

THE CHANGING SEASONS

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WHILE MOST CHANGING SEASONS EDITORS BEGIN BY describing the incredible variety of weather and migration patterns evident across the country, this season was characterized by its remarkable uniformity. Spring was early and dry, and this earliness was reflected in the migration of many birds. Along the Pacific Coast, after a fairly wet winter, the spring was relatively warm and dry. In the mountains and near the Great Lake states, a mild March was followed by a few storms that didn't have much effect on the birds. In much of the east and south the story was the same: a warm beginning (except in Quebec), followed by a lack of rain as the drought of '86 came into full swing. The effect, if any, of the drought will probably come this summer during the breeding season and later, as it affects food availability for migrants and winter visitants. In any event, we'll have to wait to see the effect as the birds generally didn't seem to care that it wasn't raining.

They did care, however, that it was warm. In general, waterfowl and passerine migrants established early records in virtually all Regions. These included birds like most ducks, swifts, swallows, flycatchers, wrens, thrushes, warblers, and vireos. The bulk of the migrating individuals, however, came more or less on time, and in usual numbers.

Patterns of migration

The overall patterns of migration deserve some comment. Along the Pacific Coast and the southwest, it was "one of the dullest in years," or "even paced and unremarkable." In the mountain states and further east, the migration was early, but not spectacular. Numerous early sightings are sprinkled throughout almost all these Regional Reports. The amount of migration was termed poor in the northeast and south, with some marked exceptions. But before we get into comments on specific species and overall trends, we would like to get up on the soapbox that belongs to the Changing Seasons authors.

Readability of Regional Reports

The readability of the various Regional Reports is quite variable. We hate to hit on the hard-working Regional Editors, having sat in that chair ourselves in past years, but we will, nevertheless, make a plea on style that editors should, we feel, at least consider.

We read with some bemusement statements like: "A Tree Swallow in Jones Apr. 18 represented a new park record," or "At Los Benthos an Am. Redstart provided a not unexpected first record May 8." Both tell us almost nothing. Are these new seasonal records, a range expansion, first for the site, state, country, or . . . ? In addition, comments like Bobolinks "larking and burbling at Garbagetown May 18" don't really help the editor to communicate. Finally, a listing of records that were received without sufficient details only serves to confuse the issue. If there is suspicion of validity on the editor's part, but the record still warrants inclusion, then give us details with appropriate caveats.

We applaud those editors who tell us the meaning of a particular record. A mere listing of a report of "30 Little Gulls at Plainville" tells us absolutely nothing unless one is familiar with the area and the species. "Thirty Little Gulls at Plainville was a surprising find at the northern limit of their regional distribution" would be so much more informative. If the individual reports could be read productively by someone with little or no specific knowledge of the birds in the region, then you have probably done your job. A good rule of thumb is if you don't have room to tell why it's important, you don't have room for it!

So what do you do with all those records that space dictates leaving out? Previous Changing Season authors have bemoaned the fact that we just can't publish everything, yet the Regional Editors compile a vast amount of truly valuable sightings in the course of writing their seasonal reports. These data should be made available to researchers in some format. Perhaps with the advent of personal computers we will come closer to sharing that information. Each region and its editor probably needs to treat this in-

formation differently. It only remains for each editor to make it clear to researchers in their region what happens to all of the unpublished data.

Are all those species really increasing?

We found that observers are much more likely to report good news in their summaries. New birds get far more space in the reports than declining species. Unless things are really a lot better than we think, about an equal number of species should be increasing as decreasing. The regional reports don't reflect this, and the ratio of increases to decreases is about 10 or 20 to 1. This is probably human nature, rather than bird nature, and it would naturally make an objective investigator somewhat leery of taking these reports at face value. If a person misses a species, he or she is far less likely to notice it than if more than the usual number were observed. Also, an element of self-doubt can enter in. If you don't see a bird, you don't know if you suddenly developed a blind spot for it, or if it REALLY wasn't there! All of this leads to a natural bias in reporting that needs to be taken into account when interpreting data such as these.

What can a birder see?

In going through the accounts, we wondered just how much an observer could actually say about the quantity of migration, as it applies to the actual numbers of birds moving through an area. In terms of waterbirds, we feel that the accounts are fairly accurate. Most observers in an area can actually view ducks, shorebirds, *et cetera*, fairly accurately and completely. Hawks are also pretty well known and monitored from various vantage points. However, when one begins to talk about thrushes being down, or Yellow-throated Vireos up, we have some doubts, as observers see only a very small fraction of the migration.

Aside from the fact that observers are far more likely to call an increase than a decrease, as we noted above, there is also the factor of the sheer number of migrants. The many millions of birds that move through any given region in a season are a sequential horde that even a team of observers only begins to sample. Seeing a few hundred land birds in a day, the average observer can easily transform that into an overall view of the strength of migration. Only when systematic counts or censuses are taken in the same area (or preferably several areas), on a daily basis, can really good estimates of quantity of migration be made. While the excellent programs at the various banding stations and bird observatories can contribute much to our understanding in any given year, most of these stations are located at the coast, off the main migration route of most passerines. The vast majority of passerine birds that arrive on the coast are young birds, often associated with weather systems that take them off their course to a certain extent. The report from the Upper Texas Coast of the "year the warblers returned" is quite possibly due to fall-outs of migrants on the weekends. (The report we have just received of a shocking failure of passerine reproduction this spring in California from D. DeSante emphasizes the need for such monitoring programs. . . more on this next season!!) Inland stations, like Powdermill Nature Reserve in Pennsylvania can (and does in this season) contribute a great deal. We need more systematic censusing, however, to give us a real handle on migration.

Why are the warblers so boring?

There also seemed to be fewer trends reported in warblers and sparrows than in other groups of birds. We suspect it is because observers are so overwhelmed by the 20+ or even 30 warbler species and the few dozen sparrows that can turn up in an area or a region, that they don't compare the numbers between years carefully. If these groups were less closely-aligned taxonomically, there might well be more notice taken of the individual species that make up the group. With some marked exceptions, most regional reports only tell of new, early, or late dates in these groups. The alternative, that warblers and sparrows are more stable than other groups, doesn't seem likely to us. We feel that it would lend more credibility to the reports if observers could spend a bit more time thinking about the individual species in this group than they appear to be doing.

With the above caveats in mind, however, let us look at the various trends that we have divined from the reports of Regional Editors.

General trends

There were some trends that the Regional Editors tended to agree upon. Loons and grebes were reported in good numbers. Herons and egrets seem to be continuing their expansions (except for bitterns). Waterfowl numbers are generally down with some exceptions, while most raptors, gulls, and terns are on a positive upswing. Woodpeckers were generally reported in good numbers, especially Red-headededs. Flycatchers were said to be in good numbers in most regions. The thrush migration was considered about normal for most regions, although there were some hesitant signs that it might be lower. Here, as in many other groups, we feel that observers tend to remember a big wave, and that an exceptional event may overshadow a generally poor season.

General impressions of the warbler flight were that it was poor, at least in numbers of individuals, right across the country. Some of the eastern regions felt that it was at least better than last year's very poor showing. However, the Northern Great Plains described it as the "best warbler migration in years," as contrasted with the Southern Great Plains where the numbers were quite low. Finally, as a whole, the sparrow migration appeared to be about normal. Very few regions noted much in the way of any consistent patterns of abundance either way.

Emerging trends

Like any good stock analyst, Changing Seasons authors love to spot an emerging trend, like a new growth stock, or one that is on its way down. One of the main functions of these reports is to sound the warning on such species. Among the trends that were reported are those which fall logically (at least to our minds) into some categories. Most of these, as you will see, are continuations of past patterns, but some could be the waves of the future. In writing this report we have gained the impression, not necessarily real, that the health of many of our bird populations is very good. Nearly all of the regional and inter-regional trends are of species whose populations and/or ranges are increasing. Although our remarks in the preceding section would encourage caution in interpreting these trends, nonetheless, it is instructive to look at them and the possible factors for their existence.

Pesticide era birds

Many of the species that declined drastically during the peak of the DDT era are recovering, but some have required major captive breeding and/or reintroduction programs. The prime examples of this group are some of the raptors. Bald Eagles were reported nesting in many new locations in the east, especially as a result of reintroduction efforts. Most regions also reported good numbers of migrant and non-breeding eagles. In the west, an active nest about 175 miles south of the Arizona border provided the first Sonoran and inland Mexico nesting record, and a pair in Southern California still present in late May raised hopes for the first nesting in that Region since the 1950s. Farther north, the increased predation from Bald Eagles in the North Pacific Coast Region caused abandonment of a Great Blue Heronry.

Parallel with the Bald Eagle increase is a definite rise in Osprey populations across the U.S. Peregrine Falcons were also well reported, and it has been suggested that its status in the Western Great Lakes be changed from rare to uncommon. Not clearly allied but possibly related to the post-pesticide recovery were reports of migrant Swainson's Hawk flocks from a number of southern Regions. In recent years the only real flocks of Swainson's Hawks have been from fall migration. Conceivably related to these higher numbers was Arkansas' first nesting record. Certainly these stories are reason for us to be proud of our long-term efforts towards the well-being of these species.

Another taxonomic group affected by DDT and apparently recovering is the Pelecaniformes. Brown Pelicans were well reported on the west coast, primarily because of an early northward migration linked to warmer than average ocean temperatures. However, in the Northern Pacific Coast Region, they have appeared in May every year since 1982, a definite change from their near absence prior to the 1980s. Double-crested Cormorants continued their increase in the Niagara-Champlain, Appalachian and Middle Atlantic Coast regions. And the Anhinga increase in the Central Southern Region in recent years persisted.

Bottleneck species

While most raptors were adversely affected by the DDT era, one species was supposedly spared from its effects. During the 1960s and 70s, Black-shouldered Kites staged a remarkable increase, not only in numbers, but in distribution. This increase continues as they were found outside their normal range in southern California and Arizona, southern Nevada had its second record, and the four reported in New Mexico was a state high. Best of all was Florida's first nesting record since 1910.

How does one account for this remarkable recovery of a species that was considered to be down to less than 50 pairs and declining in California in 1927 (Hoffman, R., *Birds of the Pacific States*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston)? Possibly our Black-shouldered Kite has experienced a "tradition (or genetic) shift" that allowed it to pass through a "population bottleneck" of the sort that Temple (*Auk* 103:632) has described for the Mauritius Kestrel. This could happen if some small number of an original population was well adapted for a habitat, feeding strategy, breeding site or whatever, that the main part of the population was not. If the environmental conditions changed so that only those specially adapted individuals became the successful reproducers, the

bulk of a population might disappear while part of it was increasing. This environmental shift could also have affected predators, competitors, and even the distribution of habitats. The results of this scenario could conceivably include a population and distributional expansion such as that we see in the Black-shouldered Kite.

Another group that has experienced a similar population expansion after a decline are the herons and egrets. The history of exploitation and the recovery of the ardeids due to protection is well known. And even now, years after their protection, many species in this group are still expanding their ranges. Another species that could fall into this category is the Canada Goose, undergoing regular expansion throughout the east.

Among land birds, House Finches have not experienced a marked decline in population, but are still increasing quite markedly in the east with comments on this in most regions. The first official state record in Wisconsin came with a rush—7 records including one breeding! A suggestion that they may also be moving east from the west came from a report of a dozen at a South Dakota feeder, and an explosion in numbers around Golden and Evergreen, Colorado.

If we knew more about the biology of these species prior to their declines we might be able to make better guesses as to the changes that they have been through and thus better understand the changes, both positive and negative, that species are experiencing today.

Increasing rarities

A number of species that were considered extremely rare or even unrecorded in most of North America are now reported so regularly that they have become part of our "normal" avifauna. Compare the following species distribution this spring with that described in the 1957 A.O.U. Check-list and you will be impressed.

Two Yellow-billed Loons in northern California and six in the Pacific northwest were considered normal, one was even inland in Idaho! Prior to 1967 there were essentially no records in those regions and now they are annual. Tufted Ducks have also become regular winter visitors in North America along both coasts and even inland at times. Prior to 1957 there were only 2 records south of Alaska and Greenland, both from Massachusetts! In 1957 the Ruff was known in the lower 48 states only as an east coast rarity and true vagrant in the eastern interior. This season saw no fewer than 25 reports from the east coast, 7 interior reports and 6 from the west coast! Little Gulls were considered casual in the northeast in 1957 and found nowhere else. This season found four(!) in northern California; two more in the Northern Pacific Coast; the first Minnesota nesting attempt in the Western Great Lakes Region, and over 62(!) records from the Ontario Region. Others were found along the east coast south to the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Lesser Black-backed Gulls, represented by only 2 records south of Greenland in 1957, were scattered along the entire east and Gulf coasts with sightings even from the West Indies!

These examples illustrate that a significant invasion of European and Asian birds has taken place in the last 30 years. Some of these may go on to establish substantial breeding populations, while others will probably always be rare winter visitors. It is up to us to continue our documentation of these interesting changes.

Mixed-signals birds

These are species that are possibly undergoing dynamic changes. That is, going one way or another, depending upon the region. One example is that cuckoos, which increased or were in good numbers in the Hudson-Delaware Region and central Texas, were considered quite rare or lower in numbers in much of the central and southern states. Mixed-signals were also received on Chuck-will's-widow and Whip-poor-wills as some regions suggested they were up, and others down.

The new slow-wave birds

These species are quite different from the wildly increasing bottleneck species. By contrast, new slow-wave birds are moving slowly and inexorably into new areas. From the south, Black-bellied Tree Ducks have moved into Arizona and are pushing their range toward southern California, while the Muscovy seems to have established a true and wild presence in south Texas. Chimney Swifts are apparently extending their range in various directions, as fair-to-good numbers were reported at Palm Beach, Florida, and southern California, as well as other sites on the margins of their range. White-winged Doves were noted outside their normal areas near Charleston, South Carolina, in northern Florida, Albuquerque, and San Diego, along with a first Denver record and a state record for Michigan. It was also more common than in the past in some New Mexico areas, and was noted to be continuing to expand its range in Texas. The Spotted Dove is expanding its limited range in southern California. Red-headed Woodpeckers may be on the move, with good numbers reported in the Appalachian and Ontario regions, and wanderers in somewhat higher numbers than usual in the west, in Quebec, and the Prairie Provinces. Ravens and Fish Crows are also reported to be continuing their expansion in the east. The crows were reported farther inland in many eastern regions throughout their range. Brewer's Blackbirds and Great-tailed Grackles were also continuing their move with modest range expansions reported from several regions.

A subset of this group are the birds that are recolonizing former ranges after a decline of some sort. There is general agreement that Carolina Wrens were increasing again in most regions, and Sedge Wrens were reported more widely than usual.

Migrant bombers

These species are migratory and are appearing in increasing numbers in areas well out of their normal ranges. These observations may be due to observers becoming knowledgeable about them, or may signal a new vagrancy in the species. For instance, Sooty Terns were trying once again to nest in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region, this time at two different sites. Reports of Black-chinned Hummingbirds, which were detected well away from their usual haunts in places like New York, Louisiana, and British Columbia, may signal something of a range expansion. Least Flycatchers were seen almost regularly to the west of their normal range. Summer Tanagers seemed to be more extralimital and more abundant than in most years, according to many regions, and may also fall into this category.

Increasing densities of species

Some species are simply becoming more common in some areas than they were previously. These may be birds which are responding to decreased competition or increased resources within their preferred habitat type, or, of course, more knowledgeable observers. Among these were Alder Flycatchers which were more abundant than usual in the middle Atlantic States and the midwest. Loggerhead Shrikes were reported as generally increasing in many eastern and southern regions. Along the west coast, many observers reported that the Western Kingbird was in exceptionally good numbers. There were also notes of more Yellow-throated Vireos than usual in many eastern regions as were White-eyed Vireos, which were noted increasing to the north. Yellow-breasted Chats were reported in many, but not all regions as being on the upswing, as were Yellow-throated Warblers. The Lapland Longspur migration in the central United States must have been above normal as we read with envy Bjorklund's report of millions migrating by in Saskatchewan. It is not often that an observer is able to experience such a sight today.

Declining species

As noted above, there were very few species which fell into this category. Common Loons in the Niagara-Champlain Region appear to be nesting in lowland marshes instead of the Adirondack Lakes that have become fishless due to acid rain. On the other hand, the Pied-billed Grebes that feed and breed in these same marshes are inexplicably undergoing a general decline. American Bitterns received less than positive reports from throughout the continent. Among the landbirds, Golden-winged Warblers continued to decline in the north, and observers naturally ascribe it to competition with Blue-winged. However, it should be noted that such a correlation should not be interpreted as a relation. Many other factors are at least as likely to cause such a phenomenon. White-throated Sparrows have become quite mundane in recent years outside of what used to be considered their normal range. There was some indication from the periphery of the winter range, however, that numbers were down this spring. And most observers agreed that crossbill numbers were down across the country.

Are we about to lose the Hawaiian Crow?

A sobering note to this season's generally good notes on various species, is that there is very, very bad news from Hawaii. Bob Pyle reports that the Hawaiian Crow continues to decline, and now may number only a very few birds, probably fewer than 20. Steps must be taken immediately if the species is to be saved. Ironically, much of the crow's habitat is on state-owned land which is leased to private ranchers under what can only be termed rather generous conditions. Only a barrage of public protest can move the Governor and United States representatives from their doing-nothing stance, which will probably result in the species' extinction (because of shooting) within 2-3 years.

Along the same vein is the report from south Texas concerning a precipitous decline in Attwater's Greater Prairie-Chickens. A proposal to establish a second refuge for the species now needs Congressional approval.

Late migrants

A few species were seen lingering on into the spring. These may reflect population increases. Many Evening Grosbeaks were reported all over the east in May, as were Pine Siskins: rather late birds enjoying the warm spring in the "south." Siskins were also noted as being above usual levels in the west. Red-breasted Nuthatches were widely reported, breeding, lingering on, and returning in an aftermath of last winter's invasion.

Vagrants

Part of the spice of any season are the vagrants. They may even be the whole reason for birding for many people. In general, we think that observers would have been much more satisfied with waterbird vagrants this season than with the land birds. Here, as in other seasons, the real story is told in the pages of this issue and we encourage you to look yourself for the vagrants that most suit your fancy.

As usual, Alaska stands by itself with such goodies from across the Pacific as Little Ringed Plover, Oriental Pratincole, Spoonbill Sandpiper and numerous landbird rarities. Maintaining Hawaii's connection with the Old World was an (Asiatic) Whimbrel. Another Old World species to make news was a probable wild Barnacle Goose in the Hudson-Delaware Region.

Hudsonian Godwits strayed west into New Mexico and Arizona and a White-rumped Sandpiper provided one of California's few spring records. In the east a Snowy Plover in Pennsylvania was the first there since 1886 and an American Oystercatcher made news in the Niagara-Champlain Region. A Clark's Grebe in the Western Great Lakes Region was Minnesota's first.

A few coastal species found inland were worthy of comment, such as New Mexico's second Brown Pelican and Arkansas' first Wilson's Plover. And yes, of course, there were reports of Western Gulls away from the Pacific coast. An adult at American Falls Reservoir, Idaho, is perhaps understandable as the northern Western Gulls do travel up rivers following the spawning salmon. More surprising were reports from the Southern Great Plains, where one was making another attempt at being Texas' first, and another in Arizona. Despite all our doubts about the validity of all inland Western Gulls, sightings inland around the Salton Sea have increased. We heartily concur with Imhof's suggestion in the Central Southern Region "if you see any of these 11 species (of gulls) out of range, out of season, out

of habitat, get all the proof you can and make sure your photographs show relative size."

Some fairly spectacular reports of *Pterodroma* petrels have been received by the west coast editors. While these reports lack immediate details, the experience of the observers and the promise of a complete discussion make these sightings worth reporting here. Offshore of the Middle Pacific Coast Region were sightings of Mottled, Murphy's, Solander's and Cook's petrels with Murphy's Petrel being found off the Southern and Northern Pacific Coast regions as well. Since these are difficult to identify and truly exciting finds, we look forward to hearing more on these birds. Also from California we continue to read about pelagics inland! Check out Laysan Albatross in the Middle Pacific Coast Region, or imagine yourself at the north end of the Salton Sea when a flock of 27 adult Pomarine Jaegers came in and landed on the water!

As to the land birds, Peterjohn makes a persuasive case that a Crested Caracara near Fremont, Missouri, in April was indeed a wild vagrant. A good observation of a "Cassin's Vireo," the western race, at Westmount, Quebec, is quite noteworthy; Yank and Aubry rightly suggest that this species may be split and thus should be better noted by observers. A Fork-tailed Flycatcher in North Carolina was a first. Gray Flycatchers, a whole raft of them in British Columbia, furnished Canada's second record. An adult Black-backed Wagtail provided a second record for Washington, with good notes on the plumage of the bird. Rounding out this short list, a nice (is there any other kind?) male Painted Bunting in Ontario was the Province's first.

Summary

It was a season that was not really spectacular, but it was dynamic. Many species are apparently changing their status as we watch. How carefully we watch, and how intensively we watch will largely determine how much the next generation of birders will understand the excitement that we feel today as the various species play out their roles on the continent. More importantly, our attentiveness will also determine just how much that generation understands of why species abundances change.

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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.