

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2009

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In spite of the diversity of habitats in NYS, weather patterns usually affect the state in a rather consistent manner. In fall, that means storms from the northwest and lake effects, storms from the south moving up the coast with nor'easter effects, lots of snow in the higher elevations, snow cover and less open water. Not this year. Storms were coming in from the west. The early cold did not materialize and snow cover was minimal, if not absent. Waterfowl were late in moving south, and winter finches were almost non-existent.

September was warmer to the north and a bit cooler to the south, with a heavy deluge at the end throughout the state to catch up with the lack of early precipitation. The first part of October was wet everywhere, with a dryer second half and a late coastal storm. November was warm and surprisingly snow free throughout.

In general, the fall migration was a bust. There were almost no fronts that moved migrants through, and total numbers of all birds seen were abysmally low, at least downstate except for an extraordinary gull flight. Some editors hinted at this lack of birds. What was significant to me was that the total number of species found didn't diminish. Birders were looking for birds for various lists and found them; so no big deal and no complaints. We have more birders chasing fewer birds and still maintaining their lists. Let's hope this year was only an aberration.

No Region 4 report was available this season. Therefore, where I've outlined the distribution of some of the state's avifauna, keep in mind that a part of the south central portion of the state is not included.

In spite of the lack of movement of waterfowl that some Regional editors reported, all the geese and all but a few super rare ducks on the NYS list appeared in the state this season. Of interest was how numerous and widespread some of our scarcer species were. **Pink-footed Goose** appeared again in Region 10; White-fronted Goose in Regions 1, 3, and 5; Ross's Goose in Regions 2, 3, 6, and 7, plus Ross's x Snow hybrid in Region 1; **Barnacle Goose** in Regions 3 and 10; nominate Cackling Goose in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10; and a possible "**Ridgway's**" **Cackling Goose** (*Branta hutchinsii minima*) in Region 10. Swans continue to expand their presence in the state, with Mute Swan appearing in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 10; Tundra Swan in 1, 2, 5, 6, and 10; and Trumpeter Swan in 1, 2, 5, and 6. Among the rarer ducks, Eurasian Wigeon was found in Regions 3, 6, and 10, and Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 2 and 8. Large numbers of Common Eiders appeared along the ocean in early November. Although the numbers were not huge at Montauk, it was noticeable how many appeared in numbers as far west as Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. Jones Inlet hosted an impressive 100, virtually all first year birds. Harlequin Ducks appeared only at their usual location at Pt. Lookout, Region 10.

One item of note was the report from Region 5 of diving ducks eating the invasive proliferating zebra mussels. It's good to hear some good coming from this nuisance.

Either pheasants and quail are fast disappearing in the state or are simply not being reported. Bobwhite was only reported from Region 10 and then only a few birds; Ring-necked Pheasants only from Regions 7 and 9; Spruce Grouse not at all; and Ruffed Grouse only in Regions 5, 7, 8, and 9. Wild Turkeys are just under-reported.

Pacific Loons were reported from Regions 2 and 3 and Eared Grebes from Regions 1 and 2. A Western Grebe appeared in the Hudson River, south of Piermont Pier, confirmed by sightings and photographs in Region 9. Another large grebe was found in Region 7, but this bird was identified only as a Western/Clark's Grebe.

Late Cattle Egrets were in Regions 1 and 10. A rarity was the second Region 1 sighting of a juvenile **White Ibis**, found at Tonawanda WMA in September and again, after a visit to a neighboring province, in October.

Black Vultures were reported from Regions 8 and 9 and Turkey Vultures from 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7. Eagles have become noticeably widespread. Bald Eagles were reported from Regions 1 and 5 through 10, and Golden Eagles were reported from Regions 2 and 5 through 10. For both species, this is virtually the entire state, a dramatic change from only a few years ago. An immature **Swainson's Hawk** was present in Greene Co. on 3-14 October. See Rich Guthrie's account of this spectacular find, Will Yandik's Region 8 Report, and Figure I on page 44. Two separate observers on two separate days observed a perched hawk each believed was a juvenile **Ferruginous Hawk**, a raptor not on the NYS list. The sightings occurred on 3 and 5 September near the Lake Erie shore in Dunkirk in Region 1. The actual ID requires verification at this time. An immature gray **Gyr Falcon** was seen by many birders and photographers on 25 October at West End, Jones Beach State Park (Fig. A, p. 41). It was photographed feeding on and then carrying off an adult Herring Gull. At first thought to be a Peregrine Falcon, the proper ID was confirmed subsequently from the numerous photographs taken.

While walking his dog in Caroline on 17 October, John Confer found a **Yellow Rail**. Subsequent searches failed to relocate the bird. A **Purple Gallinule** was found in Region 2 on 11 October. It succumbed two days later and is now interred in the collection at Cornell University.

Sandhill Cranes continue to expand their reach and this fall were noted in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 10. American Avocets were found in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 10.

The shorebird highlight and the bird of the season for Region 2 was Andy Guthrie's **Long-billed Curlew** at Hamlin Beach. It was a Regional first and a bird not seen in the state since 1976. Hudsonian Godwits were found in Regions 2 and 9 and Marbled Godwit only in Region 10. Baird's Sandpiper was noted only in one report in Region 1 and two reports in Region 10, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper only in Regions 1 and 10. Long-billed Dowitchers were highlighted in a number of reports away from the coast. Region 5 had its first sighting in 11

years, and a single bird appeared in the Cocksackie Grasslands in Region 8. They appeared in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 8 in addition to coastal 10.

On 27 September, Angus Wilson witnessed a remarkable flight of at least 88 Parasitic Jaegers off the coast of eastern Long Island. Also noted were a Northern Fulmar, several Cory's Shearwaters, a Greater Shearwater, and a Black-legged Kittiwake. During October he recorded several more impressive flights of seabirds, including good numbers of sea ducks, gulls, terns, jaegers, and another Northern Fulmar.

After the coastal storm of 21 November, thousands of gulls were reported flying way out over the ocean. Among the birds closer to shore, a flight of Black-legged Kittiwakes was first detected by Doug Futuyma at Robert Moses State Park. He alerted other observers up and down the coast, and a combined conservative estimate of 475 birds was made between Montauk Point and Fort Tilden. Small numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes were observed lingering near shore to 26 November, when five were noted at Breezy Point. In recent years small numbers have been reported on the ocean, most often from Montauk. This season's numbers are truly impressive both as to quantity and distribution.

Of course, the Niagara Frontier is the place for unusual but now expected gulls. The gull species numbered 13 and included Black-legged Kittiwake, **Sabine's**, Black-headed, Little, **California** and **Thayer's** Gulls. A **Franklin's Gull** was reported from Region 2.

Eurasian Colored-Dove was found in Regions 2 and 9. This species continues to expand north. Single Snowy Owls in Region 2 and 9 were the only reports this fall. As with the finches, there was almost no movement of these northern birds.

Few Common Nighthawks were reported in most Regions and several editors commented on this, but 150 were reported in Harriman State Park on 3 September. A **Rufous Hummingbird** visited feeders in a yard on Staten Island in Region 10 for almost two months starting on 10 October.

Black-backed Woodpeckers were found in Regions 6 and 7, but Am. Three-toed Woodpecker was not reported.

An **Ash-throated Flycatcher** was discovered in a relatively unbuilt area of Queens, NYC, Region 10 (Fig. H, p. 44). An Orange-crowned Warbler, less obliging, frequented the same area. Western Kingbirds were only found in Region 10. A **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** was found and photographed in Savannah, in Region 2, on 24 October (Fig. F, p. 43). The next day, the bird was relocated and seen by many observers from early morning to last light.

The only positive Cave Swallow sightings were at Hamlin Beach on 9 November in Region 2, when 73 passed on that single day. Four distant Cliff/Cave Swallows were seen in Region 3, too far off to ID to species. In a gathering reminiscent of Tree Swallow congregations, Region 1 had a remarkable 1290 Northern Rough-winged Swallows off Niagara Falls SP on 7 October. Another large species concentration was 2650 Golden-crowned Kinglets noted at Hamlin Beach on 16 October.

Rarer warbler species included: a dull "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler seen briefly in Ithaca, Region 3; Connecticut Warbler reported in

Region 3 (immature female), 5 (2 birds), 9, and 10 (8 birds in as many widely scattered locations); Orange-crowned Warblers reported in Regions 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10; and Yellow-breasted Chat in Regions 9 and 10.

Some of the sparrows more difficult to find in fall migration included: Clay-colored Sparrow in Regions 1, 2, 5, and 10; Lark Sparrow only in Region 10; Grasshopper Sparrow in Region 10; Henslow's Sparrow in Region 6; and Lapland Longspur in Regions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 10. Also interesting finds were a single male Western Tanager, which paused at Jones Beach and was seen by two observers but did not stay; Blue Grosbeak only in Region 10; and Dickcissel in Regions 6, 9 and 10.

A Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 10 was seen by a single observer and did not linger.

The fall/winter incursion of waxwings and finches was for all purposes non-existent. Ten Bohemian Waxwings at Paul Smiths College on 6 November was the only report for the species. Red Crossbill reports were: one bird seen in Region 2; a handful in Region 5; two in Region 6; and two locations in Region 8. From here on it's all downhill. White-winged Crossbills were reported in Region 3 and on one day in Region 6. Only Region 8 reported Common Redpolls. Single Evening Grosbeaks were noted in Regions 1 and 5 and at various locations in Region 7. Pine Grosbeaks were a no show.

Finally we come to the "Bird of the Season" Award. Although the **Long-billed Curlew** is a mega-rarity, it was only seen and photographed by a single experienced observer. I don't think that is enough for this call. In my opinion the distinction clearly belongs to the young **Swainson's Hawk**. It very cooperatively lingered in the centrally located Albany Region for over a week, affording close and prolonged viewing to a great array of NY and out-of state birders.

