

REGION 3—FINGER LAKES

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Spring 2010 was an interesting period in Region 3 both for its weather and the fascinating variety of birds. All three months had temperatures warmer than normal, with several significant warm spells contributing to the high averages. Precipitation events were largely not noteworthy, and monthly totals were within an inch of typical levels, though April and May were dryer than normal. Snow was only recorded in early March, and even that was only ~1.2". March was marked by two warm spells with temperatures 10° F greater than normal, one from 11-13 March and another from 18-22 March. A cold front brought sharply reduced temperatures on 27 March, with a high of 30° F, about 14° below the normal temperature for that date. April began with a major warming trend, with four days breaking 80° in the first half of the month, and temperatures at least 10° above normal for 2-9 April. May also got off to a hot start, with a southerly flow 1-4 May with temperatures at least 10° above normal. This trend coincided with an influx of neotropical migrants into the Region and also ushered in some of the rarest birds of the period as discussed below. One non-weather event worth noting is a wildfire that burned around 700 acres of marsh near the Main Pool at Montezuma NWR on 4 April. The smoke from the blaze was visible in Ithaca, nearly 40 miles away to the south. Long-lasting impacts on local birdlife are not anticipated given the location and quick regeneration of the burn area.

This spring, though lacking reports of many uncommon but regular species, was punctuated by several significant rarities. These included the Region's first two reports of **Mississippi Kite**, five reports of **Black Vulture**, **Whimbrel**, two **Little Gulls**, **Franklin's Gull**, **Sedge Wren**, **Yellow-throated Warbler** (ssp. *dominica*), and **Prothonotary Warbler**. This report focuses on species and number highlights and how they reflect patterns of status and distribution on a larger scale, as well as discrete weather events and the birds associated with them. Along a similar vein, specific spring arrival dates are not

supplied for some species in the Region because of the increasingly blurred line between wintering and arrival dates in some cases. First records for each year for the Cayuga Lake Basin, where the vast majority of Region 3 reports originate, are compiled on the website of the Cayuga Bird Club (<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/cayugabirdclub/firstrecords.htm>). Additionally, eBird's immense and growing database allows anyone to generate arrival tables for states, counties, or hotspots, and to compare yearly migration trends for any species or suite of species relative to historical data.

Waterfowl migration is one of the truly exciting predictable events of the birding year in Region 3. This year's migration was stellar as usual, though the typically prolonged goose flight through the area was largely compressed into a few days. Usually large numbers of geese can be counted on for several weeks in the general vicinity of Montezuma NWR after passing over most of the Region's birders in Ithaca. This year, after a huge flight on 10 March that was witnessed by many birders at the south end of Cayuga Lake, around half a million Snow Geese and lesser numbers of Canadas staged around Montezuma for only a few days before moving out of the area. This is likely due in part to warmer than average local temperatures, a lack of snow cover which failed to concentrate the geese, and an exceptionally early spring in eastern Canada, characterized by high temperatures, early snowmelt, and lots of open ground, which allowed birds to pass out of the northeastern US much earlier than normal. Though most of the Snow Geese that move through the Finger Lakes in spring appear to be "Greater" Snow Geese based on appearance and the very low proportions of dark morph birds in large flocks, it is apparent that "Lesser" Snow Geese are involved in spring flights as well. This year, many of the more westerly breeding "Lesser" Snow Geese arrived in breeding areas on the western Hudson Bay in Manitoba around a month early, following the warmest March on record and a similarly warm April. As discussed here, reports from breeding areas outside the immediate reporting area can often lend cues as to migratory patterns and behavior.

One of the interesting consequences of the quick exit of the geese to the north was the relative geography of Cackling and Ross's Goose records this spring. Both species are now known to be regular in the hordes of Canada and Snow Geese that pass through the Region. However, this year the majority of both Cackling and Ross's Goose records in the Region came from Tompkins County as flyovers. Four Ross's Geese and 22 Cackling Geese were noted between 8 and 17 March by observers around Ithaca, indicating not only the quality of observer coverage in that location but also the change in our understanding of the status of these species in the Region over the years.

One interesting goose from the period that is worth discussing was an apparent "Greenland" Greater White-fronted Goose (ssp. *flavirostris*) that Gary Kohlenberg found at Myers Point, Lansing, Tompkins County at the end of the winter season and which continued through at least 6 March. The bird obliged with extremely close views and was well photographed. Additionally, the Greater White-fronted Goose was accompanied by a Canada Goose marked with a yellow neck collar, likely also of Greenland origin based on a number of

recent similar tag returns from the northeast from Canada Geese associated with Greater White-fronted or even Barnacle Geese, though this has not been confirmed at the time of writing.

Prodigious numbers of ducks were present in mid-March in the flooded agricultural fields along the Seneca Canal between Montezuma NWR and Savannah, an area that bridges two different *Kingbird* reporting Regions. Trumpeter Swans were observed nesting in at least three locations at Montezuma NWR this spring, and the summer report will likely detail the success of these nestings. With a year-round presence, increased breeding, and high numbers of migrants and wintering birds, it should not be long before NYSARC officially recognizes the species as established within the state.

The days of 8-9 May saw an interesting pair of herons at different locations in the Region. A Cattle Egret was a surprise find for David and Debbie Suggs on 8 May at Myers Point, Lansing, and a Snowy Egret was found the very next day in Union Springs by Ann Mitchell and Gary Kohlenberg. No obvious connection between the sightings exists other than the date being an excellent one for bird migration in general.

The aforementioned southerly flow in early May that ushered in many songbird arrivals was also responsible for the overdue first record of **Mississippi Kite** for the Cayuga Lake Basin. Chris Wood and Jessie Barry spotted an immature kite while driving and followed the bird along Fall Creek from Dryden into Ithaca, Tompkins County. The bird was later seen along the creek briefly before disappearing, though a number of searchers enjoyed the consolation prize of at least one **Black Vulture** that cruised over Ithaca and Lansing for much of the day. On 31 May, Ken Rosenberg studied another **Mississippi Kite** during a fortuitous hawkwatch near his yard in northeast Ithaca. Given the species' surge northward in recent years and the likely breeding last year and this year in Montgomery County, we can only expect more of these graceful raptors in the skies of New York in the future. Likewise, reports of at least five **Black Vultures** track nicely with a widely documented northward push of this species.

Shorebird habitat at Montezuma NWR this spring was relatively poor, with the impoundment at the refuge visitor center being the focus area for most observations. A nice day of visible migration on 24 May at the refuge revealed a movement of over 80 Semipalmated Plover, six Black-bellied Plover, several Dunlin, and a Sanderling. Though always very rare in the Region and never part of a predictable phenomenon, a Whimbrel passed Myers Point on 6 May.

Jeff Gerbracht and Tim Lenz turned up a lovely but ephemeral rarity at Myers Point on 3 May, an adult **Franklin's Gull** in breeding plumage! Likely put down by storms accompanying a passing frontal system, the bird cleared out quickly after the weather improved, eluding other observers. Associated in date but probably not in mode of migration or place of origin was a **Laughing Gull** that Jay McGowan found on Cayuga Lake 6 May off the Varick waterfront. Earlier that day, Chuck Gibson saw a hooded gull at the Montezuma NWR visitor center; it seems likely that multiple birds were involved.

Always rare but usually annual in the Region, Whip-poor-wills were found in three locations this spring in a fairly tight window from 30 April to 4 May in

Tompkins County. At least two of the migrant Whip-poor-wills found in recent years have called for a brief period right around the end of civil twilight (about 8:30 PM here, in the beginning of May) before going silent and presumably continuing on migration. Keying in on this temporal window could lead to the discovery of more migrant Whip-poor-wills. The species has not been found nesting in the Region for many years, and almost all records are of singing spring migrants encountered briefly.

Purple Martins nested in Tompkins County this year at Willow Point on the west side of Cayuga Lake. Though the species is uncommon to common along the northern half of the lake and the surrounding agricultural land, it is not usually detected as a breeder in the Ithaca area. Swallow migration was widely enjoyed this year, with hundreds of individual swallows representing all local species concentrating along Cayuga Lake 25-26 April. Minor cold snaps in May were enough to disrupt nesting for some Tree Swallows due to the temperature's influence on insect availability and perhaps swallow metabolism, and substantial nest failure or abandonment was well documented in the Region by the long term project coordinated by Dr. David Winkler at Cornell University.

Only two obvious pushes of neotropical landbird migrants were noticed as distinct from the usual trend in spring migration for migrants to suddenly "appear" on their breeding territories with little fallout or flocking fanfare. The night of 30 April-1 May represented a moderate to heavy flight, with numbers of herons, rails, and early cuckoos noted in addition to passerines calling in nocturnal migration. Perhaps more significantly, and surprising given the late date, 16 May provided a welcome surge of songbird migrants throughout the Region. In Tompkins County, Laura Stenzler reported that the morning was "the birdiest I have experienced at our property on Hunt Hill". Geo Kloppel turned up a surprising total of 10 Tennessee Warblers along Bald Hill Rd. in Danby, and many other observers enjoyed excellent birding as well.

At the end of the month, two closely linked warbler records fit into a pattern of southern overshoots. On 30 May, I found a road-killed Prothonotary Warbler along Fall Creek in Ithaca, now deposited with the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates. The next day, while working on book projects at their home, Chris Wood and Jessie Barry discovered a singing Yellow-throated Warbler, also along Fall Creek but a bit further east in Dryden. The Yellow-throated Warbler spent the afternoon singing from tall white pines and spruces. The habitat and the yellow marks in the bird's lores, along with long bill, suggest that it is of the subspecies *dominica*, different from the *albilora* birds which breed in New York at Allegany State Park. Both Prothonotary and Yellow-throated Warbler, species of southern forests, are extremely rare in Tompkins County, and the temporal and geographic association of these two records cannot be ignored, especially with the added impact of the kite record from Ithaca on 31 May. Ken Rosenberg listened for night flight calls on the evening of 31 May and noted around 30 thrushes and several cuckoos, further providing evidence for a landbird movement late in the month after most local breeders are well into their reproductive activities.

Orchard Orioles were widely reported this spring, mostly from the Ithaca to Montezuma corridor along the east side of Cayuga Lake. Jay and Perri McGowan found a surprising seven during a trip along that corridor on 27 May. Comparisons of the frequency and abundance of Orchard Oriole in the Region as compared with previous years, based on eBird reports, did not show a significant increase over the average, but observers should be careful to watch and listen for this species, one of a number of potential vanguards from the south.

One of the valuable aspects of long-term bird banding operations is the precise geographical connections made by the recoveries of banded birds, providing ornithologists with hard evidence of bird migration. One really interesting recovery this year involved a Pine Siskin that was banded by John and Sue Gregoire at Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory in Burdett. They originally caught the bird on 16 April 2009, and it was found dead almost a year later on 2 April 2010 near Fulford Harbor Island, British Columbia, Canada, over 2200 miles away.

Most of the data summarized in this report comes from eBird and the Cayugabirds-l listserv hosted by Cornell University. Arrival date compilation was aided by the careful arrival tracking efforts and review of Dave Nutter and Matt Medler. Observers are encouraged to submit their sightings to eBird and to provide links to documentation photos of rarities in the comments fields of that application.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MtPl – Mount Pleasant, Dryden; MNWR – Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge; MyPt – Myers Point; StP – Stewart Park, Ithaca; SMSC – Savannah Mucklands Seneca County.

WHISTLING-DUCKS – VULTURES

Ross's Goose: 4 Ithaca-Dryden 8-10 Mar (TJ, JB, AF, CWo).

Snow Goose: max 300,000-600,000 MNWR 8 Mar (LVL).

Greater White-fronted Goose: Myers thru 6 Mar (mob).

Cackling Goose: 22 over Tompkins Co. 8-17 Mar (mob); max 10 MtPl 10 Mar (TJ, JM).

Brant: 220 MNWR 8 May (TJ), high.

Tundra Swan: 1044 Cayuga Lock 8 March (CWo), high.

Trumpeter Swan: 3+ pairs nesting MNWR.

Am. Black Duck: 650 SMSC (MI), high.

Green-winged Teal intergrade (*crecca* x *carolinensis*): MNWR 14-17 Apr (TL, MI).

Eurasian Wigeon: CLSP 14 Mar (TL, CWi); MNWR 20 Mar- 24 Apr (mob); SMSC 14 Mar (mob).

Canvasback: 12000 MNWR 19 Mar (IBA monitoring).

Great Egret: Union Springs 24 May (TJ, CWi), rare in CAYU.

SNOWY EGRET: Union Springs 9 May (GK, AM).

CATTLE EGRET: MyPt 8 May (DDS).

HAWKS - ALCIDS

MISSISSIPPI KITE: Dryden/ Ithaca 2 May (CWo, JB); Ithaca 31 May (KR), first regional records.

BLACK VULTURE: Lansing/ Ithaca 2 May (TJ, mob); Ithaca 7 May (DN); Ithaca 16 May (CD, NC); Dryden 21 May (TJ); 2 Ithaca mid-May (SuF).

Golden Eagle: 20 individuals reported during spring migration in Tompkins County (mob).

Sora: MNWR 2 Apr (AB), regional record early.

Sandhill Crane: arr MNWR 14 Mar (TL, CWi); bred Genoa (Cayuga Co.); Dryden Lake 11 Apr (NI, JM).

Black-bellied Plover: arr 5 MNWR 24 May (TBJ, CWi).

Semipalmated Plover: 80 MNWR 24 May (TBJ, CWi) high.

Whimbrel: MyPt 6 May (MI, BS, JB).

Least Sandpiper: MNWR 6 Apr (DD), regional record early.

Ruddy Turnstone: MyPt 12 May (TBJ), only report.

Wilson's Phalarope: MNWR 6 May (CG, JM); MNWR 19-21 May (LL, BM).

Red-necked Phalarope: MNWR 28 May (JM, PM, AV).

Lesser Black-backed Gull: last Dryden 24 Apr (KM).

Iceland Gull: last StPk 2 May (NW, JM).

Glaucous Gull: last Dryden 16 Mar (CWo, JB).

FRANKLIN'S GULL: MyPt 3 May (JG, TL).

Laughing Gull: Varick, Cayuga Lake 6 May (JM).

Little Gull: MyPt 9 Apr (JM); MyPt 11 May (TJ), both adults.

PIGEONS – WOODPECKERS

Short-eared Owl: 3 Lansing 7 Mar (TJ).

Long-eared Owl: Lansing 6 Mar (TJ, SB, CS, CWi).

Whip-poor-will: Danby 30 Apr (TJ); Lansing 2 May (LW); Lansing 4 May TV).

Ruby-throated Hummingbird: arr Dryden 18 Apr (NM); noticeably low numbers this season.

Red-headed Woodpecker: Ithaca 5 May (TS).

FLYCATCHERS – WAXWINGS

Purple Martin: breeding Willow Point, TOMP, rare as a breeder in the county.

Bank Swallow: MNWR and Lansing 9 Apr (TJ, JM), very early.

SEDGE WREN: MNWR 22 May (GL).

WARBLERS

Tennessee Warbler: 10 Danby 16 May (GK), high.

Golden-winged Warbler: Dryden 1 May (CWo, JB).

Palm Warbler: both subspecies StPk 26 Apr (DN).

Cerulean Warbler: migrant SW 5 May (AMJ, LS).

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER: 1
dominica Dryden 31 May (CWo, JB).

Prothonotary Warbler: 1 roadkill 30 May
Ithaca (TJ), very rare in Tompkins County.

TOWHEES – WEAVERS

Clay-colored Sparrow: singing male
Shindagin Hollow 16 May (MM).

Chipping Sparrow: first 16 Mar (MW; TJ),
early.

Am. Tree Sparrow: last SW 20 Apr (JM, TJ),
late.

Savannah Sparrow: arr MyPt 5 Mar (TJ),
early.

Orchard Oriole: 7 East side of Cayuga Lake
28 May (JM, PM), high.

Baltimore Oriole: 1 MyPt 14 Apr (TJ), early.

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