

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SUMMER 2018

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June brought close to average temperatures throughout most of the state, while July and August were generally 3-5 degrees warmer than normal. Rainfall reports were more varied, with June generally slightly drier than normal and July and August wetter overall, especially in the eastern Regions. In Regions 8 and 10, the summer was characterized as being oppressively humid, and featured a heat wave at the beginning of July. Several Regions mentioned that fluctuating water levels through the summer tended to not coincide with shorebird migration, with water levels being too deep by the normal August peak of migration. The high water levels were a benefit to waterfowl, gallinules and coots, and several Regions mentioned good numbers for those species.

To that point, a pair of Trumpeter Swans in Iroquois NWR raised six young- the first confirmed breeding record for the Region. High counts were reported from Region 3, where they are expected. Common Gallinules were mentioned in Regions 2, 3 and 4. In Region 2, the Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area produced a high count of 296—a mind boggling number to this Region 10 birder who scrambles to get a glimpse whenever one turns up on a local pond! Improved visibility due to damage to cattails by muskrat activity apparently helped make them more findable. The Region 3 portion of

Montezuma turned up a peak count of 250—hard to imagine. Region 4, where they are much more unexpected, also had confirmed breeding.

Other marsh breeders mentioned favorably include Least and American Bittern in Region 1, Least Bittern in Region 5 and Pied-billed Grebe in Region 2, with up to 42 counted at Montezuma NWR. Dabbling ducks were considered to have done poorly in Region 2, with mixed results in Region 3. Lingering non-breeding waterfowl included Brant in Region 2, Long-tailed Duck in Regions 1, 2 and 3, White-winged Scoter in Region 2, and a Snow Goose in Region 5, and the usual long list in Region 10. Horned and Red-necked Grebes also turned up in small numbers in Regions 2 and 3, and in Region 2, numbers for Common and Red-throated Loons were thought to have been a little above normal and a little early in their re-appearance in August.

Sandhill Cranes continued their dance across the state, with breeding mentioned for Regions 2, 4 and 7, and additional reports from Regions 1, 3, 9 and 10—remarkable considering that the first confirmed breeding for the state occurred as recently as 2003.

Caspian Terns returned to breed for a second confirmed record at Buffalo Harbor in Region 1, but peaked at a disappointing 100 in Region 2. But the sight of a Bald Eagle flushing 168 Black Terns from a marsh in the Van Dyne Spoor area in Region 2 must have been quite spectacular! A Least Tern on East Spit at Braddock Bay provided only the fourth record for Region 2. In Region 10, 26 individual Arctic Terns were documented, a very large number. Laughing and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were scattered through several of the non-coastal Regions, where they are notable, and a count of 22 Lesser Black-backs on the annual Captree June Count, in southwestern Suffolk County on 9 June, was also significant. An adult Glaucous Gull was found at East Spit in Region 2 on 23 July. Four days later another was reported at Wilson Tuscarora State Park in Region 1, a distance of less than 60 miles as the Burgomaster flies. On Long Island, a large Laughing Gull colony was located on a marsh island in Great South Bay, just the second major colony found in the Region, although increased numbers in recent years hinted at its existence.

Region 10 also turned up some good shearwater flights visible from the beaches, even into the eastern end of the Long Island Sound. In most years, birds like Bridled Tern, White-faced Storm-Petrel and South Polar Skua would be the highlights of the offshore pelagic season, but check the Region 10 report for a taste of what else lurks out there.

Shorebird numbers were erratic, reflective of rainfall and drought conditions in different Regions and months during the period. In Region 2, for example, numbers were described as low early in the season when late spring migrants are expected, but picking up considerably by late July with decent numbers of southbound birds. Throughout the eight non-tidal Regions of the state, 33 species of shorebirds were reported—surely a respectable total. The highlight for breeding shorebirds surely must be a pair of Piping Plovers with four chicks in Oswego County in Region 5. A juvenile found in Jefferson

County was wearing a band acquired in Oswego County—was that one of these four? Another shorebird in trouble, Upland Sandpiper, was found in seven Regions, but nothing encouraging was said about them in any case. At Fort Edward in Region 8, the maximum reported was just two birds.

American Avocets were recorded from three Regions, including 26 at Westfield in Region 1 and three fly-bys photographed in Region 5. A Marbled Godwit was photographed at Barcelona Harbor in Region 1, the only one reported away from tidal Regions of the state, as was a Ruff in Region 3 at Montezuma and a Western Sandpiper in Region 7. Willets were found in five non-tidal Regions, including one flock of 11 in Region 1 and they bred at Marshlands Conservancy in Region 9, where a Western Willet was identified in early August. A Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Region 3 at Montezuma was the only one reported away from the coast. A Red-necked Phalarope was a nice find at Crown Point in Region 7. A Long-billed Dowitcher photographed in Region 8 was a great Regional rarity.

Interesting waders away from the tidal zones included multiple Little Blue Herons in Region 8 and Region 9, Snowy Egrets scattered across several Regions, and Yellow-crowned Night Herons in Regions 3, 5 and 8. A Cattle Egret at Montezuma in Region 3 was the only one recorded upstate.

Merlins were reported or suspected of breeding in Regions 1, 2, 4 and 5, solidifying their hold in areas of the state where they were unknown as breeders just a couple of decades ago. Likewise, Black Vultures are now found almost across the entire state, with the comment from Region 1 that they now occur year round in the Lewiston area. Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons continue their well-documented expansion throughout the state, while American Kestrels and Northern Harriers continue to trend in the opposite direction, going unreported across large swaths of the state. A Golden Eagle on 22 August was noteworthy for time of the year, as were two Rough-legged Hawks going by the Braddock Bay Hawk watch on 13 June, all in Region 2.

Owl reports may be as much a function of effort as species' presence, but a Barn Owl in Steuben County in Region 3 was notable. Snowy Owls lingered into early June in Region 6 and to 1 July in Region 10. A Eurasian Collared Dove in Region 2 was the only report of this invasive, which surprisingly has spared New York State from its continent-wide expansions. A female Spruce Grouse with five chicks in Region 7 is exciting news for birders around the state who still have hopes of seeing this "grail" bird. Cuckoos of both species were reported widely, but only in Region 6 were numbers thought to be notable. A Chuck-will's-widow in Warren County, Region 8 lingered into early July. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were widely reported and mentioned as doing well in several Regions. Clinton County in Region 7 recorded its first nesting record for Red-bellied Woodpecker, a pair feeding young. Just two Black-backed Woodpeckers were reported state-wide, one each in Regions 5 and 7.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was reported from every Region and Olive-sided and Acadian nearly so. Three Canada Jays reported in Region 5 were the only

ones mentioned statewide. Two Fish Crows were detected in Watertown, Region 6, after an absence of several years. High counts for swallows were topped by an impressive 2425 at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 in early July. Following the pattern of few reports of boreal specialties, Boreal Chickadee was mentioned only once, that in Region 7. A maximum count of 23 Sedge Wrens at Fort Drum led an impressive Region 6 total of 33 birds. They also returned to Region 8 after a six year absence.

Cedar Waxwings were reported in good numbers, with a maximum of 305 at Hamlin Beach in Region 2. Red Crossbills were widely reported, but generally in small numbers. White-winged Crossbill was reported only from Region 7, and Evening Grosbeak from Region 7 and 8.

Grassland species seem to be doing well in protected grassland areas. Clay-colored Sparrows continue to establish themselves as part of the state's avifauna, with good numbers reported from Region 1 at four different locations, and a max of 24 at Fort Drum in Region 6. Overall, they were reported from six upstate Regions. Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows were likewise widely reported, and two different Henslow's Sparrows in Region 2 were surprising. Henslow's returned to the Shawangunk Grasslands in Region 9, this time a pair observed and suspected of breeding. Dickcissel apparently did not repeat from last year in the 'gunks, but was found in the Orange County Black Dirt region in July and August. Region 10's grassland birds—Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows, Horned Larks and E. Meadowlarks—continue to hang on in the relict patches of habitat left to them, and were reported only in small numbers. Back in Region 2, a Western Meadowlark delighted birders through the reporting period. The grasslands there also produced Bobolink counts of up to 100 birds, and this species was widely reported from upstate Regions.

Away from the grasslands, the picture for passerines was more mixed. Warblers were widely reported as migrants, and there were some encouraging comments when it came to breeding success, especially for those generally thought of as southern breeders. Prothonotaries were well represented in Region 5 and elsewhere, and seven Hooded Warblers was a good one day total in Region 4. 31 Cerulean Warblers was a good one day count at Howland Island in Region 4—this is, of course, a species of great concern here in New York and throughout its range. Another warbler in trouble, Golden-winged, generated quite a few comments, none of them good. In Region 6, they continue to lose ground to Blue-winged Warbler. Hybrids were reported from at least seven Regions. Yellow-throated Warbler returned to Region 10's Bayard Cutting Arboretum for an eighth year. A record early Connecticut Warbler was banded on 25 August in Region 2. Another at Sapsucker Woods in Region 3 was a rare find. Yellow-breasted Chats in Regions 3, 5 and 9 were unexpected rarities, with breeding suspected in Region 9. Hopefully early flights of Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finch and Myrtle Warblers in Region 10 were harbingers of a fall or winter finch flight rather than a reflection of a poor breeding season as reported further north in the state.

A Black-headed X Rose-breasted Grosbeak was photographed at a feeder in Steuben County, Region 3. In Region 1, a male Summer Tanager was photographed and represents the second summer record for the Region.

I encourage everyone to read through the Regional reports—there are so many gems of information buried within. For example, you may have a tough time finding cuckoos, but birders in Region 5 have found that this is not a problem for everyone. Check that Region’s report for details on a new method for censusing cuckoos and maybe Least Bitterns as well. Check Region 8 for a very detailed and very discouraging assessment of the breeding season at one Saratoga County location. Hopefully some of the poor numbers may reflect local or temporary conditions. Hummingbirds, for example, seem to have fared better elsewhere in the state than at this location.

And, especially for those of us who have been doing this for a while, I point you to the Region 2 report from Robert Spahn. Maybe I’m reading my own frustration into his words, but I was kind of entertained by his comments while trying to deal with the new sequence of species that the Regional editors have to adjust to. I can almost convince myself that a grouping titled “Rails to Tropicbirds” make sense, but then I scroll around to see “Loons to Parrots” and “Waterfowl to Hummingbirds”, and, Robert, I feel your pain.

Finally, while many of us may think that lounging on a sailboat in Long Lake on a late summer afternoon sounds idyllic, the fact that a Brown Booby actually did this while posing for photos and video surely makes this sulid a contender for Bird of the Season. Another contender comes from Region 9, the Anhinga which put in a couple of appearances, allowing a few lucky birders to see this fourth state record. Two outstanding pelagic species from Region 10 warrant consideration, but considering their “limited engagement” and the need for NYSARC review, I think the nod has to go to the Region 9 Roseate Spoonbill which, after remaining tantalizingly close to the New York, New Jersey state border, eventually made a few forays into the Orange County side of the Wallkill River NWR to scoop up the BOTS Award. With that one in the books, who knows what next summer might bring.