

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2017

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Our rapidly changing climate produces numerous effects each season. Ironically, these can be so many and so varied that it is often difficult to summarize the trends. Was spring 2017 warm, average, or cold? At least we can say that April and May were very wet in many parts of New York State, April was much warmer than average, and May featured normal to slightly cool temperatures along with its heavy precipitation. In contrast, March was cooler than average across the state, with the temperature deficit ranging from one to four degrees, depending on the Region. With these deviations largely offsetting each other, the three-month season as a whole looks less remarkable (at least in terms of temperature), but perhaps the trend to look for here is not average temperature, but rather month-to-month volatility: even more remarkable than March's cooler than normal average was the contrast this posed against not only the warm April that followed but the very warm February that preceded it. Astonishment is obvious in the tones of the Regional editors as they note that March 2017 was not only distinctly cool in an absolute sense, but actually cooler than the preceding February.

The implications of these weather effects for bird life are similarly difficult to summarize. Nobody knows which weather variables are the best predictors of over-winter survival for half-hardy species testing the limits of their tolerance for cold. Summing heating degree-days over an entire season obscures inter-month variability; the season's absolute minimum temperature might be a better predictor of mortality for some species. Another potentially useful variable might be the duration of the season's longest sustained interval below freezing. But in reflecting on spring 2017 as a coda to winter 2016-17, it occurs to me that unusual cold and snow in March might have larger impacts on birds than even worse conditions earlier, if resources have been depleted by the birds that have survived thus far. A related question is the impact of unseasonal cold and snow on early spring migrants. In this regard, exceptional numbers of American Woodcocks were observed in duress and taken into rehabilitation in New York City following a mid-March snowstorm and subsequent hard freeze. Similarly, the large numbers of Woodcocks that arrived early in Region 6 following February's warmth vanished following the return of freezing conditions in March. Region 10's Suffolk County yielded two noteworthy examples of over-winter survival: two **Rufous Hummingbirds** through at least 2 April at feeders in Aquebogue, and a Northern Waterthrush through 7 April in natural swampy woodland in Babylon. The latter date was confidently distinguishable from an

early spring arrival because of prior, mid-winter observations at the same location.

Upstate editors describe conspicuous impacts of this spring's heavy precipitation. Lake Ontario's water level was very high, and Jeff Bolsinger was not surprised that Piping Plovers were not observed on territory at the site favored during the previous two years. Remarkably, though, **Piping Plover** was recorded in Regions 1 and 2—the former the first for Niagara County and, perhaps, tellingly, found in a flooded field (the species is almost never recorded in fields even where common on Long Island). Flooded fields were mentioned repeatedly in the reports from mainland New York State. Mike Morgante's Region 1 report details a particularly rich bounty of shorebirds in this context, and **Ruff** and **Red-necked Phalarope** were spectacular highlights of this spring's shorebird bounty in Region 8, where appropriate habitat is often scarce or lacking.

The timing of migration appeared generally earlier than average, with the earliest suite of species strongly influenced by February's warmth, and a broad suite of later species influenced by April's warmth. I was struck by the many references to slightly earlier than average arrival, as opposed to record-early dates. The latter were, as one would expect, much fewer. Jeff Bolsinger, in far-northern Region 6, has an excellent vantage for viewing the timing of migration (no waterthrushes overwintering there, yet), and he has a discerning, quantitative eye for such things. Beyond the overall earlier average date and multiple record-early dates, I particularly valued the contrast he highlighted between the **71** species arriving more than two days earlier than their respective long-term averages and the mere **2** species arriving more than two days later than average. With regard to the tempo of migration, it is of course well worth reading all the Regional reports closely, as well as referring to the arrival tables.

In terms of rarities, **Pink-footed Goose** made first-Regional appearances in Regions 2 and 8, and **Barnacle Goose** and **Tufted Duck** were recorded in Region 7. Region 5 featured both **Eared Grebe** and the continuing **Clark's Grebe**. **American White Pelicans** continue to increase as spring migrants, garnering attention in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. During a Fire Island seawatch on 6 May, a **Pacific Loon** was mightily eclipsed by a **Yellow-nosed Albatross**. A **Black-necked Stilt** in the Montezuma area near the border of Regions 2 and 3 was an outstanding rarity inland, but consistent with its increasing occurrence coastally, where several were recorded in Region 10. The **Smith's Longspur** photographed by Gale VerHague at Dunkirk Airport on 8 March was probably the rarest bird recorded this spring, apart from the continuing Clark's Grebe.

In terms of southern species north of usual haunts, Region 6 recorded its first documented **Summer Tanager**, Region 8 recorded **Chuck-will's-widow** for the second consecutive year, and Region 10 hosted a cooperative **Swainson's Warbler**. An **Audubon's Warbler** in Region 5 and a **Townsend's Solitaire** continuing from winter in Region 10 were also highly noteworthy.

George Chiu informed me of two very important records from Region 4, which lacks a spring report. A **Little Gull** on 6 April and a **Franklin's Gull** on 6 May were potential first records for Broome County.

To mark this point in history, when an ABA Code 4 species occurred in two upstate New York Regions in the same season, I choose **Pink-footed Goose** as Bird of the Season. I predict there will be further records in the future—but that its continental rarity code will probably be revised!



Yellow-nosed Albatross, Robert Moses SP, *Suffolk*, 6 May 2017. Video-grab copyright Taylor Sturm.



Pink-footed Goose, Kinderhook, *Columbia*, 8 Apr 2017, © Naomi Lloyd.