

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2020

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The warm winter experienced in January and February continued into March with average temperatures 5° to 7° F above normal. April also started out above normal but a cold spell after the first week lasted for four weeks. Average April temperatures were -1° to -4° throughout the state except in Region 10 where temperatures were more moderate and averaged 2.7° above normal. This cold trend continued through the first half of May; temperatures were below normal but warmer conditions prevailed for the latter half of the month. Monthly averages for May were generally below average from -1° to -2°. Throughout the state, precipitation was slightly below average overall with plus-or-minus variations in the ten Regions.

The warmer than usual winter that extended into early spring kept water open on inland lakes and reduced ice levels on the Great Lakes, resulting in more overwintering waterfowl, especially in the eastern part of the state and the Finger Lakes region. The colder than normal temperatures in later April and early May delayed the peak migration of Neotropical migrants. Nevertheless, actual first arrival dates for many species were earlier than their long-term average.

The spring season was overshadowed by the novel coronavirus, Covid-19, which first appeared in the western United States in late January but was not recognized as a serious threat until late February. In March this pandemic hit the eastern US; by the end of March, there were over 80,000 cases in New York State. This disease lingered throughout the spring and is still not under control as of this writing in September. Covid-19 had a significant effect on birders. The public was implored to stay home to fight the spread. Field trips were cancelled throughout the state, international birding tours were put on hold, birding club meetings were cancelled, and banding stations had to scale back their schedules and programs. With the beginning of voluntary isolation in March, it is likely that fewer birders were in the field. However, later in spring, outdoor activities without crowds were considered a safe recreational option. Since birding falls into this category, the disease did not impact field visits by small groups. In fact, local birding increased. The timing of this coincided with the beginning of the 2020 Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) program. The BBA was another incentive to go exploring for birds. Region 5 reported that there was a significant increase in the number of birders submitting checklists to eBird through the spring quarter. It is likely that this trend was seen throughout the state.

Waterfowl migration was long underway by March. The Regional reports indicated that waterfowl counts were typical. From across the state, at least 54 Trumpeter Swans were reported, with highest counts in Regions 2 and 5. Barnacle Goose was reported from Region 10, Ross's Geese were found in five Regions, and Cackling Geese were reported from seven Regions with a maximum of 18 at

a single location in Region 1. Greater White-fronted Geese were well represented in eight Regions. Among the rarer ducks, three Regions reported Tufted Duck and a probable Tufted/scaup hybrid from Region 1. A single Eurasian Green-winged Teal was in Region 1 and Harlequin Ducks were in three Regions. Like some of the uncommon geese, Eurasian Wigeon and Barrow's Goldeneye are uncommon but annual in the state and were generally well distributed. Two Western Grebes were found in the western part of the state: one on Seneca Lake, Region 3, and the other off Lake Ontario in Region 1. All Regions reported Whip-poor-will and there were only two occurrences reported for Chuck-wills-widow, one each in Regions 9 and 10. Reports for Common Nighthawks were very scarce throughout the state except for Regions 8 and 9: a maximum of 33 seen at Stuyvesant and 60 counted at Wallkill River NWR.

A Black Rail was heard calling in Region 9 by Ari Rice on 24 May and the calls were confirmed by a few birders. This rare species is the first record for Orange County, and one of very few records for the state in recent decades. Eight Regions reported normal shorebird migration; the exceptions were in Region 9, and also in Region 2 due to lack of habitat. American Avocets made an appearance in late April to early May in Regions 1, 3, and 6. Piping Plover returned to Sandy Point, Region 5, hopefully to breed again, and a migrant was at Braddock Bay on 18 May. Upland Sandpiper continues to hang on with only four or so likely breeding sites identified this season by the end of May. Higher numbers of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were reported from Regions 1 and 2 but seen in most Regions. Most of these were gone by April but a late lingering Glaucous Gull appeared to spend the entire summer at Braddock Bay. There was a total of 16 reports for Little Gulls, all from the Regions bordering Lake Ontario or the central Finger Lakes. Two Black-headed Gulls were found in Region 10, an immature at Timber Point and an adult at a nearby pond a week later; another was seen several times in Region 7, first discovered at Willsboro Point. Black-legged Kittiwake was visible from shore at Robert Moses State Park, Suffolk County. Other species seen from the Long Island shore include Thick-billed Murre from Montauk Point on 3 March and a Razorbill from Canarsie Pier on 2 March. A Gull-billed Tern at Robert Moses State Park in western Suffolk County was notable, as this species is rarely seen even short distances east of its regular breeding areas in Queens and Nassau Counties. Another, found far inland at Iroquois NWR, was completely unexpected; this mega rarity was a first record for Region 1 and may well be the first upstate record. It was present for two days. There were four spring reports of Arctic Tern from Long Island. In addition to several late May reports from Long Island, where not unusual, a Parasitic Jaeger was spotted from Fair Haven, Region 5 in mid-April, and a Pomarine Jaeger was resting on Nickerson Beach, Nassau County, at the end of May in Region 10.

A Pacific Loon was seen on 1 March in Suffolk County. White-faced Ibis were present at each end of the state: one in Region 1 on the Niagara River and two or possibly a third in Suffolk County, Region 10. Snowy Egrets were found in four upstate Regions and Little Blue Heron was in Region 5 at Hamlin Marsh

on 3 May. Derby Hill Hawkwatch totaled 82,684 raptors and Braddock Bay's spring count was 51,658. Northern Goshawks are becoming extremely uncommon. The total number for each of these two hawkwatch sites was only four. Rough-legged Hawk numbers were also low, perhaps reflecting early departure. Single Swainson's Hawks were seen at Hamburg on 15 April and Derby Hill on 1 May. A Mississippi Kite was a flyover at Central Park, New York City on 31 May. Black Vultures continue to increase across the state; they were seen in every Region. A Crested Caracara flyover in Kingston, Region 9, was unusual. It was not a flight year for either Northern Saw-whet or Snowy Owls. This spring, there were only 10 reported Snowy Owls based on totaling the maximum seen in each Region.

There were many reports of uncommon passerines and readers should scan the Regional reports. A Western Kingbird at Braddock Bay, Region 2, and a Say's Phoebe at Crown Point, Region 7, highlighted the flycatchers. Olive-sided Flycatchers were noted in all Regions except for Region 10, but eBird reveals a good number of reports from that Region as well. Among thrushes, there were reports of Bicknell's Thrush in Regions 5, 7, 8 and 10 and Townsend's Solitaire from Jefferson, Region 6, and Suffolk County, Region 10. The only Varied Thrush was in Region 10. A Harris's Sparrow visited a feeder location in Lockport, Region 1, and another was in Albany County, Region 8. A high count of 19 Grasshopper Sparrows was reported from Fresh Kills Park, Region 10, one of very few breeding sites left in the Region. There were only a handful of reports for Henslow's Sparrow, all from Chaumont Barrens Preserve in Region 6. Researchers apparently found them at Perch River as well, but no further information was obtained. Though there is some uncertainty about the size of the population and the number of occupied sites in the Region, their status as breeders here is certainly precarious, with loss of habitat contributing to a continuing decline. Lark Sparrow reports came from Regions 5 and 10. Golden-crowned Sparrow was, perhaps, the most unusual sparrow; one was reported from West Winfield in Region 5.

Among warblers, a Kentucky Warbler was banded at Braddock Bay Bird Observatory on 24 May; this species was reported from all counties in Region 10 except one, Nassau County. Reports for Connecticut Warbler came from the area bordering Lake Ontario, Regions 1, 2, and 5. Prothonotary Warblers returned to their known nesting location in western New York and sightings also came from four other Regions. Swainson's Warbler was seen at Muttontown Preserve, Nassau County. Among the more uncommon warblers, there were multiple reports of Yellow-throated Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chats. Although uncommon, Summer Tanagers were found in most Regions this spring and were in every county in Region 10. However, a Western Tanager was a fourth Regional record at Point Gratiot, Region 1. Blue Grosbeak was photographed at Seneca Landfill, Region 3, far from their new breeding sites in southeastern New York State. A Painted Bunting persisted from winter in Brooklyn at Plumb Beach and a female was at a feeder in Marcellus, Region 5,

14-16 May. Among grassland species, Dickcissels were recorded in five Regions. Sedge Wrens showed up in six Regions, all in the western half of the state except one in Region 10, where they are quite rare. Four of these reports showed early arrival, between 30 April and 3 May.

Spring migration is always an exciting time. This year's spring will always be remembered for the Covid-19 pandemic and how it affected us and our birding. As birders got out more, unusual species were definitely being found. Many noteworthy sightings included: Gull-billed Tern in Region 1, Western Kingbird and Piping Plover in Region 2, Blue Grosbeak in Region 3, Snowy Egret in Region 4, Golden-crowned Sparrow and Painted Bunting in Region 5, Townsend's Solitaire in Region 6, Tufted Duck and Black-headed Gull in Region 7, Harris's Sparrow and Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 8, Crested Caracara and Black Rail in Region 9, and many species in Region 10—but the Swainson's Warbler here is definitely special.

Given that there have been only five state records of Golden-crowned Sparrow accepted by NYSARC thus far, I select this as the bird of the season.

Much of the data in the Regional reports is sourced from eBird: eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relMay-2020. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. May 2020.