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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2020

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Fall of 2020 was characterized by roughly average temps in September and October, with September being just slightly warmer and drier than normal, and October being slightly warmer and wetter than normal. November temperatures, however, remained well above average across the state, with precipitation levels just below expected levels. Except for a few periods following heavy rains, mainly in October, shorelines were exposed, providing better than average shorebirding opportunities while limiting numbers of non-grazing waterfowl.

Several Regional editors declared the fall 2020 season as one of the most interesting migration periods they've seen in many years. Overall, good numbers of migrants were found. These good overall numbers were accompanied by some fantastic rarities. After several years of selecting from a few, widely scattered rare birds to highlight, this season

there were really too many to mention. If there was ever a time to read every Regional report, this was the season to do so. You'll find comments like "this was an excellent season for birding. Each month saw the species count close to record high..." from Robert Spahn in Region 2, and from David Wheeler in Region 5, "Fall 2020 was an absolutely epic season for rarities, scarce passage migrants, shorebirds, and winter finches, finishing 30 species above the recent 10 year average...". William Kuk in Region 4 attributed increases in numbers of observations to "more birding due to the pandemic, the breeding bird atlas, and to the growth of eBird."

Several species which have been trending upwards in recent years continued to do so. American White Pelicans were reported from six Regions, Trumpeter Swans from six, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks from Region 3, with multiples at three locations, and a Brown Booby from Region 9 and two from Region 10. Sandhill Cranes were found in eight Regions, with high counts of 150 in the Region 2 section of Montezuma NWR and 187 in the Region 3 section. Cackling Geese were reported from nine Regions while Pink-footed was reported from two, including a second Regional record for Region 5. A family group of Barnacle X Cackling Goose hybrids made an appearance in Orange County in Region 9 after having been detected in Massachusetts and Connecticut earlier in the fall. Cave Swallows were recorded from four Regions, including multiples in Region 10.

Several species that have been trending downward continued to do so. American Golden-Plover is one, and although it was reported in small numbers from all ten Regions, the double- and triple-digit flocks of Long Island have been missing for some years now. Single Upland Sandpipers were reported from just three Regions. Brendan Fogarty in Region 10 noted "few records of larger species like godwits and avocets, and all the sod farm shorebirds were once again in single-digit flocks." A single record of two Spruce Grouse in Region 6 and one other eBird entry from Region 7 were the only reports of this sensitive species. Two additional species, both of them found in reduced numbers, but maybe not actually in trouble, are Red-tailed Hawk and Snow Goose. The latter has been mentioned in recent seasons as having bypassed traditional sites, and again in fall 2020, Jeff Bolsinger mentioned that they "largely missed Region 6." Next door in Region 7, a max count of 10,000 probably indicates that there is just some location-shifting going on. Overall, they seem to be doing well. More puzzling are the comments from Region 4 about Red-tails. This season, Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch saw a 60% falloff from the average count. See that account for details on similar drops at other major northeast hawk watches. Again, Red-tailed Hawk as a species seems to be plentiful, but is there a problem with the populations that migrate through our area?

Back on the positive side, there seemed to be a coordination of incursions of species that we normally think of as irruptive. Snowy Owls seemed to be preparing for a decent winter showing, with all but one Region reporting them. Birds began showing up in the first few days of November. Rough-legged Hawks were reported from all 10 Regions, not always in great numbers, but still a pretty widespread distribution.

Of course, there's one group of birds that immediately comes to mind when we think of irruptives—namely, winter finches. After a few winters of good flights of Evening Grosbeaks and crossbills, this fall it seemed that all the players got on the same page. Following closely on the heels of early precursor flights of Red-breasted Nuthatch and Black-capped Chickadees, huge numbers of Pine Siskins flooded through the state often accompanied by good counts of Purple Finches. Most of the other winter finches followed, led by Common Redpoll and Red Crossbill. Also recorded, but in numbers closer to normal, were Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill and Hoary Redpoll. The Region 1 report mentions that this was often considered "the best irruptive finch flight in decades."

The editors there give a summary of Red Crossbill call types identified in the area. To give some idea of the extent of this flight, all Regions reported Evening Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, and Common Redpoll, nine reported White-winged Crossbill, and seven reported Pine Grosbeak and Hoary Redpoll! In his Region 10 report, Brendan Fogarty gives a nice summary of continent-wide events that may have some connection to our experiences in New York.

As mentioned up top, Regional editors lauded the fall 2020 season, sometimes for quantity, sometimes for quality, and sometimes both. Good waterfowl records included King Eider, with max counts of 11 in Region 2 and six in Region 5. One in Region 4 provided a rare inland record. A juvenile Harlequin Duck in Region 5 was surprisingly early on 11 September. Is it safe to assume it belongs to the eastern Canada breeding population?

Good shorebird habitat in several Regions yielded many nice records. A Western Sandpiper at the Allegheny Reservoir was a great find in Region 1. A Purple Sandpiper in Region 7 was the seventh record since 1950 and a Hudsonian Godwit at Dorchester Park provided a first Regional eBird record for Region 4. The extensive Region 5 account of the shorebirding season is worth a read.

While we're hanging out at the waterfront, this is probably a good place to mention that Region 1 had its third record of **Purple Gallinule**—a bird photographed at an elementary school! Sabine's Gulls were found in three Regions, a **Magnificent Frigatebird** was seen flying into Lake Ontario in Region 5, and a **Neotropical Cormorant** in Region 1 was the third record there.

Two **Swainson's Hawks** in Region 10 were exceptional, as was a **Mississippi Kite** in Region 1. At Franklin Mountain, Bald Eagles hit an all-time high of 248, while Golden Eagles were slightly better than average. As always, it's worth going back and reading through each of the hawk watch reports, where hard data is available to make seasonal comparisons.

Many Regions recorded late passerines, probably encouraged to linger by mild November temperatures. These are widely scattered through the Regional reports. A couple of species seemed to have many more mentions than we normally see. Eight Regions reported Nelson's Sparrows—are we just getting better at figuring that bird out? Also recorded from eight Regions was Connecticut Warbler, with reports from at least 40 locations in Region 10 alone. Additionally, as mentioned several times, there were many records of exceptional Regional rarities, such as a single Boreal Chickadee seen and audio recorded in Warren County in Region 8 providing the first Regional record in ten years, and quite a few statewide rare birds. For more details of both, it's really worth going through the Regional reports, but I'll try to mention a handful of birds not listed previously that could easily be Bird of the Season most years.

For starters, a **Sage Thrasher** in Columbia County in Region 8, a **Say's Phoebe** in Region 4, or a **Black-throated Gray Warbler** in Region 10 would all be BOTS contenders. Also in Region 10, an empid identified by recorded calls as **Pacific-slope Flycatcher** is at least as rare (if not quite as dramatic) as the **Painted Redstart** seen by many observers in Brooklyn. However, this time around, I think I would have to give the nod to Region 9, where a **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** not only was **not** the best bird, it wasn't even the best flycatcher. I'd give BOTS this time around to the **Tropical Kingbird** found at Dobb's Ferry, a long overdue first state record, a great bird that had the decency to hang around for a second day, to be enjoyed by many.

REGIONAL REPORTS—FALL 2020

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