

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SPRING 2006

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### THE WEATHER

Spring 2006 was generally mild, continuing the trend established during the winter season. March temperatures were above average in the far western portions of the state although closer to long-term averages elsewhere. Even in the Regions that had more typical overall temperatures, there were stretches of warm days. April and May were for the most part warmer than usual, although periods of extended northerly winds affected raptor migration in April and passerine migration in early May. Downstate suffered the most from high precipitation totals with rainfall 3.16" above normal in Region 10 during April, and heavy rains in Region 9 during mid-May.

### SPRING MIGRATION

Keeping with the mild conditions this spring, passerine migration seemed somewhat ahead of schedule, particularly early in the season. A number of earlier-than-normal sightings blurred the line between early arrivals and winter lingerers. Some early sightings lacked the detail necessary to confidently eliminate similar species more likely to be present in early spring. It is easy to imagine that if our winter weather continues to be mild, we will see an increase in both survival of overwintering "half hardies" and an earlier movement of medium distance migrants from the south as milder conditions allow these species to survive further north. As mentioned in several Regional reports, Neotropical migrants would be less affected by regional weather conditions, and these species typically arrived closer to their long-term arrival dates. The Regional reports contain a parade of record-early or near record-early sightings, as well as discussion on the phenomena. See in particular the Region 10 report for an in-depth discussion of possible causes and the difficulty of sorting through some early records. After the mild weather in early spring, a lingering low pressure system produced conditions unfavorable to migration across much of the state in early to mid-May. In many regions this was followed by a good burst of late migrants but in others this weather pattern seemed to disrupt the movement of later migrants, as in Region 5, where according to the seasonal report, "Late migrants were barely mentioned."

Warbler variety, if not always numbers, was good in many regions. Region 2 tallied all 35 "expected" warbler species, including rare-in-spring Connecticut Warbler and other less common species such as Worm-eating and Kentucky, and multiple sightings of Orange-crowned, Prothonotary and Yellow-breasted Chat. Two well-observed Connecticut Warblers were also reported to the west in Region 1, where additional warbler highlights included an early Prothonotary

on April 30, Worm-eating Warbler, two Yellow-breasted Chats, and a window-killed Kentucky Warbler. Another Kentucky Warbler was identified in Region 3 when the observer recorded the song and matched it with commercial recordings. Upstate, Yellow-throated Warblers were found in Regions 3, 7, and 9; the bird in Region 3 was discovered by birders following a report of Red Crossbill seen earlier that day in the same tree. In addition to the sightings in Regions 1 and 2, Orange-crowned Warblers were found in Regions 6, 7, 9 and 10, a good spring showing. Following last spring's remarkable incursion of southeastern breeding warblers into Region 10, a smaller but similar wave occurred this spring. Species involved included Yellow-throated, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers, as well as Summer Tanager. A Swainson's Warbler was also reported without details. See the Region 10 report and the separate summary for details and a comparison with last year's event.

Many regions remarked that cuckoo numbers were up this spring, along with, variously, Eastern Tent, Forest Tent and Gypsy Moth caterpillars on which the cuckoos feed. Conversely, Common Nighthawk numbers were described as low, if mentioned at all, with the exception of a good (for recent years) spring count of 17 in Region 3. These were presumably migrants, as the species no longer regularly breeds in the Region. Whip-poor-wills arrived early at Fort Drum in Region 6 and were found in good numbers there, but were generally reported only in small numbers elsewhere in the state. Clay-colored Sparrows were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6; many of these were birds returning to traditional breeding locations of the past several years. Fox Sparrow was reported in good numbers in Regions 2 and 5. White-crowned Sparrows were found in good numbers in Regions 2 and 9 but were low in Region 5. Comments on Lincoln's Sparrow included a mention of low numbers in Region 5 and a record-early 14 April arrival in Region 10. Additional comments of note from the various reports included a good movement of Red-headed Woodpeckers, good April kinglet movements, and excellent totals for both Baltimore and Orchard Orioles in Region 2; a flock of 65 Rusty Blackbirds, a good number for recent times, in Region 8; and migrant Bicknell's Thrushes in Regions 9 and 10.

## **WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS**

Waterfowl migration seemed to revert to more normal timing following the apparent facultative northward migration some species undertook during the mild winter season, although generally open conditions may have facilitated the rapid passage of many species through the state. In particular, favorable conditions during the second week of March led to large movements of geese and Tundra Swans in western and central Regions. Maximum Snow Goose numbers were found in the Montezuma area in Region 3, where 110,000 were counted at the Savannah Mucklands in early March. Many of these birds were presumably tallied again in Region 5 on their way back north, with counts of 70,000+ on 11 March and 50,000+ on 25 March. Regions 6 and 7 also recorded counts of multiple thousands of Snow Geese. Good counts of Tundra Swans included 720 in Region 2 on 23 March and 500 in Region 3 on 18 March.

Other waterfowl high counts included 175 Wood Ducks in Region 1, a record Regional spring count; good numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers in Region 2; and 500 Green-winged Teal, 1,000+ Redhead, and 20,000 diving ducks, mostly Greater Scaup, in Region 6. Described as "more dubious" was the new Regional maxima of 17 Mute Swans on 10 May in Region 1. On the flip side, Blue-winged Teal were recorded in notably low numbers in Regions 1, 2, and 5. See the Regional reports for additional high and low counts.

Rare geese included Greater White-fronted Geese in Regions 1, 3, 5, and 10; Ross's Geese in Regions 1, 2, and 3; Cackling Geese in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 7; Barnacle Goose in Region 5; and both Black and intermediate-type Brant in Region 10. Eurasian Wigeons were recorded in good numbers in Regions 1, 2, and 3, where ten individuals were found at various locations on 18 March; other reports came from Regions 4, 7, and 10. Other unusual ducks included an adult male Harlequin Duck in Region 1, King Eider in Region 2, and "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal in Region 10. The highlight waterfowl of the season were three Fulvous Whistling-Ducks which touched down in Jamaica Bay, Region 10 on 28 May and remained through the end of the month.

Loon numbers were low on Lake Ontario in Regions 2 and Region 5, including no Red-throated Loons reported in the latter. Conversely, Red-throated Loons were found in less likely locales, including two in Region 4 and one in Region 7, the first Hamilton County record in decades. Red-necked Grebes were well reported this spring, with sightings recorded in every Region except Region 4. Generally above-average numbers on Lake Ontario included 61 in Region 5 on 7 April; several Region 1 counts exceeding 100 in late March and early April, including 248 counted on the Buffalo Ornithological Society Spring Count on 9 April; and a remarkable 1088 counted in Region 2 on 24 March. This latter number continues a string of extraordinary spring counts from Region 2, all much higher than the maxima listed as of the publication of Bull's Birds of New York.

Notable heron reports were highlighted by a White-faced Ibis at Jamaica Bay in Region 10, at least the third consecutive spring that the species has been seen at that location in late April or May. Upstate, unusual reports included Tricolored Heron and Cattle Egret in Region 1, the former sighting a 6<sup>th</sup> Regional record; Little Blue Heron and Cattle Egret in Region 2; Tricolored Heron in Region 3; Least Bittern in Region 4; a flock of 5 Snowy Egrets in Region 5, the highest Regional count since 1965; Glossy Ibis in Region 8 and Region 9, the latter the third Sullivan County record; and Cattle Egret in Region 9.

Sandhill Cranes continue to be an increasing presence in much of the state, with reports from 7 of the 10 Regions. Most are presumed migrants, many seen only in flight, although a pair bred again in the Savannah Mucklands at the edge of Regions 2 and 3. Once again wayward Whooping Cranes from the Florida reintroduction program strayed into Region 6, this time an adult accompanied by a juvenile. A report from Vermont near the NY border in Region 8 may have referred to one or both these individuals as well, but in any event they stayed east of the state border and didn't stray into NYS. The birds in Region 7 were captured on 5 May by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and transported to Wisconsin to join the remainder of the experimental flock.

## RAPTORS, ETC.

Comparative migrant raptor numbers were hampered this year by a lack of coverage at one of the state's major spring hawkwatches, Braddock Bay in Region 2. Prevalent northerly winds for the first part of March also served to hold down counts of early migrant hawks. The tide turned with a strong southwesterly flow on 31 March which carried large numbers of Turkey Vultures past the Lake Erie and Lake Ontario hawkwatches. From west to east, the day's tallies were 2,208 at Ripley and 1,569 at Hamburg in Region 1; 3,119 at Braddock Bay in Region 2; and 1,703 at Derby Hill in Region 5. These large early season totals led to record seasonal counts at the Region 1 watches and a remarkable seasonal record of 11,375 at Derby Hill. Bald Eagles were seen in good numbers again this spring. Migration highlights included a seasonal record 114 at the Ripley Hawkwatch in Region 1 and, in Region 5, record daily (73) and seasonal (363) counts at Derby Hill. Nesting pairs also remain on the increase; in Region 1, nests were "too numerous" to list individually, although several nests were noted as occupied for the second consecutive year; in Region 9, Westchester County's first nesting record represents the southernmost on the Hudson River. Nesting Peregrine Falcons continued to be newsworthy with pairs noted in at least five Regions, including results of two dramatic confrontations in Region 1. The other falcon on the increase in the state is Merlin, which this season was reported nesting at last year's site in Buffalo in Region 1 and at a new location within the City of Ithaca in Region 3. It's hard to imagine that since the first recorded nest in 1992, breeding Merlins have expanded across much of the state and are now found breeding in urban centers. Golden Eagle was widely reported, with records in all regions except coastal Region 10. Of note was an apparent adult sighted at Fort Drum, Region 6, in mid-May. Occasional late spring and summer records from here suggest this may become a breeding location, although such sightings are sporadic and this year's bird was not relocated. Also lingering at Fort Drum were small numbers of Rough-legged Hawks, including one found on 27 May. Rare raptors were just that this spring, with the only standouts a handful of out-of-range Black Vultures upstate in Regions 1, 3, and 5, plus an impressive series of sightings in Region 10; and a Swainson's Hawk in Region 5.

Owl migration along the Lake Ontario plain was slow this spring, perhaps due to the unfavorable early spring conditions. Region 5 had only one report of Long-eared Owl and none of Short-eared, and the migration of Long-eared and Saw-whet Owls in Region 2 was described as "less than spectacular". Snowy Owls lingered into the spring season in a handful of Regions, but none longer than the individual which loitered in Region 3 until the remarkable late date of 19 May.

## SHOREBIRDS

The overall feeling about the spring shorebird season seemed to match the description from Region 1: "hit or miss". Many areas reported low overall numbers without any sizeable fallouts, but there were a few highlights scattered

throughout the state. Long-billed Dowitchers made rare spring appearances in Region 1 (for the first Regional spring record) and Region 3, where a half-dozen birds were initially identified by their distinctive call. Other highlights from Region 1 included an early Least Sandpiper, two Purple Sandpipers at Niagara Falls, and a Whimbrel and up to five Red-necked Phalaropes at the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant in late May. Four more Red-necked Phalaropes were found on 16 May in Region 7, and a stunning female lingered for a week in late May at Pike's Beach in Region 10, presumably the same bird returning from last year. Noteworthy reports from Region 2 included record early Solitary Sandpiper, Whimbrel, and Least Sandpiper, as well as a spring American Golden Plover and decent numbers of Semipalmated Plovers. "Lowlights" from there included poor counts for both yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Upland Sandpiper. In addition to the Long-billed Dowitchers, Montezuma NWR in Region 3 also hosted a good count of 19 White-rumped Sandpipers on 27 May, and elsewhere in the Region a Whimbrel made a flyby appearance at Myers Point, Cayuga Lake on 30 May. In Region 4, "shorebird activity was excellent" with Regional highlights including Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitcher. General comments from Region 5 echoed those from Region 2 to the west – migrant shorebirds appeared in scattered, low numbers, and some expected species, such as Ruddy Turnstone and Short-billed Dowitcher, were missed entirely. A lack of reports in Region 6 was attributed at least in part to reduced observer effort by birders frustrated by dwindling numbers of birds at traditional "hotspots" in recent years. The only passage-migrant shorebirds recorded in the Region this spring were Greater Yellowlegs and Least Sandpiper. Region 8 editor Will Yandik notes that the only migrant shorebird species of note reported there this season, a Pectoral Sandpiper, occurred at "an unassuming splotch of mud in Columbia County," the type of small-scale habitat which can be critical stopover points for migrating birds and is most at risk for development. Birders may be able to provide useful support for the preservation of such habitats at the local level. In Region 10, the peak shorebird migration occurred during the last week or so of May. Shorebird counts during this period at Pike's Beach in Cupsogue, Suffolk County included an encouraging count of 500+ Red Knots and 750 Ruddy Turnstones, the latter possibly the second highest count ever for New York State.

## GULLS

Gull excitement dwindled somewhat from the winter season, and there were no major rarities reported. Some rare and uncommon gulls were still found and some winter visitors lingered into late spring. On 15 April, a Little Gull accompanying three Bonaparte's Gulls at Iroquois NWR in Region 1 provided the first inland record for the species, which occurs regularly on the Niagara River about 35 miles to the west. Eight Little Gulls at Hamlin Beach on 2 April were highlights in a "pretty lackluster" gull season for Region 2, which included low Bonaparte's Gull numbers in the Region. A Thayer's Gull was also identified at Perinton Pond. Iceland Gulls were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 10, including individuals lingering to 7 May in Region 2 and 17 May

in Region 1. Glaucous Gulls were found from these same Regions, as well as Region 6; the latest lingerers were from Long Island in Region 10 where two different birds were seen on 14 May. Single Laughing Gulls strayed inland to Region 3 in March and Regions 5 and 7 in the latter half of May. Also in Region 5, Derby Hill hawk counter John Van Dort turned his attention away from the skies and toward Lake Ontario on a day with strong westerly winds and found an adult Black-legged Kittiwake. The sighting is notable in two regards since most kittiwake sightings on Lake Ontario are young birds found during fall migration. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were reported in varying numbers from central and western Regions, with high counts of eight in Region 1 and five in Region 5. There were May reports from Regions 1 and 2, with the last on May 14 in Region 1.

Tern comments from the Regional reports were generally negative. Region 2 reported lower than usual numbers of Caspian, Common, and Forster's Tern. Black Terns continued a downward trend in most reporting Regions, although a count of 51 on 12 May from Iroquois NWR and Tonawanda WMA in Region 1 was good for recent years. Caspian Tern nests on Little Galloo Island in Region 6 were down from 1789 last year to 1589, the first year of decline following a series of increasing numbers, possibly due to mortality from botulism.

## **WINTER FINCHES AND OTHER WINTER LINGERERS**

Winter finches were generally lackluster with most species occurring only in small numbers, if at all. Pine Siskin was the only "winter finch" reported from all ten Kingbird Regions, but small flocks were the rule. Common Redpoll was widely scattered as well, with reports from all Regions except Region 10, again in mostly small numbers although maximum counts of between 100-200 birds were noted in Regions 2, 5, and 7. The Hoary Redpolls at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 during the winter season lingered until 19 March, and two more were found in Region 7. Red Crossbills were found in Regions 3, 4, 6, and 7, with breeding activity and fledglings noted in Regions 4 and 6. The breeding birds in both Regions were large-billed "Type 2s" using Red Pines; according to Region 4 editors Matt Young and Jon Weeks this is the only type that can use Red Pine for nesting. Medium-billed Type 1s were also noted in Region 4. White-winged Crossbills were scarcer with reports from Regions 4 and 5. The only report of Pine Grosbeak was from Region 7. Evening Grosbeaks were relatively widespread, with reports from eight Regions. The Region 4 editors noted it was the best showing since the winter of 2001-2002, although still far fewer compared to numbers from the 1970s to early 1990s. Among other winter birds, Bohemian Waxwings were generally scarce. Good numbers were found in Regions 6 and 7, the largest flock totaling more than 1000 individuals in the Canton and Potsdam areas of Region 6. Outside of these two Regions, there was only a single report, an individual found with large numbers of Cedar Waxwings on the Cornell University campus in Ithaca, Region 3. Northern Shrikes were reported in all Regions with the exception of downstate Regions 9 and 10, lingering until late March or early April. The latest report was on 15 April from Clinton County in Region 7.

## BREEDERS

Non-native swans “highlighted” breeding waterfowl in Region 2, where Mute Swans continued to increase, occupying “just about every suitable location” and Trumpeter Swans returned to nesting sites in Wayne County. Although Trumpeter Swans were noted in three other Regions no further nesting activity was reported this season. As has been typical for recent years, nesting activity of marsh birds showed mixed results. Common Moorhen “continues to be a bird of major concern” in Region 2, although numbers are better along the east lakeshore there than along the west lakeshore. News was more positive in Region 5, where regenerating marsh habitat in the Three Rivers WMA attracted Common Moorhens as well as Marsh Wren. Also in Region 5, intrepid birders exploring remote wetlands in southeastern Herkimer County found good populations of Common Moorhen, Virginia Rail, and Sora, along with several Least Bitterns.

Among corvids, Fish Crows were reported from central and western New York in Regions 2, 4, and 5. The birds in Region 2 were noted engaging in flight display during early May. Common Ravens continue to increase in non-traditional areas. There were numerous reports of wandering birds as well as evidence of increased breeding activity in Region 4, where a large group of up to 34 individuals was found in March and April.

Breeding sparrows again included two species heading in different directions, population-wise. Clay-colored Sparrows were reported from multiple locations in Regions 1, 2, and 6, along with a returning breeder in Region 3. Conversely, Henslow’s Sparrow continues to linger in dwindling numbers at a handful of traditional locations. Efforts to locate the species at one of the State’s traditional strongholds, Fort Drum in Region 6, turned up only a single male by the end of May.

In addition to Henslow’s Sparrow, two disparate grassland breeders continue to show signs of decline. Upland Sandpipers were reported in low numbers from most traditional sites. Region 6 editor Jeff Bolsinger notes the species is becoming “increasingly scarce” and this year were reported from only four hayfields in Jefferson County. The single report from Region 8 came from Columbia County, where the species had not been observed for several years in the shrinking grasslands where it formerly bred. Sedge Wrens were only reported this spring from Region 3, where one was found at Montezuma NWR; Region 6, where numbers in southern Jefferson County and Fort Drum were smaller than in May 2005; and Region 7.

Orchard Orioles seem to be increasing and expanding northward in recent years; this spring there were reports from all ten Kingbird Regions, with possible breeding noted in Region 6 and a note that the species is “increasingly widespread and numerous” in Region 10. Also of interest is that the geographically widespread Regions 1, 8, 9 and 10 all noted first arrivals during a two-day period, 25-26 April.

Westchester County in Region 9 tallied first breeding records for three species this season - Saw-whet Owl, Great Blue Heron, and Bald Eagle, somewhat surprising for this populous county with a long birding history.

## RARITIES

In addition to the highlights mentioned above, rarities this spring included a few holdovers from the winter season, including the Northern Hawk-Owl that remained at Yates in Region 1 until 10 March, the wintering Varied Thrush at Webster Park in Region 2 that was last seen on 8 March, and the Pacific Loon on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 that stayed until 18 March. American White Pelicans were a noticeable presence in the western part of the state, with four stopping over at Dunkirk Harbor in Region 1 in mid-April, and nine appearing at Braddock Bay in Region 2 on 21 May and then likely the same nine birds lingering at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 from 24-30 May. Local rarities in Region 1 included Eared Grebe and Forster's Tern. Another Eared Grebe was found in Region 2, the first there since 2004. Cattle Egrets made appearances upstate in Regions 1, 2, and 9. Other rarities that made appearances in multiple Regions were Varied Thrush and Yellow-headed Blackbird. In addition to the over-wintering Varied Thrush at Webster Park in Region 2, individuals were seen in Region 7 and Region 10, the former accompanying a flock of American Robins. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were reported from Regions 2, 7, 8, and 10. Additional Region 2 rarities included Loggerhead Shrike, a former breeder now only a very infrequent stray, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Brewer's Blackbird. Reminiscent of last spring's influx, there were Swainson's Warbler reports from Region 3 and Region 10; unfortunately, unlike last year's relatively confiding individuals, these were only briefly seen and didn't linger long enough for follow-up sightings. A Northern Wheatear, much rarer in the state in spring than in fall, was found above treeline in Region 7 on 27 May. A Red Phalarope which provided the first Dutchess County record on 13 May was almost certainly influenced by the same weather systems which brought large numbers of phalaropes to the New England coast and carried smaller numbers inland. The Region 8 report contains some thoughts on the difficulty in some cases of determining if an individual sighting is an escaped "exotic" or a wild individual. The Eurasian Collared-Dove sighted in Columbia County this spring could be a forerunner of the species' eventual expansion northward from more established populations in the southern United States, but as is often the case with unusual waterfowl, the fact that the species is kept in captivity complicates the analysis. It is good practice to maintain a record of even obvious exotics in order to maintain a complete ornithological history of the state. Region 10 hosted a number of vagrants in addition to the rarities listed above. Major rarities just a handful of years ago, both Wilson's Plover and Arctic Tern have been appearing with some regularity in recent years. Unlike some recent sightings, this spring's Wilson's Plover was a "one-day wonder," only seen on 28 April at Robert Moses State Park in Region 10. Increased Arctic Tern sightings from the past several years are likely in large part attributable to dedicated searches for over-summering birds, mainly subadults, which have been found in small numbers among more common species at various points on Long Island's south shore. This year's sightings began with an adult and a second-summer bird found at Cupsogue County Park, Suffolk County, on

29 May. Farther west on Long Island, a confiding King Rail delighted many observers at Tobay by appearing repeatedly, often at close range and in the open, during its three week stay from mid-April to early May. Finally, a White-winged Dove at Jones Beach West End on 5 May continued a string of spring sightings at that location of western strays more often seen in New York during fall migration.

## MISCELLANEOUS

Additional exotics reported this season included sightings of European Goldfinch at two Region 5 locations, a free-flying immature Black Swan in Region 7, and two Red-headed Conures and a Budgerigar in the vicinity of Forest Park, Queens, in Region 10. The European Goldfinches, which can be found for sale in pet stores, were most likely local escapes, but as noted in the Region 5 report there have been reports of the species breeding in the Great Lakes region following a mass release of a number of European songbirds several years ago in Michigan. The Black Swan provides an interesting data point in the discussion of origins of odd waterfowl – native to Australia, it's not a species that will get here under its own steam; a free-flying immature may be a bird raised by captive adults which escaped before it could be secured by pinioning or other methods. An odd-looking warbler found at Doodletown Road in Region 9 appeared to be a hybrid between American Redstart and another species. In the better-late-than-never category, the first Franklin County record of Wood Stork, two birds present in early June 2001, was documented with a digital photograph.

## BIRD OF THE SEASON

There were a number of excellent rarities across the state, including multiple reports of vagrants such as Varied Thrush, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Swainson's Warbler, and additional highlights such as Pacific Loon, King Rail, Wilson's Plover, Arctic Tern, Swainson's Hawk, Northern Hawk-Owl, White-winged Dove, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Wheatear, and Brewer's Blackbird. Many of these would make a respectable BOTS, but my choice this season goes to the three Fulvous Whistling-Ducks which touched down at Jamaica Bay. This is apparently the first record of the species in New York since 1981, and, interestingly, occurred at the same location and the same dates as the second record for New York State in 1965.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The summer highlights essay was not received in time for inclusion in this issue. If possible, it will be included in the next issue.