

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON, SUMMER 2021

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June of 2021 came in a bit drier than average through most of the state, but by July and August nearly everyone was seeing rainfall above—in some cases far above—normal levels. June was generally a bit cooler than average, but both July and August were hotter than normal across the board.

Rainfall, or lack thereof, has its effects on many of the locations that we rely on for bird finding. Low water levels at the right time can attract migrating shorebirds, while higher levels might be an aid to breeding ducks and other water birds. Montezuma NWR in Region 3 reported high counts for several expected species of waterfowl; for most of the neighboring Regions numbers seemed to be about average. Among the more unusual sightings, Snow Geese lingered into June and July in five Regions, a Eurasian Wigeon at Montezuma in Region 3 in late August was surprisingly early, and two Regions reported June Brant, birds bringing up the rear of northbound migration.

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were reported from three locations in Region 3, and two locations from Region 10. I'm tempted to say "only" two Regions reported them this year vs. three in Summer 2020. Four different King Eiders summered in Region 10, all immature males. A female Common Goldeneye with four young provided a rare breeding record for Region 6. Common Mergansers are widespread breeders throughout much of our non-coastal areas, but a flock of 12 on Staten Island in Region 10 was surprising. They often don't show up downstate until the first freeze of winter. Trumpeter Swans seem to be, at minimum, holding their own, with reports coming from five Regions. Upper and Lower Lakes WMA in Region 6 seems to be a major stronghold.

Wild Turkey is apparently the only New York chicken doing well, but one report of a covey of 18 Ruffed Grouse in the town of Van Etten in Region 3 must have been a nice find. Pied-billed Grebes were present in eight Regions, about typical, but high counts in the Region 2 section of Montezuma were about half of what they were last year.

A Eurasian Collared-Dove was at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 on 29 August. One seems to pop up somewhere in the state every year or so and judging by the reactions of birders in other parts of the country, it's nice that they remain as interesting novelties and nothing more. Several upstate Regions mentioned

outbreaks of the moth formerly known as Gypsy. Both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos responded to the feast and were well represented. Common Nighthawks were mentioned in all 10 Regional reports, no doubt more a function of the timing of both spring and fall migrations than any gains as a breeder. The number of eBird reports of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds always seems surprisingly high to me, but I think people love to report them and homeowners are rightly proud of having them at the feeder. An adult male Rufous at a feeder on eastern Long Island in early August was the only oddball hummer this season.

Two different King Rails were found in Region 1, nice records of a scarce and difficult-to-see bird. Virginia Rails were reported from seven Regions, including a location on the barrier beach of Long Island, where not expected. A high count of 161 Common Gallinules at Montezuma in Region 2 seems like a decent number. Compare with last summer's high of 12 and a high of 296 in 2018. Water level and visibility no doubt have significant effects on numbers found. A Purple Gallinule was at the Jamaica Bay Refuge in Region 10 in early July. All ten Regions recorded Sandhill Crane this summer, a sentence that would have been absurd to write just a few years ago. A high count of 40 was made at Montezuma in Region 3.

The non-coastal Regions reported more or less typical shorebird movements, with late lingerers and early arrivals generally related to water level conditions at the local hotspots. A Black-necked Stilt at Iroquois NWR in Region 1 was surprisingly the only one found state-wide. A juvenile Western Sandpiper at Braddock Bay in Region 2 was a nice find. Wilson's Phalaropes were recorded from five Regions, Red-necked from six, both probably a bit higher than expected.

Upland Sandpipers were widely scattered, occurring in seven Regions, but nowhere were the reports accompanied by positive comments. Just a couple of confirmed breeding sites were mentioned. Piping Plover continue to hang on in Region 5, with two breeding pairs at Sandy Pond.

Birders always hope that hurricanes and tropical storms will transport all manner of exotic and ocean dwelling birds into their local bay or lake, but *Henri* in August 2021 had other ideas. While he delivered few bona fide rarities, *Henri* highlighted how little we know about the normal routes taken by some regularly occurring species. See Shai Mitra's account in the Region 10 report of flocks of 100-plus Hudsonian Godwits on Long Island and in nearby New England.

A couple of Iceland Gulls lingered in the western part of the state, with one in Region 1 on 1 June just making it into the report, and another at Braddock Bay into early July. Two Glaucous Gulls in Region 10 were noteworthy. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were reported from six Regions, including a high of 185 at Robert Moses SP in Region 10 on 28 August. A Franklin's Gull at Braddock Bay in June was the best of the gulls.

About 13 Arctic Terns from the traditional Long Island sites was a good seasonal tally. A count of 500 Roseates in Plum Gut off the north fork of the island is indicative of the strong colony at Great Gull Island. Bridled Terns were reported twice at Hudson Canyon in the waters off Region 10, along with a nice collection

of tubenoses and other pelagic species. A couple of Brown Boobies were also detected from shore through August.

Only modest numbers of Brown Pelicans made it as far north as Long Island this summer but check the Region 10 report for an interesting observation of one flock's movements along the south shore and into New Jersey.

If there was one event that the Summer of 2021 should be remembered for, it would be the incursion of southern wading birds across much of the continent, including New York State. Although we have still not cashed in on the Limpkin Lunacy that seems to be occurring everywhere else, this summer saw an unprecedented irruption of Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills. Wood Storks were found in four Regions, including a first for summer in Region 3, an apparent first Regional record for Region 8 and one on Staten Island that succumbed to the dangers of the Amazon (Fulfilment Center).

Lest Wood Storks be allowed to grab the spotlight, a truly unprecedented incursion of Roseate Spoonbills brought birds to five Regions. In Region 4 there were three separate locations reporting spoonbills representing two or three birds, while in Region 10 there were definitely two different birds. One of these went to great lengths to straddle the line between Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The Region 10 editor mentions the "great frustration of conscientious county listers", leaving implied the heedless impetuosity of the rest of us who checked that sucker off ASAP. Interestingly, White Ibis did not seem to get in on the "northeast express"—none were reported from anywhere in the state.

I think it's interesting to speculate on other "southern" wading birds. Great Egrets were everywhere, and Cattle Egrets, Little Blue Herons and even Tricolored Heron put in appearances away from coastal areas. One at Ausable Point in Region 7 represented the first Regional record since 1989. Some of these are to be expected but is it possible that in a year like this, at least some of these birds originate from parts of the country or parts of the world where Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills also occur?

Raptor reports were probably about normal, with the exception of continued increases in Bald Eagle numbers and more and more Red-tailed Hawks nesting within the limits of New York City. Unusual records included Swallow-tailed Kites in four Regions and a Swainson's Hawk at the Braddock Bay Hawkwatch on 22 August. A Snowy Owl remained in East Worcester in Region 8 through most of June.

Every Region recorded Red-headed Woodpeckers, including Region 7, where the record was the fifth for the century. In Region 6 a pair was observed enjoying the Gypsy Moth caterpillar feast.

Olive-sided Flycatchers generally got favorable mentions and they were reported from every Region. Both Acadian and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers also seemed to be widely present and in decent quantities. Two White-eyed Vireos at different locations in Region 1 were Regional rarities. Other passerines that seemed to be widespread and with encouraging numbers included Red-eyed Vireo, Cedar Waxwing, and Bank Swallow. Sedge Wrens seemed to be around In

surprisingly good numbers. They were found in nine Regions, with multiples in seven of the nine.

“Winter” finches lingered in small numbers, with Evening Grosbeak and Red Crossbill occurring in six Regions, Pine Siskin in eight. Most unusual was an Evening Grosbeak on Fire Island in Region 10 in mid-June.

Some of our grassland birds also seemed to be doing a little better statewide. Horned Larks and Grasshopper Sparrows received several positive comments and Clay-colored Sparrow is now more numerous and widespread than some of our “traditional” grassland birds, like Vesper Sparrow. Dickcissel also seems to be going through an eastward expansion, with four Regions reporting them. A max of seven was at Croton Point in Region 9 through most of the period. Bill Ostrander in Region 3 mentioned high counts for other sparrows—Chipping, Field, Savannah, and Song. Maybe some positives for a habitat that has been in decline for years.

Continuing the theme of a decent early passerine flight, several Regional editors had positive things to say about the August southbound flight. In Region 1, American Robins and Bobolinks made impressive showings, and in Region 6 Jeff Bolsinger wrote “the summer ended with the most active southbound songbird migration seen in several years.” Check his Regional account also for comments regarding the development of new solar farms and the conflict that more and more of us have between clean energy and the disturbance of valuable grasslands.

Although the Summer of 2021 did not bring any shocking rarities to New York State, there were a lot of interesting and seldom-seen birds for us to ogle. I think Bird of the Season should go to Roseate Spoonbill, not to any one individual, but to the half dozen or more who made themselves accessible to so many of us. What’s not to love about a tall, pink, tropical bird? Can our first New York Flamingo be far behind?

Thanks for reading and check out those Regional reports where all the interesting nuggets are found.

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

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