

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SUMMER 2008

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WEATHER

June was warm across the State, averaging 2-4° above Regional norms. Rainfall varied, with about half the Regions above and half below normal. July was close to normal in temperature for all Regions with the greatest variance coming from Region 8 at only 2.4° above. While the month was near or even below average in terms of precipitation for western regions, it was wet in Regions 6, 7, and 8. August was slightly cooler than normal for all regions with precipitation varying from 1.5" above normal in Region 1 to 3" below in neighboring Region 2. Such a variance in adjacent Regions is mainly due to the tracks of local convective storms. For the three-month period, most Regions were near normal for both temperature and rainfall. However, Regions 6, 7, and 8 were much wetter than normal and, as a result, most of the weather-related comments were from there. From Region 6: "ground-nesting birds likely suffered..." and "high-water levels left very little shoreline exposed ... and not surprisingly few shorebirds were reported." From Region 7: "the high water along the Clinton County shoreline may account for the variety of puddle ducks at the Chazy Riverlands..." Contrasting were these comments, from Region 4: "nesting this year should not have been a problem due to weather."

BREEDING BIRDS

Bald Eagles are nesting in most Regions and are doing so well now that they hardly elicit comment anymore. Perhaps just as successful in their comeback but still considered endangered in the State by the DEC, Peregrine Falcons were found breeding in six Regions this summer. Merlins are likewise doing well, with sightings in every region and nesting in six. However, in Region 1 they had a slight setback—the species did not nest there after three consecutive years of doing so. Perhaps it is a good sign that the declining American Kestrel received relatively little comment. Region 4 noted the species as being down for the third year but in Region 2, a count of 22 in an area on 22 July seems like a good total. Region 7 also gave some quantitative data for nest-box success. Remarkable was Long Island's first ever nesting record of Turkey Vulture.

Trumpeter Swan bred again in Region 2. In Region 6, where they have nested at one locale since 1995, they bred at two other sites as well. A summering bird in Region 1 was apparently unmated but hints at possible further expansion of this introduced species and its ultimate establishment on the

New York checklist. The most noteworthy of the ducks was Common Goldeneye, which established a second nest record for Region 6. The species also nested in Region 7 where it is less unusual. The only place left in the State that Northern Bobwhite occurs naturally is Long Island. This summer it was noted in better numbers and at more sites there, though unfortunately in such a heavily congested area, this trend is not likely to continue. An unconfirmed report of Common Loons with a baby loon on Lake Ontario would be the first breeding record along the New York side of this Great Lake in many decades.

High-quality wetland habitat is hard to come by so a newly flooded wetland in Volney, Region 5, which hosted Least Bittern, Pied-billed Grebe and Common Moorhen is welcome news. Although not a new site, the Motor Island heronry in Region 1 is thriving with increasing numbers of Great Egrets and continued good numbers of Great Blue Herons and Black-crowned Night-Herons. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons nesting in the City of Mount Vernon, Region 9, made the local papers while a single bird at the Motor Island rookery prompted speculation that this rare inland species could conceivably breed there someday. Measures for controlling the breeding population of Double-crested Cormorant by the DEC continue. In Region 7 this included shooting 878 adults, a controversial tactic that has been used in other Regions as well. The most noteworthy comments for Common Moorhen were from Region 3, where record numbers were counted at Montezuma NWR and from Region 6, where it was noted as absent from at least five locations where it was formerly annual. While the good nesting season at Montezuma, due to managing for higher water levels, is welcome, this writer considers a thinner but more widespread population to be a better situation for long-term stability and therefore laments the losses in Region 6. Sandhill Crane nested again at the Montezuma complex but it is not clear that any fledglings survived. They were also reported again this summer at the Iroquois NWR complex in Region 1 and a pair summered and was observed performing the courtship dance in Region 6. Breeding in another Region seems likely in the near future, indeed, if it has not occurred already.

A late report from Region 10 indicated that Laughing Gull nested for the first time east of Jamaica Bay in 2007. Three Common Tern colonies in Region 6 suffered 25% chick mortality from thunderstorm events in June. Other colonies were unaffected by storms. Common Nighthawks still hang on in Buffalo during the breeding season. Chimney Swifts had a bad year in Region 4, with notes that they disappeared from two regular nesting sites and that numbers were well off of previous years. The species elicited little comment from other Regions. Purple Martins were noted as continuing their slide, including in Region 10 where they were absent from a traditional breeding site. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet in June and July in Region 3 possibly indicates a rare nesting away from the northern parts of the State.

In Region 6, studies at Fort Drum of the "winged warblers" revealed that the ratio of Golden-winged to Blue-winged has changed from about 5:1 in the mid nineties to 1.3:1 this year. In addition, Fort Drum recorded its first three "Lawrence's" Warblers ever. Region 1 editor Mike Morgante appropriately warns against identifying the now-rare Golden-winged by song alone, as birds of

mixed parentage cannot be ruled out by song. Dickcissel continues its recent trend of breeding or summering in the State, with sightings in Regions 1, 6, and 8. Henslow's Sparrows continue their trend in the opposite direction, with no reports in former breeding areas of Regions 1 and 2 and reports from only one locale each in Regions 3, 4, and 8. In Region 6 numbers actually increased but as editor Jeff Bolsinger suggests, this could indicate that the loss of habitat elsewhere in the Region is forcing birds into the few remaining patches of habitat, such as at Fort Drum.

The Region 6 report does an excellent job of putting reports, or the lack thereof, of breeding birds into context. It also offers quantified data for some species, including studies done at Fort Drum. While many birders would agree that Region 7 has some of the best areas for breeding birds in New York, Region 6 offers a tremendous diversity of habitats, including the last best stronghold (if it can still be called that anymore) of grasslands in the State. Along with this, what excites me about Region 6 as a place to study birds is that the density of both resident and visiting birders is quite low, such that the potential for interesting discoveries seems quite high. So, if you like to explore, the next time you are heading to Fort Drum for your annual fix of breeding Whip-poor-wills, nighthawks, Golden-winged Warblers, and Henslow's Sparrows, why not spend some time checking other areas in Region 6? LeConte's and Nelson's Sharp-tailed sparrows and Yellow Rail have all been found there during past summers—perhaps you can be the one to confirm New York's first breeding record for one of these species.

NON-BREEDERS

Hamlin Beach SP in Region 2 has taught us many things over the years, not the least of which is that unexpected birds can occur in any season on Lake Ontario. This summer Brant, Red-throated Loon, and Red-necked Grebe were all seen from there. The Brant and grebe were also found in Region 7, and Snow Goose was also recorded in both Regions this summer. Tolerance to very nearby vehicles led to speculation that a Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 3 was of suspect origin. A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in Region 8 caused much excitement initially until a yellow tag was noticed on one leg, indicating the bird was likely an escape. A Surf Scoter in Region 8 was a good bird for summer.

Regions 4 and 5 noted an unusual number of Great Egrets. With breeding a regular occurrence in Region 1, evidence for such should be looked for in the heron rookeries of other Regions in the future. Away from Region 10, unusual summer waders included Little Blue Herons in Regions 2 and 3, and both Snowy and Cattle egrets in Region 3. There was also a single report of the latter, as well as a White-faced Ibis, in Region 10. This ibis's range is expanding greatly, and the species is now of near-annual occurrence in the State. The only White Pelican report came from Region 6. A Great Cormorant in Region 9 was only the third summer record there. Five Audubon's Shearwaters were reported on three dates offshore in Region 10. Although there are only five records

accepted by NYSARC, this species may be turned up more frequently with increased offshore efforts in late summer.

Out-of-place Black Vultures were in Regions 1, 2, 6, and 10. The possibility of further breeding of this species should be looked for, especially along our southern tier. After surprising breeding attempts in two New England states, Mississippi Kites are another species that could make an attempt in New York. Two sightings in Region 10 and one in Region 2 may be an unprecedented number for one season. A Golden Eagle in Region 2 was out of season and 40 Broad-winged Hawks migrating at Derby Hill in Region 5 on 8 July was a most unusual date.

With the exception of Region 10, most areas of the State had little shorebird habitat. Highlights included American Avocets and "Western" Willets in Regions 1, 2, and 10, Whimbrel in Regions 5, 6, and 9, a Hudsonian Godwit in Region 3, Marbled Godwit in Region 9, and Red-necked Phalarope in Regions 2 and 10. Region 10 added a Black-necked Stilt.

Long-tailed Jaegers were in Regions 2 and 10, where most of the State's reports come from, but they are still cause for excitement even there. Franklin's and Iceland gulls in Region 1, a Black-headed Gull in Region 7, and Little Gulls in Regions 7 and 10 were excellent summer discoveries. Slightly less unusual were two Laughing Gulls in Region 3 and one in Region 5. Although least frequently encountered during the summer, Lesser Black-backed Gulls were still found in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 10. A July Bridled Tern offshore in Region 10 is earlier than almost all reports of this species. Nine different Arctic Terns spread out through June and July would formerly have been considered unthinkable but now, according to Region 10 editors Pat Lindsay and Shai Mitra, they are considered as likely overlooked in the past. On the other hand, with increasing reports and earlier summer dates, five Sandwich Terns in Region 10 probably reflect a true increase.

Now very rare away from Region 10, a Barn Owl was a great find in Region 8. The owl was heard first, and then confirmed with a visual observation. Common Ravens continue to consolidate and expand their range with sightings of three birds north of breeding areas in Region 2.

A Cerulean Warbler in Region 6 was noted as a rare migrant and I would add that this is especially true in the fall migration. An adult Worm-eating Warbler that was molting its flight feathers was banded in Region 10 on 1 July at a location where they are not known to breed. The bird was recaptured in fresh plumage on 5 August (see p. 348). Unusual sparrows this summer included a Fox in Region 7, a White-crowned in Region 2, and an Am. Tree Sparrow in Region 8. "Winter finches" were widely reported this season. Pine Siskins appeared in Regions 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 and Evening Grosbeak in Regions 3 through 8. Red Crossbills were found in a remarkable eight Regions, including a bird presumed to be lingering from spring in Region 10, and flocks of about 50 and a dozen in Region 1. The Region 1 birds were considered new arrivals, just passing through. White-winged Crossbills were also widely reported, presaging the fall and winter invasion to come, with reports from seven Regions.

MISCELLANEOUS

Two books that should interest New York birders have been published recently. Check out John Peterson's Region 7 report for information about Adirondack Birding: 60 Great Places to Find Birds by John Peterson and Gary Lee. The other book is the anticipated climax to the State's second cataloguing of breeding birds, known as Atlas 2000. The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State, edited by Kevin McGowan and Kimberley Corwin, is a must for any serious student of birds in New York.

BIRD OF THE SEASON (BOTS)

The choice for the BOTS award comes down to just a few species. An immature White Ibis was photographed in Region 9, after initially being spotted in flight and eventually located on land (see p. 355). There are only 12 prior records recognized by NYSARC. The bird was only seen one day. South Polar Skuas were reported on two different dates offshore in Region 10. NYSARC has accepted only two records of this species, the only two reports ever submitted. However, there are a number of other summer reports of South Polar Skua, many of which were assumed to be this species because of the dates of the sightings. The very similar Great Skua is reported to occur only in late fall and winter. However, without rigorous identification, it is tenuous to accept skuas based only upon the date. This summer's bird or birds were photographed and they could make a valuable contribution to the record, if submitted to and accepted by NYSARC. Two extremely rare shorebirds, Red-necked Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, were at Jamaica Bay in Region 10 this summer (see p. 355). There are five accepted records of the former and only two of the latter. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have occurred numerous times in the State but an adult male in Region 9 this summer must have been a special treat. The fact that he stayed for three days allowed many people to see it. The species is usually a one-day wonder and often not an adult male.

The birds just described are all compelling challengers for the BOTS award this season. Either the Red-necked Stint or the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper on its own would be a fine choice for the award. Occurring together as they did, in the same location, makes it appropriate to choose them as co-recipients of the BOTS award. Their concurrent appearance at Jamaica Bay allowed some birders to observe both species on the same day and from the same spot! This is a truly remarkable confluence of two mega-rarities, and well deserving of the Bird of the Season award.