

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – FALL 2005

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THE WEATHER

Fall 2005 was the fifth warmest fall since 1895, continuing the trend from the summer season. Both September and November were over 3° above the 110-year average temperature. October's temperatures moderated across most of the state, but precipitation was well above average, fueled in part by the remains of Tropical Storm Tammy passing through early in the month. It was the wettest October since 1895, contributing to the second wettest fall season overall during the same period. 2005 ended as the most active season on record for Atlantic Ocean tropical storm activity, but there were no "direct hits" in New York and, as a result, few obviously storm-transported birds. October's weather seemed to have a concentrating effect on migrants, as many birds bottled up by wet weather took advantage of the handful of good migration days. A consistent theme later in the season was the late departure of southbound migrants, perhaps due to being blocked by the weather from moving south or being able to survive milder than normal conditions, or in some cases the apparent movement of birds back into the region on prevailing south-westerly winds or in the wake of passing tropical storms.

WATERFOWL/OTHER WATERBIRDS

General impressions of the season's waterfowl migration expressed some disappointment. Regions 2, 5, and 8 noted poor or unremarkable movements. Even Region 6, which experienced "decent numbers," noted few large concentrations. Scaup numbers were cited as particularly low in Region 2, where they were described as "virtually absent", and Region 5. On the plus side were new Regional high counts of 440 Wood Ducks coming to roost on 11 November (Region 1) and 10,000+ Red-breasted Mergansers counted off Irondequoit Bay (Region 2). Ninety Ruddy Ducks at Braddock Bay were a good count for Region 2, where any double-digit count is notable. Conversely, at the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant in Region 1, counts of hundreds of Ruddy Ducks were still much lower than previous years. Region 3 experienced good numbers of dabbling ducks, with the single-site maxima for a variety of species at an eleven-year high. For Blue-winged Teal, widely declining across the state, it was the third consecutive year of "significant" increase. On the diving duck front, Region 5 tallied good numbers of White-winged and Black Scoters and Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers.

Tundra Swans appeared in good numbers in Region 1 on 18-19 November, while arrivals in Region 2 a week later were record-early for the Region. Cackling Geese, continuing their post-speciation assault on the State's ornithological record books, were reported from 7 of the 10 Regions this season. Notable among the

reports were three at the traditional Region 1 location, Iroquois NWR, and a Regional first record photographed in Region 8. Additional waterfowl highlights included two separate Common Eiders in Region 2, including an extremely cooperative bird at Irondequoit Bay outlet which showed characters (primarily bill structure and color) differing from the subspecies which regularly occurs in coastal New York waters, *S. m. dresseri*. Preliminary research led observers to believe that it may have been *S. m. borealis*, which, as the scientific name implies, is a more northerly form, occurring in winter south to the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and coastal Maine. New York has at least one record of *borealis*, a specimen collected at Montauk in December, 1945. Identification of Common Eider subspecies is difficult, particularly for females, and female *borealis* is apparently very similar to female *S. m. v-nigra*, the Pacific Ocean subspecies, which has occurred very rarely in the western North Atlantic. Further review of pertinent literature and museum specimens may shed more conclusive light on this identification. In any event, this is a significant record – kudos to the careful observers who paid enough attention to notice the slight differences. Among “regular” rarities, there were only three Greater White-fronted Goose reported, two from Region 2 and one from Region 10, and two reports of Ross’s Goose, one from Region 3 and one from Region 7. Eurasian Wigeon appeared in one more region, but in greater overall numbers, with a single report from Region 1 and multiple reports from both Region 3 and Region 10.

Large numbers of Common Loon were reported in Region 2, where Hamlin Beach experienced several days with migration counts of over 1,000, and in Region 5, where migrating loons delayed by southerly winds amassed at Fair Haven and Oswego. Central New York experienced a fallout of Red-throated Loons on 23-25 November, most likely due to a quick-moving cold front which passed through the region. Several grounded birds were found and brought to rehabilitators in Region 4 and Region 5, and a number of similar reports were received during this period from non-birders. Pied-billed Grebes were found in notable numbers in Region 3 and Region 1, where 192 on Chautauqua Lake on 10 November established a new Regional high count. Also in Region 1, three Eared Grebes continued into November at the Batavia WWTP, a regular location for the species. Region 2 recorded good numbers of Red-necked Grebes, including four days with 20+ at Hamlin Beach.

Northern Gannet appeared in at least three upstate Regions with another possible sighting in a fourth. There was one sighting in Region 1, single birds sighted on three different dates in Region 5, and a record number of reports from Region 2 – 14 birds were recorded, with most deemed “definitely separable” by plumage characters. Following the Hurricane Wilma/Nor’easter event in late October, a possible Northern Gannet was found grounded and tentatively identified after its subsequent release at Otsego Lake.

Western New York experienced a late season incursion of Cattle Egrets, with one in Region 1 and five in Region 2 found during the third week of November. Region 10 had the only other reports, in mid-September from Jamaica Bay. Great Egrets were down in Region 5, with only a single report, and up in Region 1, where 87 at Tonawanda Wildlife Management Area in September established a new Regional maximum. Elsewhere reports seemed normal.

Glossy Ibis was found inland in Region 3, with up to two birds at Montezuma NWR in September, and along the Hudson River at Piermont Pier in Region 9.

The season's tropical weather appeared to have only a modest avian impact, primarily in Region 10. On 16 September, as Hurricane Ophelia passed well offshore, several Cory's Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrels were seen from Long Island's south shore, and a handful of Lesser Black-backed Gulls appeared at scattered Long Island locations. The following day, a Manx Shearwater was discovered in Jones Inlet; during its week-plus stay this bird provided a good opportunity for birders to debate its identification and separation from Audubon's Shearwater (see *Kingbird* 55: 335-339). All of these birds could occur without the influence of tropical weather systems, but the passing storm may have concentrated them onshore. Almost certainly storm-influenced was a Magnificent Frigatebird at Bayport on November 6, about two weeks after the remnants of Hurricane Wilma passed offshore. This report continued the trend from the summer, when two Frigatebirds were reported from Long Island, and also mirrors reports of multiple birds from surrounding states. Unfortunately, the large Black Skimmer colony at Lido Beach was washed out in the high tides that accompanied Hurricane Ophelia.

Finally, for the sixth consecutive year, a type-E botulism outbreak affected piscivorous birds along Lake Erie. As in prior years, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation conducted transect counts of dead birds, and estimated total mortality on Lake Erie of 1,350 birds during the period early October to early December. The primary species affected were, as in prior years, Common Loon and Long-tailed Duck.

GULLS/TERNS

The Niagara River in Region 1 again held the most gull activity. Bonaparte's Gulls appeared in good numbers this year, with 7,000-10,000 present during the second half of November. Amongst them this fall were a Franklin's Gull, a juvenile present for most of November; a Black-headed Gull; and a juvenile Black-legged Kittiwake. More unusual for the Region was an adult Black-legged Kittiwake seen with a small group of Bonaparte's Gulls flying west on Lake Ontario on 5 November; juvenile Kittiwakes are seen far more frequently inland than adults. For the 14th consecutive year, a California Gull was found as large gulls began congregating in late November. To the east, Region 2 hosted a good variety of small gulls as well. Notable sightings included two Sabine's Gulls, 5 Black-headed Gulls, 12 Little Gulls, and a record early Black-legged Kittiwake. Only 5 kittiwakes were tallied for the season, however, a low total for the Region, particularly in contrast with the good numbers recorded at Derby Hill in Region 5, which produced a daily maximum of 12 on 16 November. Region 5 also tallied single Black-headed and Little Gulls. There was a minor Laughing Gull incursion inland, with one in Region 2, two in Region 3, and one in Region 8. Increased scrutiny may be part of the reason for more unusual gulls being reported in Region 7 recently. This season's reports included one or two juvenile Black-legged Kittiwakes (observed from Vermont) and a good total of 7 Little Gulls.

Several regions upstate noted Caspian Terns lingering later in the season than normal. Reports were received into October in Regions 1, 2, 3 and 5. Black Terns were noted in good numbers, for recent years at least; Regions 1 and 2 both recorded maxima of 8, and 19 reported from the south end of Cayuga Lake in Region 3 was an eleven-year high for the fall season. Conversely, only a single bird was found in Region 5 and coastal counts were lackluster. A Region 1 record-high 22 Forster's Terns were counted at Beaver Island S.P. in September. A maximum of 50+ Royal Terns were counted at Pike's Beach, Suffolk County in Region 10, and the season's only Sandwich Terns were found along nearby Dune Road.

A good number of jaegers were found along Lake Ontario in Regions 1, 2 and 5. In Region 1, only one was identified to species, a Parasitic Jaeger, but 13 others were seen, including one considered a probable Pomarine. The season totals in Region 2 were deemed "respectable" after a slow start; the final counts reported were 12 Pomarine, 68 Parasitic and 1 Long-tailed [When? Not mentioned in report]. The totals in Region 5, mainly from Derby Hill, were 10 Pomarine and 19 Parasitic. In Region 3, a Pomarine Jaeger was found in a more unusual location when presumably the same individual was seen at two locations on Cayuga Lake on 30 October. The only other jaegers reported were two Parasitics harassing gulls on 5 September on Lake Champlain in Region 7.

RAPTORS

Fall hawk-watching presented a few notable highlights in the course of a generally underwhelming season. Among the continuing trends was increased Bald Eagle numbers in many regions. This season was also good for Golden Eagles, with reports from seven Regions. While numbers were high in general, most of the Regional tallies were dwarfed by the remarkable 252 Golden Eagles recorded at Franklin Mountain Hawkwatch in Region 4. Probably due in some part to this year's record coverage, this is the single-site seasonal record for the eastern flyway, and tops the 229 recorded there last fall. Included in the season's total was an also remarkable single day high count of 71 on 11 November, also a record high count for eastern North America, surpassing the previous high count of 51 which Franklin Mountain had shared with Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania. Peregrine Falcons also continued to be well reported this fall. A strong push occurred through the state in October. On 8 October, a new Region 1 high count was recorded when 9 were seen migrating along Lake Ontario at Wilson. On the same date, 7 Peregrines were observed moving along Cayuga Lake in Region 3. Region 2 recorded excellent numbers of migrating Peregrines, with a total of 26 in October, including 19 in a two-day stretch, and several other regions noted good counts. Region 3 also noted many Merlins in its westernmost regions. In Region 1, up to four Merlins were on site at the wintering roost at the University of Buffalo, and Region 2 tallied 18 migrants in October. Some Regions reported low hawk watch totals due to lack of coverage, likely due to the inclement weather during the peak migration periods. Conversely, the Lenoir Hawk Watch in Region 9 had a "banner day" on 16 October, when a cold front passed following a week of record rainfall, as hawks were funneled

The Kingbird 2006 March; 56(1)

by the weather along a narrow corridor over the Hudson River. Broad-winged Hawk numbers were generally low to moderate. Peak counts were from Region 9, where various sites recorded 1000+ individuals on four days, topped by 1400 at Bear Mountain on 24 September. A rare dark-morph Broad-winged Hawk was sighted at Mount Peter on 20 September. Region 10 recorded two individuals into November, the last on the 21st. Also late for the season was an Osprey on 20 November in Region 5.

Snowy Owls made appearances in five Regions, raising hopes for good winter numbers. Otherwise, there was no indication that the “northern owl” invasion of last winter would repeat. Northern Saw-whet Owls were poorly reported, with only three Regions listing the species this fall. Region 1 noted an early arrival on 25 September. 51 Saw-whets banded at two sites in Region 1, and a road-killed recovery in Region 8 report, the only Regional report, are indications that this secretive species is likely more common than evident from the number of reports.

SHOREBIRDS

A common thread throughout the Regional reports was that the season’s shorebirding was generally mediocre. Comments included phrases such as “numbers unspectacular” (Region 2); “generally low” (Region 4); “few” reports (Regions 5 and 6), and “lackluster” (Region 8). In Region 3, low reports might have been a result of maintenance work at Montezuma NWR, the focal point for shorebird activity in the Region, which apparently forced birds into less accessible areas. In Region 8, high water levels throughout the season likely contributed to the dismal showing.

Highlights included American Avocet, Red-necked Phalarope, and Hudsonian Godwit in Region 1; a cooperative Red Phalarope in Region 2; Whimbrel, Western Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Region 3; good numbers of Baird’s Sandpiper in Region 4; good numbers of American Golden-Plover and Pectoral Sandpiper in Region 5; American Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, and Red Phalarope in Region 6; Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Willet, and Hudsonian Godwit in Region 9, the latter two both at Piermont Pier along the Hudson River in Rockland County; and Red-necked Phalarope in Region 10.

PASSERINE MIGRATION

Passerine migration on the whole was good. Many regions reported excellent overall counts of various species, and there were several notable migration events during the season. In Region 2, the passerine migration was described as “fabulous.” Maximum daily counts included 85 Winter Wrens, 160 Hermit Thrushes, 50+ Field Sparrows, 600+ Savannah Sparrows, 1,200+ White-crowned Sparrows, and 1,200 Rusty Blackbirds. The sparrow season was “the best in years”. In Region 3, on 11 October, nocturnal migrants appeared to be concentrated by a low cloud ceiling and lights at Cornell University’s football stadium. After word spread, a dozen birders converged on the site and tallied high counts and Regional late departure dates for a number of warbler species, as well as approximately 1,000 Savannah Sparrows, most foraging on the stadium’s

artificial turf. Four Dickcissels were also heard calling overhead during the night. See the Region 3 species accounts for further details. When the rainy weather cleared through Region 10 several days later, a major passerine flight moved through the Region, culminating with a large number of birds—mainly sparrows, kinglets, wrens, and thrushes—grounded on 21 October by a line of showers. An unfortunate consequence of the event was the demise of large numbers of passerines along Ocean Parkway, a busy commuter road which runs along the Jones Beach strip, where grounded birds concentrate. Region 10 authors Shai Mitra and Pat Lindsay witnessed a sample of the carnage on 20 October and describe their observations in the Regional report. On a happier note, Mitra and Lindsay also note that this fall was a good one in Region 10 for observing uncommon or rare migrants such as Olive-sided Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, and Dickcissel. Thrushes were well reported, spurred in part, no doubt, by more widespread attention on nocturnal migration. As an example, a listener in Region 1 tallied 5 thrush species on 22 September, including 181 Swainson's Thrushes, and "many" Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes were heard overhead in Region 5 on 15 September, although exact numbers weren't noted. Observers in Region 3 typically maintain the most regular and rigorous nocturnal flight monitoring. Thrush counts at Sapsucker Woods this season included 1,000 Gray-cheeked Thrushes and 1,500 Swainson's Thrushes on 24 September. Philadelphia Vireos were noted in high numbers in Regions 1, 3, 5, and 10, and were reported from eight of ten Regions. In addition to the Region 2 numbers mentioned above, sparrows were well-reported in Regions 1, 5, 6, and 10. A number of Regions reported good variety of warblers, many establishing late departure dates. Two uncommon species which were particularly well represented this fall were Orange-crowned Warbler, reported in 8 of 10 Regions, including 12 on the Buffalo Ornithological Society Count in Region 1, 10 in Region 3, and 14 in Region 10; and Connecticut Warbler, with reports from four Regions, including three banded at a single Greene County location in Region 8, and 16 reports, with some possible duplication, from Region 10. Rusty Blackbird, a declining species, garnered positive mentions in several Regions in addition to the good numbers in Region 2. Also in Region 2, another declining species, Chimney Swift, made a good showing, with a maximum of 1,300 counted at a traditional roost site. Chimney Swifts made news in Region 10 as well when exceptionally late birds were recorded into November. An impressive diurnal migration of Black-capped Chickadees was noted on 5 November at the Lenoir Nature Preserve, when over 1,000 were counted moving south in flocks of 25-80. Presumably a Boreal Chickadee seen a day earlier across the Hudson River at Sterling Forest was part of the same general movement.

There was little evidence of a winter finch invasion this fall, with only scattered reports of few individuals. Pine Siskin was reported from nine Regions but generally in small numbers; Region 1 reported a minor flight, with "much smaller numbers than last fall." Other exceptions to the general trend were good numbers from Region 3 and Region 8, where the species was "widespread." Evening Grosbeak was likewise widely distributed in small numbers, with

reports from nine Regions as well. Common Redpolls were only reported from four Regions, although five in Region 2 on 9 October were record-early for the region. White-winged Crossbills were scarce, with reports from only three Regions, with only single birds from two of those. Red Crossbills were somewhat more common with reports from five Regions. Pine Grosbeaks were reported from four Regions, all from late November apart from two birds in late October in Region 9. Another early arrival in Region 2 was Snow Bunting, which tied the Regional record early date of 28 September. Northern Shrikes appeared in all Regions except southernmost Region 10; despite some arrivals on the early side overall numbers were average. Bohemian Waxwings appeared in moderate numbers along the Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River plains but had not appeared elsewhere by season's end.

SWALLOWS

The most notable aspect of the season's migration was the unprecedented incursion of late-season swallows into the state. The now-annual pulse of Cave Swallows occurred again this year, with birds seen along the Great Lakes and the coast. This year, inland birds vastly outnumbered birds downstate, where about 10 sightings on coastal Long Island, from Montauk Point to Point Lookout, comprised mostly single birds, with a maximum of three. Upstate the picture was very different! Regions 1 and 5, with one previous record each, recorded multiple Cave Swallows. In Region 5, at least 7 passed Derby Hill on 6 November, and three more were seen at Fair Haven to 17 November. Many were recorded flying westward along Lake Ontario in Region 1, with counts of 40+ on 5 November and 80+ on 6 November from various lakeside locations. Even these remarkable numbers paled beside the counts from Region 2. Beginning with 28 counted on 3 November, by 17 November diligent watchers counted nearly 800 birds in total, all moving west along Lake Ontario. For a detailed account of this phenomenon, please see the Region 2 report. An article summarizing this event is in preparation for an upcoming issue. This year, the late-season swallows included a number of additional species. A Purple Martin seen by swallow-searchers in Region 1 on 5 November established a late date for the state. Rough-winged Swallows were seen into November in Regions 1 and 2, with a late date of 13 November in Region 1. Barn Swallows were seen to late October in Regions 1 and 2, while in Region 10 there were at least seven reports in November, the last on the 21st. Region 10 editors Mitra and Lindsay discuss the larger context of these reports as part of an event, possibly caused by Hurricane Wilma, which led to large numbers of late-season aerial insectivores as far north as the Canadian Maritimes. Mitra and Lindsay also voice a note of caution regarding the identification of late-season *Petrochelidon* swallows—although Cave Swallows have become expected, the presence of dozens of Cliff Swallows this November in Nova Scotia is an indication that no assumptions should be made in these identifications.

RARITIES

A good number of rarities were seen throughout the state this fall. It was a down year for vagrant hummingbirds, but two *Selasphorus* were seen, one

each in Region 1 and Region 8. Despite extensive photographic documentation and expert review during its two-month stay, the Region 1 bird could only be identified to genus. The Region 8 bird was banded and identified in hand as a hatching year male Rufous Hummingbird, which remains the only species of the genus positively identified in the state.

In addition to the unusual warblers discussed previously, several additional finds made news across the state. The fourth fall record of Worm-eating Warbler, and the latest ever for Region 1, was found there on 6 October. Even rarer was one found in Region 7 on 13 September, only the fourth Regional record since 1979. A Yellow-throated Warbler was seen sporadically at a Region 5 feeder in November. The rarest warbler statewide was a cooperative Black-throated Gray Warbler which frequented Forest Park in Queens County, Region 10, for a week in mid November.

One American White Pelican lingered from the summer season at Montezuma NWR in Region 3, remaining until mid-October. In early November, Westchester County in Region 9 recorded its second and third county records of American White Pelican, first three soaring over Rye Town Park on 1 November, followed by a single bird at Croton Point Park on 4 November, and five were seen at Jamaica Bay in Region 10 on 27 October.

The only inland Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow this fall was found at the traditional Region 3 location at Hog Hole at the south end of Cayuga Lake. In nearby Dryden on 11 October, a single field held a LeConte's Sparrow, a rarity at any time in the state, and two Grasshopper Sparrows, which, while resident breeders in many areas, are rare anywhere in the state as migrants. Clay-colored Sparrow was found in four Regions, including 2 at Wilson in Region 1 representing the second Regional fall record, and at least 15 individual birds in Region 10. Lark Sparrow was found only in Region 10, where there were six reports.

A horde of interesting reports were generated from Region 7. Regional editor Mike Peterson comments that a number of species which have historically been considered especially noteworthy in the Region have now become regular, including Barrow's Goldeneye, Great Egret, Gyrfalcon, Western Sandpiper, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, and Carolina Wren, all recorded this fall. Barrow's Goldeneye matched the state early arrival date on 5 November at Noblewood Park in Essex County. More noteworthy sightings included a third Regional report of Great Cormorant, a first Clinton County and fifth Regional record of Red Phalarope, and two separate Western Grebes about a month apart at the same location in Clinton County, the first and second county records. Truly remarkable and deserving of detailed documentation was a report from Lake Champlain of a flock of 14 Black Guillemots. Any occurrence of this species in NYS away from the outer shore of eastern Long Island is very unusual. Even at Montauk single birds are the rule, and the present flock represents more than a third of the total previous reports from the state! Even this was not the most noteworthy report from the Region, as a lone observer identified a bird sighted on 13 September as a female Yellow Wagtail. The Yellow Wagtail complex was split in 2004 by the American Ornithologists' Union, with the North American breeding population reclassified as Eastern Yellow Wagtail. Outside the breeding

grounds, this species has only been recorded as a vagrant in California, plus one sight record each from Nevada and Alabama. The AOU did not further analyze the Yellow Wagtail complex, on the basis that only the newly-minted Eastern Yellow Wagtail has occurred in North America. Although not specified as such, presumably this report refers to the North American breeding Eastern Yellow Wagtail. Needless to say, if accepted by the NYS Avian Records Committee (NYSARC), this would be a first record for the state.

Another highlight rarity was a cooperative Gray Kingbird in Region 2, which was seen by many observers during its four-day stay in early October. According to the Regional report this is the second record of the species for Region 2, although there are no previous records listed in *Bull's Birds of New York State* or the NYSARC archives. It represents only the tenth for New York State, pending acceptance by NYSARC.

Additional rarities from around the state included Harlequin Duck and Sandhill Crane in Region 1; up to three Sandhill Cranes in Region 3; an October White-eyed Vireo in Region 5; a feeder-going White-winged Crossbill in Region 8; from Region 9, an immature Blue Grosbeak, Boreal Chickadee, Sedge Wren, Dickcissel and Townsend's Solitaire, the latter a first for Ulster County; and White-winged Dove, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Northern Wheatear, "Gambel's" White-crowned Sparrow, and Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 10.

MISCELLANEOUS

Once again, the wayward Whooping Crane from the eastern reintroduction program was sighted in Region 6, this time in late October. It was only seen briefly, and was next sighted on 9 December in North Carolina, where it was captured and relocated to Florida to join the rest of the experimental flock.

Other "non-countable" species reported this season included a Monk Parakeet photographed in Region 5 and Ringed Turtle-Dove, Mitred Parakeet, and two Pin-tailed Wydahs in Region 10. As noted by Region 5 editor Bill Purcell, even in cases where a bird is likely to be an escape rather than a genuine vagrant, it is important that sightings be recorded to establish a full picture in the event that a population becomes established or pattern of occurrence develops. It can also be useful to understand the occurrence of exotic species which can be confused with "legitimate" vagrants, such as Ringed Turtle-Dove, which can be difficult to separate from Eurasian Collared Dove.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

There were a variety of potential choices for the BOTS this fall, from vagrants such as Western Grebe, LeConte's Sparrow, and Black-throated Gray Warbler; to unique events, such as the amazing influx of Cave Swallows, particularly the numbers tallied in Region 2; to potential first state records, such as the Region 7 Yellow Wagtail. My choice for the BOTS is a classic, crowd-pleasing vagrant, the Gray Kingbird seen for several days in the town of Greece in Region 2. This well-documented bird, seen by many during its stay, is the first occurrence of the species in the state since the fall of 1992, the tenth overall, and only the third record away from Long Island.