

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2011

S. S. Mitra

Biology Department, College of Staten Island
2800 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, NY 10314
shaibal.mitra@csi.cuny.edu

Fall 2011 featured many early arrival dates for geese, a good inland Brant flight, and another strong showing of Ross's Goose across the state. A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck continued from summer in Region 1; a Pink-footed Goose was found in Region 9; a breeding-plumaged Yellow-billed Loon was found on Lake Ontario; and various holdovers from Tropical Storm *Irene* persisted, especially along the coast.

Swainson's Hawk is not only rare in New York, but the few that are found almost always move through quickly. For the second time in two years, however, a juvenile bird found roadside grasshoppers an irresistible attraction, this time in Hamlin, Monroe County. As in the case of the Greene County bird of 2009, observers worried about the bird's exposure to traffic; sadly, in this case, the bird was eventually struck and killed by a vehicle. We can take some consolation in the fact that it furnished a very valuable specimen for the collection at Cornell University.

It was an excellent season for Red Phalarope in all sorts of contexts, across the state. This species was found in Regions 1, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10, including a first county record for Orange, a second county record for Dutchess, and 262 on one pelagic trip off of Long Island. Jim Pawlicki, Andy Guthrie, and others did a great job finding an excellent variety of small gulls in the western part of the state, including good numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Sabine's Gulls, wayward Franklin's and Laughing Gulls, and the scarcer Black-headed along with the more regular Little Gull. Pomarine Jaeger is seldom documented anywhere in the state, so Jim Pawlicki's documentation of three in Region 1 this fall is especially noteworthy.

Common Nighthawks were nowhere numerous and notably low in Regions 1, 2, 4, 6 (missed), 7, and 10; numbers were only modestly better in Region 5, despite greater than usual effort. In contrast, a good Snowy Owl irruption was evident by season's end, with four in Region 6 and one on Long Island by late November.

Fall 2011 featured several kinds of evidence underscoring ongoing changes in our understanding of late season swallow migration. The increasingly late abundance of Northern Rough-winged Swallow in western NYS (e.g., 950 at Niagara Falls on 2 October, with birds persisting into late October in Regions 1, 2, and 3) is simply astonishing to long-time (and especially coastal) observers. On the other hand, no Cave Swallows were reported this fall anywhere in New York State, marking the species' first absence since 2000. Late Cliff Swallows recorded in Region 2 (22 October) and Region 10 (8 October) serve as

reminders that observers should keep open minds and pay close attention to all late season swallows.

The fall flights of Blackpoll Warbler were notably heavy and late. The Buffalo Ornithological Society's October count found 188 as late as 9 October. In adjacent Region 2, the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory (BBBO) banded a fall total of 760, vastly greater than last year's tally of 280 and the previous maximum of 383. There has been a trend evident in recent years toward later persistence of this long-distance migrant in the Northeast, but fall 2011's flight was still remarkably late across the state. It extended through late October in Region 1; 8 November in Region 2 (Regionally record-late); 10 November in Region 3; 14 November in Region 5 (Regionally record-late); 23 October in Region 8; and 18 November in Region 10, with three counts of 13-16 as late as 22-25 October.

Although irruptive finches were scarce most places throughout the season, a highly anomalous surge of Pine Siskins was recorded at BBBO on 5 October, with 311 banded in one day. For comparison, maximum counts in Regions 1 and 10 were 60 on 9 November and 11 on 31 October, respectively. Illustrative of how enigmatic irruptive movements can be, zero siskins were captured at BBBO after that 5 October peak!

Among passerine vagrants, trios of Say's Phoebe (Region 8 and two Region 10) and Northern Wheatear (two Region 8 and Region 10) were especially impressive. Yellow-headed Blackbird occurs more often than these two species, but a total of four this fall (Region 5 and three Region 10) was still impressive. Two Lark Sparrows inland in Regions 3 and 5 were excellent finds, and there seemed to be more than the usual number of Dickcissels across the state. Other outstanding rarities included a Le Conte's Sparrow in Region 9 and a Black-throated Gray Warbler in Region 10.

My choice for Bird of the Season is Blackpoll Warbler. Seldom does such a striking and surprising ornithological event as this fall's Blackpoll flight involve so many observers, each collecting valuable data in supposed isolation, only mutually to discover the intriguing scope of their collective work.

