

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SUMMER 2007

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The summer months provide a heady mix of nesting species, lingering winter birds and a host of migrants that pass through the state at the tail end of spring and early days of fall. As usual, our crack team of Regional Editors have done a superb job of synthesizing hundreds of reports and their introductory paragraphs are studded with insightful comments reflecting their deep familiarity with each *Kingbird* Region. Rather than try to duplicate their work I will use this Highlights section to share some general observations and perhaps express a personal opinion or two.

EXPANSION & CONTRACTION

There are many lessons to be gleaned from carefully recording birds over the years and one of the most fundamental is that bird populations are rarely static. Some species become more numerous and widespread whereas others decline, in some cases vanishing altogether. From a New York State perspective, the good news from the Summer of 2007 is that two western species, Sandhill Crane and Clay-colored Sparrow, have continued to strengthen their foothold as breeders. The pair of Sandhill Cranes near Savannah, Wayne Co. (Region 2) successfully hatched two chicks, although it seems that only one survived at least into early August. A different pair spent another summer at Watts Flats WMA near Panama in Chautauqua Co. (Region 1), close to the New York/Pennsylvania border. There is a good chance that this second pair might have been nesting or attempting to nest, somewhere in the area, perhaps out-of-sight on private land. In June, up to 4 Sandhill Cranes were noted in the Tonawanda Wildlife Management Area in Niagara/Genesee Cos. and on the adjacent Iroquois NWR, Genesee Co. (Region 1). Whether these include, or are different from, the Watts Flats birds is not known but certainly hint at the possibility of additional prospecting or even nesting pairs in the western part of the state. As local birders accumulate more and more summer sightings, we may get a better fix on the secluded spots favored by these spectacular birds.

The core nesting range of Clay-colored Sparrow covers the northern Great Plains, notably Alberta and Saskatchewan. Coinciding with a general eastward expansion into northern Illinois, Michigan, southeastern Ontario and southern Quebec, the first nesting pair for New York was found in 1971 near Alfred in Allegany Co. (Region 1) and was followed by scattering of nesting records

including some mixed pairings with either Chipping or Field Sparrows (Rising 1997, Novak 1998). In the early 1980s, surveys for the first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) found evidence of potential breeding in northern Franklin Co. and neighboring Jefferson Co., with the greatest concentration in and around the Fort Drum Military Reservation in Jefferson Co. (Region 6). As Regional Editor Jeff Bolsinger explains, Fort Drum remains the stronghold for the species with 19 singing males on 10 Jul 2007. Indicative of continued expansion, Mike Morgante (Region 1) commented on the discovery of several new (presumed) nesting sites away from the Allegany and Cattaraugus strongholds, including six males on private property near Wilson (Niagara Co.). Clay-colored Sparrows were also found at several sites in Region 2 and single sites in Region 4, 5 and 8.

The reasons for the eastward spread of Clay-colored Sparrow are not fully known but their willingness to use disturbed habitats such as abandoned farms and commercial Christmas tree plantations has been floated as one contributing factor (Rising 1997). Indeed, the inaugural nesting pair in Alfred used a commercial pine tree plantation and the combination of small trees and overgrown weeds seems to be the key. Thus in New York, the highest densities of Clay-colored Sparrows are from sandy pine barrens such as found at Fort Drum, as well as weedy openings in conifer plantations or inactive pastureland with scattered low shrub and trees. Coincidentally, this is habitat that often supports Prairie Warbler. General changes in the North American climate might also be playing a part in reshaping the breeding range by altering rainfall patterns and summer temperatures.

While things are looking up for Clay-colored Sparrows and Sandhill Cranes, the future remains gloomy for grassland specialists such as Upland Sandpiper, Bobolink, and Grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows, all of which appear to be in a steady and unrelenting decline across the State. Bolsinger comments that Upland Sandpipers have disappeared from several traditional spots in Region 6 as they have done from the lakeshore near Rochester (Region 2), although reports of 9 at the Sky High Sod Farms near Sullivan (Region 5), 10 in Geneseo (Region 2) and 18 at the Seneca Fairgrounds (Region 3) offers some solace. The grasslands around Sharon Springs, Schoharie Co., (Region 8) remained productive for Henslow's, Vesper, Grasshopper, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

Another species that is not doing so well is the Ruffed Grouse, especially in the southern portion of the State. Grouse have become extremely difficult to find in Region 10 having little tolerance for urban sprawl and seem to have vanished almost entirely from Long Island where a remnant population had persisted in the more extensive eastern woodlands around Riverhead, Suffolk Co. The 2000-2005 BBA data offers a single positive square for the entire island and shows a severely reduced density of positive squares for Region 9 compared to the first Atlas. Against this depressing backdrop, the belated report of a Ruffed Grouse near East Quogue, Suffolk Co., on 20 May (regrettably without further details) is exciting, but as regional editors Patricia Lindsay and Shai Mitra stress, undocumented Ruffed Grouse reports need to be treated with caution at this time of year. Young game birds such as Wild Turkey and Ring-necked Pheasant

attain the power of flight shortly after fledging and thus might be mistaken for a grouse. The strength of the report rests on the fact that there have been several reports of grouse in the past few years from this same area of woodland (Hugh McGuinness pers. com.). If nothing else, the East Quogue report offers encouragement to observers exploring the woodlands of eastern Long Island to keep a sharp eye and ear out, especially in winter when the grouse may be more obvious and the specter of fleeing young Turkeys should be less of a problem!

WINTER HANGOVERS

As occurs in most summers, a long list of lingering waterfowl were noted across the state, ranging from Brant, Greater Scaup and Red-breasted Mergansers on the Niagara River (Region 1) to the mid-June Eurasian Wigeon at Montezuma NWR, Seneca Co. (Region 3). Why a few individuals choose to stay through the summer is a mystery but I suspect lingering winter waterfowl often have some underlying pathology (tissue damage from hunters' shot, parasites, etc) that leave them unable (or unwilling) to push further north or northwest with the bulk of the population. One or two lingerers gave hints at breeding. Case in point was a summering Ruddy Duck in Clinton Co. (Region 7), a first summer record for the Region, and the presence of several summering birds at Jamaica Bay NWR in Queens Co. (Region 10), where the species has bred in the past. Considering how common Ruddy Ducks are during the winter, perhaps we can expect more breeding records in the future. The same reasoning might also apply to Northern Shoveler and Redhead, which, like Ruddy Duck, are predominantly western North American species that nested in NYS in moderate to fairly large numbers in the 1960s.

The discovery by Tom Wheeler of a pair of Red-necked Grebes engaged in courtship display on Lowe Lake near Canton (Region 6) was very exciting because the species has never bred in NY before. Unfortunately, the birds seemed to vanish in mid-June, although a bird was seen at the same location in mid-July. Whether this is just coincidence or evidence of attempted breeding somewhere less accessible is open speculation. On the subject of grebes, the arrival of multiple Eared Grebes during mid-late August at two traditional sites separated by the breadth of the state is now a firmly established pattern, quite distinct from the species' usual mode of occurrence in NYS. What is it about the Batavia Waste Water Treatment Plant and Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge (or the liquid effluent provided by the good people of Genesee and Queens Counties) that makes these sites so attractive to this species?

The discovery of an adult Snow Bunting by Tom Dow on 20 June at Piermont Pier, Rockland Co., on the Hudson River is absolutely mind-boggling, not least because the pier hosted an Ivory Gull and Snowy Owl earlier in the year. Given this spectacular list, various wags speculated on other arctic species that might show up before the year was out, with Polar Bear as a suggestion that

should give local residents pause for thought. The Snow Bunting remained until 25 June and was carefully studied and photographed by many.

SHOREBIRDS AND TERNS

Shorebird migration was productive in many spots across the state, perhaps reflecting a relatively dry summer. In Region 7, the farmland between the Great Chazy and Little Chazy Rivers, known locally as the Chazy Riverlands, was productive with 15 species including an adult Stilt Sandpiper in early August and the Region's first Forster's Tern, a non-breeding adult, on 6 July. Lake-bound Willets (probably of the Western flavor) were found at Dunkirk Harbor, Erie Co. (Region 1) and Sandy Pond, Oswego Co. (Region 5). A Long-billed Dowitcher photographed at Oak Orchard WMA in Genesee Co. by Jim Pawlicki furnished the first documented summer record for Region 1, although local experts inform me that the species will probably turn out to be regular in western NY if birders spend more time carefully scrutinizing and listening to dowitchers in mid to late August.

Region 10 produced its usual strong showing of shorebirds with the greatest diversity and numbers occurring at Jamaica Bay in Queens Co., and in Suffolk Co. at Cupsogue County Park and adjacent Pike's Beach as well as Mecox Bay, in Watertown. Patricia Lindsay was a finder/cofinder of not one but two Curlew Sandpipers in what turned out to be a very good year on the east coast for this gorgeous Old-World species. Both 'Curlew Sands' posed admirably for the cameras (Figs. E & F, p. 323). A Ruff on the Sky High Sod Farms in Madison Co. (Region 5) rounded out the list of Old World shorebirds. Despite some decent flocks, the numbers of Semipalmated Sandpipers seemed lower than normal to me, and perhaps helps to explain the absence of stint sightings despite the best efforts of the Swarovski-wielding cognoscenti.

Finally, it is hard to think of the Adirondack Mountains as fruitful shorebird habitat, but every once in awhile they provide migrants with a needed stop over site. A Whimbrel on a lawn in the town of Inlet, Hamlin Co. (Region 7) on 27 August must have been quite unexpected and provided a first county record.

RARITIES & BIRD OF THE SEASON

An impressive selection of rarities was reported and in many cases, documented with photographs. A Eurasian Collared-Dove in Region 4 at Port Crane, Broome Co. (Fig. C, p. 322) and a number of wandering *Plegadis* ibis, Little Blue and Tricolored herons in western and northern NY deserve mention. Although downplayed in the regional report, an adult male Lapland Longspur flushed multiple times by Dave Tetlow on 31 Aug and 1 Sept in Hamlin, Munroe Co.,

was not only a regional but State record early date by almost a week. Likewise details were lacking for four Brown Pelicans spotted by the same observer flying west at close range along the lakeshore past Hamlin Beach. This was not a 'pelican summer' and there were no reports from anywhere else in the state including Region 10 where sightings are the most regular. Indeed, informal enquires failed to turn up any reports from our lakeshore neighbors in Ontario or Pennsylvania. So the Hamlin pelicans were remarkable indeed. Of course, there have been influxes of Brown Pelicans into the Great Lakes in the past but these are usually accompanied by multiple sightings within the lake system. I sincerely hope that descriptions and pertinent details for all of these great birds make their way to NYSARC where they will be added the permanent archive for the benefit of current and future birders. Nowadays, it really isn't too much work for anyone with access to a computer and a few minutes to spare to put together a satisfactory report. Adequately documenting rare bird sightings is a humble act of fellowship with the broader birding community and sets a great example to up-and-coming birders who can learn from more skilled observers by reading how they found, identified, and reported exciting rarities. With this in mind, future issues of *The Kingbird* will publish a selection of exemplary NYSARC submissions both as an instructive tool and as a celebration of the wonderful encounters that are possible.

On 5 July, Corey Finger discovered a female Yellow-headed Blackbird on the Ocean Parkway median at Jones Beach, Nassau Co. (Region 10). The species is quite rare on the coast and gave many local birders something to savor during the heat of mid-summer. I have fond memories of sitting on the wooden divider in the parkway alongside the late Al Ott as we waited for the blackbird to return to its favored lawn in front of the park police station. I had seen the bird briefly but Al had not, having walked up moments too late. He expressed no irritation at the news and seemed perfectly content to sit and chat about birding as we waited patiently on that hot summer afternoon. It is sad to think this was the last time I was to experience his delightful company.

Rarities often remind us of the unpredictable nature of birding. A subadult Magnificent Frigatebird that appeared on eastern Long Island (Region 10) in late August seemed not to be storm-associated but had presumably wandered on its own up the Atlantic coast from Florida or Gulf of Mexico. It was discovered in the late afternoon by Chris Roberts who saw it fly over Accabonac Harbor in Springs, Suffolk Co., before settling to roost on a traditional 'bonacker' fish trap constructed from sticks and netting and mounted in Gardiners Bay off Gerard Point. Chris promptly contacted local birding maven Hugh McGuinness who was only able to get there after dusk but successfully scoped the roosting frigatebird in the moonlight. News circulated fast and a cadre of dedicated birders from elsewhere on Long Island were at the spot before dawn the following morning. With the first hints of daybreak on the horizon, they saw the frigatebird take to the air and then drift off across the bay. Others who arrived minutes later were, needless to say, mighty disappointed, but a boater on the Peconic Bay near Riverhead noted what was presumably the same bird. Like Swainson's Hawk or Swallow-tailed Kite, Magnificent Frigatebirds are

notoriously difficult to chase. You are either there looking skyward at the right moment or you are not! Finders of these aerial masters are often the only observers, and the success of the early chase parties is notable in itself. I write all this with gritted teeth as our weekend house is within walking distance of the roosting spot. The kicker is that I was abroad at the time and had to settle for an agonizing play-by-play by way of e-mail. Ah well, there is always next summer....

The undisputed BOTS was the Western Reef-Heron discovered by Alex Wilson in Region 10's Coney Island Creek, King's Co. on 8 July. Pending review by NYSARC, this will be the first record for NYS and one of only a handful of sightings in the US and Canada. A full account of the discovery appears in this issue of *The Kingbird*. Alex's find of this dark-morph adult of the nominate subspecies *gularis*, followed a tantalizing report on 30 June 2007 of a possible reef-heron from South Amboy in Middlesex Co., New Jersey—a shallow tidal bay on the opposite side of New York Harbor. As it turns out, the bird seemed to be shuttling between different feeding spots scattered around the muddy edges of New York's outer harbor and was noted more than once by observers on the south shore of Staten Island. Large numbers of birders from the New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and beyond made the pilgrimage to Coney Island Creek to enjoy this splendid African visitor and were guided by a continuous stream of internet postings giving details of the tide, driving directions and the presence or absence of the bird. Some were forced to make the pilgrimage more than once because of the unpredictable schedule the reef-heron seemed to follow. I don't think I will offend anyone by describing this badly neglected city park as one of the less savory birding locations in the area and must salute Alex for his dedication to checking this and other under-birded spots in Brooklyn on a regular basis. Spectacular 'out of the way' discoveries such as the Western Reef-Heron prove that unusual birds can be discovered almost anywhere and that year-round visits to your own local 'patch' (as these regular spots are referred to by British birders) can strike gold once in a while. There is nothing sweeter than finding something unusual or downright rare yourself and it being on a patch you can call your own puts a cherry on top.

LITERATURE CITED

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