

The Changing Seasons

Kenn Kaufman

IN LATE MAY 1984 a Laysan Albatross came out of the heat-haze of southern California's Imperial Valley and stationed itself at the north end of the Salton Sea. The word went out, and the birders flocked in. Many had tried and failed to see this scarce bird on winter boat trips off Monterey; now they could plant their telescopes on the dike at the Whitewater Rivermouth and watch it here, on this steaming inland sea, where no albatross had ever been seen before. Then in June, remarkably, a second Laysan Albatross appeared, and the two birds could sometimes be seen together.

Guy McCaskie, who knows the birds of the Salton Sea better than anyone, said at the time: "This one will be hard to top." So, naturally, in late July a gadfly petrel showed up on the Sea: one of the *Pterodroma*, those true pelagics, lovers of deep water, making the Laysan Albatross seem practically humdrum and ordinary by comparison. Observers wrestled with the thorny question of whether the Salton Sea bird was a Cook's Petrel (which had been found, a few times, many miles off the California coast), a Pycroft's Petrel (*never* found in North American waters at all), or perhaps something else. McCaskie shook his head in mock resignation: never make conservative predictions in field ornithology. Any bird record can be, and probably will be, topped.

And in fact there had been some reason to *expect* the Salton Sea albatrosses. We had all been incredulous when two good birders had reported a Laysan flying across Morongo Pass in May, 1976. But in subsequent years, at the same season, another appeared in southern California's interior and one was found on a sidewalk

in southwestern Arizona. The two this year added to a clearly developing pattern. Some scientists will belittle the importance of isolated rare birds, but I believe this kind of pattern often has significance and is worth recording. And today's freak vagrant may fit neatly into tomorrow's pattern of rare-but-regular occurrences.

Why we cannot trace the commonplace

HERE IS A RARE-BUT-REGULAR OCCURRENCE in field ornithology: four times a year, somewhere in North America, a bird person sits down with a stack of 27 *American Birds* Regional Reports and uses them as a springboard to writing this column, "The Changing Seasons." The results of this random biological event are somewhat unpredictable. Most writers use this space to comment on the birds of the season; some turn it around and analyze the Regional Reports themselves, to see how well they are performing their task, whatever that task is perceived to be.

Those who take the latter angle generally do so because they have something to criticize. Now, criticism is a valuable thing, but most of the critiques I recall have taken the same theme: the Regional Reports do not say enough about the commonplace. In spring and fall, they do not allow us to track the migrations of common species across the continent. In winter and summer, they do not provide enough data for us to keep tabs on subtle population trends in widespread birds.

These points are hard to contradict. The Regional Reports do not do those things. In a similar vein, my friend Dean (who is a cat) does not bark (although

I've tried to teach him how!). But in both cases, we might ask: Can they? Should they?

Dean, I suspect, really can bark, and simply refuses. But I do not think the Regional Reports *can* follow the fortunes of every common bird in every season. This is partly a problem of space. The Regional Editors are given space allotments, and even if they blithely exceed these at times, conscience reins them in at some point. When I was involved in writing the Southwest Regional report, Janet Witzeman and I once calculated that it would take one-third of our space allowance simply to *list* all species reported in a season—without dates, places or punctuation. Saying something significant about each would have taken us hopelessly beyond the limit.

But when it comes to reporting subtle population trends, the hardest part is noticing these in the first place. The kind of birding that most of us enjoy, the kind that makes birding so popular, is not conducive to detecting minor changes in bird population levels. If we seem to notice more or fewer individuals of some common species—even if our daily notes show higher or lower numbers—this could mean that we are getting out more or less than last year, going to different places, birding at different times of day, estimating numbers differently, or any of hundreds of other variables.

Of course some birders have census routes that they cover in a standardized way, giving them numbers that can be reliably compared from year to year. But Lord Kelvin's dictum applies to most general impressions of bird population if we haven't measured it, we don't know what we're talking about. So while many

Regional Editors are glad to quote population figures that have been scientifically obtained (*e.g.*, the figures on waterfowl in Alaska, and various colonial birds on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts), vague impressions are less likely to be written up unless they have been echoed by many observers.

Monitoring the edges

BUT WHILE LOCAL BIRD populations might rise or fall unmeasured, changes in the distribution of a species are something else. Most birders have at least one geographical area of particular interest—be it their home state or province or county, a certain park, a Christmas Bird Count circle—and they are keenly aware of which species occur within that area. At least here at the populated latitudes, no range extension can proceed very far without crossing a boundary watched by some birder; no range contraction can go on very long without that species vanishing from some observer's preferred area. And when something new appears, or when something familiar disappears, birders take note and notify their Regional Editors.

These changes in distribution are taking place constantly—every work on "Status and Distribution of the Birds of . . ." is out of date before it comes off the press. I believe one of the greatest contributions of the *American Birds* Regional Reports is that they allow us to follow the whole panorama of North America's changing avifauna—on a large scale that no other periodical even attempts, and with an immediacy that books on bird distribution cannot hope to match. The birders of the continent are out monitoring the edges of changing bird distributions, and the results are all distilled between these covers.

The edge moves forward

NEARLY EIGHT YEARS AGO in this column (*AB* 31:148), after mentioning the "Blue List" of declining species, I suggested half-seriously that we should initiate an "Orange List" of birds with increasing populations or expanding ranges. Fortunately, this idea never caught on; but if it had, first prize in this category—the orange ribbon—certainly would have gone this season to the Double-crested Cormorant. This bird is enjoying phenomenal success almost literally everywhere.

It is hard to recall another occasion when a native bird has had such a population increase on such a broad front. Consider this summer's scorecard. In the Maritimes, Double-cresteds were found nesting in St. Pierre et Miquelon for the first time since 1964. Rhode Island's Sakonnet Point colony, established just three years ago, was increasing exponentially, and a new colony of 70 pairs was established on the East River in New York City. Cormorants bred for the second time ever in Virginia; although few nests were involved, many adults were in the area and hundreds summered on the Chesapeake Bay. Inland, the colonies on Lake Champlain and eastern Lake Ontario continued to grow, although one of the latter was vandalized. In the Western Great Lakes Region the cormorants "continued their phenomenal nesting success, with expansion noted in several locales;" Ontario had reported the same kind of trend in 1983. Iowa noted its first nestings since 1966, and numbers of summering nonbreeders drew comments in other midwestern states and in the Appalachian Region. Cormorants in the Dakotas were doing well, and moderate-to-major increases were noted at colonies in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, southwestern Arizona, southern Idaho and eastern Washington. On the outer coast of Washington, this species (and most other breeding seabirds) evidently had a bad year; but on protected waters the picture was much brighter, with increasing numbers in Grays Harbor and the Straits of Juan de Fuca and in the Straits of Georgia, British Columbia. Finally, in the well-worked San Francisco Bay area, first breeding records were confirmed for two counties. . . . have I left anybody out? Is anyone still in doubt? There was justification for Blue-listing this bird in the early 1970s, but for the moment, at least, the Double-crested Cormorant is doing very well!

Some of the cormorant's advances may represent a regaining of lost ground; but the award for great comebacks has to go to the Brown Pelican. The pelicans are doing so well today that it is hard to imagine the trouble they faced less than two decades ago. Their resurgence in the post-DDT era has been remarkable. Their successful nesting trend on the Texas coast continued this season, and they bred for a second consecutive year in Alabama. Florida colonies prospered despite local damage to the nesting substrate, as detailed by Richard Paul. Pelicans



Brown Pelicans and other birds at Hampton Roads on the lower James R., Va., June 30, 1984. Brown Pelicans staged a major northward invasion along the Atlantic Coast this summer. Photo/Bill Portlock.

cans are advancing north on the Atlantic coast: North Carolina had seven colonies this season, and the northernmost at Oregon Inlet had 65 pairs (up from just three nests in 1983!). For the third consecutive year large numbers moved north along the coast as far as New Jersey, and there was a possible report inland in Pennsylvania.

This post-DDT era may simply be a more prosperous time for all the big fish-eaters. That other comeback kid, the Osprey, got rave reviews practically everywhere, and Great Blue Herons were widely reported to be doing very well.

After several bits of suggestive evidence over the last decade, the Wood Duck was finally confirmed as a breeder in Arizona, with several pairs nesting in the Prescott region. This summer Wood Ducks also registered their first nestings in western Colorado and a rare nesting in Saskatchewan, and a lone male provided a first record for the Northwestern Canada Region; the species may be undergoing a general increase in the West. The Ring-necked Duck may also be in a period of expansion, judging by peripheral breeding records from upstate New York, Iowa, Nevada, and northern California.

Snail Kites in Florida were making a comeback after a few bad years, and the other three kites (not including the peripheral Hook-billed) all showed signs of continuing their recent range expansions. Mississippi Kites were even noted as "pest birds" in some towns in the Southern Great Plains Region!

From their stronghold in the center of the continent, Wilson's Phalaropes have been spreading in all directions recently. This summer, surprising numbers were noted in the Yukon Territory, new breed-

difficult to trace: note their sudden appearance after mid-July in places as far apart as North Carolina and Illinois.

Both Frances Williams (Southern Great Plains) and Lasley and Sexton (South Texas) mention the cowbird threat to Black-capped Vireos, and the latter editors relate some truly alarming figures on the rate of cowbird parasitism on this species. (For some perspective on the cowbird's effect on uncommon species, see Mayfield 1977, *AB* 31: 107-113. Extrapolating from the figures Mayfield gave then, it is likely that Kirtland's Warbler would be extinct today were it not for the cowbird control program in Michigan.) Cowbirds were also named as the culprits in a decline of Orchard Orioles in the southern plains states.

Reduced numbers of Western Meadowlarks were noticed in parts of Colorado, Wyoming and North Dakota. This may have reflected local habitat changes or effects of last winter's weather. But as Ron Weir notes this season, the eastward expansion of this species in the Great Lakes area also seems to have slowed to a halt.

The erratic edge

I HAVE ALWAYS HAD a special liking for those nomadic birds whose geographical and seasonal occurrences cannot be predicted from one year to the next, even if their wanderings are dictated by something so mundane as food supply.

The number one nomad this season was White-winged Crossbill. Some summers (1983, for example), this species goes virtually unmentioned in these pages; this year it was reported as unusually numerous in central and south-central Alaska, parts of Alberta, eastern Ontario, much of Quebec, and throughout the northern part of the Northeastern Maritime Region. Representing the tip of the iceberg south of the border, Wyoming had a major flock in July, a dozen summered in New Mexico (where rare at any season), Nevada had its second record ever, and a stray showed up at Walla Walla, Washington.

I have to wonder: where were all these birds last year? Were they simply swallowed up in the vastness of the boreal forest, or is there tremendous variation in the total continental population from one year to the next? Stuart Tingley reports that the White-wingeds in the Northeastern Maritime Region started nesting as soon as they showed up, in June, and he

also relates the bizarre story of Red Crossbills in Maine nesting while still in juvenal plumage. Nesting by very young birds has been documented in certain doves and other birds; this capability would seem biologically valuable for crossbills, which depend on the decidedly unpredictable resource of good cone crops. It is tempting (if somewhat far-fetched) to speculate that some of the June breeders in the Maritimes might also have nested (or even hatched!) in Alaska during the spring. (The distance should be no obstacle to carduelines; note that a road-killed Pine Siskin in British Columbia this season had been banded in New Jersey.)

Among other erratic species, Black-billed and Yellow-billed cuckoos were mentioned as generally scarce and locally numerous. Many reporters tied cuckoo numbers to local tent caterpillar populations, but in the Hudson-Delaware Region cuckoos were rare everywhere regardless of the caterpillar supply. Cedar Waxwings staged an unprecedented incursion into parts of the Middle and Southern Atlantic Coast regions, breeding at many new localities.

Dickcissels, whose erratic breeding distribution cannot be connected to any one food item, had a typically strange year: they were usually numerous in the Middlewestern Prairie Region, Michigan, and western Nebraska, but the Northern Great Plains Region found none at all; one adventurous individual sang from a fencepost in Newfoundland. Armistead summed up their status on the Atlantic Coastal Plain, where Dickcissels are found "at widely separated spots and in perilously low numbers." Red Crossbills were unusually numerous along the length of the Pacific Coast, and a patchy abundance of Pine Siskins was noted in several areas, especially in the Northwest.

Finding the edge

RANDOM BIRDING TURNS UP surprises and makes major contributions in every season, but I confess I am most impressed by purposeful fieldwork designed to answer specific questions. The Southern Atlantic Coast Region provided some good examples this season. LeGrand and others surveyed some previously neglected habitats and discovered new populations of Lark and Henslow's sparrows; the Henslow's were especially notable because of the many sites and

individuals involved, and because prior to last year the Region had had no summer reports since the 1950s. Meanwhile, offshore work by Lee, Haney, Forsythe and others continues to revolutionize our knowledge of seabird distribution there. This summer produced notable numbers of Band-rumped and Leach's storm-petrels, Black-capped Petrels and Masked Boobies, and yet another record of Red-billed Tropicbird, this one a first for Georgia. Given the scarcity of historical pelagic birding in this Region, it is hard to say which of these trends reflect actual population changes; but thanks to the current work, future changes will be easier to detect.

One of the most significant recent developments in birding has been the initiation of bird atlas projects in several states and provinces. The atlas approach is very effective because it does not try to collect an infinite number of precise locations ("3.7 km w.s.w. of Greenville") nor does it deal in generalities ("western Iowa"); it divides the area under study into a manageable number of small squares, and attempts to determine which species breed within each square. Virtually everywhere that atlas projects have been tried, they have produced an extraordinary number of new discoveries; see the comments this season in the Ontario, Quebec, and Appalachian regions. Once again, most of these findings represent extensions of knowledge, not extensions of birds' ranges, but today's atlasing will provide a basis for comparison in monitoring tomorrow's changes.

So far, almost all of these projects are being carried out on the eastern half of



Young Short-billed Dowitcher at Akimiski I., N.W.T., July 12, 1984. First local confirmation of breeding, and one of the many discoveries along the Ontario north coasts generated by the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project. Photo/A. G. Carpentier.

the continent. It is true that some states in the Mountain West are now recording distribution by latilongs, following the example set in Montana by P.D. Skaar, a sort of coarse-grained atlasing that makes a very good first step for the wide-open spaces. But to date there has been practically nothing in the way of organized, systematic, cooperative study of bird distribution on the West Coast, even in California, aside from their very detailed atlasing of little Marin County. So it is encouraging to hear that a larger-scale atlas project is being organized for southern California.

Beyond the edge

ALTHOUGH MOST OF THIS summary deals with happenings along the edges of birds' established ranges, a few other exceptional occurrences this season merit additional comment.

In terms of distance, the greatest range extension of the season was that of the Fulvous Whistling-Ducks recorded nesting in Hawaii for the first time. Although the birds could have been escapes from captivity, the track record of the species suggests otherwise: this is the world's most widespread wild duck (breeding north and south of the Equator in both the eastern and western hemispheres), and it is known to wander far out of range in flocks, a habit that makes it exceptionally capable of colonizing new areas. Of course, all of Hawaii's birds, even the "non-introduced" ones, have descended from birds that originated elsewhere; but it is exciting to think that we may be witnessing one of these unaided arrivals in progress.

A Greater White-fronted Goose sum-



A handful of downy young Wilson's Phalaropes near Russell, Ont., June 30, 1984. First confirmation of breeding for the Ottawa area. Photo/B. M. DiLabio.

mering in northern California was thought to represent the mysterious "Tule Goose" that forms a small minority of the wintering White-fronted population in that area. The Regional Editors refer readers to a paper in this journal (Krogman 1978, *AB* 32: 164-166) for more information. Note however that although Krogman calls the Tule Goose *A. a. gambelli*, it was formally described in 1975 as *A. a. elgasi* (*American Museum Novitates* No. 2565) by Delacour and Ripley, who considered *gambelli* to be another uncommon large race wintering on the Gulf Coast. This taxonomic arrangement has been disputed. But whatever its Latin name is, the Tule Goose differs from other White-fronteds wintering in California in being larger and proportionately longer-necked, with much darker head and back, slower wingbeats and deeper, harsher voice; it tends to flock apart from other White-fronteds.

In Virginia, an apparent Sandwich Tern with an all-yellow bill raised the possibility of Cayenne Tern, a South American bird variously regarded as a full species, a race (*S. s. eurygnatha*) of Sandwich Tern, or perhaps a mere color morph of that species. Whatever it is, the Cayenne Tern already has been reported in North America, although many birders missed the news (May 30, 1983 at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; Buckley and Buckley 1984, *Auk* 101: 396-398). And whether or not it eventually proves to be "countable," birders throughout the Southeast should watch for it, as it may be spreading. For the last two years Robert Norton has reported small numbers in the islands just east of Puerto Rico; this summer there were nine there on Aneгада. The count of 3450 pairs on Aruba this season indicates a substantial source population in the southern Caribbean.

Last words

THE ONE THING I DISLIKE about writing this column is that every season offers so many fascinating multi-Regional events that there is never room to discuss them all. My first draft was over twice the length we could use; I had to slice out long sections on the fortunes of bitterns, the spread of Great-tailed Grackles and House Finches, the northward shift of Golden-winged Warblers, and the lingering effects of *El Niño* in the North Pacific, not to mention the literary implications of Willow Flycatchers in North Carolina and the hazards of being a conspicuously late Indigo Bunting in Florida. But do not take my word for it: read on; all the good material is in the pages ahead.

Abbreviations Frequently Used in Regional Reports

ad.: adult, Am.: American, c.: central, C: Celsius, CBC: Christmas Bird Count, Cr.: Creek, Com.: Common, Co.: County, Cos.: Counties, *et al.*: and others, E.: Eastern (bird name), Eur.: European, Eurasian, F: Fahrenheit, *fide*: reported by, F.&W.S.: Fish & Wildlife Service, Ft.: Fort, imm.: immature, I.: Island, Is.: Islands, Isles, Jct.: Junction, juv.: juvenile, L.: Lake, m.ob.: many observers, Mt.: Mountain, Mts.: Mountains, N.F.: National Forest, N.M.: National Monument, N.P.: National Park, N.W.R.: Nat'l Wildlife Refuge, N.: Northern (bird name), Par.: Parish, Pen.: Peninsula, P.P.: Provincial Park, Pt.: Point, not Port, Ref.: Refuge, Res.:

Reservoir, not Reservation, R.: River, S.P.: State Park, sp.: species, spp.: species plural, ssp.: subspecies, Twp.: Township, W.: Western (bird name), W.M.A.: Wildlife Management Area, v.o.: various observers, N,S,W,E,: direction of motion, n., s., w., e.,: direction of location, >: more than, <: fewer than, ±: approximately, or estimated number, ♂: male, ♀: female, ♂: imm. or female, *: specimen, ph.: photographed, †: documented, ft: feet, mi: miles, m: meters, km: kilometers, date with a + (*e.g.*, Mar. 4+): recorded beyond that date. Editors may also abbreviate often-cited locations or organizations.

NORTHEASTERN MARITIME REGION

/Stuart I. Tingley

June and early July were generally very warm and dry with record-breaking high temperatures in many areas. Heavy rains fell in most areas in mid-late July but temperatures remained near normal. The biggest exception to this generalization was Newfoundland, where June was characterized as cool, wet, and windy and July was considered pleasant with considerable sunshine.

This Region seems plagued more than any other with tardy reporting. Although the deadline for submitting observations to me for this nesting season report was August 7, the peak of receipt of material in my mail box was fully a month after that, well past my deadline for submission of this report of September 1! The main reason for this is undoubtedly because this Region encompasses no fewer than five states and four provinces, most of which have their own journals or newsletters collecting bird observations on deadlines completely out of synchrony with ours. This report, although being completed more than *two months* after the end of the reporting period, is still incomplete. Coverage is good only for Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Rhode Island, patchy for Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, and totally lacking for Prince Edward Island and New Hampshire. Special thanks this season to Roger Etcheberry for a very thorough nesting season report from the French islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon.

ABBREVIATION — S.P.M. = St. Pierre et Miquelon.

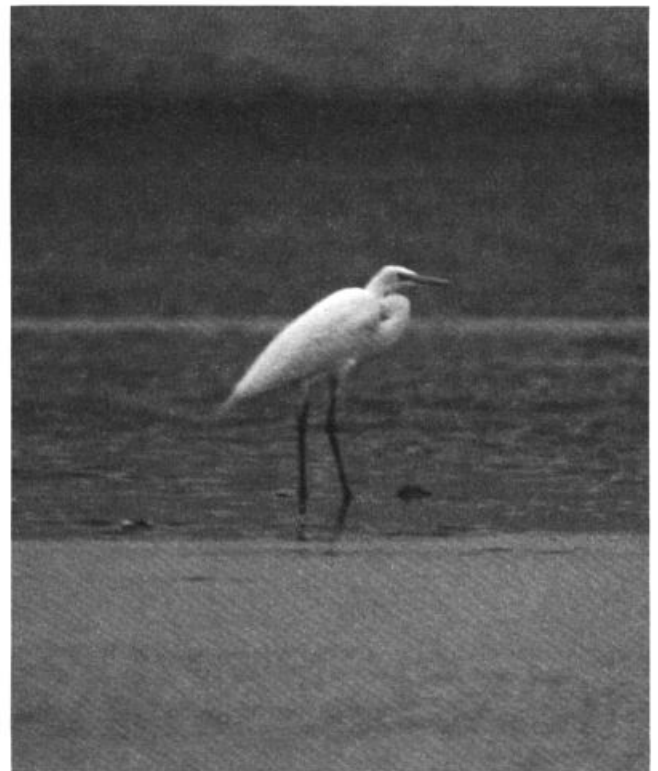
LOONS THROUGH HERONS — There exist but a handful of nesting records for Red-throated Loon in the Region s. of Labrador, those being from insular Newfoundland and S.P.M. At the latter location, a nest with one egg at Langlade June 2 and a 4-week-old juvenile at Miquelon July 10 were of interest (*vide* RET), as was a non-breeding concentration of 59 along 15 mi of beach near Eddie's Cove, n. Nfld., June 17 (BMc, JW). Farther s., lingering or summering birds included singles at Pt. Judith, R.I., June 3 (*vide* DE) and near Chatham, Mass., July 15 (V. Cordes, *vide* BN). Noteworthy was a Pied-billed Grebe near Glenwood, Nfld., July 21 (*vide* HD). This species is not known to have ever nested in that province. Apparently unique in the Region was a probable summering Horned Grebe at Napatree Pt., R.I., July 22 (*vide* DE).

Northern Fulmars were unreported south of Cabot Strait during the period. Shearwaters were well reported and apparently occurred in good numbers at their traditional locations. Impressive was a count of 1100 Cory's Shearwaters 35 mi s. of Block I., R.I., June 27 (*vide* DE). The

only Cory's recorded in the Maritimes was one from the Cabot Strait ferry (Nova Scotia side) July 28 (BMy). Manx Shearwaters were widely reported in small numbers, including up to 35, 9 mi s. of Block Island June 27. Five Manx Shearwaters seen at dusk in early June flying into the w. passage of Narragansett Bay, R.I., was suggestive of possible nesting on Dutch or Hope islands (*vide* DE). This species was also heard vocalizing at night in early August on Colombier Island in the S.P.M. archipelago where it is suspected of nesting (RET *et al.*).

A census of nesting cormorants in S.P.M. revealed 120 nests of Great Cormorants and 12 nests of Double-crested Cormorants, the first definite nesting of the latter species since 1964 (*vide* RET). Double-crested continue to increase exponentially at their Sakonnet Pt., R.I. colony with 388 nests reported this summer (*vide* DE).

Least Bitterns were reportedly doing very well in Rhode Island where 14 were observed in June (*vide* DE). One at Longmeadow, Mass., June 19 was unusual in that part of the state (*vide* SK), while several were noted again at national wildlife areas in s.e. New Brunswick and n. Nova Scotia (HPB). Great Blue Herons made news in Rhode Island when a nest was discovered at Buck Hill June 12, providing a first state nesting record (REN, *vide* DE). Other nesting herons and egrets were reported reduced in numbers in that state this summer, with the exception of Great Egret which is described as "flourishing" at Gould I. in Tiverton where 53 nests were reported (*vide* DE). Nova Scotia's only known Black-crowned Night-Heron colony, at Bon Portage I., contained 14 nests this summer. This colony was once again attended all summer by four breeding-plumaged Snowy Egrets although efforts to discover Canada's first nest were unsuccessful (PCS, EPS *et al.*). Northernmost Tricolored Herons were at Machias, Me., June 6 (*vide* WCT) and an unconfirmed report by a visiting birder at Great Barasway, Placentia Bay, Nfld., June 10 (*vide* BMC) which would provide only the 2nd provincial record. Other stray herons in Newfoundland included two Little Blues—an adult at St. John's in mid-June (*vide* WAM) and an "immature" at Swift Current July 1 (RET)—and a Great Egret at Stephenville Crossing June 5-16 (BMy *et al.*, ph.). The only Cattle Egret reported n. of New England was an adult at Grand Pre, N.S., June 23 (ELM *et al.*), while the only Yellow-crowned Night-Herons reported were four immatures at 2 e. Massachusetts locations in late July (*vide* BN).



Great Egret at Stephenville Crossing, Nfld., June 9, 1984. Photo/Blake Maybank.