

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – SPRING 2018

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All Regions for which we received reports noted March colder than February, and most averaged cooler than normal. April was generally cooler than average, delaying migration and leafout, but then May featured a big reversal, with warmer than normal temperatures and a number of new record-highs.

One of the most spectacular bird occurrences I can recall in New York State occurred in Region 1 during mid-April, when the breakwaters and ice pack at Buffalo Harbor hosted an unprecedented concentration of 44 Snowy Owls! Interesting patterns observed this spring included further indications of two ongoing range expansions, albeit in opposite directions. Pileated Woodpeckers were confirmed nesting in the Staten Island Greenbelt, Richmond Co, an event described as the first such in New York City in almost two centuries. Chuck-will's-widows also continued to push their distributional limits, with a record on 19 May from the northern part of the Hudson River Valley Region, at West Mountain, Warren County, where the species has been heard for at least the last two years. Another occurrence that might (we hope!) be part of a trend involved the state's fourth **Kirtland's Warbler**, at Manhattan's Central Park, 11-13 May. This stunning bird was seen by many, many birders who had been unable to chase the inaccessible individual at Fort Drum and the one-day wonder at Hamlin Beach, both from June 2014.

Rarities were numerous and well distributed statewide this spring. An excellent candidate for **Dark-bellied Brant** (*Branta bernicla bernicla*) was closely studied and photographed at Coney Island Creek, Brooklyn, on 12 April. This Palearctic race has been recorded only a few times in North America, including New York State (23 Nov 1999). Its status in North America and its identification in relation to potential intergrades between Atlantic Brant (*hrota*) and Pacific Black Brant (*orientalis*)—as well as the enigmatic Gray-bellied Brant (*nigricans*)—are topics that remain works in progress, but which have important roots in the New York/New Jersey area and in this writer's own work (Buckley and Mitra 2002, *North American Birds* 56: 502-507; Buckley et al. 2004, *North American Birds* 58: 180-185).

A Swallow-tailed Kite at Derby Hill on 12 May was just the fourth record for Region 5; all of the prior ones were also from that perennially productive migration monitoring site. There were several notable inland occurrences of rare gulls this spring: a **Mew Gull** at Region 8's Collins Lake Park, Schenectady County on 15 April, a Little Gull at Hillcrest Pits, Broome County on 26 April (for the second year in a row), and several reports of Little Gull around Seneca

and Cayuga Lakes, possibly involving the same individual. A **Cave Swallow** 15-16 April at Salt Point, Tompkins County joined the very small set of spring records for northeastern North America. The possibility of a Caribbean origin should be considered here. Very rare in spring, a Connecticut Warbler at a Pulaski home on 19 May was very notable. Once fairly regular in Region 2, **Western Meadowlark** had not been recorded since 2008 until a male was found near Armitage Road, Seneca County on 14 April. Singing conspicuously, he remained there for many to see and hear through the end of the season.

Several of the foregoing are strong candidates for Bird of the Season. The BOTS award is based on multiple criteria, such as overall rarity, years elapsed since the last record, and the degree of opportunity for birders to enjoy the bird. Both the Kirtland's Warbler and the Western Meadowlark scored well in these respects, and indeed, both were described to me in conversation as long anticipated and deeply valued state birds by many people. Even so, the BOTS award must go to the **Wood Sandpiper** at Region 10's Timber Point Golf Course 16-17 April. Just the third record for the state and the first in spring, this bird stirred unusually intense emotions in a great many people—those involved in its discovery, those who were able to see it during its brief visit from late one evening to early the next morning, and, regrettably, in the many who narrowly missed it. It was a bird that will be remembered.