

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – FALL 2006

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THE WEATHER

The season started off with the passage of the remnants of Tropical Storm Ernesto in early September, bringing heavy rains and strong winds, and a handful of storm-driven birds, mainly to Region 10. The remainder of September was generally uneventful across the state, and temperatures were close to long-term averages. October was also close to average in terms of temperature, but was significantly wetter across the state. Region 1 experienced some extreme weather during the month, including a surprise lake effect storm on 12-13 October, which resulted in snowfall in excess of two feet in some areas. Gray-cheeked Thrushes and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were among disrupted migrants noted during and immediately after the event, although Regional editor Mike Morgante comments that the true impact of the storm may not be known until the summer 2007 breeding results are tallied, due to the resultant tree damage. Late in the month, western New York experienced sustained southwesterly and westerly winds, which carried significant numbers of gulls and other migrant waterbirds to eastern Lake Erie and to a lesser extent to Lake Ontario. November was notable for its extremely warm weather, in many cases 4-5 degrees warmer than normal. As a result, there were a number of late migrants lingering throughout the state.

WATERFOWL/OTHER WATERBIRDS

The generally mild conditions into late fall seemed to disrupt waterfowl migration in various ways across the state. In Region 1, waterfowl lingered longer than usual and concentrated in good numbers, while pleasant weather made viewing conditions nicer than usual for birders. Region 6 reported good variety, but low numbers, while the overall waterfowl season in Region 2 was described as “uneventful”.

A good variety of rare and uncommon geese turned up across the state. Greater White-fronted Goose was reported in six Regions; Ross's Goose in three; and Cackling Goose in five. Careful observers in Regions 2 and 3 picked out Ross's x Snow Goose hybrids in “white goose” flocks. Most remarkable was a single flock in Region 3 that contained all of these species - four Greater White-fronted Geese, 5 Ross' Geese, 2 Ross' x Snow Goose hybrids, and at least one Cackling Goose. Uncommon ducks included Harlequin Ducks in Regions 1, 5, and 10; Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 1, 3, 9 and 10; and Barrow's

Goldeneye in Regions 7 and 8. Scoters were widespread across the state including many on smaller bodies of water. It's likely that all three species appeared in all ten Regions, although White-winged and Black Scoter were not specifically mentioned in every report (missing Regions 2 and 10, respectively). Ducks reported in good numbers from various Regions included Wood Duck and Green-winged Teal, and a good count of 2000 Ring-necked Ducks was found in Region 6. Several Regions commented on continuing low numbers of Blue-winged Teal. Loon numbers were generally low. A continuing concern is the spread of Type E Botulism across Lake Erie and Lake Ontario; Common Loons seem especially susceptible and make up the great majority of recovered specimens. A Red-throated Loon at Tomhannock Reservoir was notable for Region 8. A Pacific Loon in Region 3 was the only report for the season. Red-necked Grebes were reported from all ten Regions with a high count of 535 on Lake Ontario in Region 2. Several Regions reported high numbers of Pied-billed Grebes, including counts of 147 in Region 1, 60 in Region 2, and 90 in Region 6. Several Regions tallied Eared Grebes this fall, including three at the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant in Region 1 and singles in Regions 2 and 3. Sandhill Crane continues to be well represented, with reports from five Regions, including a high count of nine at the Savannah Mucklands in Regions 2 and 3, and the first September record from Region 1. Five lingered at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 until November 24. Cattle Egrets were noted in Regions 3, 6, 8 and 10, all from 30 October or later.

GULLS/TERNS

Conducive weather conditions on the Great Lakes, plus an assist from Tropical Storm Ernesto, brought a good number of unusual gulls to the state this fall. In Region 1, strong westerly and southwesterly winds on October 28th and 29th concentrated large numbers of gulls and other waterbirds at the eastern end of Lake Erie. In Hamburg, the tally from several viewing points included 2-3 Sabine's Gulls, up to seven Black-legged Kittiwakes, up to 12 jaegers including 2-3 Pomarines, and a Northern Gannet. The same system also brought a Franklin's Gull to the Niagara River, as well as an estimated 20,000 Bonaparte's Gulls, an excellent number for late October. Additional unusual gulls found on the Niagara River this season included two adult Black-legged Kittiwakes and, for the 15th consecutive year, California Gull. Sabine's Gulls were unusually widespread this season; apart from the birds mentioned above, there was another along Lake Ontario in Region 1; two more seen in Region 2; one on Cayuga Lake in Region 3; two in Region 5; one in Region 7; and a storm-driven bird following Ernesto in Region 10. Little Gulls were reported from Regions 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7, and Black-headed Gulls were found in Regions 2, 5, and 10. Black-legged Kittiwakes were found in a total of five Regions; in addition to the sightings in Region 1, there were reports from Regions 2, 5, 6, and 10.

Several good terns were transported north by Ernesto, concentrated in Region 10. On the days following the storm's passage, observers on the southern Long Island coastline reported Sooty Terns, Bridled Tern, and counts

of 30-40 Black Terns, good numbers for recent years. Inland, only Region 2 seemed to benefit from Ernesto, with a report of two Sooty/Bridled-type dark terns, too far to be positively identified. See the Region 2 and particularly the Region 10 reports for more details regarding the effects of Ernesto. Also in Region 10 the maximum count of Royal Terns for the season reached 117 in the Pikes Beach/Moriches Inlet area on 10 September.

Jaeger numbers were generally lackluster along Lake Ontario, with, for example, only 18 Parasitic and two Pomarine Jaegers for the season in Region 2, and 13 Parasitic and one Pomarine in Region 5. Two immature Long-tailed Jaegers at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 did spice up the season there. Elsewhere, reports included the jaegers mentioned above at Hamburg as well as a scattering of additional reports of Parasitic and unidentified jaegers in Region 1; a Pomarine Jaeger in Region 6; a Parasitic Jaeger in Region 7; and at least 19 Parasitics and five Pomarines from Region 10, some of these arriving in the wake of Ernesto.

RAPTORS

Apart from some good showings in Regions 4 and 5, southbound raptor migration was relatively uneventful. Franklin Mountain in Region 4 surpassed 5000 raptors for the fifth time in the 18-year history of the site, and along the way set seasonal records for Red-shouldered Hawk and Merlin, and the second-highest total for Red-tailed Hawk. Golden Eagles topped 200 for the fourth straight year. Region 5 enjoyed several good days of raptor movement with particularly good numbers of Turkey Vulture and Broad-winged Hawk. Northern Jefferson County in Region 6 hosted encouraging numbers of American Kestrels and Northern Harriers, both species in general decline. Rough-legged Hawks did not move in to the state in any numbers by the end of the season. Marshlands Conservancy in Rye, Region 9, enjoyed the season's daily high count of Broad-winged Hawk, with 5,435 on 21 September. Three Black Vultures at the Elmira-Corning airport in Region 3 on 20 October were the second fall Regional report in the past ten years; another was seen upstate in Region 8 at Chatham on 9 October.

There were very few Snowy Owl reports for the season; in fact, the two apparently southbound birds, in Regions 3 and 7, were matched by two remarkable over-summering birds in Region 6. The first had been previously noted from Point Peninsula, and remained until 7 September. The second, not previously mentioned in the Regional reports, was banded in February 2006 and remained on territory through the end of November. Owl reports in general were scarce and several regions commented on the low numbers of migrant Saw-whet and Long-eared Owls, and there was no mention of Barn Owl from any Region. Good numbers of Short-eared Owls were noted in traditional areas in Regions 1 and 6, but only low numbers elsewhere.

SHOREBIRDS

Many of the Regional reports echoed a common refrain regarding the poor shorebirding this season. Select comments from the narratives include: "Shorebird habitat was nonexistent in the bays and along the creeks", "plover numbers were pathetic" and "may have been the worst shorebird fall on record!" (Region 2); "Maxima for most shorebirds were low, especially common species" and "few positives" (Region 5); "Shorebirds were once again reported in dismal numbers, with no particularly notable sightings" (Region 6); "Migrant shorebirds were scarce, with even some fairly common species represented by only a single report, and numbers were similarly low" (Region 7). As always, however, some Regions bucked the trend, and there were some interesting and exciting reports scattered throughout the state. One oddity during the fall was the relative abundance of Hudsonian Godwits inland compared to the coast, a reversal of normal fortunes. The high August numbers at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 didn't last into September, but four there was still a decent count, and a flock of 17 Hudsonians passed Derby Hill on 24 September. More bizarrely, a local business owner witnessed a flock of "several dozen" godwits flying through and into power lines in Ballston, Saratoga County. Eight Hudsonian Godwits perished as a result of the collision and were collected by pathologists from the DEC. Finally, Region 1 recorded a record late Hudsonian Godwit on 11 November in Dayton. Although Hudsonian Godwits are often grounded in Region 10 by tropical storms and hurricanes, none were found following the passage of Ernesto. Eventually several showed up at Jamaica Bay, and one in Accabonac, a low total for the Region.

Region 1 also recorded its second October record of American Avocet, a Long-billed Dowitcher, and one each of Red-necked and Red Phalaropes. The "only highlight" in Region 2 was a Regional record-late Solitary Sandpiper on 15 November. The Montezuma NWR complex, in particular Puddler's Marsh along Towpath Road, held good numbers and variety of shorebirds, although the birds were harassed by up to three Peregrine Falcons. Most notable were a maximum of three Red-necked Phalaropes on 3 September.

PASSERINE MIGRATION

Many regions described warbler migration as mixed – good in terms of variety but generally poor in terms of number. A total of 36 species were reported, a good fall figure, and some of the more uncommon species recorded in multiple regions were Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Cape May Warbler, and Bay-breasted Warbler. Golden-winged Warbler was found in Regions 9 and 10; Yellow-breasted Chat in Regions 4, 9, and 10; and two Yellow-throated Warblers were found, one in southern Region 10, at Jones Beach, and one in northern Region 7 at Ausable Point, the latter a fourth Regional record. Most remarkable was the influx of Connecticut Warblers; the species was found in six

Regions, with one in Region 5; two reports each in Regions 1, 3, and 8; three in Region 2; and approximately 18 in Region 10, although an exact count is made difficult by the multiple sightings at locations such as Central Park, Clove Lakes Park (Staten Island) and Jamaica Bay.

Thrush reports were augmented by the increasing focus on nocturnal migrants, including the use of automatic recording equipment and computer programs able to analyze and identify the calls of certain species. See the Region 4 report for some additional description of this technique and its resultant observations there. Late September and early October, in particular the period 25-27 September, featured heavy *Catharus* thrush migration, as noted in particular in the Region 4, 6, and 8 reports; many other seasonal maxima for Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes from other Regions fall into this period as well. Bicknell's Thrushes were reported from four Regions, with banding records from Regions 2 and 4.

Fox Sparrows were noted in good numbers in Regions 2, 3, and 5, and Region 6 featured a heavy migration of thousands of White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows on 4-6 October. Even larger numbers of sparrows, and late migrants in general, were noted in Region 10 on 3-4 November, when, among other extraordinary migrant totals, the following sparrow numbers were estimated: 10,000 White-throated Sparrows, 1,000 Dark-eyed Juncos, 750 Chipping Sparrows, 500 Swamp Sparrows, and 400 Song Sparrows. Please refer to the discussion in the Region 10 report for more details about this remarkable event, including a more comprehensive list of species involved. Region 10 also featured excellent numbers of Clay-colored and Lark Sparrows, as well as Dickcissel, this fall.

Winter finches were generally scarce this fall, with little indication of movement out of traditional strongholds. Two Pine Grosbeaks in Region 2 and five in Region 3 were the only reports of that species. A Northern Shrike at Westville, Franklin County in Region 7 on 28 September was a state-record early arrival; elsewhere, Northern Shrike numbers were generally low to moderate for the season. Conversely, the mild fall weather allowed a number of less hardy species to linger later than normal; see the Regional reports for mentions of a number of warblers and other summering species occurring into November.

RARITIES

A wide variety of rarities turned up across the state. Derby Hill in Region 5 hosted two normally maritime species, both Regional firsts, in short order in October. First, a well-described Razorbill flew past on 21 October, followed two days later by a Manx Shearwater. Region 1 also hosted a Razorbill, the third Regional record, present at the mouth of the Niagara River from 19 November into January 2007. It's hard to know whether this was the same individual, or whether something diverted multiple Razorbills into the Great Lakes. The same thoughts could possibly apply to the Manx Shearwater, as Lake Ontario also featured two disparate sightings this fall, with an earlier

record at Hamilton, Ontario in late August. It seems less plausible, however, that a shearwater could survive on fresh water for almost two months, making it perhaps more likely that two separate birds arrived as a result of differing influences.

Also out of place, albeit not as dramatically, was a Northern Wheatear well inland at the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant from 21-23 October. The Northeast featured a good number of this normally coastal vagrant this fall, including several others at inland locations. The only other report in New York this fall was in Region 10; the species is more expected here, although even this sighting was more inland than unusual in South Huntington, Suffolk County, near the middle of Long Island, rather than on the immediate coastline where most reports occur.

The third major rarity in Region 1 this fall was a well-described Black Rail that was flushed from a large meadow as it was almost completely mowed in Ellicottville. The observer was able to relocate the bird in a small remaining unmowed patch and studied it closely. This is the first report of the species in the Region since the first Regional record in May, 1933. Also in Region 1 was the second fall Regional record of Summer Tanager, in Wilson; Snowy Egret; White-eyed Vireo; and an unidentified pale-rumped swallow. Additional White-eyed Vireos were noted upstate in Regions 2 and 3. Region 2 also featured a Loggerhead Shrike, up to five Cave Swallows, and a single-observer report of a Violet-green Swallow; as noted in the Regional report this latter species has not been confirmed in New York State, and is cautiously treated as hypothetical in the Regional summary. Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows were found in Region 3, at a traditional fall location, and in Region 5 for a first Regional record. The only Yellow-headed Blackbird report was from Montezuma NWR in Region 3. Rufous Hummingbirds were identified in Regions 4, 9, and 10, where there were two, and another *Selasphorus* hummingbird in Region 8 was also thought to be a Rufous. Western Grebes were found in Regions 6 and 7. A LeConte's Sparrow photographed at Bashakill in Region 9 on 22 October was part of a larger regional event which brought the species to New Jersey and Massachusetts as well. Western Kingbirds were found at Katonah in Region 9 and Montauk in Region 10. New York State's second Hammond's Flycatcher (pending acceptance by NYSARC) was seen, heard calling, photographed, and video recorded at Marshland's Conservancy during its six-day-plus stay; unfortunately, it tended toward an alternate day schedule, meaning many more observers missed it than saw it. Another fantastic flycatcher was a Say's Phoebe seen by many at Robert Moses State Park in Region 10, the 16th state record, pending NYSARC review. A Yellow Rail, highly sought after by even the most experienced New York birders, turned up in Region 10 as well; unfortunately, shortly after its discovery in Lynbrook it was hit by a car, which did at least allow for photographic documentation of the record. Certainly rare for Region 10, and unusual anywhere in New York during migration, was a Henslow's Sparrow beautifully photographed in Central Park on 31 October. Other rarities reported in Region 10 included four American White Pelicans seen flying over Oceanside, Nassau County on 31 October; two Audubon's Shearwaters near Hudson Canyon on 28 September; a Painted Bunting in Water Mill on 15

October; Cave Swallow; Sedge Wren; and Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow. Locally noteworthy from Long Island were Common Raven and Pileated Woodpecker, both rarely seen or documented from the Region.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

A variety of contenders surfaced for Bird of the Season, including Regionally significant rarities such as Razorbill in Regions 1 and 5, Manx Shearwater in Region 5 and Black Rail in Region 1; statewide rarities such as Pacific Loon, Western Grebe, Yellow Rail, Sooty and Bridled Terns, Northern Wheatears (Figure C, p. 49), Say's Phoebe, Harris's Sparrow, and LeConte's Sparrow; and even a potential state-first record, Violet-green Swallow. My selection for the Fall 2006 BOTS is a bird I was fortunate to see, the first Region 9 record and second state record Hammond's Flycatcher, which was carefully documented at Marshlands Conservancy in Rye, Westchester County (Figure D, p. 49).

