

Summer is the season when we should be able to figure out what is actually going on with our birds.

In the other seasons, the picture is obscured by too many variables. During migration, our counts of birds may be skewed by so many things: a simple shift of wind may change our seasonal tally of one species by an order of magnitude. Good weather may allow the birds to fly safely

to their destinations, and in the absence of any fallouts we may complain of a "bad migration." In winter, mild weather or an abundance of wild food may allow the birds to disperse over the countryside, and the lack of bird concentrations at our feeders may create illusions of scarcity. Harsh conditions may force the birds to go elsewhere. Their populations in these other seasons are too mobile to be gauged accurately from a local perspective.

But in the breeding season, populations of most species are far less fluid. Most birds go to their breeding ranges then, space themselves out on territories, and attempt to raise young. So this should be the best season for judging the health of their populations, for counting the numbers of adults and checking the success of their reproductive efforts. Summer should be the most important season for birding.

#### **Trends and contradictions among Neotropical migrants**

Especially over the eastern and northern sections of the continent, the last few years have been marked by widespread and well-founded concern about many birds that migrate to

# THE CHANGING SEASONS

## Summer 1991

### By Kenn Kaufman

the Neotropics in winter. Migration-watchers generally agreed that total numbers of migrants are way down from historical levels. Theoretically, the same trend should be reflected in the numbers present on the breeding grounds. Here, however, the picture is decidedly mixed.

In this season's reports there were numerous examples of apparent contradictions, birds that were doing well in some regions and poorly in others. Yellow Warblers were generally agreed to be in low numbers in the Appalachians, but were said to be "prospering" next door in the Hudson-Delaware Region. Summer bird counts showed Black-and-white Warbler numbers to be up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, but down in Suffolk County, Long Island. Prairie Warblers were in low numbers in the Appalachians, and have apparently receded from some former breeding areas in Oklahoma; but the species was continuing a range expansion in far upstate New York, and good numbers were found in Massachusetts.

I paid particular attention to this season's comments on Wood Thrushes and Hooded Warblers. These two birds nest in forest interior at mid-latitudes in eastern North America,

where human impact has been intense, and they winter in the interior of tropical forests in Central America, an endangered habitat. They might be thought of as good indicator species.

Comments on Wood Thrushes were not all bad. Around Huntsville, Texas, fairly good numbers were found for the third straight year, after several years of decline. Birds were found at some peripheral points in Oklahoma. In the upper Midwest there was a prevalence of negative reports, but numbers were said to be improving in some areas. In the Appalachians, Wood Thrushes were still down in some areas but their overall numbers were perhaps improving. A summer bird count on Long Island showed a decline, but the one at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, recorded a 15-year high for the species. In Ontario it was widespread and common in the Niagara region, and numbers remained high on Breeding Bird Surveys in the eastern counties. Quebec had its easternmost record yet on the North Shore, perhaps signalling an expansion.

Oddly, the comments about Hooded Warbler this season were all positive. Birds were singing at Tulsa, at the western edge of the range. Others found in Minnesota and Wisconsin were north of traditional limits. Some 22 nests were found in one small area of Ontario (and those nests are hard to find!). Nine Hoodeds at three Rhode Island locales made a good number there. Hoodeds were doing well generally in the Hudson-Delaware Region, and showing a steady rise on one study area in Rockland County, New York.

If there is any pattern here, it might be that the birds are doing somewhat better in the northern parts of their breeding ranges. This is a type of pattern that we have noticed before with other birds. The optimistic interpretation is to say that the birds are just shifting their ranges northward. For example, this season,

Joe Grzybowski laments the decline of Orchard Orioles in Oklahoma; farther north on the plains, Gordon Berkey reports that this species is still expanding its range. This is not to say that everything is peachy or that we should ignore local declines, but it may be a reflection of the global warming that most biologists believe is already under way.

#### **Northward expansions**

The warbler clan offers several examples of species that seem to be expanding their breeding ranges toward the north. Yellow-throated Warbler have been a well-publicized players in this movement, and it continued so this year, with another nesting in Connecticut and several birds in Wisconsin. Cerulean Warbler also drew some notice. They were found nesting in South Dakota, one in Ontario was north to Manitoulin Island, a pair was in Quebec's Gatineau National Park, and three individuals were found at South Quabbin, Massachusetts.

Another possible example of a northward shift involves Bay-breasted Warblers. They were thought to be scarce this year in Minnesota, at the southern edge of its breeding range, but it is apparently establishing itself as a summer resident in Newfoundland, a new northerly area.

One of the most successful of northward expansionists is the Blue-winged Warbler, and this is a situation that causes little cheer among birders. The secret of the Blue-winged's success is that the way has been paved by the closely related Golden-winged Warbler. A Blue-winged that goes prospecting to the north does not have to find a member of its own species in order to breed; it can mate with a local Golden-winged, and it does. All over eastern North America, the Golden-winged Warbler is receding rapidly toward the north, as southerly populations are "swamped" by the genes of Blue-wingeds. The Golden-winged as a

recognizable species may become extinct within just a few decades. This is a case where human intervention may be impossible. The best we can do is to appreciate the Golden-winged Warbler while it still exists.

#### **Northward movements from Mexico**

If a warming climate and northward range extensions are really widespread phenomena, we might expect some birders to plant themselves at the Mexican border and wait for new species to fly north into United States airspace. Indeed, some observers seem to be doing just that, at least mentally.

This was generally considered a slow and dull summer in Arizona, since no totally cosmic mindblowers turned up—nothing new for the United States, for instance. But was the season really that bad? Eared Trogons showed up early in the Chiricahuas, in June, and were more cooperative than any had been since the first occurrence of the species 14 years earlier. (Just after the end of the official reporting period, Eared Trogons were present simultaneously in *three* Arizona mountain ranges.) Adjacent southwestern New Mexico had its first Elegant Trogons in five years. A Ruddy Ground-Dove turned up in central Arizona, well north of previous state sightings, to establish a first summer record. *Eight* White-eared Hummingbirds, perhaps a record number, were found in Arizona, and one reached western Texas where there are very few previous records. Berylline Hummingbird nested in Arizona, for only the fourth time. Arizona also had three Green Kingfishers, a Groove-billed Ani, and various Lucifer Hummingbirds and Buff-collared Nightjars. A mere fifteen years ago we would have considered this a really good summer!

But this season's champion stray from tropical latitudes would have to be the hummingbird that crossed at least *two* international borders on its way north. In a shocking first for

Canada, a Green Violet-ear appeared in Ontario. Obviously, this is a species that could turn up anywhere!

#### **Extremes of weather and their avian effects**

Now that Dan Quayle has re-defined the term "wetlands," in a pursuit that we might call "Voodoo Ecology," Lake Michigan may be the only area left in the United States that could qualify as a "wetland." But in summer 1991, a lot of land was decidedly wet. Extremely heavy rains made news over much of the southeast, particularly in eastern Texas and Louisiana, where almost-constant rain broke records. Plant life flourished, insects were abundant, and most birds apparently had very successful breeding seasons. Veteran birder David Wolf told me that many passerines in east Texas evidently took advantage of the conditions, extending their breeding season much longer than usual; around Nacogdoches, many songbirds were still fledging from second or third broods in mid-September.

To the north, in Ontario, conditions were unusually warm and dry. But this was apparently an advantage to many nesting birds, especially those that arrived early, and Ron Weir reports that breeding success was generally high.

In Newfoundland, a different kind of weather extreme held sway for much of the summer. Exceptional cold, and heavy pack ice just offshore, affected feeding and breeding conditions for many species. Coastal birds and seabirds were especially affected. Bruce Mactavish has many details on this phenomenon in the Atlantic Provinces report.

#### **Airport 1991**

Upland Sandpipers are common mainly in areas where birders are scarce, from the Flint Hills of Kansas north through the Prairie Provinces and into east-central Alaska. The outlier populations on the Atlantic seaboard make up only a small per-

centage of the world total. Even there, however, are some surprises. I was impressed by the survey tally of 127 Upland Sandpipers in Vermont in June and July—could some have been early migrants?

Aside from these Vermont birds, Upland Sandpipers in the northeast have a clear habitat preference, and the habitat is a manmade one. As Wayne Petersen points out, Uplands in both Massachusetts and Connecticut are primarily found on airports. (A New Hampshire concentration was found on an Air Force Base, which is something like a glorified airport.) The Atlantic City airport and New York's Kennedy airport were also mentioned this season as Upland Sandpiper strongholds.

Airports came up for mention in other contexts as well. Boston's Logan airport now has a nesting colony of the beleaguered Least Tern. (Logan was already famous as a wintering site for many birds, including Snowy Owls.) Kennedy airport, already a major nesting site for Laughing Gulls, now plays host to nesting American Oystercatchers as well; the oystercatchers have far less competition there than on the crowded beaches in summer.

Because of the old problem of bird/aircraft collisions, many airport officials are probably less than enthusiastic about their avian guests. However, studies at Logan airport have suggested that the wintering Snowy Owls are actually helpful, by keeping flocks of starlings and other birds scared away from the runways. And officials at Kennedy were able to keep their Laughing Gulls out of the way of aircraft with a minimum of control. The airports on this continent comprise huge acreages of open grassland that are patrolled, controlled, and not used for other purposes. What would be the possibilities if some of these could be managed for small, sensitive, non-flocking grassland birds? Could remote areas of our airports be made into refuges for

scarce birds like Henslow's Sparrow? The idea is at least worth considering.

#### **Some miscellaneous rare, endangered, or declining birds**

Cause for serious concern is a major decline in numbers of Spectacled Eiders in western Alaska. Although this ghostly boreal duck breeds over a wide stretch of coastal tundra in Alaska and Siberia, the Yukon Delta region is thought to be one of its two main nesting areas. This season, numbers of Spectacleds on the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge were apparently below 2000 pairs; this is a drastic drop from 1970s estimates of 50,000 to 70,000 pairs on the refuge. Reasons for the decline are far from obvious.

Also mysterious is the apparent decline of the Common Ground-Dove in the southeastern states. Declines have been noticed in various areas during the last few years. This season, Harry LeGrand reports that the species is essentially gone from North Carolina, and becoming scarce in South Carolina.

Both Golden-cheeked and Kirtland's warblers apparently did well this year, with the tally of Kirtland's in Michigan up to 347 singing males this year—still a desperately low total for a passerine, but better than in some recent years. Black-capped Vireo numbers were holding fairly steady in Oklahoma, and they had mixed success in nesting in Texas. All three of these species are now essentially wards of the state, and might decline rapidly toward extinction without the continued trapping of cowbirds to protect these birds from nest parasitism.

We always turn to Bob Pyle's column, with a mixture of hope and dread, for news on endangered bird populations in Hawaii. It was good to read this season about sightings of two fledged juveniles of the extremely rare Puaiohi, or Small Kauai Thrush. But for the Hawaiian Crow, the news continues to be all bad. There is not

much room for optimism about this bird any more.

#### **Splitting headaches**

Birders are supposed to be pleased when birds are "split," when one species is separated into two or more: it makes for a longer bird list. However, the recent split of Western Flycatcher into two species may have been more trouble than it was worth. The specific English names chosen for the two new forms—"Cordilleran Flycatcher" and "Pacific-slope Flycatcher"—are so awkward that they seem to symbolize the confusion caused by the birds.

Field identification of the two forms has been, up to now, based entirely on voice, since no one has found visual differences between them. However, voice is apparently less than 100% reliable. Last year (*AB* 44:1179), Bill Tweit *et al.* discussed the situation in the interior of the Northwest, where many birds seem to have voices intermediate between those of the Pacific-slope and the Cordilleran. This summer, similar confusion was noted in the Warner Mountains of northeastern California; the birds there are supposed to be Cordillerans, but observers heard callnotes ranging the spectrum between the two forms there. Farther north, in eastern Washington, Dick Cannings reported that most birds had "marginally Cordilleran songs and obvious Pacific-slope calls."

Does all this mean that the two forms should not have been split? I don't think so. Ned K. Johnson's work on this complex was quite thorough and convincing. (Not convincing to everyone: Allan Phillips blasted this taxonomic move in Volume 2 of his *Known Birds of North and Middle America*. Phillips has never seen eye to eye with Johnson anyway, and he is a field-based ornithologist, distrustful of genetic work.) What it means, more likely, is that these are two species that will continue to be extremely difficult to separate in the field.

For a preview of future splits, take a look at Sibley and Monroe's *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World* (Yale, 1990). These authors, basing many conclusions on DNA work, map out a surprising new classification. In North America they would recognize three meadowlarks, not two, as well as three Solitary Vireos, two Warbling Vireos, two Brewer's Sparrows, and so on, with room left open for further splits of

Marsh Wrens, Red Crossbills, et cetera. None of these "new" species will be easy to identify in the field! Although we could regard these newly split species as cause for headaches, it would be more positive to think of them as new challenges, exciting new birds to keep the age of discovery alive. ■

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