

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—SPRING 2023**

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The warm weather of winter continued into early spring, with most Regions reporting above average temperatures for March and April. May cooled off a bit, but by then many birders had already seen an exodus of wintering birds and a push of migrants into their areas.

Most Regions reported lower than normal numbers of waterfowl, especially of “rare” geese. The feeling was that many birds had already moved on by the

opening of the spring season. The only large flocks of Snow Geese reported were in the first half of March, with counts of 100,000 recorded in Region 3 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of March. Greater White-fronted Geese were widespread, but some Regional editors commented on their low numbers. John Haas in Region 9 said “Uncommon geese were exactly that this spring”. No Brant were detected in the three westernmost Regions. Best among that group were the fourth Region 5 record for Pink-footed Goose, and the “Blue” Ross’s Goose found in the same Region a week later.

Two Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in Region 1 provided the earliest spring record there, when they were discovered on 17 April. Elsewhere, a Eurasian Green-winged Teal found in Region 6 was followed by a second report a few weeks later at a different location. A Mottled Duck returned to a pond on Long Island for its second season after providing a first state record in 2022. Tufted Ducks were recorded from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 7. No eiders were reported away from Region 10.

A White-winged Dove visited a yard in late May in Albany, Region 8—that same yard had a Red-headed Woodpecker earlier in the month! Both species of cuckoos were widely distributed across the state. Some observers noted decent counts of Yellow-billed, possible related to a continuing outbreak of Spongy Moth (*Lymantria dispar*). Similarly, Common Nighthawks and Whip-poor-wills were scattered across all Regions, with little hopeful signs here and there. Detection of loud night birds is probably enhanced during the years of the Breeding Bird Atlas. An example is the discovery of Whip-poor-will on Jones Beach in Region 10. Chuck-wills-Widow was found at several traditional Region 10 locations. No unusual hummingbirds were reported for the season, but a one-day max count of 60 Ruby-throats at a banding station in Region 5 seems really impressive.

Both Sora and Virginia Rails seemed to be pretty well represented across the state, but the big “rail” showstopper turned up in Conewango Swamp in Region 1. On 11 May two birders heard a Yellow Rail calling! The next night other observers were able to obtain audio recordings. What a great find! Once again, Sandhill Cranes were found in every Region, including several flocks exceeding 30 birds.

With most Regions recording higher than average rainfall through March and April, there was widespread consensus that shorebird habitat, and shorebird numbers and diversity, were sub-par. The following, from the Region 7 editors, summed up the situation for many observers: “high spring water levels in Lake Champlain were likely the culprit of a slow shorebird season.” Among the few highlights were American Oystercatchers showing up in Region 9 along the Hudson River, and American Golden-Plovers in Regions 6 and 10. At this point, any Upland Sandpipers are going to be considered “good birds”, so having reports from six Regions almost seems hopeful. A scattering of the more coastal shorebirds inland included Ruddy Turnstones in six inland Regions, Black-bellied Plovers in eight, and Dunlin in seven. Regions 5 and 6 both recorded nesting Piping Plovers, with birds nesting again at the latter location. A Red-necked Phalarope in Region 8 was a nice find, and there was a scattering of onshore reports of this species in Region 10 as well.

A Parasitic Jaeger put in a rare spring appearance at Hamlin Beach in Region 2, and a one-day count of 11 was impressive even for a Region 10 sea watch. An

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inland influx of Black-legged Kittiwakes across the eastern states did not skip New York. Seven Regions reported them, with some reports being of multiple birds. Derek Rogers reports there are no prior records of the species in Region 7, where six were documented. There were also widespread records of Little Gull through the spring, with seven non-coastal Regions recording them.

Nice as these gull records are, the spring gull season turned everything upside down with two wild sightings—two first state record gulls. The first was a bird found in the Bronx which checked all the boxes for Glaucous-winged Gull—not an entirely unexpected species, but more likely to follow the existing pattern of recent vagrants by showing up around the Great Lakes. Six weeks later we saw round two, as a first state record Heermann's Gull was observed at Sodus Point in Region 2. This is probably one of the birds that has been navigating its way up and down the east coast for the past couple of years. Both this and the Glaucous-winged Gull are records that just a few years ago would have been considered extraordinary, but given events of recent years it's almost a relief to get these two onto the state list!

A Least Tern found at Sandy Pond in Region 5 provided a first Regional record. Caspian Terns were early arrivals in several Regions, with birds found in late March in Regions 5, 7, and 9, with more in the first few days of April. Two Royal Terns on 13 May set a record early date for New York City.

Pacific Loon was recorded from Region 2. The Region 10 report includes interesting results from an offshore research vessel, which recorded some surprising species for the date of 10 May. No doubt the highlight was Black-capped Petrel, but the sense is that there's a lot to be learned about pelagic birding at that time of year.

Anhingas put on a show in many areas north of their normal range, and at least one bird visited several locations around New York City in April and May. This pales in comparison, though, to the flock of at least 22 birds that spent about a week in Region 5 at Rome. Will Anhinga beat Black-bellied Whistling-Duck to the state's breeding list? Crazy talk!

Three Regions reported American White Pelican, about normal for recent years, while an early Brown Pelican was found at Staten Island in Region 10. Every Region reported the secretive Least Bittern, perhaps another example of Breeding Bird Atlas efforts paying off.

Swallow-tailed Kites were reported from three Regions, and Mississippi Kites from two. Swainson's Hawks were recorded as migrants in Regions 2 and 5, while the wintering bird in Region 10 lingered long enough to make the spring list. Golden Eagles were recorded from every Region. It's pretty clear now that this is another raptor occurring in increasing numbers through this part of its range. American Goshawk numbers were up noticeably from the past few years, with records coming primarily from hawkwatches. A Gyrfalcon at Derby Hill in Region 5 was probably the best raptor report of the season.

The always impressive Scissor-tailed Flycatcher put on a show in three upstate Regions, with reports on 21 April in Regions 2 and 5, and then for a prolonged stay in Region 4. It's possible that the first two may have been the same bird. The locations are about 30 miles apart. Two Regions reported Loggerhead Shrike this spring; possibly three different birds were involved. With protection

and recovery projects ongoing to the north of us in Ontario, it would be great to see some signs of those efforts reflected in our area.

There were several high counts of Black-capped Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse. Derby Hill recorded a one day high of 275 of the former, while the BOS count in Region 1 tallied 334 Tufted Titmice during their April effort. There were several tallies of 500 to 1000 Horned Larks statewide, with 1000 reported in Washington County in Region 8. Other open country passerines were found in good numbers as well. Triple digit counts of Snow Buntings were recorded in several Regions, with a high count of 890 in Region 3. Counts of up to 55 Lapland Longspurs and 350 American Pipits in Region 2 are impressive tallies.

After a pretty lackluster winter, Bohemian Waxwings turned up in numbers in a few Regions, topping out at 330 birds near Pulaski in Region 5. Where were they coming from? Bohemian Waxwing is sometimes regarded as an honorary “winter finch”, but among the actual winter finches, it was nice to see the Region 4 and 5 reports of birds like Pine and Evening Grosbeak and Purple Finches still lingering in good numbers. Red Crossbills continued to nest on eastern Long Island in Region 10.

In the Region 5 report you’ll find a really interesting discussion of birds detected by Motus monitoring stations, including two different Bicknell’s Thrushes that had been tagged in the Dominican Republic. The entire Motus discussion is especially fascinating—it really seems as if we are on the cusp of a game-changing technology. While on the topic of technology in birding, it’s definitely worthwhile to check out the comments and frustrations expressed by Jeff Bolsinger in his Region 6 report regarding the possibility of being overconfident when using the Merlin app to identify difficult bird songs. Elsewhere, a Varied Thrush was a great yard bird for a homeowner in Penfield in Region 2.

This seems as good a place as any to mention a few of the many early arrival dates for migrants this spring. In Region 1, Baltimore Oriole arrived on 18 April, Region 2 recorded Cliff Swallow on 2 March, Cape May Warbler on 24 April in Region 5, and a Purple Martin in Region 10 on 18 February, which technically should have been part of the winter seasonal account! Many other species arrived earlier than long-time observers are used to, but as Jeff Bolsinger puts it in his Region 6 report, “many species arrived early compared to long-term averages, but at similar or only slightly earlier dates relative to most recent years.” It’s worth going through each of the Regional accounts just to see the effects of the early warm weather on our arriving migrants.

The always elusive Henslow’s Sparrow showed for many observers at locations in Regions 4 and 5 (one bird in each spot) and generated some interesting comments in the Region 5 report. Grasshopper Sparrows are still widespread, albeit in small and dwindling numbers. The Region 7 editors talk about some specific habitats that this species seems to rely upon for migration or perhaps for scouting potential breeding sites.

There were a number of still unmentioned rarities scattered across the state. A Connecticut Warbler in Region 2 was the only one found in the state, as was the Swainson’s Warbler on Long Island. A first Lark Bunting for Region 2 was photographed at the Braddock Bay Hawk Watch on 12 May; another provided a first spring record for Region 10 along Dune Road in Suffolk on 14 May. An adult

male Western Tanager in Rochester (Region 2) provided an excellent sixth Regional record. Painted Buntings are no longer the rarity that they once were in Region 10, but the one in Central Park still deserves mention! On nearby Randall's Island, a transitioning-plumaged Smith's Longspur provided a seventh state record, and it was followed a few weeks later by a spectacular adult male on Long Island.

This season there were many candidates for Bird of the Season; Smith's Longspur, Lark Bunting, Yellow Rail are a few that come to mind. But, honestly, it would be hard to deny that the two first state record gulls, Heermann's and Glaucous-winged, really have to get the nod. Both are stragglers from the west coast, neither entirely shocking based on recent records in surrounding states, and, I think, both deserving of sharing top spot for the Best of the Season.

So, as always, thanks for reading and good luck in your bird-finding endeavors.