

**"Global Warming:
The Early Years"**

SIMON PERKINS came up with that title, but I couldn't resist repeating it. It seemed singularly appropriate this season in the northeast quadrant of the continent, south to Florida and west through Ontario, where high temperatures

made news. It was the warmest spring ever in Buffalo, the warmest in a century in New York City and New Jersey. May averaged 4° above normal in Massachusetts, 6.5° above normal in Maryland. In North Carolina, March through May were the 15th to 17th months of above-normal temperatures. How long before we alter our perception of "normal"?

If global warming is really under way, the average citizen may not notice until it gets hot enough to melt his television. But birdwatchers are far more aware than the average citizen; and they are especially likely to notice climatic variations when those variations seem to affect the timing of bird migration.

Early Migration in the East:

In this warm season, numerous reports suggested that migration occurred earlier than usual. The Maritime Provinces saw migrants on or ahead of schedule (except in Newfoundland, which had a cold, wet spring). Migration was thought to be two weeks early in Quebec, two to three weeks early in the Appalachians. Ontario had record-early dates for 54 species. The northern Great Plains had many early records during big pushes in early March and early May.

With the clear hot weather, there

THE CHANGING SEASONS

Spring 1991

By Kenn Kaufman

were also fewer stopovers. Most migrants seemed to fly over Florida without landing, except during a couple of brief storms. In upstate New York, Ken Able noted that many species arrived on breeding grounds in the Adirondacks before any had been detected at intermediate stopover points. Greg Hanisek, drawing on long experience in New Jersey, reports that earlier spring migration of passerines seems to be an ongoing trend—one that was underscored this year. As pointed out by Bill Boyle *et al.*, these factors make it hard to gauge populations of these birds from migration counts.

Late Migration in the West:

The situation was strikingly different in the West. In southeastern and southcoastal Alaska, storms from late April through mid-May seemed to delay spring by at least two weeks; migrant passerines arrived late and in low numbers. This sense of a late migration extended all the way down the Pacific seaboard, from British Columbia to southern California, with many observers estimating that the migration averaged a week to two weeks behind schedule.

Perceptions of numbers were also affected by weather. In southern California, rains in March were felt to have delayed migration; when the rains ceased, some sections reported

best numbers of April migrants ever. Northern California saw record numbers of *Empidonax* flycatchers on passage (a mixed blessing!), and big concentrations of warblers. In Oregon and Washington, May was a particularly cool and rainy month, and birders there encountered classic "fallouts" of migrants: 200 Warbling Vireos in one park in Portland May 15th; 75 Townsend's Warblers in one tree in Bend on the 18th; and numerous other examples. Since 14 inches of snow fell around May 18th in southeastern Oregon, it's not surprising that northbound insectivores might have paused to reconsider. In southern British Columbia, cold and rain grounded hundreds of woodpeewees May 25th.

Birders in eastern North America are thoroughly used to the connection between bad weather and "good" migrations. In western regions, the idea may still seem novel. But in spring 1991, for once, the term "warbler waves" could have applied almost as well in the West as in the East.

Cuckoo chronicles:

Black-billed Cuckoo always seems more scarce and elusive than its Yellow-billed cousin, but this spring it drew notice in some areas. Texas migration-watchers saw more Black-billed than usual, and so did some observers in the southern Great Plains. A one-day count of 15 in one park in Indiana was very impressive for this skulker. Several were seen at unexpected locales in the Gulf states, but most surprising was the pair found *nesting* in Louisiana, a first state breeding record and some distance from any known previous attempt.

Western birds east in the central corridor:

This season a few western species showed up slightly east of usual areas. The trend was set by Yellow-headed Blackbird. In Louisiana, where irreg-

ular, many were found this spring. There were several records farther east in the Gulf states, and unusual numbers in Florida and New England and Michigan.

But Yellow-headed Blackbird wanders east every year anyway. More impressive was Western Tanager, with unusually high numbers in eastern Texas and Louisiana. East of usual limits were two each in Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, plus singles in Iowa, Illinois, and Alabama. Lazuli Bunting followed the same pattern. The eastern half of Texas had record numbers, there were a few east to Tulsa and Wichita and Winnipeg, and Florida had two for very rare occurrences.

Surprisingly, at the same time, unusual numbers of eastern warblers spread out over western Texas, and a good variety of such strays reached west to New Mexico and the Mountain West.

Painting the wind blue:

Some movements can be traced more readily. A big coastal storm April 21-22 evidently pushed migrants out over the Atlantic. These displaced birds then picked up winds from the southeast, and made landfall farther north than they might have otherwise. This weather pattern had results manifested in shades of blue in the northeast, as Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks rained down beyond their usual limits. This was most evident in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, which noted hundreds of the buntings and at least 41 of the grosbeaks. One feeder near Halifax hosted 14 Indigo Buntings and seven Blue Grosbeaks! Birds apparently spilling over from this flight reached Quebec, and coastal New England had fair numbers. Farther afield but possibly drifting inland from the same displacement, a Blue Grosbeak was in far upstate New York, four reached Ontario, and Michigan had its first solid record.

Endangered species adventures:

Say you're an endangered Peregrine Falcon, and you've just discovered a great source of food—a tern colony. Among the abundant Common Terns you notice a minority of terns that are whiter, slower, with fluttery wingbeats; they make perfect targets... This actually happened in New England this spring, as the threatened Roseate Tern encountered a new threat. Simon Perkins has all the details.

At the opposite end of the United States, as Bob Pyle reports, good rains last fall and winter on the big island of Hawaii gave a boost to the endangered Palila this spring. Elsewhere on the island, however, heavy rains in March may have disrupted the breeding of some other endangered birds.

Arrivederci, *Pterodroma*...

To anyone birding since the Sixties or before, it still seems a minor marvel that *Pterodroma* petrels should turn up regularly over North American waters.

As recently as 13 years ago, California's only hints of the genus *Pterodroma* had been a few Mottled Petrels washed up on beaches. Cook's Petrel was not detected offshore until 1979; Murphy's Petrel was worked out later. This spring, trips off northern California found Murphy's Petrel to be the *most common bird* far offshore in late April and early May—remarkable for a species that was just described to science in 1949! Cook's Petrels were encountered in smaller numbers, and three Cook's were also seen far off southern California.

Off the southern Atlantic Coast, large numbers of Black-capped Petrels may seem old hat by now; but as recently as 1975, sightings of singles were still boldfaced in *American Birds*, and double-digit counts were not registered until closer to 1980. This spring, North Carolina moved into a higher realm of rarity with a

Herald Petrel photographed (and another seen) in May. Perhaps this species will be found more frequently in the future, as birders learn (as they have for other *Pterodroma* species) just when and where to look for it.

Another *Pterodroma* was reported off North Carolina this spring, one not on any official North American list: Soft-plumaged Petrel. As Harry LeGrand points out, this bird had been reported twice before. So why isn't Soft-plumaged Petrel on the official checklist yet? Is it because of some soreheads on a committee somewhere, who refuse to consider sight records? No, there's a better reason: "Soft-plumaged Petrel," as currently conceived by birders, is probably not a species. Seabird expert W.R.P. Bourne has shown (1983, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 103: 52-58) that the old "Soft-plumaged Petrel" is really a complex of three species. Two of these, *madeira* and *faeae*, are in the North Atlantic, and they are so similar that field identification could be tough. While I don't doubt that birders have seen something from the "Soft-plumaged" group of petrels, the bird can hardly be added to the list until we know what species it is. ■

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