

# Changing Seasons

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SPRING IS TRADITIONALLY thought of as a time of rebirth and renewal, a season for starting over with a clean slate. Spring 1994 must have seemed that way in particular for those birders (and birds) who had lived through one of the worst winters on record in the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada. No doubt they wanted to forget that winter as quickly as possible.

But it is impossible to discuss the events of the spring without referring back to the conditions that prevailed during the preceding season...or even the season before that. Seasons do change, as implied in the title of this column, but they are all interconnected.

**In some areas, the phenomena of spring were dominated by leftovers from a tough winter.**

The numbingly harsh winter of 1993–1994 over much of southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States continued to have an impact on avian events through the spring season. Observers in many regions commented on the contin-



**One of the largest recorded invasions of Greater Golden-Plovers brought at least 200 to Newfoundland this spring. This one was at St. John's May 2, 1994. Photograph/Bruce Mactavish.**

ued survival of some species and the continued displacement of others.

Carolina Wren was the indicator species that drew the most attention. Near the southernmost extent of the winter's extreme conditions, populations in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee were thought to be normal. Farther north there was widespread agreement that the species was, as George Hall put it, "down but not out."

Across the upper midwest and southern New England, significant decreases were reported; for example, an estimated

60% decline was reported in some areas of Indiana. But no place seemed to see a total wipeout.

Simon Perkins suggested that Carolina Wrens in New England are increasing their capacity for surviving such harsh conditions. Indeed, the operation of natural selection, during a winter like this one, should tend to weed out those that are most susceptible to cold, leaving a population that is better adapted to surviving the winter.

Some of the winning adaptations may be behavioral ones: Ron Ridout reports that in southern Ontario, the wrens seemed to fare better in the urban centers, with their bird-feeders and warm microclimates, than in rural areas. Feeders were also noted as contributing to survival in the Appalachian region. Whatever the cause, records of at least three in Quebec during the spring indicated that a few individuals made it through the winter at the extreme northern end of the range.

Large-scale movements of birds during the winter also had aftereffects this spring. The huge flight of Bohemian Waxwings that reached New England in the winter seems to have turned around and retreated promptly to the northwest in early spring, suggesting that these hardy birds were not particularly stressed by the harsh conditions (although one in southern Ontario May 7 was record late).

But the same could not be said for Red-necked Grebes. After their record-setting winter flight, some lingered on the Atlantic Coast as far south as New Jersey and Maryland through the end of May. (As outlandish as it might seem, there was even a tantalizing suggestion that the species might have nested in New Jersey, hundreds of miles from any previous nesting record.) Most of the grebes that survived did return northward, of course, and some very high counts were recorded in upstate New York, Quebec, and some parts of the Atlantic Provinces.

The winter's big redpoll flight faded away in a predictable way, with last dates for most areas south of Canada being recorded in mid- to late April. Most remarkable, however, was a Common Redpoll that made it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, being enjoyed by many birders on Dauphin Island, Alabama, at the end of April!

Although this was the only redpoll found at that latitude, some other birds on the Gulf Coast were probably driven there by the conditions of the winter. Saddest of the lot was a lone King Eider, lethargic and in worn plumage, probably doomed, that lingered on the Louisiana coast for much of April and May. The

Louisiana coast was also invaded by northern gulls in phenomenal numbers. At least 20 Lesser Black-backed were found during the season, along with at least three Black-legged Kittiwakes, a Little Gull, a definite Thayer's Gull, four Glaucous Gulls, and thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls.

**Some bird records this spring were probably echoes of last fall.**

Autumn 1993 saw unprecedented numbers of Palm Warblers in western North America, primarily along the Pacific Coast. Many of these birds wintered there, especially in coastal California (where a few may be present every winter). This spring, nearly 20 lingered in southern California into April or even early May. There were several sightings in the Queen Charlotte Islands off British Columbia, including the two that had successfully overwintered there.

Returning Palm Warblers were noted widely in the interior as well. Nevada had its first spring record, and there were three in Arizona and a couple in New Mexico. One in northwestern Nebraska and at least five scattered through western and northern Texas also could have been on the rebound from last fall's western flight.

Another phenomenon of last fall and winter in the west was a big movement of Mountain Bluebirds into southwestern lowlands and out onto the plains. Perhaps as a result of this, the spring saw a scattering of Mountain Bluebirds to the east. Two in Iowa and seven in Minnesota were noteworthy; birds much farther afield included the second ever for Massachusetts, and Quebec's fifth and sixth records.

Autumn 1993 also produced excellent numbers of Northern Wheatears in eastern North America, south of their arctic breeding range. Those wheatears that go south on the "wrong" side of the Atlantic—rather than migrating back across to Europe and Africa, along with their kin—probably do not often survive. I'm aware of only one record of a wheatear known to have overwintered successfully in the New World (the bird in Louisiana during winter 1992–1993). This spring, a wheatear present on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, at the beginning of April was seemingly too early and too far south to be an overshooting migrant from the Old World wintering areas, so it may have been a returnee from last fall's southward push in the Americas.

Certainly the latter explanation would have to apply to the wheatear found in North Dakota for a first state record.

**...And some aspects of this spring's birding reflected the conditions of the preceding summer.**

One of the biggest human news stories of summer 1993 was the massive and widespread flooding in the upper Mississippi River basin. Communities that were affected by the flooding certainly have not forgotten, and many are still in the process of digging out from the damage of that season. As a footnote, we might point out that these floods had a measurable effect on birding in some areas this spring.

preceding year, apparently establishing the second highest totals since 1976. This spring was actually a fairly dry season in the Dakotas in terms of precipitation, so the good water levels are largely a result of last year's rains.

**As soon as the harsh winter in the northeast came to an end, a flood of early migrants came in.**

It seems ironic that, after an exceptionally cold winter, many regions recorded exceptional numbers of early migrants.



Over much of the upper midwest, the shorebird migration was described as very poor. This was particularly true in the Middlewestern Prairie and Northern Great Plains regions. Observers there noted a general lack of shorebird habitat, because of high water levels. In the Middlewestern Prairies, however, there was a sense that shorebirds were scarce even where habitat was available. Ken Brock suggests that last summer's flooding may have destroyed much of the invertebrate fauna along the floodplains of the Mississippi and its tributaries, thus wiping out a major food source for migrant shorebirds that ordinarily follow the river system north.

On the northern Great Plains, likewise, the shorebird migration was termed "dismal," with most probably overflying the region. But this was more than compensated for by the success of those birds that like the water high. Numbers of herons, egrets, bitterns, rails, and coots were up dramatically. According to Ron Martin, numbers of breeding ducks increased "astronomically" in the Dakotas. Counts of breeding pairs of ducks were up by more than 100% from the

**Apparent Hoary Redpoll (the pale bird) with Common Redpolls in Lake County, Ohio, March 16, 1994. Photograph/John Pogacnik.**

This was most pronounced from the Hudson-Delaware Region west to Illinois and Ontario. In New York, Pennsylvania, and northern New Jersey, where snow lingered on the ground until the middle of April, warm weather in late April was accompanied by a rush of early vireos and warblers. In Ontario, more than one hundred local early records were set, 11 of these being all-time early records for the entire province.

On first reading these accounts, I was tempted to believe that some observer bias was operating: that observers who had endured the bitter winter might have rushed out *en masse* on the first warm days, thereby happening to turn up the earliest arrivals. However, data from Chicago indicate that the early arrival of many migrants was real, not an artifact of observation. Monitoring the migration in Chicago's Jackson Park, and comparing this season to 15 years' worth of data, Paul Clyne found that the mean arrival date for 155 migrant species was a full six

days earlier than average. Amazingly, Clyne had fourteen species of warblers in Jackson Park on the early date of April 16.

Farther east, in Rochester, New York, where complete data on migration have been kept for decades, ten species of warblers tied or beat their all-time early records. In northeastern Pennsylvania, veteran observer William Reid had never found more than ten species of warbler in a day in April, despite field experience going back nearly half a century. This year he was amazed to find 20 species on April 30, all in one county.

**The "Iceland Express" produced some exciting bird records in Newfoundland and nearby areas.**

In some spring seasons, flights of Greater Golden-Plovers arrive in Newfoundland and elsewhere in the Maritimes. This plover breeds mainly across northern Europe, and the ones that reach eastern Canada are probably birds that overshoot in their attempt to migrate to Iceland, the northwestern limit of the species' normal range. This spring, for the seventh time in the last 16 years, Newfoundland was visited by Greater Golden-Plovers; the 200+ birds reported made this one of the largest flights yet.

The big flights of this species are undoubtedly related to certain weather conditions. (I should say that weather has been overrated as a cause of vagrancy among birds over land. For example, if there is a strong wind out of the west, a stray Varied Thrush from the Pacific Coast can simply land in Montana; it won't be blown all the way to New York against its will. But land birds or shorebirds flying over the ocean are more at the mercy of weather; if they are caught by a storm, their best option may be to keep flying downwind.)

According to Blake Maybank, the prime conditions for pushing birds across the northern Atlantic involve at least two low-pressure systems southwest of Iceland, acting to funnel strong northeast winds toward Newfoundland. Such conditions this season brought not only the golden-plovers but several other birds as well.

Most exciting from some perspectives was the Eurasian Oystercatcher in Newfoundland. This was a species that I had picked two years ago as a "stealth vagrant," i.e., a bird that was probably reaching North America but being overlooked. Indeed, the Newfoundland bird was apparently thought to be an American Oystercatcher at first, and not cor-



rectly identified until the last day of its stay. Other birds possibly associated with this weather system included a Black-tailed Godwit in Newfoundland and a Fieldfare in St. Pierre et Miquelon.

Four Northern Wheatears in southeastern Quebec and one in New Brunswick, all in late May/early June, may have been helped along by this weather also.

Checklist committees take note: Late May also produced a Common Chaffinch in Newfoundland, the second for that province and seventh for the Maritimes. The species is on the Canadian list, but for some reason it has not been considered for the continent-wide lists yet; it is a good candidate for status as a genuine vagrant from Europe.

**Birders were happy to note that Alaskan weather (and associated bird movements) returned to "normal" this season.**

For the last few years, Alaska has been affected by an extended and extreme El Niño/Southern Oscillation event, with warmer ocean temperatures and generally warmer and dryer conditions over land. This phenomenon seems to have peaked in the summer of 1993, and then ended during the following winter.

During the same few years, the spring birding on Attu Island, at the western end of the Aleutian chain, has failed to live up to its known fabulous potential. Apparently this is no mere coincidence. According to Thede Tobish, the "normal" weather pattern is what brings fall-outs of Asian migrants to Attu, and the El Niño conditions may have directly reduced the numbers of such strays there. In spring 1994, with weather

**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in flight at the Robert C. Byrd Locks on the Ohio River, Mason County, West Virginia. If a wild bird, it would represent a first state record. Photograph/Mike Griffith.**

closer to normal again, Attu produced a wealth of Siberian birds for those birders who made the trek there.

Among the highlights were numbers of Hawfinches, a Steller's Sea-Eagle, a second North American record of Narcissus Flycatcher, and the first Lesser White-fronted Goose to be undoubtedly a genuine wild vagrant to North America.

**Whistling-duck wild cards continued to raise eyebrows.**

Birders have become accustomed to the idea that Fulvous Whistling-Ducks may wander widely to the north of their subtropical breeding areas. We may have to accept the same thing about their relatives, the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. Over the last couple of years, there has been much consternation over sightings of Black-bellieds as far north as Pennsylvania, Quebec, Ontario, and Iowa, with the predictable arguments over the origins of the birds. This season produced two Black-bellieds in Virginia, one in West Virginia, and a flock of four in Missouri.

There was also one far north in Arkansas, and the species has become regular in parts of Louisiana; two in central New Mexico and one in southern Nevada were also notable. Even though birders are quick to apply the label "escape" to anything that looks as exotic as a whistling-duck, I'm inclined to believe that the Black-bellieds in this recent rash are mostly wandering wild birds.

**Eastern observers traced the progress of overlapping corvids.**

Thirty years ago, probably few birders would have expected to see Common Raven and Fish Crow on the same day. Ravens in the east were restricted to the north and to a few high parts of the Appalachians, while Fish Crows were characteristic of southern coastlines and a few major river valleys. But both species have been expanding their ranges, in opposite directions, during recent decades, so that they now actually overlap in parts of western New England and upstate New York.

This spring marked the second modern nesting record of Common Ravens in New Jersey; the first was just last year. Notable nestings in the Appalachians were near Johnson City, Tennessee, and near Brasstown Bald, Georgia. Records of wandering singles in Rhode Island and at low elevations in Maryland probably reflected expansion of numbers in nearby areas. The species seems to be consolidating its breeding range in northern Connecticut.

Meanwhile, Fish Crows continue to make inroads inland, having followed rivers deep into the interior. In New England, there were notable numbers of records in western Massachusetts. In upstate New York, one Fish Crow was found well up into the Adirondacks, but another at Rochester was considered almost annual there now. Ontario had its fourth record ever, at Point Pelee. A few followed rivers up into the Appalachian region in Maryland and Virginia. Fish Crows were noted again in parts of north-central Texas where they were first found last year. In the upper midwest, there were notable records in Missouri, Indiana, and Iowa.

**On the subject of endangered species, there was some good news and some bad news.**

Readers with an interest in conservation of endangered species (and I hope that includes most of us) always turn to the Hawaii column for Bob Pyle's perceptive updates on bird populations in the fiftieth state. This season, there were some hopeful notes on the Hawaiian Black-necked Stilt, officially designated as Endangered. On the island of Lanai, the stilts were frequenting the artificial ponds at the water treatment plant, the first good wetland habitat on Lanai.

Meanwhile, on Oahu, more than sixty stilts were found (including some nesting) around a catchment basin at an oil refinery. Fortunately, the refinery staff was cooperating in protecting the birds. The race of the stilt in mainland North America has readily adapted to man-made wetlands, and it is to be hoped that the Hawaiian form will prove equally adaptable.

On the big island of Hawaii, a native forest bird, the Hawaii Akepa, nested successfully in an artificial nest box for the first time this season. Such nest boxes, carefully placed, may be safer than natural sites now that rats and other introduced predators are present in the forests.

Of course, islands and island groups always offer particular challenges in bird conservation: their distinctive species are likely to be more vulnerable than mainland birds. See the West Indies Region column for Rob Norton's reports on the rare and decreasing White-breasted Thrasher, as well as other threatened species on St. Lucia and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Back on the mainland there was some local good news about the declining

Henslow's Sparrow: one breeding population in North Carolina turns out to be larger than anyone had suspected. Elsewhere there were few positive notes about this characteristic bird of the eastern meadows. And from Texas comes the grim news that the Attwater's race of the Greater Prairie-Chicken appears to be headed for extinction.

An Endangered Species sidlight this spring involved Kirtland's Warbler. For years we have assumed that it was essentially impossible to find a Kirtland's on migration. However, this rare bird has been doing somewhat better recently, thanks to intensive management, and recent censuses on the breeding grounds have been higher than any in the preceding three decades. Perhaps reflecting this increase was the fact that the species was seen three times during this spring migration: singles in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

Thoughtful observers might consider this story about Kirtland's Warbler and extrapolate it to apply to migrant birds in general. With Kirtland's, once its population dropped below a certain level, it became invisible on migration: Birders simply did not encounter the very small numbers that were passing through. The same kind of thing could happen to many of our other migrant species.

All of us, even those who have come into bird-watching for sheer recreation, have reason to become conservationists. Unless we preserve healthy populations of the migrant species, their dwindling numbers will slip by us unseen each spring and fall. Spring, the time of renewal and rebirth, would be a hollow season indeed if we could not hope to witness the arrival and passage of the northbound migrants. ♪

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