

SPECIAL REPORT OF THE NEW YORK STATE AVIAN RECORDS COMMITTEE: ADDITION OF SIX NEW SPECIES TO THE NEW YORK CHECKLIST

Extraordinary times call for an extraordinary report. The following six additions to the Checklist of the Birds of New York State were reviewed and accepted under NYSARC's Accelerated Review Policy that prioritizes well documented sightings of species not previously recorded in the state. A total of 37 submissions were evaluated, seven from 2013 and 30 from 2014. All six records were accepted, and this brings the state list to 489 species. Full details of the sightings and criteria for acceptance are provided in the narratives below.

We are grateful to the 28 contributors who provided written reports, photographs, sketches and/or video recordings. The Committee also wishes to thank Jeremy Kirchman (New York State Museum, Albany, NY), Paul Sweet (American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY), Peter Pyle (Institute for Bird Populations, Point Reyes Station, CA), Shaibal Mitra (College of Staten Island, NY), and Michael O'Brien (Cape May, NJ) for information that was used during the review process or preparation of this report.

2014 REPORTS ACCEPTED

Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*)

2014-8-A/H One, Point Peninsula, Town of Lyme, Jefferson, 24-27 Apr (Kevin McGann, Derek H. Rogers, Kimberly Sucy, Arie Gilbert, Mark Magistro Jr., William Watson, Bernie Carr, Jeff Bolsinger; ph K. McGann, D. H. Rogers, K. Sucy, A. Gilbert, M. Magistro Jr., J. Bolsinger; field sketch B. Carr)

This was a most unexpected discovery, causing much excitement within the birding community. Eugene Nichols discovered the ptarmigan on the shore of Three Mile Bay, Jefferson, NY on 24 Apr and, after sharing an iPhone photo with Derek Rogers on Long Island, established the tentative identification. Eugene alerted local birders, including Jeff Bolsinger, and together they refound the bird the next day. It's estimated that upwards of 300 people visited between 25-27 Apr alone, a remarkable number for this remote location. The nearly all-white ptarmigan frequented the shoreline, where it was noted eating ice, but also spent time in nearby scrub and woodland, where it consumed buds mainly from willow trees. Based on the written descriptions and near point-blank photos, the identification as a male Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) in predominantly basic plumage (winter whites) was well established. The less-likely White-tailed Ptarmigan (*L. leucura*) can be readily ruled out by the presence of black outer tail feathers. Separation from Rock Ptarmigan (*L. muta*), a possibility that has wandered to southern Quebec, is more challenging, but a male would be

expected to show black feathering on the lores and behind the eye, along with a daintier bill.

The ptarmigan was not seen on 28 Apr but, as explained in Jeff Bolsinger's report, had simply moved on to private property, where it remained. Sadly, on 24 May the property owners Tom and Wendy Weaver found the ptarmigan dead. David Klauber, who had traveled up from Long Island to search for the bird, advised them to freeze the carcass, which was shipped by Jeff Bolsinger to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Analysis by Jeff Groth and Paul Sweet at the museum found it to be a male with moderately enlarged testes and beginning pre-alternate molt. Plant material was found in the stomach. The skull showed clear evidence of blunt force trauma, almost certainly the cause of death. The fat reserves were low but otherwise the bird seemed in good health. The skin is now in the AMNH collection (AMNH 840211), and the carcass and skull will be provided to the DEC.

A tundra and birch/willow scrub resident, Willow Ptarmigan has an extensive circumpolar distribution, which in North America extends from western Alaska to Labrador. They are especially abundant in northern Quebec, the most likely source for the NYS bird. Not considered a migratory species, there are relatively few records from the lower-48. That said, there is a clear precedent for occasional southward vagrancy, most notably by a series of occurrences from Maine (Apr 1892, May 1951, Dec 1954, May 1977, Apr 1988, May 1990, and May 2000), with late-spring dates consistent with the discovery of the NYS bird (Applegate 1996). Looking further back, Willow Ptarmigan were fairly regular south to Montreal, Quebec—only 160 miles northeast of Point Peninsula—into the 1800s, and there have been several irruptions extending to the St. Lawrence River in more recent times. Indeed, it has been argued that occurrences in southern Ontario also represent birds from the Quebec population following the St. Lawrence River valley and north shore of Lake Ontario (Pittaway and Iron 2011). Vermont added its own first record with a bird in northeastern Caledonia County in May 2015 (Vermont Bird Records Committee).

This 2014 sighting adds Willow Ptarmigan to the New York State Checklist. As an interesting addendum, there is reference in the literature to a Willow Ptarmigan killed on 22 May 1876 near Watson, Lewis County, NY that was given to local collector, Romeyn B. Hough (Coues 1878; Merriam 1881). According to John Bull (1974)—who listed the species as 'Hypothetical'—the identification was not confirmed by an independent source and, more to the point, the whereabouts of the specimen was no longer known. Bull also considered the date as 'suspiciously late' but in fact it matches several of the Maine specimen and sight records. Although separated by 139 years, Watson is only 44 miles from Three Mile Bay, and the 1876 bird was described as a male transitioning from basic to alternate plumage. The similarities between these two encounters seem difficult to ignore. In fact, these might not be the only instances of ptarmigan reaching the area because, as Hough later indicated in a letter to C.

Hart Merriam, local lumbermen had seen ‘white partridges’ which he presumed were also ptarmigan. A number of specimens originally belonging to Hough were incorporated into Elon Howard Eaton’s collection housed at the NY State Museum, Albany, NY. There is no mention of receiving a ptarmigan in Eaton’s inventory; however, a number of the Hough items were later listed as ‘damaged, discarded’ (per Jeremy Kirchman).

Fea's Petrel (*Pterodroma feae*)

2014-48-A/B One, at sea over the outer Hudson Canyon (39° 24’ 36’’ N, 72° 10’ 0.011’’ W), Pelagic, 12 Aug 2014 (Doug Gochfeld, Sean Sime; ph D. Gochfeld, S. Sime)

Just before 8 AM on 12 Aug 2014, an already successful overnight pelagic trip out of Freeport, Nassau, organized by See Life Paulagics, jumped to the next level when a *Pterodroma* petrel belonging to the feae-complex flew by the mostly-stunned observers. The encounter lasted about a minute, but dozens of photos were taken, some of them of excellent quality. Both the field observations and the photographs leave no doubt that this was a member of the feae-complex, but separation of the various taxa within the multi-species complex is notoriously difficult (Robb et al. 2008; Flood et al. 2013). Most authorities recognize the “feae-complex” as comprising three taxa, which the current American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) treats as two species: Fea’s Petrel (*P. feae*) and Zino’s Petrel (*P. madeira*). Fea’s Petrel is considered polytypic with two subspecies: nominate Cape Verde Petrel (*P. feae feae*) and Desertas Petrel (*P. feae deserta*). Some authorities consider each to be a full species, but this is not universally accepted. Only recently has the AOU accepted Fea’s and Zino’s as more than ‘hypothetical’ (see Hess 2008). Regardless, all of the feae-complex are rare in terms of the number of individuals, with some estimates pegging the combined world population at only 3,000 birds! More specifically, *P. f. feae*, breeding on multiple islands within the Cape Verde archipelago, is the most numerous, followed by *P. f. deserta* with 150-200 pairs, breeding only on Bugio in the Desertas Islands. Lastly, Zino’s Petrel (*P. madeira*) has a population of only ~65-85 pairs that nest on the volcanic summit of Madeira. Specific field identification of birds within the complex, especially away from breeding islands, is fraught with difficulty, as most of the differentiating characteristics are subtle and have some overlap across the three taxa.

Despite the large number of observers and photographers onboard that day, only two reports were provided to the Committee. Fortunately, these included a full suite of photographs showing the bird from various angles. Additionally, the reports provided helpful discussion of the identification, and most importantly, laid out the arguments for why the bird could be identified as a Fea’s rather than the very similar Zino’s Petrel. The chief differences between these two species are the overall structure, bill size and shape, and the amount of white showing

on the primary and secondary coverts of the underwing. The literature indicates that molt timing can also be useful, although this is less helpful for birds in August. The submitted photographs allowed for critical assessment of all of these features. Images showed a relatively long and heavy bill, with an obvious and reasonably steep notch between the nasal tube and the bulbous tip. As a stand-alone feature, the shape of the bill was contraindicative of Zino's. The underwing coverts showed some restricted white, but again this was outside the range for most Zino's Petrels but well within the normal range for Fea's Petrel (more so for those from Desertas, apparently). The color of the underwing coverts alone did not rule out Zino's, but was clearly supportive of Fea's. Likewise, the thick-bodied, long-winged appearance seemed very typical of Fea's, lacking the short, thick neck and comparatively small head appearance of Zino's. The Committee was unable to make any recommendation as to which population of Fea's this bird could be referred to. Although identification criteria are being developed, any differences are subtle, and the extent of individual variation is not well enough understood. With the photographs safely archived, this could be revisited in the future.

The Committee's deliberations were centered on the photographic evidence, supplemented by written descriptions, and ultimately the members voted to accept this as a Fea's Petrel, excluding Zino's Petrel. It is important to point out that in 2012 Anthony Collerton and charter skipper Max Kramer encountered a *Pterodroma* belonging to the feae-complex just a few miles southeast of Montauk Point, Suffolk Co. As is typical of these enigmatic seabirds, this earlier sighting also involved a very brief flyby, and thankfully a handful of photographs were secured. After extensive review, the earlier sighting was accepted as a Fea's/Zino's Petrel (NYSARC 2012-35-A), with the Committee concluding that the photographs that showed the bird already moving away were not sufficient to firmly distinguish between these two species. The 2014 sighting from the Hudson Canyon described here therefore replaces this dual species entry on the NYS Checklist without changing the total number of species.

Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*)

2014-62-A/N One, West Village, New York, New York, 23 Dec 2014-3 Jan 2015 (Zack Winestine, Joanne Pawlowski, Richard Guthrie, Angus Wilson, Jamie Koufnan, Thomas W. Burke, Doug Gochfeld, Shawn Billerman, Arie Gilbert; ph or video Z. Winestine, R. Guthrie, Phil Uruburu, Ardith Bondi, J. Koufnan, Cathy Weiner, Gail Benson, Lloyd Spitalnik, Pat Dubren, D. Gochfeld; audio Klemens Gasser)

Joanne Pawlowski glimpsed this kingbird several times near her lower Manhattan apartment in the two months leading up to the Christmas holidays and recognized it as something unusual. On 23 Dec 2014, her husband, Zack Winestine, managed to study it more closely and suspected it might be a Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*) based on likelihood. On Christmas Day

Winestine obtained photographs, which he shared with Gabriel Willow, who concluded that it was most likely either a Tropical (*T. melancholicus*) or Couch's (*T. couchii*) Kingbird. Winestine's impression of the bird's vocalizations seemed a better fit for Couch's. This prompted Willow to post the location details to a local listserve, and the news was further disseminated by Andrew Baksh. Many birders were onsite the next morning and soon refound the bird, which was extensively photographed. Vocalizations were also heard, confirming the identification as a Couch's Kingbird. Although the kingbird was seen at multiple locations, it favored a tiny green space (known locally as a 'vestpocket park', on account of being even smaller than a 'pocket' or 'micro' park), featuring several deciduous trees, ornamental shrubs, and a fountain. The kingbird also frequented surrounding apartment buildings, using balconies and fire escapes as perches from which to sally after flying insects.

Couch's Kingbird has been on the radar as a possible vagrant to New York for some time, although the reasoning for this prediction has not been clearly articulated. Compared to Tropical Kingbird, Couch's has a rather restricted range, namely the eastern slope of Mexico from the Texas border down to the Yucatan Peninsula, including Belize and Guatemala (Brush 1999). While some authors considered it to be essentially non-migratory, Howell describes it as partially migratory, retreating from the northern end of the range, especially Texas and higher elevations in Mexico, during the winter (Howell and Webb 1995). However, there are a scattering of extralimital records, including a few to New Mexico and northern Texas, as well as California, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida. Most relevant to the NY sighting, there are accepted records from Michigan (Tawas Point State Park, Iosco Co., 26-28 May 2007; Putnam 2010), Maryland (eBird 11-24 Nov 2014), Massachusetts (Plum Island, 7 Sep 2001; Rines 2002) and Nova Scotia (16 Oct 1997; Field Notes 52:23). There are also a few Tropical/Couch's extralimital records where the identification to species level remains uncertain. The exact date for when Pawlowski first noticed the kingbird is uncertain but was probably at the beginning of November and thus close to the discovery of the Maryland bird. Seen by hundreds of birders and local residents, the kingbird was last reported on 9 Jan 2015 after a series of very cold nights.

The kingbird was extensively photographed and a number of video recordings were made. These show the bright sulfur yellow underparts, white throat, greenish wash across the upper breast and greener back. The tail was brown and noticeably forked, unlike the tail of Western Kingbird, which is square-tipped and black with white outer edges. Although broad, the bill was not as long as would be expected for the very similar looking Tropical Kingbird, and the sharp call note was very different from the noisy drawn out twittering calls of Tropical. Careful study of feather wear indicates an adult, although there were competing opinions as to whether it was a male or female as judged by the shape of the primary tips. Even after review by Peter Pyle of specimens at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at UC Berkeley, this remains ambiguous.

Tropical Kingbird seems more prone to vagrancy than Couch's, occurring regularly up the west coast of North America as far as British Columbia and with a broad scattering of records across the Great Plains (MO, IL), the Great Lakes (PA, MI and ON), the Northeast (three times to MA, ME, and QC), the Atlantic coastal states (MD, DE, GA and NC) and even the oceanic island of Bermuda. In purely statistical terms, Tropical Kingbird is the more likely possibility but so far has not been found in NYS. For further discussion of Tropical/Couch's Kingbird vagrancy into North America, see Mlodinow 1998. Prior to the Manhattan bird, our closest brush with this species was the apparent Couch's x Scissor-tailed Flycatcher hybrid (NYSARC 2003-60-A), extensively photographed near Genesee in Livingston County in November 2003 (McGowan and Spahn 2004).

Kirtland's Warbler (*Setophaga kirtlandii*)

2014-19-A/F One, Hamlin Beach State Park, Hamlin, Monroe, 1 Jun 2015 (William Watson, Kimberly Sucy, Dominic Sherony, Glenn Miller, Patricia Martin, Andy Guthrie; ph K. Sucy, D. Sherony, G. Miller, A. Guthrie)

This singing male Kirtland's Warbler was amply documented with many photographs and several written descriptions. The original finder, Andy Guthrie, first noticed it's emphatic song as he pulled into the State Park ahead of a pre-arranged meeting with other birders. Aware of this species as a potential spring vagrant, he had deliberately familiarized himself with the song and recognized it almost immediately. Once he had visual confirmation and had captured a few photographs, Guthrie called other birders, including Jim Pawlicki, who promptly forwarded the news to the Genesee Birds listserve. These timely postings, additional phone calls, tweets, and repostings, brought numerous observers to the park within hours, and the warbler was followed off-and-on throughout the day. Unfortunately, most of the new migrants departed the area that night, including the Kirtland's Warbler, which was not seen again.

The Committee found no concerns about the identification, based on the many excellent photographs. The late spring date fits with the expectation for birds returning from their wintering grounds to the main stronghold in northern Michigan or satellite colonies, including those in Ontario, north of Lake Ontario. Interestingly, the Hamlin sighting was delayed compared to scattered sites in Ontario, where several migrants were discovered during a four-day window between 10 and 13 May (Burrell and Charlton 2016).

With a world population of no more than 5,000 individuals and with limited breeding and wintering ranges, Kirtland's Warbler is classified as 'Near-Threatened' (BirdLife International 2017). At its lowest point, a comprehensive census found only 432 singing males (Mayfield 1953), prompting an intensive program of conservation efforts led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that began in the late 1980s and continue to this day. These active measures include the creation of appropriate nesting habitat and control of the brood-parasite,

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). This has resulted in the steady growth of the core population nesting in extensive stands of jack pine re-growth forest in Michigan's Au Sable River drainage and in the establishment of new colonies elsewhere in Michigan, Wisconsin and Ontario. With increased numbers, the likelihood of birds being encountered on migration either traveling from or to the wintering grounds in the Bahamas should increase. The Hamlin bird was presumably one such example, deviating only slightly from a straight line path between Michigan and the Bahamian wintering grounds.

As noted in the 2010 Annual Report, there were a handful of historical reports of Kirtland's Warbler from western New York, spanning the years 1918 to 1943 (Taylor 1985), that for unknown reasons have disappeared from the more recent literature. Perhaps these reports faced skepticism in the absence of specimen evidence and increasing scarcity of the species. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, these old reports, along with the single-observer sighting on 18 May 2010 some 70 miles to the west of Hamlin along the lakeshore (NYSARC 2010-45-A), seem more credible. Regardless, the good news is that Kirtland's Warbler now takes a firm place on the Checklist of the Birds of New York State. If the population growth continues, there is a good chance that this beautiful warbler will become an annual visitor to NYS, and perhaps ultimately a breeding species.

2013 REPORTS ACCEPTED

Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)

2013-91-A One, Hamlin Beach State Park, Hamlin, **Monroe**, 14 Aug 2013
(Andy Guthrie; ph A. Guthrie)

Without supporting photographs, acceptance of this flyby seen by a single observer would have been problematic. The photographs show a smaller cormorant traveling with a flock of Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) and they document the difference in the relative length of the tail compared to the body, the more compact profile, slimmer and shorter neck and, most importantly, key details of the head, including the feathered area above the lores. Kudos to the observer, Andy Guthrie, for having his camera ready whilst lake watching and for managing to capture these essential shots.

Neotropic Cormorants are becoming more widespread in the southern states, including Arizona, Texas and Louisiana, and there is an emerging pattern of regular dispersal up the Mississippi Valley into the center of the continent. Neotropic Cormorants now breed regularly in Oklahoma and sometimes as far north as Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. There are now several records from Ontario associated with the Great Lakes (Crins 2006, Tozer and Milsom 2006). Ohio's first was recorded in Sandusky in April 2014 at the mouth of a river flowing into the western end of Lake Erie, and there have now been multiple sightings on the US and Canadian sides of the lake. Thus, the fact that this first

sighting comes from western NYS rather than coastal areas makes sense despite the very large numbers of cormorants that migrate up and down the Atlantic coast. That said, the first for New Jersey was found on a lake in Clinton, Hunterdon Co. in early April 2014 and stayed into the summer, likely returning the following year (Brown et al. 2015). Thus, Neotropic Cormorant could occur anywhere in the state. Since the Hamlin record, there have been additional sightings of Neotropic Cormorants in western NYS (Chautauqua and Erie Co., pending NYSARC review). It is likely there will be more, and observers are encouraged to pay close attention to cormorants, making every effort to photograph any birds that appear slightly smaller than Double-crested Cormorants.

Elegant Tern (*Thalasseus elegans*)

2013-55-A/F One first-summer/second-cycle, Cupsogue Beach County Park, **Suffolk**, 3, 7 July (Andy Guthrie, Brendan Fogarty; ph A. Guthrie, B. Fogarty); Tiana Beach Recreation Area, **Suffolk**, 4-6 July (Brett Glietsmann, Angus Wilson, Thomas W. Burke, Arie Gilbert; ph B. Glietsmann, A. Wilson, T. W. Burke, Gail Benson)

On 28 June 2013, Arie Gilbert posted a message to the NYSBirds listserv describing a medium-sized orange-billed tern that he and others observed the day before on the flats at Cupsogue Beach County Park. In his message he described an orange-billed tern with a bill that appeared “*long and orange*” and “*not quite right*” for a Royal Tern. Gilbert considered Elegant Tern as a possibility, but unfortunately the views did not allow for a positive identification. No further sightings of the mystery bird were made until the afternoon of 3 July when Andy Guthrie, Andrew Baksh, and Michael Scheibel, who had just finished observing a continuing Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) on the Cupsogue flats, photographed an orange-billed tern that they cautiously identified as a first-summer Elegant Tern. The next day, after unsuccessfully searching for the tern at Cupsogue, Brett Glietsmann photographed what was almost certainly the same individual approximately 11 miles further east at the Tiana Beach Recreation Area. He spread the word, and the tern was studied and photographed by many observers over the next two days, with the last reported sighting occurring back at Cupsogue on 7 Jul.

A total of six reports were received by the Committee, nearly all of which contained photographs illustrating the Elegant Tern’s smaller body size, thinner and slightly down-curved bright orange bill, longer crest, and extensive black mask, features that easily separated this Pacific coast species from the larger Royal Terns. The combination of these features also helped distinguish it from the pale-billed ‘Cayenne’ subspecies of Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis eurygnatha*), which has been previously documented on Long Island (NYSARC 2000-33-A/B), as well as the similar Mediterranean subspecies of Lesser Crested Tern (*T. bengalensis emigrata*), an old world taxon

many consider as a potential vagrant to the Atlantic coast of North America. The combination of darker secondaries and primary coverts, the presence of gray spots on the tail and the winter-like crown were consistent with 1st-summer plumage transitioning to 2nd winter. The fact that the inner primaries and outer secondaries were already replaced might suggest that molt had been suspended during early summer.

Elegant Tern is found primarily along the west coast of North, Central and South America. The core range is from Southern California through Baja California to Nayarit in Mexico. Some 90-99% of the world population nest on Isla Rasa in the Gulf of California, and they occasionally wander north to Oregon and even British Columbia. After the breeding season the species exhibits an odd migratory pattern, first moving north up along the coast of California (Jun-Sep) and then back southward, wandering south as far as central Chile. Vagrants have been recorded on several Pacific Islands and, more surprisingly, a remarkable slew of 20+ records come from Western Europe (France [several], Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland [several], Spain, Belgium, England, Germany, and Denmark) as well as the Canary Islands and South Africa.

Starting in the late 1990s, sightings of Elegant Terns along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts have steadily increased, especially in Florida, where the species has been documented hybridizing with ‘Cabot’s’ Sandwich Terns (*T. s. acufavidus*) (Paul et al. 2003, Shoch and Howell 2013). Mixed pairings are also known from California (Collins 1997) and from Baja Sur, Mexico (Velarde and Rojo 2012). There’s evidence that some hybrids are fertile, emphasizing the surprisingly close affinities of Elegant, Sandwich and Cabot’s Terns (Bridge et al. 2005). Sometimes F1 hybrids show limited black flecking in the bill, which was not evident on the NYS bird, and slightly reduced size compared to pure Elegant Terns, which would be very hard to assess in this context. Although the Committee found no evidence for a hybrid, these concerns underscore the importance of thorough documentation of any out-of-range sightings of orange-billed *Thalasseus* terns. Some of the European sightings have involved hybrids, and their identification has been quite controversial. However, at least three examples have been confirmed as Elegant Terns using molecular approaches (Dufour et al. 2016).

The Long Island Elegant Tern represents the first record for New York and follows closely on New Jersey’s first record that occurred within sight of NYS, a “subadult/non-breeding adult” present at Sandy Hook, Monmouth County from 2-22 Sep 2012 (Boyle et al. 2013).

Submitted on behalf of the New York State Avian Records Committee:

Angus Wilson (Past Chair), Gary Chapin (Secretary), Thomas W. Burke, Willie D’Anna (Chair), Doug Gochfeld, Andrew Guthrie, James Pawlicki, and Christopher L. Wood

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