

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – Spring 2012

Ken Feustel

41 Belton Road, Babylon NY 11702
feustel@optonline.net

The spring of 2012 was warmer than average, reflective of weather in the U.S. that saw the last twelve months ending in June as the warmest 12 consecutive months on record. In New York March was warm and dry, setting high temperature records throughout the State. April was cooler, only to be followed by above average temperatures again in May. Many regions reported the early departure of winter waterfowl, spring migrants arriving a few days to a few weeks earlier than average, and the abrupt decline in the number of migrants after mid-May. Following a poor season for winter finches, most Regions had few spring reports. Although some regions reported good spring flights of passerines, particularly in early May, there were few rarities compared to previous seasons.

WATERFOWL TO WADERS

Waterfowl migration this spring was lackluster over much of the State, as many waterfowl had departed in February. Two separate Ross's Geese in Region 5 were good finds, and a Barnacle Goose in Region 9 lingered for four days. Seven reports of Greater White-fronted Geese were received from four Regions. Eurasian Wigeon were widespread this spring, with reports received from Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 10. A female Hooded Merganser with five young in Region 9 was notable, although not entirely unexpected given its recent breeding expansion over much of the State. In Region 10 a female King Eider observed in Glen Cove on the north shore of Long Island was an unusual location, while single "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal were reported from Regions 3 and 10.

A flyby Pacific Loon in Region 5 would be a first Regional record pending approval by NYSARC, while two **Western Grebe's** observed in January and February in Region 3 continued into March. Regions 1, 2, and 3 hosted Eared Grebes this spring. A total of five American White Pelicans were found in Regions 1, 2, and 5. Inland waders included Little Blue Heron in Regions 1, 8, and 9, and Cattle Egret in Region 1. A Yellow-crowned Night Heron in Region 8 was the only inland report. Single Glossy Ibis were observed in Regions 1, 3, and 4. The appearance of White-faced Ibis in Region 10 in spring is now an annual event; this spring two different individuals were reported. A **Magnificent Frigatebird** at Montauk Pt. in Region 10 was associated with an April storm. Sandhill Cranes were widespread in Region 1, while below average in Region 5. A total of six Sandhill Cranes were reported from Region 9 and two were reported from Region 8.

RAPTORS

Black Vultures continued their expansion north, with a record high of 18 at the Braddock Bay hawkwatch in Region 2 and six at Derby Hill in Region 5. A tally of over 34,000 Broad-winged Hawks at Braddock Bay over three days in April was impressive, while the spring hawkwatch at Derby Hill was characterized as “.....one of the best since daily counts began in 1979”, with 18,000 raptors, mostly Broad-wings, counted from 1-4 May. Increased sightings of Mississippi Kite in New York State have delighted many birders, none more so than the pair in Region 9 at Sterling Forest that were observed constructing a nest, a possible first breeding record for Region 9 and Orange County. Additional sightings of Mississippi Kite included a total of four reports consisting of four individuals from Regions 2, 5, and 10. Swallow-tailed Kites were recorded in three Regions tallying four birds. Three Swainson’s Hawks were reported from Derby Hill in Region 5.

SHOREBIRDS, TERNS AND GULLS

Shorebird migration was a mixed bag this season, with the dry weather creating poor conditions in Regions that rely on ephemeral pools and puddles for attracting shorebirds. Other neighboring Regions with a more permanent water sources did better. Any godwit observed in spring in New York is unusual, so observations of Hudsonian Godwit in Region 3 and Marbled Godwit in Region 6 were notable. Single Red-necked Phalaropes were recorded in Regions 1 and 5 and a total of four Wilson’s Phalaropes in Region 10 was a good spring number. A Long-billed Dowitcher in Region 1 on 24 March was only a third spring record while a single Black-necked Stilt in Region 10 was a one-day wonder.

Due largely to the efforts of Shai Mitra, Arctic Terns again were observed this spring at Cupsogue County Park in Region 10, with a high of four on 27 May. Despite many overwintering species leaving early, a number of gulls tarried. Late Glaucous Gulls were in Region 3 (25 April), Region 1 (18 May) and Region 10 (22 May). A late Black-headed Gull in Region 3 on 26 April was unusual and 1,500 Bonaparte’s Gulls in Region 10 on 17 April was surprising given their scarcity in the region this past winter. Single Little Gulls lingered in Regions 6, 7 and 9.

DOVES TO WOODPECKERS

White-winged Dove has become almost annual somewhere in Region 10 in spring. This year the species was observed at Jones Beach State Park for the second consecutive year. Three Regional reports mentioned a lack of cuckoos this spring. In Region 10, the precipitous decline of Black-billed Cuckoo the last few years is such that some active field observers are now missing this species on their annual State list. A lack of tent caterpillars the last few years may be partially responsible for the species downstate decline. Following a good Snowy Owl winter, lingering Snowies included six in Region 1, two each in Regions 2

and 5 and one each in Regions 6, 7 and 10. A nesting Saw-whet Owl with four young was observed in Region 1. An owl monitoring program in Region 2 on the west side of Braddock Bay reported below average numbers of migrating Long-eared and Saw-whet Owls. Regions 1, 2 and 5 reported disappointing numbers of Common Nighthawks this spring. Red-headed Woodpecker made a good showing in Region 1, while a Three-toed Woodpecker in Region 5 was a nice discovery. Single Pileated Woodpeckers were reported from the Bronx and Staten Island in Region 10.

CORVIDS

Common Ravens were much in evidence this spring in the southern portion of the State; Region 10 reported “widespread” sightings, in addition to the Region 9 coordinator commenting “Common Ravens are now breeding in the entire Region”. Region 4 had a nesting pair just outside of the City of Cortland. Region 2 reported a first confirmed “modern era” nesting of Common Raven; the species had bred historically. Multiple sightings of Ravens around two power plants were noted in Region 1.

PASSERINES

Some Regions reported the passerine movement peaking in the first week of May. To use a phrase that is commonly associated with aging (sixty is the new fifty!), the last week in April is the new first week of May, at least in downstate Regions. Seventeen species of warblers were noted in Region 10 on 27 April. For birders conducting spring big days, setting a big day date for the second week of May now risks missing the bulk of migration. A coastal fallout of birds was noted on 22-23 April in Region 10 consisting of Blue Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings. Good movements of warblers were noted on 1-2 May in Regions 5, 9, and 10. A **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** was observed briefly in Region 10, while a single Sedge Wren in Region 8 was unusual. The Rufous Hummingbird that had wintered at the American Museum of Natural History was last seen on 13 March. Bohemian Waxwings loitered into spring in Regions 2, 5, 6, and 7, with an outstanding high of 2,400 at Stony Point in Region 6.

Single Connecticut Warblers, a rare spring migrant, were noted in Regions 1 and 3. Yellow-throated Warblers were widespread in Region 10, with a pair, including a singing male, noted on 28 April and again in early May at Connetquot River State Park. If confirmed, this would be a first Region 10 breeding record. Prothonotary Warblers were noted in most Regions, and Kentucky Warbler was well-represented downstate, with three reports of four individuals from Region 9, and approximately eleven to thirteen reports (accounting for possible repeat observations) from Region 10. The mild winter and spring allowed for a few unusual species to successfully overwinter. A Black-throated Blue Warbler in Region 10 that successfully wintered at a feeder lingered until 31 March. A Lark Sparrow at a feeder in Region 2 also stayed until March. A Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco was on Staten Island in Region 10.

Seven Regions reported Clay-colored Sparrow this spring, with Region 2 tallying ten reports of fifteen individuals.

Rusty Blackbirds were noted in numbers in five Regions this spring, certainly a bit of good news for this declining icterid. The high count was over 1,700 birds in Region 2. Regions 2, 3 and 4 reported single Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Perhaps the most unusual bird this spring, at least in terms of timing, would be the **Bullock's Oriole** in Region 7 that visited a Saranac Lake feeder on 13 April for one day. Poor numbers of winter finches, particularly downstate, led to fewer species lingering into spring. Additionally, numbers of Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting were generally low. As usual, some birds bucked the trend. One hundred fifty White-winged Crossbills in Region 1 on 15 May easily outnumbered the combined numbers reported from other Regions. Region 4 described Pine Siskin nesting as the best for central New York since 2004 as well as reporting small numbers of Red Crossbills with recently fledged juveniles. A Pine Grosbeak in Region 2 was the only spring report. The highlight of the finch reports was the **Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch** in Region 6. This individual, present from 4 March to 8 March at a feeder in Leyden, was a second New York State record, the first State observation being only a few months before.

BIRDERS, BIRDING RECORDS AND THE SUMMER OLYMPICS

As this report is being written the Summer Olympics are in progress. What does this have to do with birding, you say? The answer is records. Whether they are world records, Olympic records, State records, or new records, we use records to tell us about where our hobby, sport, or profession has been, and where it is going. We tend to pay particular attention to long-standing records, whether it be Joe DiMaggio's fifty-six game hitting streak in baseball, or the legendary first New York State record (and lower 48 record) of Broad-billed Sandpiper in 1998 at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Recently there was a newspaper article that discussed the increasing emphasis on the use of statistics in sports, and focused on a researcher who was busy looking at Olympic records, specifically swimming and track records. The researcher found that track records were broken infrequently, with some records being twenty or thirty years old. Swimming, on the other hand, often set new records (as anyone watching Olympic swimming events can attest). The researcher felt that because the ability to run was limited only by the need to buy running shoes (barefoot runners aside), the number of participants was large. The researcher described current track times as near the edge of human endurance. The cost of entry into swimming involves access to a pool, training facilities, and coaching, all of which limits the number of prospective swimmers. To put it in birding terms, if you were competing in the World Series of Birding your chances would be better drawing a team from a thousand birders than two hundred birders. Whether you agree or disagree with the researcher's conclusions, it is not hard to see that birding shares characteristics of both track and swimming. Young birders (teens and twenties for purposes of this discussion) have added an

astonishing number of new records recently while increasing the number of birders in the field. Speaking just of Region 10, my home base, young birders have added NYS records of Gray Kingbird, Grace's Warbler, Hermit Warbler, and "Yellow" Wagtail. Additionally, in large part due to the trend towards warmer weather, new arrival and departure records are being set annually for many species. Recently, birders doing big years in New York State have been exceeding the previous record high count, and it seems possible that last years NYS big year record will be toppled this year. If many birding records are so short-lived, do we value them less?

BIRD OF THE SEASON AWARD

Good birds observed this season included Western Grebe, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Magnificent Frigatebird, White-faced Ibis, White-winged Dove, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Bullock's Oriole, and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. My arbitrary criterion for the "Bird of The Season" award is a rare species seen by many observers. Clearly, the **Gray-crowned Rosy Finch** in Region 6, seen by many birders, is the runaway winner for the Spring 2012 BOTS award. This bird had the added bonus of temporarily concentrating birders in Region 6, improving the coverage. Whether it is called the "Patagonia Picnic Table Effect" or by some other name, increasing the number of birders in a geographic area often leads to new records.