

THE CHANGING SEASONS

by James Tate, Jr.*



The nesting season, 1974. About as normal and propitious as any nesting season could be

Black Duck, vanishing species? See text. Photo/ Allan D. Cruickshank from N.A.S.

I don't know if I have ever been able to find a suit off the rack that could fit me perfectly without alteration. I recognize that I am tall — like many Americans. But somehow that average American for whom the clothes are designed just plain doesn't exist. Each of us is a little too tall, too short, too round or too near the proportion of your average Sandhill Crane.

If ever we were looking for an average breeding season for North American birds, we may have found it in 1974. Admittedly we will have to alter the prognosis to account for a tropical depression in late June in Florida and Georgia; have to allow for high waters on the Great Lakes; a cool June in the north central area and a dry July in the heart of the continent. But all in all if a bird in North America had the urge to breed and could find a willing mate, the weather should not have been a problem. Coming on the heels of the good-to-excellent breeding year of 1973, we have an opportunity in *The Changing Seasons* to look for population trends that are possibly affected by events other than atmospheric.

We will also keep an eye out for the unusual. The rarities are fun, but a bit frustrating if you find out that someone had the first state record of a Rufous-necked Sandpiper in the very next county but no one thought to tell you (it could have happened in California). The best reason for watching for rarities is that today's rarity might well be tomorrow's range expansion if the habitat or adaptive changes continue.

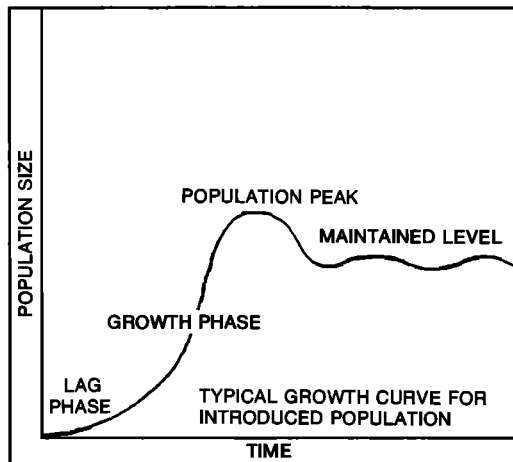
Common Loons summered in unusual locations in New York, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma and even Louisiana. An out-of-place Arctic Loon

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was in Denver on June 2 and a Yellow-billed in Washington state on June 14. Human pressures on nesting Common Loons are causing problems on small mountain lakes in southern British Columbia and in southern Ontario.

Brown Pelicans showed good success in South Carolina, southern California and Louisiana. Two new nesting sites were discovered in Florida. While we have no reason to believe that this bird is "out of the woods" yet, these continued encouraging reports are welcome. Up until recently the Brown Pelican, state bird of Louisiana, no longer bred in its home state. The success of the transplanted colonies in Louisiana is another example of innovative non-game wildlife management. I hope that we will hear the complete story of this venture soon.

The Cattle Egret, self-introduced exotic in



North America, continues to expand with new reports coming from Idaho and Saskatchewan. Like most successful transplants, the population in any given locality can be expected to exhibit a low level of success for several years running before experiencing a logarithmic period of growth followed by a maintained population at a slightly lower level. (See Figure)

Old reports of House Sparrows and Starlings show this pattern. The Monk Parakeet in the Northeast had just left the lag phase and entered the growth phase before "controls" were instituted. Judging from 1973 and 1974 the Cattle Egret has entered the growth phase in South Texas.

Yellow-crowned Night Herons and Great Egrets made a strong invasion of the Northeast this year, penetrating into western New York and southern Ontario. Their flight was noticeable through the Appalachians.

I want to take a moment to commend John Ogden once again for his wading bird nesting survey for peninsular Florida. Somehow we must do more to see that this important region for wading birds is properly censused and properly protected.

The waterfowl nesting season was good-to-excellent in the Great Plains duck factory of Canada and north central United States. The Gadwall continues its expansion in the East with record numbers and summering birds from Ontario and northern Illinois. Feral Mute Swans continue their slow invasion of much of the northern tier of states.

The Black Duck is probably doomed. Not so much by the hunters' guns as by the slow spread of Mallard genes through their populations. In Ontario few hybrids are evident anymore — only Mallards. As modern man opened up the eastern woods, the woodland ponds were no longer a genetic refuge for the Black Duck. The prairie-pond-adapted Mallards found their range greatly expanded and quickly filled the gap. With a genetic combination only slightly different from the Mallard, the pure Black Duck has become rarer and rarer until only the saltmarsh Blacks of the coast and extreme northeast of North America continue to hang on. Even Black Ducks from Maine and New Hampshire are no longer pure. It was a fine native duck — but mother nature played a trick on us this time.

The success story of the Canada Goose is woven through the pages that follow — but we should leave the details until another time. Rarities are the word for many of the Alaska counts. Words like Garganey and Pochard appear often in the waterfowl section.

Am I hanging on every little sign of hope, or are

the Bald Eagles and Ospreys really doing better? Judge for yourself by looking at the reports from Ohio, Minnesota, California and Washington. Turkey Vultures seem to be continuing their slow breeding season invasion of the northeast. Marsh Hawks are clearly in trouble just about everywhere. Kites continue to make news in every report within their ranges. Mississippi Kites seem to be doing particularly well.

Do you want to see Yellow Rails in numbers? Go to Aitkin County, Minnesota, next summer. Black Rail reports are becoming more common as birders become better at recognizing their sounds, and the tape recorder is becoming a regular birding companion.

Bar-tailed Godwits appeared at several points along the Pacific coast. The Alaska shorebird reports read like a field guide to Asian sandpipers. The American Woodcock clearly expanded its breeding range on the prairie border in Minnesota, the Dakotas and into Colorado. With only spotty high water damage, gulls and terns, including the precarious Least Tern, had a good season. I want to draw the reader's attention to the story of Mono Lake, and the discovery of a Marbled Murrelet nest in the Middle Pacific Coast report.

Throughout these reports unusual sightings appear regularly. It would be unnecessary for me to repeat each of them here. Of special note, however, is the Rufous-capped Warbler that has been in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park since September 1973, and the Crimson-collared Grosbeak near Bengtson, Texas.

Barn Swallows are continuing their expansion into the South Central states and west into South Texas. The Cassin's Sparrow made an invasion into Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado that is well documented herein. Grasshopper Sparrows are reported in trouble in several regions.

One final word should be said for the numerous reports that bear numerical data. For many species quantitative information is hard to get. It is absolutely essential, however, if we are going to pinpoint suspected changes. Like the Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird Census, we need to know how many birds occupy a known quantity of range or how many were seen resulting from a known effort. We have long felt that the northern warblers are not as abundant as they once were. In most cases any estimate is pure speculation, however.

So like the average citizen buying a new outfit, it has been an average breeding season. With minor adjustments here and there it may shape up as one of the best seasons in a long time. The spectacular was largely absent as most birds settled into the serious business of raising a family.