

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2021

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The fall season of 2021 was described by most Regional editors as warmer and wetter than average in September and October, but closer to normal or even a bit cooler in November. Regional mean temperatures in September ranged from near normal to just about 3° F above normal in the eastern Regions, and to about 3° above in several western and central Regions. The remnants of Hurricane *Ida* struck Regions 9 and 10 on 1-2 September with torrential rains, flash flooding, property damage, and loss of life. Additionally, Region 9 experienced 19 days of rain in September, providing good habitat for shorebirds on the flooded fields but creating poor conditions for dabbling ducks and waders elsewhere. Throughout the state, October was one of the warmest on record; temperatures averaged 5-7° above normal. In November temperatures and precipitation were about average, but the early frost was delayed by 19 days in Region 2, and the first freeze recorded at Albany was not until 2 November.

For the season, Regional editors generally reported normal total species counts, and that waterfowl movements were typical, but in Region 6 Jeff Bolsinger found waterfowl numbers generally low. There was a good selection of rare or unusual waterfowl. Cackling Goose was found in all Regions except one, Ross's Goose in five Regions, and Greater White-fronted Goose in six. Barnacle Goose was reported in three Regions and likely represent two different birds based on dates and locations. Most unusual among the geese, a Pink-footed Goose was seen in Regions 9 and 10, perhaps representing the same bird. King Eiders were found in all Regions bordering Lake Ontario but numbers were down from last year's report. Among the rare ducks, a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck was found in Region 10; Eurasian Wigeon had a good representation; a Tufted Duck was found in an unusual location in Region 7; and Harlequin Ducks appeared in their usual locations on the Niagara River; also, a pair showed up in October on Lake Ontario, Region 2, and ended up spending the rest of the season as well as the winter there. There was a rare Wood Duck x Mallard hybrid in Region 1.

Two Yellow Rail sightings occurred in Region 4 several days apart, suggesting this might be the same bird. The property owner generously welcomed about 30 birders to come and try for it, allowing a lucky few to obtain great photos.

Sandhill Crane sightings continue to increase. They were reported across the state, with Dave Wheeler calling it “a record-setting year”. The highest numbers still occur upstate, where three Regions reported groups of 100 or more and a maximum of 200 were counted at Montezuma NWR. In Region 9, 145 were seen flying southeast from coastal Westchester on 23 November. Even in Region 10, where they are still rare, a few flyovers were recorded in Manhattan.

Shorebirds were well represented at locations that had adequate habitats, but dry conditions were unfavorable in some Regions. Through the fall, there was a good mix of shorebirds but no unusual numbers. American Golden-Plover was seen in every Region with a single high count of 99 in Region 1. Some Regionally rare species included Stilt Sandpiper in Region 8, Baird’s Sandpipers in Cortland County, Western Sandpiper in Region 5, and Long-billed Dowitchers in Regions 4, 5, and 6. Sandy Pond in Region 5 had good shorebird conditions and produced two outstanding rarities: a first state record Snowy Plover and a third state record Common Ringed Plover in September.

It was a good fall for jaegers upstate. Parasitic Jaeger was found in Regions 1, 2, 5, and 9; Pomarine and Long-tailed in Regions 2 and 5, plus nine reports of jaeger species in Region 1, and ten in Region 2.

Following an influx of Razorbills on the St. Lawrence River in Quebec, the species was reported from five upstate Regions (1, 2, and 5, on Lake Ontario, and very unusual for Regions 7 and 8 on Lake Champlain). Expected in Region 10, the species was reported at a totally typical arrival date.

Most of the rare gulls showed, but Franklin’s Gull is becoming scarcer; we had only one report.

A Pacific Loon flew past Hamlin Beach in October and another was on Cayuga Lake in late November. High counts of migrant loons on Lake Ontario in Region 2 show significantly decreased numbers when compared with counts ten and twenty years ago. It was formerly typical for high count days of more than 1,000 loons of both species, and some years had a high day count of 3,000. In more recent times, single day peak loon counts at Hamlin Beach are a few hundred. These comparisons would need more detailed surveys to determine their accuracy. But they indicate that the number of migrant loons may have decreased substantially. There also are indications that peak numbers of wintering ducks are lower.

A White-faced Storm-Petrel was found on a pelagic trip 10 October, late for that species, and a Northern Fulmar, usually offshore, was seen from the seawatch on Long Island on 29 October.

A Wood Stork was photographed in the town of Clarkson, Monroe County in Region 2 on 11 October. Another unusual sighting was a Magnificent Frigatebird seen over Oneida Lake on 27 September—an inland location with no extreme weather that might have brought the bird there. In Region 10, Brown

Boobies were recorded on Staten Island 11-19 September, from Robert Moses State Park 5, 9, and 13 October, and from the Orient Point ferry 2 November. Sightings of this species have increased noticeably in the past several years along the coast. Northern Gannets were reported from several upstate Regions where they are unusual to say the least. The first for Region 1 since 2013 was seen on 18 November; several observers noted one in Region 2 on 19 November; Region 5 had its first county record 18-19 November; and Region 7's second record ever appeared on 6 November. Down in Region 10, where they are numerous and expected, a max of 10,000 counted at Great Kills Park in Staten Island was an amazing sight, and described by the observers as likely undercounted.

An incursion of Cattle Egrets to the northeast this fall was well-documented in our state, with multiple reports from every Region. Jeff Bolsinger in Region 6 commented the species was well reported, with up to six at a time being seen at Dog Hill Road, and at other locations for a total of 10, a change from the single or zero reports that are the norm. Region 9 started out with a record 15 sighted, with more to follow over the season, and Region 10 documented birds at no fewer than 12 locations, with a max of four in Orient. A rare Great White Heron, was found at Marshlands Conservancy in Region 9 on 7 September and was seen again for most of October.

A White Ibis in Orange County, Region 9, was seen by many birders. The Roseate Spoonbill that originally appeared at Montezuma NWR in July continued there through mid-September.

A total of 38,949 raptors were seen at six hawk watch sites in the state this fall. There were 154 Golden Eagles, the majority at Franklin Mountain in Region 4, 219 Peregrine Falcons, the majority at Fire Island in Region 10, and 12,985 Broad-winged Hawks, the majority at Mount Peter in Region 9. Two Northern Goshawks were recorded from Franklin Mountain, and there were four other reports scattered around the state. Rare raptors included two Swallow-tailed Kites, one in Cortland County, Region 4, on 12 September and the other found in Yates County, Region 3, in August which stayed through mid-September. A Mississippi Kite in Albany County, Region 8, was briefly seen. Three Swainson's Hawks were reported, one each in Regions 2, 9, and 10. The immature Swainson's in Region 2 lingered for several days in the front yard of a homeowner. Many people got to see this bird, but unfortunately, it died.

Jeff Bolsinger of Region 6 reported that the fall passerine migration was much more active than the previous two years, with moderate to heavy migration for much of the season, except for an extended period during the first half of October. He cited 60 reports of Philadelphia Vireo. In other Regions, passerine migration was as expected. However, outside of Region 10, the number of noteworthy passerines were considerably less than last fall, and winter finches did not repeat their remarkable irruption of a year ago.

A Tropical Kingbird found by Richard Veit on Staten Island in Region 10 on 26 September would be a second state record, pending acceptance by NYSARC. At least one observer heard and described the bird's distinctive twittering call in

his eBird report. Adding to the parade of rarities Staten Island recorded this season, a Gray Kingbird showed up on 13 October and remained for 10 days, unlike the usual one-day—or one-minute—wonders they usual are, like the one that was found and quickly vanished at the Fire Island Lighthouse on 13 October. Western Kingbird was a rare find in Region 4, and in Region 1, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at the Dunkirk Airport remained for four days.

Bicknells's Thrush usually migrates along the far eastern corridor; they rarely appear further west, but one was banded at the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory in Region 2 this fall. Northern Wheatears were found in Regions 5 and 10.

A Lark Sparrow in Region 3 was a great find. LeConte's Sparrow is very seldom seen but one remained for four days at Croton Point Park in Region 9. It was another good year for Connecticut Warblers with 50 reports from seven Regions, and a season high of over 20 in Region 10. A Townsend's Warbler identified by an eBird reviewer from a photograph two weeks after it was first seen on 13 September was a first record for Region 1. A cooperative Townsend's Warbler was present for two days at Green-wood Cemetery in Brooklyn in Region 10. Dickcissels are more common in Regions 9 and 10, but they were reported from six other Regions this fall.

Of the more than 330 species reported in the Regional reports, this summary highlights only a few seen this fall, and focuses on some of the rarer species. I would strongly recommend that readers look through the quarterly Regional summaries for more details. The reports provide insights and context, as well as interesting information on banding and tagging data. For example, Dave Wheeler's Region 5 report presents a summary of the tracking results of the MOTUS stations around the state and beyond, revealing fascinating insights into the tagged birds' schedules and routes as they migrate south. Today, there are about 23 MOTUS receiver stations in New York State, a wildlife tracking system that uses automated radio telemetry to simultaneously track hundreds of individuals of numerous species of birds, bats, and insects. Eventually, the plan is to install more sites throughout the United States to of migrating birds than can be obtained by banding alone.

No doubt, it is a difficult task to name the Bird of the Season. Among the many rare birds reported, gems like Common Ringed Plover and Tropical Kingbird were not even the rarest, and it seems best to consider a number of different criteria:

Rarest NYS bird of the season: Snowy Plover

Most well seen bird of the season: Razorbill

Prettiest bird of the season: Townsend's Warbler

Most lost bird of the season: Magnificent Frigatebird

Most secretive bird of the season: Yellow Rail

A first record for New York State that was furthermore seen by many and is in fact very pretty seems like a solid resumé, so I will choose the Snowy Plover as the Bird of the Season.

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