

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SUMMER 2006

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THE WEATHER

June was seemingly offered an either/or proposition across the state – it was either dry, but warmer than normal (Regions 1 and 2), or about normal for temperature and exceedingly wet (pretty much everywhere else). Precipitation comments from various regions pointed to how extreme the rainfall was: Region 3 – “Rainfall... 194% of normal”; Region 4 – “the wettest month on record... almost one-third of the normal rainfall for an entire year”; Region 5 – “Old Forge had 8” of rain over three days in June”. The warm weather expanded to cover the entire state in July. July continued to be wet as well, with at least five Regions reporting rainfall totals in excess of 1” above normal. Region 2 led the way by tallying its third highest July precipitation total, 5.09” above normal. The resulting flooding from all this rain directly affected a number of breeding birds; for more on this, see below and the Regional reports. In most areas, August moderated somewhat in both temperature and precipitation, although central and southern Regions 3, 4, 9, and 10 continued to suffer from high rainfall totals.

BREEDING BIRDS

This was the first summer after the completion of the “Atlas 2000” project, which ran from 2000 through 2005, and many of the Regional reports commented on a corresponding decrease in observer activity, and, subsequently, reports. In addition, the heavy rainfall and flooding experienced by a number of Regions may have adversely affected nesting success of some species, although the resulting heavy food crops may have benefited species later in the season. Despite the possibly negative factors, reports of breeding birds made up a large portion of the Regional reports as usual for the summer season, and a number of interesting records were found.

For the second consecutive summer, a small colony of breeding Dickcissels was found in Niagara County in Region 1. At least four birds were found as well as one confirmed and one probable nest. Unfortunately, the nest with young was destroyed when the town mowed the roadside ditch in which it was located. A pair of Dickcissels was also found at the Oswego County Airport in Fulton, Region 5. Breeding activity was noted but nesting was not confirmed. This was the first breeding season record of Dickcissel in the Region since 1937.

The continuing sporadic presence of small numbers of Dickcissels in the state may be due to continued drought in the Midwest.

Dickcissels did not return to last year's locations in Sharon Springs in Region 8, but the private grasslands in the area remained productive for other grassland species. Upland Sandpipers, Sedge Wrens, Henslow's Sparrows, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Bobolinks were all found again this year. Unfortunately, some of these lands are apparently slated for development, another incremental loss of critical habitat. In total, Henslow's Sparrows were reported in small numbers from six locations in five Regions, with a maximum of nine at Fort Drum in Region 6. Clay-colored Sparrows were also reported from five Regions, mainly from previously known breeding locations, and again the largest numbers were from Fort Drum, where 35 singing males were more than double last summer's count there. Other reports of grassland birds included a nice count of 47 Grasshopper Sparrows in Horseheads in Region 3 and generally gloomy statements on the status of Eastern Meadowlarks and Upland Sandpipers. Sedge Wrens were found in three Regions, including the Region 8 site mentioned above. The highest numbers were in Region 6, where numbers increased during the season, resulting in six reports, all but one of multiple singing males. The Region 8 report also includes a short discussion of some of the conservation issues involved in maintaining grassland habitat for these declining nesters.

Once again, Merlins highlighted the nesting raptor reports, as the species continues to expand as a suburban breeder in New York State. Following last year's first Region 1 breeding records, nesting activity was recorded at the same two locations, as well as at a new location near the traditional Merlin roost at the SUNY Buffalo campus. Other noteworthy nests were found in Regions 2 and 3, and increased numbers were widely reported elsewhere. Nesting Peregrine Falcons were reported in Regions 1, 2, 4, 5, 8 and 10. Territorial Northern Goshawks were noted in Region 1, but the handful of reports elsewhere did not reference breeding activity. A Cooper's Hawk nest on Staten Island in Region 10, noted as the second Staten Island record since the 1950s, was locally significant, and emblematic of the species' continuing success. The most notable breeding owl reports were of Short-eared Owl in Region 6, the first documented nesting there since 2001, and Long-eared Owls in Region 8 which fledged four young. Three Long-eared Owls in Region 1 in July were the only other report of the species this season and the date also suggests local breeding.

Common Nighthawk reports referred mainly to northbound or southbound migrants, including several Regions reported encouraging increases. Several sightings in Region 1 throughout June and July may be evidence of continued nesting on some level. Nightjar surveys on Fort Drum in Region 6 recorded maximum single-route counts of 27 Whip-poor-wills and 15 Common Nighthawks. Apart from 25 Whip-poor-wills counted in mid-June in Suffolk County, Region 10, numbers elsewhere were low.

Golden-winged Warbler reports were abysmal, with none reported from Regions 1, 2, and 4, and only single birds reported from Regions 3 and 5. A maximum of six were reported from Fort Drum in Region 6, where the species outnumbers Blue-winged Warbler by a roughly two-to-one ratio; this compares

unfavorably, however, with the 40 counted there last summer. The Region 1 report notes that it is "telling that there were more reports of Brewster's Warbler... and Lawrence's Warbler than Golden-winged". One or both of these hybrid combinations was reported from seven Regions this season. Other breeding warblers reported this season include Yellow-throated Warblers in Regions 1 and Region 3; Prothonotary Warbler at traditional breeding locations in Regions 1 and 5; and Yellow-breasted Chats in Regions 1, 2, 3 and 10. A Kentucky Warbler was reported on a single date in mid-June from Region 9. Prairie Warbler continues to increase in western and central Regions, with good counts from Regions 1, 2, and 3, and good numbers of Pine Warblers were noted in Regions 1 and 5. In Region 10, a pair of Northern Parulas exhibited behavior suggesting a nest nearby. This report continues a trend of mid-summer sightings from eastern Long Island, but is noteworthy in that most prior reports were of territorial males rather than a pair.

The extent of the season's extreme precipitation and flooding on breeding success can't be known with certainty, although there were some obvious visible failures. The Ring-billed Gull colony in the Chemung River in Region 3 was decimated twice by rising floodwaters, in early and late June. Many pairs re-nested after the first flood, but there was no additional breeding activity noted after the second washout. A number of dead Tree Swallow nestlings were seen in floodwaters in Region 4, and in Region 5 many Common Loon nests were lost in Herkimer County. Observational evidence included impressions from Regions 3, 4 and 6 that ground-nesting species and waterfowl were down in numbers following the heavy rains.

Trumpeter Swans were reported from Regions 2, 3, and 6, including pairs with seven young in both Regions 2 and 6. Mute Swans continued to increase in Region 2; a single pair also nested in Region 1, and Region 10 had a high count of 325 at Jamaica Bay in late July. The increased numbers of Mute Swans in Region 2 are thought to adversely affect the breeding success there of other waterfowl. This season both American Black Duck and Blue-winged Teal, historically common nesters, were unreported as breeders in the Region. The most interesting breeding duck report was of Common Eiders which nested near Fisher's Island in Long Island Sound in Region 10. On 2 June at least 12 young were observed as well as a female Eider still on the nest.

Gallinaceous birds were scarcely mentioned this season, making it difficult to determine which species might be declining as opposed to a post-Atlas lack of observer or documentation effort. Ring-necked Pheasant was described as "scarce" in Region 2. The only Northern Bobwhite reports were three from Region 9, including two dozen at a New City, Rockland County feeder in August. Ruffed Grouse was noted as having "very few broods", post-floods, in Region 6. There was one report of Spruce Grouse, from Region 7, and the species was specifically mentioned as unreported for the season in Region 6. Another factor making it difficult to determine the true status of some species is the annual release of hunting stock and releases through various reintroduction programs. For example, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation coordinates the release of approximately 100,000 Ring-necked Pheasants, of varying ages, annually in the state

(<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7071.html>), and New York City's "Project X", a widescale reintroduction of extirpated or declining native species into New York City Parks, included the release of 32 Northern Bobwhite into Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx in 1999. There are also ad-hoc releases by game clubs, 4-H clubs, and similar organizations, such as the reportedly state-sanctioned release of 140 "bobwhite quail" in 2004 in Pocantico Hills, Westchester County, by a local high school senior and 4-H club member (<http://www.gamebirdhunts.com/hunting-news/detail.asp?iArt=220&iType=53>).

Although reports of spring migrant Sandhill Cranes seem to be on the increase, breeding pairs are still relatively scarce. The (presumably) continuing pair in the vicinity of Montezuma NWR at the Region 2/Region 3 border produced two young; unfortunately the young didn't survive, which "has been the norm for this pair" per the Region 2 report. Other sightings this summer were a pair in the Town of Lansing in Region 3, about 50 miles from the Montezuma location, and the first summer record from Region 5, a single bird photographed in Oneida County.

Black Terns were widely reported, from seven Regions, with a maximum of 42 at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in Region 3. Encouraging news came from Region 7, where a new nesting location hosted 6-8 pairs this summer, the first confirmed breeding in Franklin County in two decades. Excellent numbers of Common Terns were noted nesting on the St. Lawrence River in Region 6. Caspian Terns breeding on Little Galloo Island in Region 6 were severely affected by a Type E Botulism outbreak. More than 700 carcasses were collected during the summer. The outbreak also killed Double-crested Cormorants, Ring-billed Gulls, and smaller numbers of other species, including all four pairs of Great Black-backed Gulls nesting on the island.

Cuckoos were generally noted in good numbers, but perhaps not as high overall as over the last several years. The Region 4 and 5 editors speculate that the caterpillar outbreaks fueling the cuckoo numbers may have had a corresponding detrimental effect on other woodland nesters, such as Eastern Wood-Pewee.

Red Crossbill was the most commonly reported winter finch, from six Regions, with breeding reported in Regions 4 and 5. Evening Grosbeak was reported in higher than usual numbers in Region 8, where 70 were banded at Jenny Lake from May to August. Adults with two young were noted in Region 6, and from Region 7, an adult female was recaptured nine years after originally being banded. Pine Siskins reported away from breeding areas in Regions 1, 3, 8, and 9 were most likely wandering post-breeding or non-breeding birds. The most intriguing "winter finch" report this season was that of a female-type Pine Grosbeak seen well in Elk Pass, at an elevation of 3400', in the Adirondacks in Region 7. The Regional report also mentions a previously unpublished mid-summer report of a singing male from nearby Panther Gorge about a quarter-century ago. The species breeds sporadically at about the same latitude in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and has also bred about 180 miles away in Quebec, Canada, but has never been recorded nesting in New York.

Other interesting boreal species reported from Region 7 were Philadelphia Vireo, with four reports in June and July; Rusty Blackbird, reported twice; and

both American Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers. Farther south, good finds in the Catskill Mountains in Region 8 included season-high counts of six Bicknell's Thrushes, seven Swainson's Thrushes, and seven Blackpoll Warblers recorded during point counts on Plateau Mountain in Greene County. Conversely, Black-backed Woodpecker and Spruce Grouse were notable by their absence from Region 6.

WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS

There were only sporadic reports of lingering waterfowl this summer. The most unusual were two Eurasian Wigeon at Montezuma in early July. Some of the more interesting reports apart from these included a handful of Snow Geese in Region 3 and one in Region 7; a White-winged Scoter in Region 7; Long-tailed Ducks in Regions 9 and 10; Lesser Scaup in Regions 2 and 6; and Common Goldeneye in Regions 1 and 3. Common Loons reports were sporadic south of the breeding grounds, and Red-throated Loon was recorded only in Region 2, where there was at least one report from each month during the season. Horned Grebe reports were scattered across the state, with one each from Region 2 and Region 8 and three reports from Region 3.

Type E botulism once again made an unwelcome appearance on New York's Great Lakes, reaching Lake Ontario in Region 6 during the breeding season, with "disastrous results", per the Regional report. Continuing with the excerpt: "Caspian Terns were especially hard hit, with more than 700 carcasses collected by the end of August and additional sick individuals seen on and near the island. All four pairs of Great Black-backed Gulls nesting on the island died from botulism, and numerous sick and dead Double-crested Cormorants and Ring-billed Gulls were present, with small numbers of several other species affected as well." This unwelcome news follows six consecutive years during which fall outbreaks on Lake Erie or Lake Ontario, primarily in Region 1, have killed thousands of migrating waterbirds.

MIGRANTS

As typical, the summer season was bookended by the tail end of spring migration and the beginning of fall migration. Late spring migrants can often be difficult to separate from potential breeders, and non-breeding birds may wander outside their normal breeding range at any time during the summer. Some of the reports considered to be of late migrants this season were June records of Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Mourning Warblers and American Redstart in Region 1. A Blackpoll Warbler in Region 3 on 5 July may have been a non-breeding summer wanderer rather than a late migrant. More typical late migrants recorded this season included Olive-sided Flycatcher from six Regions and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers from five Regions. More intriguing

was a possible breeding Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in Region 3. The tail end of spring raptor migration can often produce interesting results, although coverage is generally limited as official hawkwatches close down toward the end of May. Even with few days of coverage in Region 2, good numbers of Broad-winged Hawks and Bald Eagles were noted into mid-June, and a Golden Eagle videotaped on 18 June was a real surprise. Also unusual, and perhaps similarly straddling the line between migrant and summer wanderer, were at least three and perhaps four immature Rough-legged Hawks seen at Fort Drum in Region 6 in June and July. None of these birds lingered so were apparently either moving through or at least roaming around.

Fall migration is typically well under way by the end of the summer season, including a number of “stealth migrants” as local breeding species pass through and out of our area. By season’s end southbound Philadelphia Vireos and Olive-sided Flycatchers had been recorded in five Regions. A state record 15,000+ Cedar Waxwings were observed migrating past Hamlin Beach in Region 2 in August. Some other notable August migrant reports during August were Golden-winged Warbler in Regions 3 and 10; Connecticut Warbler in Regions 1 and 10; and Dickcissel in Regions 3 and 10. Orchard Oriole and Louisiana Waterthrush seen in July and August, respectively, in Manhattan’s Central Park in Region 10, were likely southbound migrants; early departing local breeders such as these species are often not detected during southbound migration, possibly since birders are less focused on traditional “migrant traps” in late summer. As experienced migrants, post-breeding adults may also move through more quickly and efficiently than young birds.

SHOREBIRDS

Lack of consistent shorebird habitat, and therefore shorebirds, was a common refrain from most of the state this season. A few productive locations spiced up the reports from interior Regions, and a decent variety was reported from Region 10. Highlights from around the state included a Willet and a new regional maxima of 55 Stilt Sandpipers from Region 1; Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, and Red-necked Phalarope in Region 2; good numbers and variety in Region 3, including Willet, up to 22 Hudsonian Godwits, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, Western Sandpiper, and Red-necked Phalarope; Sanderling in Region 4; Whimbrel in Region 5; Stilt Sandpiper and Red Phalarope in Region 7; and a nice variety of species at Swinging Bridge Reservoir in Sullivan County, Region 9, including Red-necked Phalarope among other significant county records. Wilson’s Phalaropes appeared in good numbers, with late spring or fall reports from five Regions, including a high count of five in the Montezuma complex, Region 3, on 27 August. A male in Greece, Region 2, in mid-June appeared at an unusually late date for a migrant. A “Western” Willet on the Cupsogue flats in Suffolk County, Region 10, on 18 June was also seasonally unusual; there are very few records of this subspecies from Long Island during May and June. The Region 10 report also contains some comments about the unusually high number of shorebirds again lingering through mid-June, a number of which were

afflicted with obvious infirmities, such as damaged legs and tumor-like swellings.

SUMMER WANDERERS

Great Egrets wandered widely across the state with several high counts, including a new Region 1 maxima of 140 at Tonowanda NWR on 17 July, 102 in the Montezuma Wetlands Complex in Region 3 on 25 August, and up to 50 on a pond in Canton, Region 6, for much of August. Other notable heron reports were Cattle Egrets in Regions 3, 7, and 10, the latter two near breeding locations; Snowy Egret in Regions 4, 5, 7 and inland Region 9; Little Blue Heron in Region 4; and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in Region 6, the third Regional record.

A number of interesting larids turned up statewide this season. In Region 1, a remarkable summer concentration of subadult small gulls included single Little and Black-headed Gulls among 120 Bonaparte's Gulls. To the east in Region 2, good gulls included at least two Lesser Black-backed Gulls and an adult Franklin's Gull. Region 10 featured adult Black-headed Gulls in July and August and a subadult Lesser Black-backed Gull in August. Nomadic tern reports this season included single Common and Black Terns in Region 4, both unusual there, and Forster's Terns in Regions 1, 2, and 8. Post-breeding tern hot spots included Chazy River and Noblewood in Region 7, both of which featured Caspian, Common, and Black Terns. A pair of Forster's Terns tending to two juvenile birds at Marshlands Conservancy in Westchester County, Region 9, may have been post-breeding wanderers from the south, but were more likely undocumented local breeders. Similarly, two records of Gull-billed Terns from the Moriches Inlet area in Region 10 in mid to late June are suggestive of possible breeders.

The most notable larid event this season was the unprecedented series of Arctic Terns found at Cupsogue County Park (Suffolk) in Region 10. Region 10 editors S.S. Mitra and Patricia Lindsay diligently monitored the tern congregations which form at low tide on the exposed flats, and they and subsequent observers were able to identify and photograph a remarkable series of mostly subadult Arctic Terns. There were up to 12 cumulative sightings, many of which could be differentiated by age and plumage features, and many of which were documented with photographs and submitted to NYSARC. Continued careful scrutiny of summering tern flocks, particularly those which contain subadult terns, may prove that the species summers in greater numbers than previously thought.

RARITIES

A number of state-level and seasonal rarities were reported from throughout the state. Covering both categories was an "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler

found on 14 June in Yorkshire in Region 1, the first summer record for this subspecies in the Region and possibly the state. Also in Region 1a briefly observed shrike in Newstead on 5 August wasn't identified to species, but was almost certainly by date a Loggerhead Shrike. Among the rarities reported in Region 2 to the east were Brown Pelican and Mississippi Kite. One can only wonder what environmental factors led to four individual Snowy Owls being seen in three Regions this summer. One each was found in Regions 3 and 5, and two were seen on Point Peninsula in Region 6. Also wildly out of season was an American Tree Sparrow reported in Region 7 on 29 August, over a month before the previous earliest New York State arrival date. In between searching for unusual terns at the Cupsogue flats in Region 10, John Fritz spotted the season's only Wilson's Plover. Studied and photographed by a number of observers for about an hour, the plover was not relocated subsequently. Other rarities found in Region 10 this summer included three Brown Pelicans on the ocean off of Cupsogue on 8 July; a Magnificent Frigatebird seen by multiple fishing boat captains off Montauk Point on 9 June; a King Rail which bred with a Clapper Rail at the Marine Nature Study Area in Oceanside, Nassau County; and a Yellow-headed Blackbird from the Jamaica Bay area. Without question the most unexpected and exciting reports were those of adult male Broad-billed Hummingbirds from Region 2 in late June and Region 4 in August, the first occurrences for the species in New York State. One can only imagine that these reports refer to a single wandering bird. Happily, the lucky observers obtained documentary photographs and reports have been submitted to NYSARC.

MISCELLANEOUS

Several regions noted that wild food crops were abundant after the summer season, due in part perhaps to the wet spring. The widespread flooding also led to fears that resulting increases in mosquito populations would lead to a spike in West Nile Virus occurrences. In Region 4, at least, no such outbreak occurred, perhaps because the mosquito species which benefited from the flooding were not important carriers of WNV.

Suspected hybrid birds show up virtually every season; some show more obvious probable parentage than others, but in most cases we never know for sure the identity of the parent species. Where genetic material can be obtained, DNA analysis can provide a more definitive answer. This was the case this summer with a hybrid warbler netted twice at a banding station in Wyoming County in Region 1. Two tail feathers from the bird were sent to Cornell for DNA analysis. The results, published in Cornell's *The Living Bird*, indicated this was a hybrid between Mourning Warbler and Kentucky Warbler. Details about the circumstances and the analysis are available at Cornell's website here: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/mystery>.

Exotics reported this season included a Monk Parakeet in Region 1 which was determined to have captive origins, and a Whooper Swan which spent the summer among the hordes of Mute Swans on the East Pond at Jamaica Bay in Region 10.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

Some seasons, I have a hard time deciding on a Bird of the Season. It's often difficult to choose from a variety of good rarities, and occasionally it's a matter of sorting through two or more roughly equivalent "megas". This season, highlight rarities include Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird, Wilson's Plover, King Rail, Mississippi Kite, "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler, the remarkable influx of Arctic Terns, and a number of seasonal rarities such as Snowy Owls, Rough-legged Hawks, American Tree Sparrow, and Pine Grosbeak. Any of these could have been worthy choices during some summer seasons. I have no trouble, however, setting all these aside and selecting the Broad-billed Hummingbird sightings from June in Region 2 and August in Region 4 (Figure B, p. 48). These unexpected occurrences, very probably the same wandering adult male, are the first state records pending acceptance by NYSARC, and apparently by far the furthest north and east. Perhaps the only downside to these exciting reports is that word didn't reach the larger birding community until after the hummingbird had stopped appearing at the feeders it had been frequenting. In any event, it is a reminder that vagrant hummingbirds can appear in mid-summer as well as late fall!

