

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SUMMER 2011

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Even more than usual, this season was one of separate stories from several angles. To the usual three-way split—the end of the spring migration, the breeding season, and the start of the fall migration—add the usual variation in weather patterns over time and geography, but on top of that, toss in Hurricane (Tropical Storm) *Irene* and its greatly varying effects across the State. Even more than usual, Region 10 was a different world as *Irene* passed. There is so much information associated with this storm that it cannot all be covered in this highlights summary, nor even in the Region 10 summer report; for a full discussion of *Irene*'s effects, the reader is urged to read Shai Mitra's summary, elsewhere in this issue.

Weather

This summer, the temperature part of the picture was quite uniform across the State. June ran 1-3° above normal; July was hot—3-5° above normal, with some interesting records set and speculation about heat waves to come; and finally August dropped back to 2° above normal, more like a typical late summer month. Precipitation brought the contrasts. June was dry to the west, but with above average rainfall continuing from spring well into the month for the southeast. July dried out, and everywhere precipitation was below average. Then came August, with areas west near to slightly above average, but the southeast seeing a lot of rain early. Region 9 had recorded its second wettest August on record by the 20th, then came the rains of Hurricane *Irene*, pushing the entire area to above normal readings and parts of the east and south to record levels.

Hurricane (Tropical Storm) *Irene*

The passage of *Irene* rates special attention. It arrived on 28 August as a low-level hurricane-to tropical storm and passed slowly north and eastward a bit inland from the coast over that and the next day and beyond, depending on your locality. From the north and east sides of the Adirondack High Peaks to the south and east past Albany, especially Schoharie and Greene Counties, the rain reached record levels and locally washed out roads and bridges, isolating towns and knocking out power for days or more. Both natural and human habitats were severely damaged in some areas. To the west in Regions 1-6, there was generally some rain and wind, but no major impact.

From a birders perspective, if one could get out, the effects ranged from a non-event to spectacular. In the six Regions to the west with little direct weather impact, there were few birds found that could be directly assigned as storm related. Most special sightings were of increased numbers and variety of birds often present at this time of year but observed with the passing of the storm; maybe as much an effect of hopeful birders out looking as actually associated with the storm. Several shorebird species and Laughing Gull in Regions 3 & 5 were most notable. To the east and south there was some great birding—possibly at a once-in-a-generation level, especially for seabirds, waterbirds, and shorebirds accompanying and immediately following the storm's passage. Often the window of opportunity was very short, and only those out in the storm were able to observe the rarest of the displaced birds. In Region 7 there was a good fallout of shorebirds and a few other species at the usual Chazy Riverlands site. In Regions 9 & 10, the list and details of even the first State or first County and other very rare birds are so extensive that all cannot be captured in this summary, and the reader is again urged to read those Regional reports completely. Just to whet your appetite, we have: a Black-capped Petrel in Region 10; an Audubon's Shearwater from the Bronx; Wilson's Storm-Petrels in Regions 9 & 10; 21+ Leach's Storm-Petrels and two reports of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel in Region 10; a White-tailed Tropicbird grounded and taken for rehabilitation in Region 8, plus at least three sighted and two more found deceased in Region 10; Black-necked Stilt in Region 9; multiple Sooty and Bridled Terns in Regions 9 & 10, with 29+ of the former and 26+ of the latter just in Region 10; unprecedented numbers of Sandwich Terns in Region 10; three reports of South Polar Skua, a Pomarine Jaeger, and many Parasitic Jaegers in Region 10, and single Long-tailed Jaegers in Regions 9 & 10; and unusually large numbers and birds in unusual locations for many other seabird species during the storm. Many of these birds were documented by photos or videos and written documentation sent to NYSARC for assessment.

Tail End of Spring Migration

Typically the end of spring migration continues into at least the first week or so of June, sometimes longer, with some raptors (especially Broad-winged Hawks and Bald Eagles), several shorebird species, a few of the flycatchers (especially Olive-sided and Yellow-bellied), thrushes, and several warbler species often seen and banded in good numbers at that time. Reporting is impacted both by varying numbers of birds annually and by varying observer attention to this period of time. This season was fairly typical in both regards.

In scanning the Regional reports gathering details for this section, it seems apparent that, in terms of reporting, this phenomenon is most evident for the Regions bordering the south shore of Lake Ontario and near the ocean, with most of the early June reports noted from Regions 1, 2, 5, & 10 plus a few shorebirds from Regions 7 & 9. This being the case, I'll leave it to interested readers to look at those reports for especially the late shorebirds and passerines.

Other late spring or possibly summering records of interest include: Snow Goose in Regions 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, & 10, with several individuals present through the summer in the Montezuma complex in Region 3; Brant in Regions 6, 9, & 10; Greater Scaup in Regions 5 & 10; Lesser Scaup in Regions 1, 2, 5, & 7; King Eider in Region 10; very late (or maybe early) Black-bellied Plovers on 22 June in Region 2 and on 15 & 27 June in Region 3, as well as through the period in Region 10; White-rumped Sandpipers in mid-June in Regions 6, 7, & 9 & through the summer in small numbers in Region 10; Dunlin on 14 June in Region 8 and 18 June in Region 10; White-crowned Sparrow in two locations in Region 2 on 21 June; first Regional summer record for Blue Grosbeak on 2 June in Region 1; and a record late Rusty Blackbird on 1 June in Region 2.

Breeding Season

It still seems that data from many of the breeding season studies often does not reach Regional record keepers. Observers are urged to contribute both records and thoughts on the season to the Regional editors or to local listservs and to eBird. The breeding season can bring observations on trends for species of special note or concern, new breeding records, and unusual summering records.

We can start with some of the trends. Among the waterfowl we find Trumpeter Swan in Regions 1, 2, 3, & 6 and a Ruddy Duck with chicks for a first breeding record in Region 7. From Region 1 there is praise for the continued colonial waterbird monitoring by the DEC related to the changing scene with the Double-crested Cormorant, heron/egret, and tern colonies in the Buffalo area along the Niagara River. In the Region 9 report, Michael Bochnik provides a detailed summary of the impacts of heavy flooding in late June at Bashakill Marsh. The Mississippi Kites were back in the same area in Montgomery County in Region 8. Osprey was noted as nesting in six Regions and with confirmed breeding thought finally imminent along the Hudson River in Region 8. The Peregrine Falcon scene was a soap opera in Region 2, with the male of a pair from last year failing in at least two nest attempts with his mate of last year at the old nest box, then also mating with another female in a location a few miles to the north and also failing there. Region 6 saw the first nesting of Peregrine Falcon in recent years. Merlin was reported in nine of the ten Regions, with nesting in at least five Regions. Sandhill Cranes were found this summer in six Regions, with nesting confirmed in Regions 2 & 3 and strongly suspected in Region 6. See more detailed notes in the Region 2 & 3 reports of crane chicks captured in an effort by Matt Hayes of the International Crane Foundation to determine the origins of the new breeding groups in the Northeast. The rooftop-nesting Ring-billed Gull saga continued in the City of Batavia near the Region 2/3 boundary. Lesser Black-backed Gull is now found at various places around the State in every month, but Region 10 hosted unprecedented numbers of immatures this summer, with counts to 70 at one site. Black Terns seem to be holding on in nesting colonies in Regions 1, 2, 6, & 7. At least five immature Arctic Terns were carefully documented in Region 10 in their now familiar mid-

June to early July window. Eurasian Collared-Dove continued in Region 2, but still with no confirmed nests, and was also reported in Region 5. All species of goatsuckers were down in Region 10 and even missing from some traditional nesting sites. This summer there were many reports of Fish Crow from along the Genesee River in and north of Rochester, but no evidence was received to confirm breeding in Region 2. Common Raven reports are up in most Regions, and a first nesting for Suffolk County was confirmed in Region 10. Among the grassland birds, some bad news related to the wet May and a lull in the rain in early June leading to early hay cutting in Region 8 and likely heavy impact on nesting. However, there were strong numbers for nesting grassland species from Region 6. There were also some good numbers reported for Bobolink at season's end from seven Regions, including a very high 1400 on 27 August in Region 9.

Other interesting brief breeding bird notes include: only six reports of Red-shouldered Hawk from three Regions; Common Goldeneye in Region 3 as well as the usual breeding locations in Region 7; Black Vulture in late July on Staten Island in Region 10; eight sites with nesting Cooper's Hawk in Region 10; a good breeding season for "Eastern" Willet and good numbers of migrant "Western" Willet in Region 10; Red-headed Woodpecker in six Regions; Sedge Wren in only Regions 6 & 9; Bicknell's Thrush doing all right were expected in Region 7; Golden-winged Warbler seen in Regions 2, 9, & 10 and nesting in Region 6; Prothonotary Warbler nesting in Regions 1, 2, & 5 and as a migrant in Region 9; all of the north country specialties noted from Regions 6 and/or 7; Clay-colored Sparrow only reported from Regions 1, 3, & 6; a Summer Tanager nesting in Region 10; and crossbills, Pine Siskin, and Evening Grosbeak only noted in small numbers.

Notes on lingering summer birds or hard-to-assign records included: most of the waterbird reports in Region 2 now from the Northern Montezuma Wetlands Complex rather than from the marshes along Lake Ontario; Northern Pintail in Region 10; Ring-necked Duck and Ruddy Duck in Region 1 at the Batavia Waste Water Treatment Plant; Greater Scaup in Region 10; Common Eider present through the season in good numbers and Black Scoter in mid July in Region 10; Iceland Gull in Region 10; Glaucous Gull to late June and longer in Regions 5 & 10; a first July record for Long-tailed Jaeger (photographed) in Region 2; mid-summer records for both waterthrushes in new locations in Region 10; and Blue Grosbeak in three locations in June and July in Region 10.

Start of Fall Migration

Often as early as mid June, the start of fall migration can be detected in the first returning shorebirds. More species are added slowly through July, and by August most breeding birds are well on their way.

Among the waterbirds, it was a very slow start this fall. Only Red-necked Grebe seen all month in Region 2 and on 21 August in Region 1 was somewhat early, and jaegers began to show as usual in late August in Regions 1, 2, & 10,

as well as associated with *Irene* in Region 9. Looking at hawks, the usual summer dispersal movement of mainly Red-tailed Hawks along the south shore of Lake Ontario was noted, but there was no official hawk count at Braddock Bay this year. Most of the State's fall hawkwatches are later. Shorebird arrivals began as early as mid-June for Black-bellied Plover in Regions 2, 3, & 10 and White-rumped Sandpiper and Short-billed Dowitcher in Regions 3 & 10. At least two dozen other species of shorebirds were recorded beginning by typical July and August arrival dates, and in only low to moderate numbers up to the hurricane effects. Typically, arrival dates were often earlier and numbers much larger in Region 10. In Region 10, 23 August was a date for many fall arrivals and some good numbers tallied, e.g., 199 Eastern Kingbirds, 10,800 Barn Swallows, many Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, and 70 Baltimore Orioles. Of special note were: 250+ American Oystercatchers in Region 10, American Avocets in Region 1 & 10, a record early 15 July Dunlin in Region 2, and Western Sandpiper in Regions 2 & 5 in addition to those regular in Region 10. The passerine movement was noted in most Regions near or after mid-August at typical dates for a wide range of species. Early dates noted included: Western Kingbird on 14 August in Region 10; a rare-for-fall Worm-eating Warbler banded on 9 August in Region 2, then recaptured on 29 August (and again after season's end on 2 September) at the same location; a Cape May Warbler on 12 August in Region 2; a Swainson's Thrush on 1 August in Region 3, and a record early Red Crossbill on 26 August in Region 2.

Rarities

Beyond the surge of rarities tied to Hurricane *Irene* or noted in other sections above, we had a good number scattered across New York State: Black-bellied Whistling-Duck for the second summer in a row in Region 1; a first State report of Fea's Petrel in Region 10; Audubon's Shearwater in Region 10; four Wood Storks in Region 1; American White Pelican in Regions 4, 5, 8, & 9; Brown Pelicans both before and during *Irene* in Region 10; the first Cattle Egret since 1998 in Region 7 plus four in Region 10; juvenile White Ibis in Regions 9 & 10; Glossy Ibis in Regions 3, 7, & 9; American Avocet in Regions 1, 3, & 10; Marbled Godwit in Regions 6, 7, & 10; first State record of Gray-hooded Gull in Region 10; South Polar Skua and Pomarine Jaeger in July in Region 10; Rufous Hummingbird in Region 10; the State's second mid-summer Western Kingbird in Region 6; and an interesting Barn x Cliff Swallow photographed in Region 2.

In addition to these, we have two birds of questionable provenance in Region 10, Great Kiskadee and Hooded Crow.

Trying to pull a Bird of the Season from all of the storm-dropped rarities and potential first records is impossible. Turning to an alternative of a breeding bird, since it is breeding season, is no help. So I'll pass this season and let it be reader's choice.