

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SUMMER 2020

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The Kingbird Regions shared remarkably consistent weather through the Summer of 2020, with June bringing slightly above average temperatures and below average rainfall, while July and August were hotter and wetter than usual. July, in particular, produced widespread record heat and two tropical storms touched parts of the state in late summer.

Snow Geese and Brant lingered into June in several upstate Regions; a Brant in July in Region 5 was decidedly rare. Even more surprising was a Barnacle Goose photographed at Three Rivers WMA, also in Region 5. Not surprisingly this provided a first summer record for the Region. Trumpeter Swans were reported from four Regions as they continue to colonize the state. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were recorded from three Regions—anyone want to take bets on this bird's breeding status for the 2040 Atlas project?

Most of the expected puddle ducks were represented by widespread reports, with good numbers of Wood Duck in many areas. 600 Green-winged Teal was a noteworthy tally in Region 3. Ring-necked Ducks, found in eight Regions, were confirmed nesting in Regions 6 and 7. Common Goldeneye was confirmed in Region 6 on the St. Lawrence River, and was suspected to have bred in Region 5.

Pied-billed Grebes seemed to be well represented, with reports coming from eight Regions, although high counts in the 50s at Northern Montezuma WMA in Region 2 were considered to be low. A Eurasian Collared-Dove in Rome in Region 5 was well photographed and had been present for some time. Another, reported from Kings County, was considered plausible but without photos could not be accepted as a first county record. This bird is extremely rare on Long Island with only one other record in eBird. Both species of cuckoos seemed to be present in good numbers and nicely spread around. 235 reports of Yellow-billed in Region 4, and 80 reports of Black-billed in Region 6 seem to point towards healthy populations. Northbound Common Nighthawks were widely reported into June, with apparent early returnees by mid to late July. Only Region 6 reported breeding populations, with up to a dozen birds on territory at Fort Drum. Whip-poor-wills were reported from seven Regions, generally in very low numbers. A Chuck-will's Widow found in Greene County in Region 8 is a great find away from Long Island—even there it is uncommon and very local. Bobwhite reports continue to pop up from a few sites on Long Island, but it's hard to say whether any of these represent established populations or just temporary releases of fox food.

Black Rail is a huge rarity anywhere in the state these days, and to have one on location for an extended period in Region 9 away from tide water locations is just phenomenal. Sora and Virginia Rail reports came from eight Regions—a good showing probably resulting from dedicated Atlas birding. Common Gallinules were reported from nine Regions—again a good, widespread showing.

Two Purple Gallinules put in appearances in Region 10. Sandhill Cranes were widely spread around the state, albeit not in great numbers, and there were only a couple of breeding confirmations.

Midsummer records of American Avocet appear to be on the rise, and a max of 18 in Ripley in Region 1 is a great count. Otherwise, shorebird numbers seemed to be a mixed bag, with a decent variety reported from Regions 2 and 6, but few rarities. Whimbrels were reported from seven Regions, with a flock of 11 on the Cohoes Flats representing the fourth record for Region 8. Regions 1 and 2 reported numbers in the 20s, also some impressive counts. Piping Plovers nested again at Sandy Pond in Region 5, apparently the only breeding location in the state away from Region 10. Nine Regions reported Upland Sandpiper. This would seem to be a decent showing for a bird that is really just hanging on in most of its former range, although most comments did refer to its overall scarcity.

A scattering of both godwits spiced things up in several Regions. One along the St. Lawrence River in Region 6 was a treat for local birders, and that Region also turned up multiple Baird's Sandpipers and *hendersoni* Short-billed Dowitchers. A Western Sandpiper at Marshlands Conservancy in Region 9 provided the only record away from Region 10, where a total of eight found at Moriches Inlet was a large number and unusual in that they were all adults. Generally speaking, though, shorebird numbers in Region 10 continue to drop off precipitously.

A Long-tailed Jaeger at Derby Hill (Region 5) was a great find. There were some pretty high-quality gull and tern reports this summer, including an early juvenile Black-legged Kittiwake and a Little Gull at Buffalo on 27 August, a day of storms and high wind. A few days later, a juvenile Sabine's was found off Hamlin Beach in Region 2. A Glaucous Gull summered on Lake Ontario, and Franklin's and Laughing Gulls were scattered across several Regions. Tropical Storm *Isaias* carried Least, Black and Sooty Terns up the Hudson River, and at least eight of the latter were reported from the River in Region 10. Individual Sooties made it all the way up to Regions 8 and 9. Their widespread fallout along the ocean beaches was more expected after storms of this nature. A Royal Tern at Piermont Pier in Region 9 was a nice rarity and lingered for several days. An immature Arctic Tern photographed at Onondaga Lake in Region 5 provided only the second Regional record for this difficult rarity.

Some may say that New York State is becoming a hotbed of booby activity—after several records in recent years, this summer several Brown Boobies were found, one in Region 7 and another in Region 9 and three separate reports from different locations in Region 10. The Region 7 bird was the second there in two years. Six Regions reported American White Pelican, while Brown Pelicans in Regions 1 and 6 are even more surprising. Both of those late August records were probably the result of stormy weather around the end of the month.

It's not surprising that storm birding was very productive in Region 10. Good birds along the beaches of Long Island included a South Polar Skua on 10 July at Robert Moses SP, a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel in Fire Island Inlet 4 August, and

a high count of Great Shearwaters from Riis Park 10 July, near the extreme west end of Long Island. More surprising, though, was that some of these same species were found along the Hudson River, away from the immediate coastline. South Polar Skua on 4 August and Great Shearwater on 11 July seen from Riverside Park in Manhattan are exceptional records. See the Region 10 report for a more complete account of the effects of both tropical storms.

Both bitterns seemed to be well represented, with eight Regions reporting each of them, and breeding confirmed for both in Region 6. Glossy Ibis was reported from Regions 8 and 9, where scarce, while to the west, Regions 1 and 2 left their *Plegadis* ibises as unidentified to species. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were unsuccessful breeders in Region 9 for the second year in a row. See the article in this issue for an inside look at their interesting behaviors.

Continuing the recent trend, Black Vultures were widely reported. Mississippi Kites were reported from Regions 1, 9, and 10, while in Region 2, two cooperative Swallow-tailed Kites were even more surprising. A volunteer mid-summer hawk watch at Braddock Bay in Region 2 produced some really nice counts, including a one-day count of 613 Red-tailed Hawks on 11 August! Does fall migration start earlier than a lot of us thought, or are there other explanations for such significant movements in July and August? At Braddock Bay and elsewhere throughout the state, Bald Eagles numbers seem to be soaring. Breeding was confirmed in 10 Atlas books in Region 6 alone. A Golden Eagle in Clinton County, Region 7 was the only report for the state, and highly unusual for summer. David Wheeler in Region 5 describes an interesting and unexpected hazard for city-dwelling Peregrine Falcons. Fortunately, this story seems to have a happy resolution.

Black-backed Woodpeckers were reported from all three Regions where they might reasonably be expected, a great result probably reflective of enthusiastic atlasers as opposed to any real improvement in their status. While we're in the boreal forests, it should be mentioned that Spruce Grouse was represented from Region 7 only, with reports including a female with two young. Elsewhere in the Adirondack section of our birding baedeker, Canada Jays were found in Regions 6 and 7, but seem to be extremely limited in distribution, while Boreal Chickadees were not found at all in Region 6, even in areas where they were known recently to breed.

Sedge Wrens were detected in seven Regions, with at least three singing males at Great Kills in Region 10, where they would be especially unexpected as breeders. Although generally considered to be declining, that seems to be a decent showing. Several Regions mentioned good numbers of the expected passerines—maybe an artifact of increased scrutiny while atlasers? Observers in Region 6 felt that passerines were nesting later than they normally do. “Winter” finches were generally found in low numbers, except for scattered good counts of Purple Finch. Some passerine highlights included Yellow-throated Warbler and Dickcissel in Region 2, Nelson’s Sparrow and “Lawrence’s” Warbler in Region 3 and an adult male Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 5. Two Yellow-headed Blackbirds in

Region 10 during June seemed out of season, but there are a number of prior records during June and July, a known vagrant window. A Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 5 was the first summer record for that species. An unidentified “yellow-bellied” kingbird in Region 1 sounds intriguing. On the negative side, no Golden-winged Warblers were recorded from Region 1, and only two Regions recorded more than single birds. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Region 10 is a stand-out rarity, but, typically, did not linger. In any other year, the Western Tanager visiting a feeder in Region 6 might have been a popular stakeout bird, but in these days of Covid, county listers had to settle for a photo.

At a time when grassland species are disappearing at an alarming rate, Clay-colored Sparrows seem to be fighting the trend. They were recorded from nine Regions this summer, even in areas where Grasshopper Sparrows continue to dwindle. Henslow’s Sparrow is already gone from most of its former range, with birds found at two sites in Region 6 being the sole representatives statewide.

With a nice variety of rarities scattered across the state, selecting a Bird of the Season can be challenging. But this being the breeding season, I’m inclined to go with one that I really hope is still nesting within the confines of New York. A lot of us can only dream of coming across a state Black Rail, and for that reason I’m going with the bird that spent at least a week or two advertising its presence at the Wallkill River NWR in Region 9.



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Much of the data in these Regional reports was sourced from eBird: eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relAug-2020. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Aug 2020.