

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2018

Michael F. Cooper
mikec02@optonline.net

All across the state, it seems like almost everyone experienced a warmer than normal September and early October. Temperatures finally moved toward normal later in October and generally became downright chilly by November. The remnants of Hurricane Florence passed over central parts of the state in mid September, bringing as much as nine inches of rain to parts of Region 7. Precipitation was more of a mixed bag until November, when almost everyone received more rain or snow than is normal.

The erratic nature of the weather conditions throughout the state makes it difficult to find meaningful trends in the timing and quantities of birds moving through on fall migration. With warm temperatures extending well into the fall season, waterfowl were later to arrive on the scene, as was noted in Region 2, where waterfowl numbers were generally considered low and arrival times later than normal. The exception here is the Snow Goose, an Arctic-nesting goose, which seems to come in earlier each year. In this case, even though we know that overall Snow Goose numbers are exploding, the fall season data can make it seem as if they are in trouble. Over in Region 7, it was noted that while Snow Goose numbers typically reach 50,000 into December, this fall numbers were down to a few thousand by the end of November due to heavy snow cover. Through much of Region 5, the Snow Goose movement was “barely discernible” and in Region 6 “very few” were reported. Otherwise, waterfowl were generally characterized as being late in arriving and low in diversity and overall numbers and the cold November temperatures pushed waterfowl out of some Regions ahead of their normal departure dates.

The few highlights seemed to mostly come out of Region 2, with good counts of Ring-necked Ducks at Round Pond, Hooded Mergansers at Honeoye Lake, and Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Mergansers at Hamlin Beach. Waterfowl “rarities” were scattered through most of the state, with Eurasian Wigeon reported from six Regions, and Tufted Duck from three. Two Common Eiders in coastal Region 9 must be a reflection of big increases seen in Region 10. A Barnacle Goose in Region 10 is now to be expected, while a Pink-footed in Region 7 was just the third Regional record. A count of 81 Red-necked Grebes in Region 2 continues a trend of high fall counts there.

A Common Nighthawk Watch in Suffolk County in Region 10 had a peak count of 306 on 11 September. A Chuck-will’s Widow in Central Park made for a very rare fall observation. Yellow-billed Cuckoos were mentioned in several reports, both for good numbers (Region 1, ten reports) and for late dates (Region 5, 9 November and Region 8, 10 November). 540 Chimney Swifts at a school in Livingston County (Region 2) constitutes a high count, and a few lingered elsewhere in the Region through 2 November. Three in Region 1 on 12

November were likewise very late. Mild temperatures through October may have allowed these species and others to linger beyond their normal departure dates. A Rufous Hummingbird brought to rehabbers provided a third record for Region 5.

A Purple Gallinule lingered for several days in Brooklyn, Region 10, and a count of 500 Common Gallinules at Montezuma WMA in Region 2 was a great number. As noted in the summer reports, Sandhill Crane is now an established, widespread part of the state's avifauna, with records from eight of ten Regions and a max of 134 at the Savannah Mucklands in Region 3.

Shorebird diversity was generally considered to be good, but numbers were low. Jeff Bolsinger in Region 6 noted that "Shorebirds were surprisingly scarce given the seeming abundance of foraging habitat...". Low numbers were mentioned throughout—"counts were poor" (Region 2), "numbers were relatively low" (Region 3), "'grasspipers' were perhaps at an all-time low" and "numbers of other sandpipers were generally very low" (Region 10). Unlike the situation with Snow Geese, where we know the overall population is booming and occasional low numbers can be written off, shorebird numbers should be of genuine concern. Good finds away from the coast included scattered Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones and Red Phalaropes.

Virtually all the comments made about gulls mentioned disappointing numbers and diversity. Sabine's in Regions 1 and 4 were among the rarer species mentioned, the latter representing the first record in eBird for Broome County. A scattering of Little Gulls was found in several Regions, including four reports in Region 5. The other usual but uncommon species—Glaucous, Iceland and Lesser Black-backed—were also picked up in small numbers. As expected, the best mix came from Region 1, with Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabine's, Little, Franklin's and both white-winged species turning up. Robert Moses SP in Region 10 produced high counts of Lesser Black-backs, including a peak of 107 on 10 September, as local birders continue to key in on the timing and weather conditions that produce beach fallouts of this species.

Parasitic Jaegers were reported from a scattering of mostly expected locations, and in Region 10 there were three separate reports of Pomarine Jaeger on 25 September, the same stormy day that a Northern Fulmar was seen from the shore in Queens. Storm birding that day also turned up all four expected shearwater species.

Four reports of Pacific Loon from upstate locations seems remarkable, among them a bird found in Chaumont Bay (Region 6) by Nick Leone. This marks the seventh consecutive year that Nick has found one at that location! I'm very tempted to say that he has a knack for finding them, but I won't. At Hamlin Beach a good peak count of 1,977 Red-throated Loons was mentioned in contrast to a disappointing Common Loon peak of only 230.

Very rare, a Brown Booby at the Verrazano Narrows is discussed at length elsewhere in this issue (pp. 22-26). A Northern Gannet reported from Derby Hill

in Region 5 is a great bird away from the tidewater areas. Up to six were seen from Playland Park in Region 9 at the western end of the Long Island Sound.

Cattle Egrets, which at one time seemed poised to stampede across North America, have become quite scarce in recent years. This fall, however, reports were received from nine of ten Regions, perhaps a sign of a resurgence? Little Blue Herons were scattered through the upstate areas, with reports coming from Regions 2, 3, 8 and 9. Tricolored Heron has dropped off the radar over the past couple of years. The only report for the season was one late bird at Jamaica Bay on 15 November. A Least Bittern at Buck Pond in Region 2 on 21 November was a record late observation for the Region. An adult White Ibis at Tobay was a nice record for this less than annual rarity.

Probably the hawkwatch highlight of the season came from Franklin Mountain in Region 4 where 128 Golden Eagles were counted on 25 October, a one day record for eastern North America. See page 27 for a write-up of this remarkable event. Overall, the numbers of raptors recorded at that site was slightly above average. Broad-winged Hawks did well at hawk watches in Regions 4, 8 and 9, and over at Fire Island in Region 10 all species came in above their 20 year averages except Peregrine Falcon, which was slightly below. A Mississippi Kite on Staten Island was notable.

23 Northern Saw-whet Owls banded at Caroline in Region 3 on 30 October set a new Regional record, while over in Region 8 on the same night the season's high count of 12 Saw-whets was captured at the Albany Pine Bush Preserve. Hamlin College in Region 5 had their peak count of 28 birds on 26 October. See that Regional report for an interesting breakdown of sex and age data for these owls and also for a discussion of owls and hawks injured or killed by traps set out for fur-bearing mammals.

A Black-backed Woodpecker at Ferd's Bog in Region 7 was the only one reported for the state this season. Three Pileated Woodpeckers on Staten Island may represent a movement of this species into Region 10, where it has historically been very rare. Red-bellied Woodpeckers continue their expansion, with a record 288 tallied in Region 1.

A Western Kingbird in Concord provided a tenth record for Region 1. Two November empid flycatchers in Region 2 are intriguing, but could not be identified to species. Olive-sided and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers received positive mentions in a couple of Regions. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Region 8 became quite a celebrity by sticking around for at least 10 days, during which time it was seen by many birders and non-birders alike. Also excellent was a third Regional record for Say's Phoebe in Region 2. Region 10 racked up some great flycatcher records as well, with a handful of Western Kingbirds, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers at Montauk (possibly two separate birds) and one at Point Lookout, an Ash-throated Flycatcher at Heckscher SP and, best of all, a Gray Kingbird at Jones Beach. This last, unfortunately, turned out to be a one-hour wonder, much to the frustration of a horde of birders who rushed to the scene.

Elsewhere in Region 10, a Northern Wheatear entertained a m.ob. of birders at Heckscher SP, while a Varied Thrush was brought to rehabbers after striking a window in Manhattan. A Bohemian Waxwing on the north shore of Suffolk County was a great find.

The extended warm period seems to have had its effect on a wide range of passerines, with many reports of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, thrushes, sparrows, etc. lingering well beyond their normal departure dates. Just as a sample, in Region 1, Red-eyed Vireos and Baltimore Orioles lingered into November, a Hooded Warbler was photographed 17 and 18 November, and a Yellow Warbler stayed around until 18 November. In Region 2, a Warbling Vireo was quite late 24 October, but while there was a nice sampling of late-lingering birds, overall numbers were thought to be down. In Region 3, November warblers included Northern Parula and Blackpoll, and in Region 5, a Blackpoll was found on 15 November, a record late date. Also in Region 5, a House Wren found on 9 November was reportedly only the fourth Nov/Dec upstate record for the species. In Region 6, late lingering songbirds included Nashville and Hooded Warbler. 39 Philadelphia Vireos for Region 6 was twice the previous seasonal high count. Still in Region 6, Orange-crowned Warblers not only stayed beyond their normal departure times, but also passed through in much larger numbers than is normal. 28 reports was said to be more than double the normal tally. Orange-crowned numbers were also up in Regions 5 and 9. In Region 10, many warbler species lingered beyond their normal departure dates, including 11 species still present in November. An Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler was photographed in Region 5.

The widely anticipated winter finch flight sort of materialized with Pine Siskin occurring in decent numbers over large parts of the state. There were widespread reports of Evening Grosbeak, with a high count of 68 coming from Summerhill in Region 3. Elsewhere they were present in low numbers, but that's still enough to send birders scrambling for a glimpse after many years of near absence. Red Crossbills and Common Redpolls were found in many areas, but almost always in small scattered groups. Pine Grosbeaks were found in generally low numbers in Regions 1, 2 and 6. Purple Finches staged a major irruption in Region 10, with a peak count of 2,216 on 30 October at Robert Moses SP. Dickcissels were found in at least five Regions, with six reports from Region 9. Rare sparrows included a Nelson's in Region 2 and another at Fort Drum in Region 6, a LeConte's in Region 8 and a Harris's in Central Park, Region 10.

I think it's safe to say that for many birders, fall migration brings the excitement of numbers swelled by the season's hatchlings and the promise of unexpected rarities waiting to be discovered. In searching for a Bird of the Season, I'm struck by the fact that we're a little lean on true rarities this season. Probably the best birds were either one-time sightings, like the LeConte's Sparrow in Region 8, or, like the Gray Kingbird in Region 10, disappeared before they could be admired by more than a handful of lucky observers. I kind

of like the idea of a bird like the Region 8 Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, a bird that had the decency to stick around for more than 10 days—and this being a species notorious for being a one-day wonder. So, this Scissor-tail is my BOTS. Please read Larry Alden’s account in Region 8 about how he was lucky to get a second shot at this bird, and then how it showed well for birder and non-birder alike. Larry talks about this “teachable moment”, and I think that really elevates the value of this bird. Also, I hope this Scissor-tail can teach proper bird etiquette to any Gray Kingbird it may meet in the future. Thank you and good birding!

=====