Long Island, where the declining population is supplemented by some unquantifiable number of releases; this problem also exists for the non-native but established Ring-necked Pheasant.

Miscellaneous reports included a smattering of unusual warblers in Region 1 in addition to those listed above, including an unprecedented summer record of Louisiana Waterthrush in Niagara County and a territorial male Lawrence's Warbler. A Nashville Warbler found at a new location in Region 1 for the second consecutive summer was attributed to habitat succession in the Region. A discussion of the affects of successional growth and microhabitat change on individual species is included in the Region 4 report. An interesting single-site snapshot of long-term breeding activity was mentioned in the Region 4 report as well, where Chimney Swift was recorded breeding in a silo for the 53rd consecutive year. Only one pair has been recorded at the site for the past three years, down from 10-12 pairs in the past. The most unusual breeding record in Region 10 was that of a newly-fledged Golden-crowned Kinglet found on 16 July in Nassau County. This is apparently the first breeding record on Long Island since 1963, and is in line with the species' tendency to nest in spruce plantations outside of its normal breeding range. The Region 10 report also contains a disheartening account of the continuing decline of a number of breeding species at one of the Region's prime woodland habitats, emblematic of a similar decline Region-wide. As usual, there are additional nuggets of information in every Regional report, well worth reviewing in more detail.

## **WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS**

Counts of Double-crested Cormorants this summer provided evidence that controversial control measures implemented by NYS DEC have had a tangible affect, as summer maxima were down in Regions 1, 2 and 3. Disturbing news was relayed about other colonial nesting waterbirds as well. In Region 1, many Common Terns perished as the Buffalo Harbor colony suffered from the extreme heat, above 100°F on the hottest days, and a number of fledgling chicks in the small colony at Tonowanda died on 4 July when they jumped into the water after fireworks were launched from a nearby barge. In Region 2, the maximum count of Caspian Terns was only half of typical numbers, and the maximum of three juveniles is also a concern.

There were some encouraging signs. Caspian Tern nests increased in Region 7 from five pairs last year to 18 pairs this summer, and the count on Little Galloo Island increased from 600 adults and young in 2004 to 1788 nests there this year. Common Terns had successful nesting seasons in Region 5 and Region 6. Up to 41 Black Terns counted in Region 7, with up to seven immatures, was positive given the decline of the species in the state. In Region 10, six pairs of Roseate Terns were found breeding on marsh islands in Great South Bay, close to the former Cedar Beach colony which had disbanded about a decade ago. Regular summer sightings of Roseate Terns in the area had led to speculation that the birds from that colony had relocated nearby, but no nests had been found prior to this summer. Also in Region 10, two very large colonies of Black Skimmers had a successful, albeit late, season; colonies of approximately 500 adults at Lido Beach and approximately 1000 adults at Breezy Point contained very small young as late as the end of August.

Migrant larids included the arrival of southbound Parasitic Jaegers on Lake Ontario at the end of the period. On 31 August, one Parasitic and two unidentified jaegers were seen at Wilson in Region 1, and on the same date an exceptional summer count of 16 Parasitic Jaegers was noted at Fair Haven in Region 5. These events may well represent birds slightly displaced by the remains of Hurricane Katrina passing through the region. Small numbers of Parasitic Jaegers seen along south shore of Long Island during June and July likely represent a mix of north-bound migrants and summering subadults or nonbreeding birds. As usual for the season, gulls were relatively absent, apart from breeding species. Strays included Bonaparte's Gulls in Regions 3, 9 and 10. Wandering terns included inland records of Forster's Tern in Region 3 and Region 9, and Common and Caspian Terns in Region 9. Black Terns were relatively widespread this summer away from breeding locations; 17 were noted on 31 August at Wilson in Region 1 and two were seen off of Rye in Region 9 on 15 June. Black Terns were also "unusually numerous and widespread" in Region 10, with reports coming from multiple locations on the south shore of Long Island. Regional editors Mitra & Lindsay suggest that the high numbers this year may reflect failed breeding efforts.

Both of New York's non-native nesting swans were noted again this summer. Mute Swan, a common and generally unwelcome breeder downstate, continues to expand upstate. They nested at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 for the first time in at least a decade, and were described as "out of control" in Region 2. Trumpeter Swans were noted in Region 2, where the continuing pair in Wayne County raised 3-4 young, and also bred for at least the tenth consecutive year at Perch River WMA in Region 6. Another pair noted this summer in St. Lawrence County in Region 6 has apparently been present for several years at the location.

As typically occurs, a variety of out-of-season, summering waterfowl was reported from across the state. The most unusual records include a Tundra Swan in Region 1; a lingering King Eider in Region 5; White-winged Scoters in Regions 7 and 9; and a head-scratch-inducing Barnacle Goose that spent most of July and August at Gilgo, Suffolk County in Region 10. See the regional reports for more details on these and other unseasonal records. As noted in the Tundra Swan account in Region 1, these birds may represent unhealthy or injured individuals (or, like the Barnacle Goose, possible escapes from captivity).

Comments on the status of breeding waterbirds included a gloomy statement on Common Moorhen in Region 2, where this formerly locally common breeder is now "virtually absent" and "obviously in trouble". In Region 3, a near absence of cattails at the main pool at Montezuma NWR was thought to be responsible for low numbers of breeding ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, and American Coots. A positive note came from Region 4, where Common Mergansers may have expanded sufficiently to require some birds to breed in relatively marginal habitat. A count of 40 Blue-winged Teal at Hamlin Beach in late August is a good count by recent standards and may represent nearby breeding success.

Sandhill Cranes nested in Savannah in Region 2 again this year, with two good-sized young observed. These birds were likely also responsible, at least in part, for reports of up to three Sandhills nearby in Region 3. Two were also found in Region 7. For the second consecutive season, Sandhill wasn't the only crane species in the state. One of the three Whooping Cranes that passed through Region 1 in the spring showed up in mid-August in Lewis County, Region 6. The bird, identified once again by its color bands, did not linger.

## RAPTORS

The expansion of Merlin as a breeder in the state continued with Region 1 recording its first nesting records. The first documented nest was, surprisingly, in the City of Buffalo. A second nest was found this summer in Salamanca, where a rescued nestling raptor, initially thought to be an American Kestrel, fledged out as a Merlin. Following up, a local birder found an adult and one fledged young at the original site. Local residents there indicated the birds had nested at that location last summer as well. In Region 3, a pair of Merlins began to nest near the business section of the Village of Horseheads but the attempt failed after the crow's nest they had adopted suffered wind damage. Region 4 had a successful nesting for the third consecutive year as a pair and one young were found in Cortland, and Merlins also nested in Regions 5 and 6. Peregrine Falcons were reported breeding in five regions. Osprey continues to increase as a breeder as well; in Region 2, pairs were seen placing sticks on cell towers in Greece and Parma, perhaps indicating future breeding attempts. The early returns on the fall hawk flight in Region 2 were dismal - this August was the worst on record. The seasonal total of Red-tailed Hawks was less than what is usually counted on several days during a typical fall, and all other species were noted in record low numbers. Bald Eagle reports were widespread, with sightings reported in eight of the ten Kingbird regions. In several locations, summering adults were found away from known nesting sites. A maximum of 17 Bald Eagles at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 on 19 June was an impressive early summer count. Golden Eagles were reported multiple times in Regions 5 and 6 during the summer. The most intriguing of these was a series of sightings of an adult from Fort Drum in Region 6, although the sightings were infrequent enough that it was considered unlikely this represented a breeding attempt at the location.

## SHOREBIRDS

The generally dry summer weather produced mixed results for shorebirds. In some regions, including Regions 1, 5, and 9, dryer than normal conditions led to an increase in numbers and variety. Elsewhere, conditions were so dry that shorebird numbers were lower than usual. Hurricane Katrina produced fewer grounded shorebirds than expected in Region 2, but did drop a good number of birds in Regions 1 and 7. There were multiple reports of Wilson's Phalarope, Whimbrel, Western Sandpiper and Willet from upstate regions, as well as Red Knot and Red-necked Phalarope. The only Ruff was found in Region 7, and record early Buff-breasted Sandpipers appeared in Region 5 on 13 August. A number of local or county firsts were among the 18 species found in Region 9, many at Swinging Bridge Reservoir in Sullivan County, which had much lower than normal water levels. County firsts there included Sanderling, Stilt Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Elsewhere in Region 9, a Willet in Yonkers on 4 July was a first for that city, and another Willet was found in Rye. Higher than normal numbers of several species over-summered in Region 10, including Red Knot, Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plover, and Dunlin. It's not unusual, given sufficient scrutiny, to find color-banded shorebirds in gathering flocks on Long Island's south shore, and, indeed, a Red Knot found at Cupsogue on 29 June had been banded earlier this year on 2 June in Delaware Bay.

## RARITIES

A number of rarities spiced up the summer's birding, in addition to those mentioned above. American White Pelicans were widespread, perhaps stemming from disruptions to breeding colonies. Two were seen in Region 1, as many as four were present in Region 3, with at least one lingering at Montezuma NWR through the season, and Region 5 had three sightings. Also in Region 1, Batavia Wastewater Treatment plant hosted an Eared Grebe for the sixth consecutive summer. A number of highlight rarities in Region 2 included the third August Great Cormorant record in the last ten years; second Regional records of Eurasian Collared-Dove and White Ibis, an adult at Braddock Bay; a subadult Mississippi Kite; and a rare summer record of Fish Crow. In Region 9, 15 Wilson's Storm-Petrels were found off of Rye on 15 June, along with a Manx Shearwater, the third consecutive year the latter species has been recorded in that part of Long Island Sound. The Wilson's Storm-Petrels, present in varying numbers for about a week, represented the first occurrence in the Region in over 70 years. Region 10 hosted a variety of unusual birds. Brown Pelicans were present in small numbers, typical for recent years. More exciting were two reports of frigatebirds, presumably Magnificent, from eastern Long Island in late July and early August. These reports mirror multiple photo-documented sightings from Massachusetts to the north, New Jersey to the south, and elsewhere in the Northeast; whether due to the extreme tropical storm activity of the season or some other reason, there were evidently a number of frigatebirds in the northwest Atlantic this summer. A second Mississippi Kite for the season, this one an adult, was found in Staten Island. Following several sightings in the spring, another Wilson's Plover was reported from Tobay Beach; hopefully documentation for the record will be

submitted to provide further evidence of what was a very good year for the species. Two species of rare terns, Arctic Tern and Sandwich Tern, also appeared on Long Island's south shore this summer, continuing a pattern of occurrence over the last several years. A one-year old Arctic Tern was found near Moriches Inlet, Suffolk County, and seen by several observers during early July. Careful observers have been able to find similarly aged Arctic Terns almost annually by scrutinizing flocks of medium-sized terns. In a similar vein, there were a series of Sandwich Tern reports from late July and August. Previously known almost entirely as a hurricane-driven vagrant, recent years have found more records less directly tied to summer storms, perhaps representing an expansion or increase of post-breeding dispersal. This year's birds, unfortunately, did not linger long at any one location. Two rare flycatchers rounded out the rarity report from Region 10. On 23 June a Say's Phoebe was found at Jones Beach State Park, a classic rarity trap in spring as well as fall. This is the first June record of the species in the state. Earlier in the month, on 5 June, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was found at Mount Loretto on Staten Island. Unfortunately, both birds were seen only on the day they were found.

### BIRD OF THE SEASON

There was no obvious, immediate choice in my mind for this summer's BOTS award. The observations listed above include a number of excellent records, but many of these were either most noteworthy on a regional basis; what I would call "mid-range" rarities (birds that turn up roughly once a year, on average); or were unsatisfying (BOTS-wise) short-term or single observer records. One exception might be the Jones Beach Say's Phoebe from Region 10; notable in the state at any time of year, this record is doubly unusual by virtue of the date, the first spring or summer record statewide. After some deliberation, however, I choose instead a collective BOTS for the unusual Mid-Western-like concentration of grassland breeding birds in a small area in Region 8. Were it not for the diligent observations and reporting by the property owner, fortunately an active birder, these birds may have gone unnoticed. To me they are another small scale reminder of the importance of the conservation of dwindling habitats, and of the fact that, as always in birding, exciting surprises are always possible.

