

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2009

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Once again, we come to the messy season, a combination of the tail end of spring migration, the heart of the breeding season, and the beginning of the fall migration. Each of these will be addressed in turn, then some special happenings noted in the various Regions.

THE WEATHER

As usual, the weather played a significant role in reporting and in thoughts about the season. The first two months of the season continued the weather of late May, cool and wet across the whole state. Each month rated comments as among the coolest and wettest on record for one or more Regions. In the few cases where averages departed from the pattern of the other Regions, there were notes that the weather reporting site did not represent the whole Region; other parts were colder or wetter. This cool, wet period and the associated wind directions appeared to cut way down on the typical tail end of spring migration, or at least on birding and reporting. There were also several comments on the likelihood that such weather at that time in the breeding season must have had some negative impacts. But there was also the positive of the wetness delaying hay cutting and probably helping nesting success of some grassland birds.

August brought some taste of summer over most of the state, with temperatures averaging a degree or so above normal all across the state and rainfall generally only an inch or so above average and even closer to average in the SE three Regions. Still, highs only touched the eighties for a few days all season in most places and almost no nineties were recorded. The two late August hurricanes approaching the coastal areas were way overblown by the news media and had essentially no noticeable impact on birds or people.

In the Adirondacks, it was dubbed the Summer That Never Was.

TAIL END OF SPRING MIGRATION

The end of spring migration usually extends a couple of weeks into June. Often the spring hawk watches still tally some good numbers of immature birds of several species, there are often some high counts for the later shorebird species, and the last of quite a few passerine species move through. There are also the usual reports of lingering individuals which were expected to be gone well before June.

At the hawk watches, there are usually days with hundreds of immature Broad-wings, Red-tailed Hawks, and some Bald Eagles, with interesting other late observations well into June. This year the weather was such that none of the watches were even monitored in that period. Next, we look for good shorebird

counts. This year among the reports were species such as Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, and Dunlin present into June in several Regions each, but good numbers only for Semipalmated Sandpiper in Regions 1, 2, and 3 in the 2-4 June window. There were rare-for-spring reports of Sanderling in Regions 2 and 7 and Baird's Sandpiper in Region 2. After last spring's increased count of Common Nighthawk into June, totals this year dropped back to the dismal numbers of many recent springs. Other typical late migrants into the first ten days or so of June include: Olive-sided Flycatcher noted only in Regions 9 and 10 to 6 June; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in Regions 1, 2, and 8 to 9 June; Philadelphia Vireo in Regions 3 and 8 to 15 June; Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes to only 1-2 June in Regions 1, 2, and 10; and Northern Parula, Magnolia, Blackpoll, and Wilson's Warblers all well into June in multiple Regions.

Winter birds lingering into June, departing late or possibly not moving on, included: Snow Goose in six Regions, less surprising now with the population so high; Brant in Regions 6, 7, 9, and 10; Horned Grebe in Region 6; Eurasian Wigeon and Ring-necked Duck in Region 3; Greater Scaup in Regions 3 and 9; Lesser Scaup in Regions 1, 2, and 5; White-winged Scoter in Regions 2, 8, 9, and 10; Long-tailed Duck in Region 5; Red-breasted Merganser in Region 5; Snowy Owls in Regions 5, 6, and 8; White-crowned Sparrow in Regions 1 and 7; and White-winged Crossbill and Pine Siskin each in many Regions. Among the late gulls, we find several Little Gulls and a Black-headed Gull in Region 1, Iceland Gull in Region 2, Lesser Black-backed Gull in Regions 1, 2, 5, and 10 and a Black-legged Kittiwake in Region 10. The individual birds in specific places are unusual, but the numbers and mix of lingerers is typical.

BREEDING SEASON

With all of the studies going on during the breeding season, such as Breeding Bird Surveys, MAPS, Marsh Monitoring, Colonial Waterbird Censuses, Grassland Bird Monitoring, and studies of species of special concern, one would think that the breeding season would be well covered. However, it appears that for many of the studies the data is not available in time for the current season's Regional reports, and much of the breeding bird information is spotty at best. In spite of notes of expected weather impacts on breeding, only the Region 10 report actually makes note of poor breeding success reported by observers for many different kinds of birds, though with limited details concerning the species involved.

Looking through the reports, there are some interesting compilations from some studies. The relatively interesting colonial waterbird counts noted from Regions 1 and 6, but no Four Brothers Islands report from Region 7 or coastal colonial waterbird information. To the west, the Heron rookery on the Niagara River is doing well and 1838 Common Tern nests were also noted. While attempts are being made to control Double-crested Cormorant populations, there were 975 nests there plus still 2751 nests on Little Galloo Island toward the east

end of Lake Ontario. Caspian Tern nests were down 23 % to 1499 on Little Galloo I. Reduced numbers of carcasses of gulls and terns killed by Type E botulism were found this year near those colonies.

The Region 6 report also provides detailed summaries of studies of grassland birds, the "winged-warbler complex", and several other studies. With seven locations, Region 6 reported the bulk of the breeding Upland Sandpiper sites in the State. Three locations there were the only Short-eared Owl nesting sites reported. Thirty-nine singing male Sedge Wrens on Fort Drum and reports from at least ten other locations is in marked contrast to only 1-2 sites for reports of the species in four other Regions. Ninety-two singing male Golden-winged Warblers were counted on the fort; there were only about ten other reports from four other Regions. Most of the Clay-colored Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow reports for the State also come from studies on Fort Drum and other parts of Region 6. Region 8 does note that grassland species were missed there in spite of much search effort.

Most of the breeding season information lies in reports of species of general interest tracked by many Regions, or just species of special local interest. One example is Trumpeter Swan, where breeding is noted in Regions 2, 3, 5, and 6, and efforts to track down breeding near the Montezuma NWR complex turned up at least six pairs with 18 cygnets in Wayne County and additional pairs on the refuge. The breeding record of the season from Region 10 is Black Vulture, confirmed nesting on Staten Island, with videotape of adult and nestling. Bald Eagle was noted as okay in six Regions, with some new nest sites, and continued Merlin nesting or likely nesting noted in five Regions, with birds also noted in four other Regions. Similarly, comments of Peregrine Falcon nesting appeared in six Regions. Among the rails, there were summer records of King Rail in Regions 2 and 5 and a male Black Rail calling in Region 10. Sandhill Crane was reported in six Regions, including Region 10, with breeding known or suspected in four of these. Shorebird breeding does not include many species for most of the state, so often it is not well reported, but this season we have note of near total breeding failure of saltmarsh-nesting species in Region 10.

Continuing on, we read through family after family, with notes here and there relative to breeding of a species but too few reports or too little information to pull together trends. As some examples, Red-headed Woodpecker is noted in seven Regions, some with numbers of sites, but none with historical context. For flycatchers, there is note of Olive-sided and Yellow-bellied nesting in the expected locations, the first summer record for Acadian Flycatcher in Clinton County and Region 7, and then only seven other notes on any of the other species from all Regions until hitting the very rare Scissor-tailed Flycatcher found in Region 10. There is note of a drop in Cliff Swallow colonies in Region 7, but no assessment of breeding elsewhere. Noted were at least four locations for nesting Bicknell's Thrush in Region 7, but no indication of how the population is doing elsewhere. Among the warblers of special interest, six Regions note records for Golden-winged Warbler; all but Region 6 had very few. But Cerulean Warbler, a heavily studied species of concern is only noted at

all in two Regions in the breeding season. A first Regional record for Kentucky Warbler in Region 6 on 27 June is interesting. Rusty Blackbird, another bird of special concern, was reported only very sparsely from breeding areas in Regions 6 and 7 this summer. Finally, while White-winged Crossbill and Pine Siskin were reported well into the season, there were no confirmed breeding records for the crossbill and only a few actually confirmed for the siskin.

In addition to breeding records, there are always a few surprise mid-summer records, this season including: mid-July to very early August Brant and Black Scoter in Regions 2 and 10; Horned Grebe and Bufflehead in the same time frame in Region 3; a first July record for Swainson's Hawk in Region 2; Gull-billed Tern in numbers in late July at Jamaica Bay in Region 10; Nelson's Sparrow in late July in Region 7; White-throated Sparrow in mid-July near Lake Ontario in Region 2; and White-crowned Sparrow on 11 August in Region 7.

START OF FALL MIGRATION

For many, the focus of fall migration is the shorebird passage. This year movement was well underway in late June, with the return of Greater Yellowlegs in Regions 2 and 10, Pectoral Sandpiper in Region 2, and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, and Least Sandpiper soon after in Regions 2, 3, and 5. The parade then continued generally as expected, with most Regions providing arrival dates. In Region 10, the migration was noted as weak overall, with "juveniles of arctic-breeding species both late and very sparse." Many of the interior Regions noted much reduced numbers and variety due to high water from the summer rains. Region 3 noted a special problem due to the Main Pool of the Montezuma NWR drawn down for work and the levels of that and other pools providing very little viewable habitat for early fall migration. Of special note for date or numbers, we have: a good count for Black-bellied Plover in Region 10, but no juveniles thru the season; American Avocets in Regions 2, 3, and 10 involving at least 12 birds on nine dates; a good Lesser Yellowlegs count in Region 1; "Western" Willets in Regions 1, 2, 9, and 10, with a Regional high in Region 2 and good numbers of both "Western" and "Eastern" Willets in Region 10; Whimbrels in all but two Regions; Hudsonian Godwit in only Region 10, but Marbled Godwit, the rarer, in Regions 2 and 10; good counts of Ruddy Turnstone in Regions 9 and 10; Red Knot numbers LOW; a maximum of 4150 Semipalmated Sandpipers in Region 10 in August; Western Sandpiper in five Regions; a tie of the record early date for Dunlin in late July in Region 2; low dowitcher counts except in Region 10; Red-necked Phalarope in five Regions in late August; and Red Phalarope only in Region 10 and early. American Golden-Plover was missed in five Regions, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper was only reported in Regions 9 and 10.

August also brought the start of the fall movement of waterfowl, off to a relatively slow start for numbers, and the usual summer dispersal of hawks now tracked at both Braddock Bay and Derby Hill—mostly juvenile Red-tailed Hawks. The passerine migration began with mostly normal arrival dates, but with observers commenting on low numbers, especially for warblers. Early

water birds included high counts for Redhead and Ring-necked Duck in Region 6 in August, Greater Scaup in Region 2 in early August, Red-breasted Merganser in Region 10 in early August, and Red-necked Grebe in Region 2 in late July. The peak Red-tailed Hawk counts were on 18 August in Regions 2 and 5, though radar detected good numbers the day before near Derby Hill, just too far to see from the watch.

SPECIAL NOTES

In Region 1, flooding on Cattaraugus Creek destroyed the pens at an exotic waterfowl facility releasing many birds. While over 350 were recaptured in the following week, others remain loose and may be the origin of some interesting reports this fall. Many of Region 2's records came from an active lakewatch on Lake Ontario and a Big August effort by one local birder. For Region 3, the main event was the draw downs and fillings of various ponds in the Montezuma NWR leading to boom then bust for shorebirds, amazing numbers of summering Sandhill Cranes, and under-reported effects on breeding waterfowl and other marsh dwellers. In Region 10, there were amazing and persistent numbers of seabirds visible from the outer beaches, tallied at sea watches, and found on pelagic trips. These are all very well covered by Shai Mitra in the Region 10 report and include some unprecedented numbers for the State. There you will also find that prior discussions of plumages of Arctic Tern have resulted in increased interest in seeking out and studying the birds in this season, leading to more reports. There are also interesting notes on the status of Northern Bobwhite and on Yellow-billed Cuckoo and molt-migrant Worm-eating Warbler on the barrier beaches in the vicinity of Ft. Tilden. As usual, the Region 10, and to a much lesser extent, the Region 9 reports contain seabird, wader, shorebird, and even some passerine records which are regular there but would be rarities anywhere else in the State.

RARITIES

Some of the rarities of the season have been woven in to the various sections above. The best of the rest will be treated here. Eared Grebe returned once again to the Batavia WWTP in Region 1. Rarities among the Region 10 seabirds included Audubon's Shearwater (~70), two-three White-faced Storm-Petrels (photos), and Leach's Storm-Petrels (~49). Brown Pelicans appeared in Region 1, where one was observed from 5-8 July then found dead on 14 July; a single bird traversing Regions 5 and 6 from 11-27 August, then taken to rehab where it died on 29 August; and at least 18 in Region 10, where it is no longer flagged as rare. Rare waders included Little Blue Heron in Region 2 (also regular in Region 10) and White-faced Ibis in Region 10. Black Vulture was flagged in Regions 4 and 5, and an August Rough-legged Hawk was a rarity in Region 4. A flamingo sp. was observed and photographed in Region 9, possibly related to an earlier Rhode Island bird. Many of the gull rarities were covered earlier, but additions are Laughing Gull in Region 1; Black-headed Gull, two Sabine's Gulls, and

Long-tailed Jaeger in Region 2 in August; and a possible Yellow-legged Gull in Region 10 still in review. The rarer shorebirds were all noted above, but it is worth emphasizing the number of American Avocets this summer scattered over the State and the season. With increased awareness of plum ages, about nine Arctic Terns were reported in Region 10. There were also at least three Sandwich Terns and two South Polar Skuas found on pelagic trips off Region 10. Eurasian Collared-Dove was reported at three sites in Region 2, with interactions between a pair at one site suggesting imminent breeding. Moving to the passerines, added rarities included: "Brewster's" Warbler in Region 7; Yellow-throated Warbler in Regions 1 and 4; Nelson's Sparrow in Region 7; Summer Tanager in Region 8; Western Tanager in Region 9; and Yellow-headed Blackbird in Regions 1, 2, and 7, the former two sharing the same bird crossing the Regional boundary.

Now to the B.O.T.S Award. To me, clearly the event of the season was the seabird spectacle from land and on pelagic trips off Region 10. But the B.O.T.S Award goes to the long-staying Mississippi Kites seen and enjoyed by many as life or state birds and providing hope for future breeding in the State in Region 8.

PHOTO GALLERY

Summer 2009



Figure A. Mississippi Kite, Root, Montgomery Co., © Courtney Moore.



Figure B. Trumpeter Swans, Hogback Rd., Wayne Co., 12 Aug 09, © Dominic Sherony.



Figure C. Little Gull, Fort Niagara, Niagara Co., 13 Jun 09, © Gary Chapin.

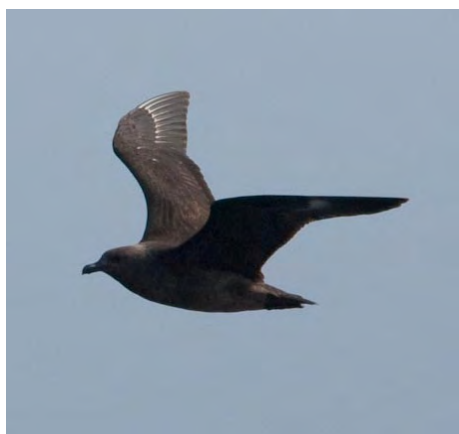
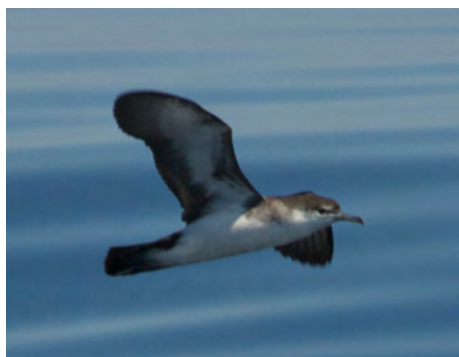
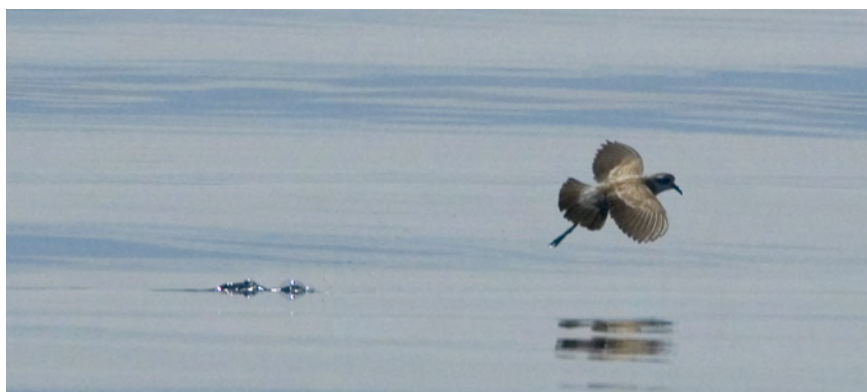


Figure E. Clockwise from top: White-faced Storm-Petrel, 95 mi sse Shinnecock Inlet, 16 Aug 09; Leach's Storm-Petrel, 92 mi sse Shinnecock Inlet, 16 Aug 09; Pomarine Jaeger , 92 mi sse Shinnecock Inlet, 3 Jul 09; South Polar Skua, 48 mi ss e Shinnecock Inlet, 27 Jun 09; Audubon's Shearwater, 82 mi sse Shi nnecock Inlet, 16 Aug 09; all © John Shemilt.



Figure F. Lesser Black-backed Gulls, 3 of 13 present at Jones Beach SP, Nassau Co., 24 Aug 09, © Brendan Fogarty. See Notes and Observations, p. 338.