

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2013

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Bird occurrence in New York State was illustrated extravagantly this spring by a staggering volume of information, and all indications are that this weighty bounty (and burden) will continue to grow rapidly in the near future. Birders have never had more resources, nor more distractions, than they have at present, and I'd like to focus this season's Highlights piece on the benefits and costs of the information age, for birders interested in status and distribution.

The massive scale of contemporary bird reporting and the ease of searching files and databases digitally make it simple to find things that once required considerable forethought and diligence to detect. Yellow-throated Warbler's invasion of NYS is easy to discern in the reports below, from the Niagara Frontier, Genesee Region, Finger Lakes, Oneida Lake Basin, and coastal New York, but this kind of thing has always been fairly easy to track because the species is still perceived as scarce—and therefore desirable—enough that all observations are recorded, vetted, and highlighted. Similarly, the Omega blocking pattern of early May 2013, in which the weather inhibited migration to a remarkable degree, would have been noted in any era. Less straightforward, however, are phenomena such as irruptive movements of common species that are present throughout the state year-round—species that are often utterly ignored by list-conscious birders. Esoteric topics such as the northbound return flights of Hairy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Black-capped Chickadees following their occasional fall irruptions catch the attention of curious birders from time to time, but such things historically have been difficult to track unless individual workers made special efforts to publish and promote their findings. Today, the efforts of people like Steve Kolbe, Luke Tiller, and Dave Tetlow to count and document interesting seasonal movements at sites such as Derby Hill (Oneida) and Braddock Bay (Genesee) are easier than ever to find, connect, and analyze, owing to resources such as eBird.

But the information age poses pitfalls, too. Although eBird can be uniquely useful in studying the commonest species, in practice one of its most popular features is as a customized listing aid, by which individual consumers can track and chase the particular birds that interest them. This not only results in gross non-independence of the quantitative database (a topic deserving of more attention than can be afforded here), it even seems to be altering (eroding?) many birders' conception of what is interesting. Confronted with an enormous volume of data, there is a temptation to dice it in the simplest possible way, attending to perceived listing needs. To me, it seems as though this habit has perverse effects on people's valuation of birds, which in turn has real effects on patterns of effort, and ultimately on the quality of data. We have probably always tended to overvalue certain mundane species that, for various basically uninteresting reasons, wind up being "needed" at particular times and places, while at the same time undervaluing others because we happen to have had some luck with them lately. But these twin delusions are undoubtedly much more prevalent in the information age, where google-gadget flash mobs routinely ignite around each new potential year-bird, and where beginning birders languish with vagrant fatigue, having already seen three or four Curlew Sandpipers, but "why can't anyone find me a Whimbrel that will stay where I can see it?" In reflecting on this spring's reports, I've chosen to discuss just

two sets of related records because they illustrate particularly well some of these diverse impacts of the information age on our understanding, and on our perception, of bird occurrence.

Consider Oregon Juncos at two Genesee feeders, a Yellow-headed Blackbird at an Oneida feeder, and a Western Tanager at a feeder in the Niagara Frontier, all during March (the blackbird was confirmed to the birding community during April but had been present at the feeder for several weeks prior). These western North American species are rare vagrants in NYS that presumably arrived in the East during fall 2012 and wintered either near where they were detected in spring, or somewhere to the south, but in eastern North America. Now consider an Indigo Bunting at a feeder in the Niagara Frontier on 30 March and a Painted Bunting at a Long Island feeder on 4 April. These birds might have arrived on site through a mechanism similar to that ascribed to the western vagrants: selection of an unusual wintering site (in this case north rather than east of what is usual); but for these there is also the possibility that they arrived via a trans-Gulf of Mexico slingshot event, as observed from time to time (in spring 2005, for example).

Is there an objective means of distinguishing which mechanism was more likely? eBird yields powerful insights here, because a slingshot event ought to leave tell-tale traces over a large area during the dates in question. In particular, one would expect to see a pattern of late March-early April arrivals in the Southeast, whereas the wintering north hypothesis would be supported by a pattern of January-February records of longer duration across the same area. For both questions, eBird maps provide a remarkably simple and powerful tool. In these particular instances, the eBird data don't seem to settle the question decisively, but at the very least there doesn't seem to have been a major slingshot event immediately preceding the buntings' appearances in NYS, and there seem to have been surprisingly many (to me, anyway) examples of northerly wintering by both species. On the balance, I would tend to favor the idea that these birds attempted to winter farther north than usual. Whatever the case may be for these particular birds, I think it is very instructive to consider the possibility that "late-lingering" is often akin to vagrancy, and that vagrancy is often akin to choice of an unusual wintering site. Five more examples of passerine vagrants this spring are at least plausibly consistent with the view that the birds in question wintered in the East, perhaps even close to where they were ultimately detected: a Varied Thrush in R10 from 7 March to 5 April; Audubon's and Black-throated Gray Warblers in Regions 3 and 5, respectively, in mid April; a Say's Phoebe in R10 on 27 April; and a Smith's Longspur in R9 on 28 Apr.

Another set of species that figured prominently this spring involves the Arctic-breeding geese, whose change in status in NYS in recent decades offers another instructive example of the interaction between perception and reality in the interpretation of bird records. Even twenty years ago, Greater White-fronted, Ross's, and Richardson's Geese were regarded as really rare; today they are almost taken for granted and have fallen from the purview of listers and vagrant sleuths to that of ornithological bean-counters, such as yours truly. Pink-footed Goose (R3, 5, & 9) has, in less than a decade, transformed from a "is it even in my field guide?" lifebird to a logistical challenge to the time and gasoline budgets of today's burgeoning masses of year-listers. In fact, this species' ascent has been so breathtakingly rapid as to eclipse the revolution in perceived status experienced by its Greenland-breeding cohort, Barnacle Goose. Whereas not a single record of the latter was accepted as naturally occurring between 1979 and 2005, it has yielded acceptable records, often in multiples, in every year since.

These shifts are largely attributable to biological reality: exploding breeding populations to the north and an increasingly suitable winter landscape here in NYS (both probably related to changes in climate) have yielded marked increases in occurrence; but these species' histories are also intertwined with our own intellectual history, and I find it

fascinating to tease apart the roles played by changes in taxonomy (affecting the perceived status of Richardson's), improvements in identification knowledge (affecting the perceived status of Ross's and Richardson's), and shifts in people's subjective attitudes toward certainty vs. probability (affecting the perceived status of Barnacle and Pink-footed). This spring's Regional Reports tell both the biological and the sociological stories quite compellingly, through the repeated notations of increasing abundance and earlier northbound passage of the common species, Snow and Canada Geese (thank you eBird!), and through the bold-faced entries for the chaseable objects of list lust named above. It really is extraordinary to contrast the matter of fact exposition of the Lower Hudson Valley's second Pink-footed Goose (which was actually regarded as an annoying inconvenience by some cynical Long Island year-listers) with the excitement, drama, and old-fashioned birding talent surrounding David Wheeler's discovery of Region 5's first record, and his companions' role in finding what was likely the same bird a week later in Region 3. This Pink-footed Goose, imbued with layers of biological and sociological meaning, is my choice for Bird of the Season.