

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2021

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The spring season of 2021 saw a rebound from late winter's below average temperatures, as March came through with unseasonable warmth across the state. April temps were also above average, while nearly everyone reported a slightly cooler than average May. April was a bit wetter than usual, otherwise it was a fairly dry spring.

Many species which normally move through in the early days of spring were present in good numbers and on early dates, and quite a few others which normally arrive later in April or May were also well ahead of schedule. Several observers noted that the May movement was less impressive, some mentioning advanced leaf-out or cooler May temperatures. Overall, it seemed that there were more positive comments about the birding in the first two months, while May didn't really monopolize the birding reports as it usually does. Jeff Bolsinger in Region 6 mentioned two periods, one beginning 30 March and ending 10 April, and the other from about 28 April to 5 May, that accounted for all of their record early dates this spring.

The western Regions provided a good waterfowl showing, with Snow Goose and Tundra Swan numbers eliciting positive comments. A high one-day count of

151,400 Snows at Derby Hill must have provided a dazzling spectacle. Ross's and Greater White-fronted Geese were widely reported, and Cackling Geese seem to be achieving "expected" status in western Regions. Two Pink-footed Geese, one in Region 8, the other in Region 10, were nice rarities, but were outdone by a Tundra Bean Goose found in two locations in Region 8 in mid-March. This may have been the same individual that birders in Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the northeast detected this spring. Pending acceptance by NYSARC, this will constitute a first New York State record. Good numbers of Tundra and Trumpeter Swans were reported, concentrated as expected in the more western Regions.

Some high counts for ducks included 1500 Northern Pintail at Northern Montezuma WMA in Region 2, 20,000 Canvasback and 60,000 (!) Redhead at Cayuga Lake SP in Region 3. The "regular" rarities were well represented, with Tufted Ducks in Regions 3 and 7, and scattered Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Ducks and King Eiders. Guesstimating from reports, it appears that there were about 15-20 Eurasian Wigeon statewide.

A Eurasian Collared-Dove spent several days in mid-March in the same Region 1 yard that last year hosted a White-winged Dove. Over in Region 2, a White-winged Dove was photographed on 8 May for a fifth Regional record. Decent numbers of both cuckoos were scattered across the state, with an early Black-billed recorded at Central Park in Region 10 on 19 April. Common Nighthawks and Eastern Whip-poor-wills were widespread, but in low numbers. Chimney Swifts put in April appearances across the state, but birds on 21 March in Region 10 and 29 March in Region 2 were exceptionally early.

Sandhill Cranes continue to colonize the state, with multiple birds in just about every Region. Shorebird numbers were a mixed bag, with some Regions, like Region 7, reporting good habitat but disappointing numbers. Meanwhile David Wheeler in Region 5 mentioned that 20 species was around the maximum variety to be expected there. Region 1 also had a nice selection of shorebirds—highlights there included a Black-necked Stilt and a Ruff, and several Wilson's Phalaropes, including a pair that seemed to be getting ready to nest before they eventually moved on. Region 5, meanwhile, provided the only Hudsonian Godwit report for the state. Three non-coastal Regions reported Piping Plovers, including what was considered to be three different birds in Region 2. Also away from the tidewater regions, there were widespread reports of Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, Sanderling, and Willet. Six Regions reported Wilson's Phalaropes, while three reported Red-necked Phalaropes.

Laughing Gulls were scattered across the upstate areas, but a Franklin's in Region 3 was a bit more surprising. Winter gulls lingered in decent numbers in several Regions, with May records for Iceland in Region 1, and both Iceland and Glaucous lingering into May in Regions 2 and 5. Little Gulls were reported from two upstate Regions, while Region 10 recorded the only Black-headed Gulls—at least seven different individuals. Lesser Black-backed Gulls continue to take their place among the "normal" avifauna of the state, with most Regions reporting multiples. A Common Gull lingered in Brooklyn (Region 10) into early March.

A Least Tern in Region 2 was just the second spring record for that species. Caspian Terns were early arrivals in several Regions, with Region 2 recording its first on 28 March, and several Regions seeing them within the first 10 days of April. A high count of ten Arctic Terns on 31 May was exceptional, even for Cupsogue County Park, one of the most reliable sites to find them in New York. The only tubenoses reported were all seen from an offshore research vessel on 15 May, highlighted by a Northern Fulmar.

An immature Wood Stork found in Westhampton (Region 10) on 4 May was part of a widespread irruption of southern waders into the northeast and upper midwest and provided the first Long Island record since 1962. A few Snowy Egrets were scattered around upstate, and one Little Blue Heron was “poached” by Region 1 birders as it made an appearance on the Canadian side of the Niagara River.

Ospreys generally arrived around the third week of March as expected. Golden Eagles were found in nine Regions, including one on Long Island where it is still quite a rarity. Mississippi Kites seem to be on their way as regular visitors to the state, with two birds in Region 2 passing the Braddock Bay Hawk Watch, and singles in Regions 8 and 10. A Swainson’s Hawk was also noted at the Braddock Bay watch. A bird that was photographed as it passed Derby Hill in Region 5 appears to have been an extremely rare Red-tailed x Red-shouldered Hawk hybrid. The fantastic Ferruginous Hawk mentioned in the Region 9 winter report was noted as late as 13 March. Snowy Owls were scattered across the state, with two birds lingering into late May, one in Region 6 and the other in Region 8.

Two Pileated Woodpeckers were video-recorded at a private home in Mattituck in early spring, an exceptionally rare species in Suffolk County. White-eyed Vireos showed up in several upstate Regions, where rare, and what was apparently a Yellow-throated x Blue-headed Vireo hybrid in Region 5 provided an exceptionally rare observation. A Boreal Chickadee in Albany County in Region 8 was well outside of its expected range.

A record was set this spring when eight species of *Hirundinidae* were recorded in the state, including two (!) additions to the state list! On 22 April a Violet-green Swallow was photographed at the Vischer Ferry Nature & Historic Preserve in Region 8 but could not be relocated afterwards. Although this species seems as if it should be a regular vagrant to the east, in fact there are just a handful of records. This record came a few weeks after a neotropical martin was located at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Region 10. This bird was considerably more cooperative, and remained at that location for four days, during which it was seen and photographed by hundreds of birders. At this point, it seems that the identification has been made as Gray-breasted Martin, apparently the third North American record, and obviously a New York State first.

Just to touch again on early arrivals, there were many reports of record-setting passerines. To mention a few, a Cliff Sallow at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 on 31 March was about two weeks ahead of any others in the state; a Lincoln’s Sparrow in Region 1 on 19 March was about a month ahead of schedule; and an

Olive-sided Flycatcher on 6 May in Region 3 and another on 29 April in Region 10 were exceptional. Jeff Bolsinger in Region 6 mentions eight species of passerines setting or equaling record early dates. Region 10 also recorded its first March record for Northern Parula and a Veery on 31 March is early enough to suggest that it may have wintered somewhere in the states.

As would be expected during any migration period, there were many exciting rarities to be found among the passerines. A Harris' Sparrow in Region 1 was the only one reported in the state, while a Black-throated Gray Warbler there was matched by one at the opposite end of the state on eastern Long Island (see photos, p. 264 and p. 314). A male Painted Bunting at a Chenango County feeder in Region 4 was the top bird in that area. A Western Tanager lingered on in Region 10, a holdover from the winter season as was a Varied Thrush, also in Region 10. A Western Meadowlark was audio recorded in Region 4.

Adding to the spice of the spring season, a nice selection of winter finches continued on beyond February. Red Crossbills and Common Redpolls were especially widespread and numerous, and seven Regions reported Hoary Redpolls as well. Smaller numbers of White-winged Crossbills were found, and even some Pine Grosbeaks made it into early March. The ever popular Evening Grosbeak was well represented, with counts of over 100 in Regions 5 and 8 right into May.

In spite of these moments of excitement, the overall picture of the spring landbird migration was pretty mixed. David Wheeler in Region 5 says "Most long-time observers agreed it was an epically poor warbler migration year, with small numbers and few good days." In Region 9, John Haas called this "a prolonged migratory season with lower numbers of birds in at least some areas." Generally, news regarding breeding birds in decline is considered dire, as in the case of three open-country species mentioned in the Region 6 report, but Brendan Fogarty's report on declining numbers of Mute Swans in Region 10 will probably be greeted as a positive by most birders.

Anyone not familiar with the use of MOTUS tags for wildlife tracking may want to have a look at the Region 5 report. The information presented is pretty fascinating. Surely these recent technologies will be expanding our knowledge of bird movement in ways that seemed impossible until now.

I think it's safe to say that the presence of four different state firsts in one season was unprecedented. The Tundra Bean Goose, Violet-green Swallow and Gray-breasted Martin constitute three additions to the state list (W. D'Anna, pers. comm.), and the lingering Ferruginous Hawk was still available to be ticked for spring 2021. Clearly in any normal year, any of these should qualify as Bird of the Season. But since I'm under strict orders to make a selection, I think I have to go with Gray-breasted Martin. Only two previous ABA area records exist, both of birds collected in south Texas in the 1880s. This extremely cooperative bird made itself available to hundreds of people over several days and generated a ton of discussion among birders and some good publicity in the non-birding community. A great find by one of our most talented local birders, and a great

learning opportunity for those lucky enough to be present as the identification points were worked over.

Thanks for reading and check out those Regional reports!

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Much of the data in the Regional reports is sourced from eBird:
eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relMay-2021. Cornell Lab of Ornithology,
Ithaca, New York. May 2021.

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