

Changing Seasons

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ONE OF THE GREAT pleasures of reading the *National Audubon Society Field Notes* regional reports, for most of us, is the feeling of recognition, the sense of having been there. Granted, there may be some diligent readers on other continents who peruse these columns, following our bird happenings from afar, and if so I salute them. But most of us have been out in the field in North America during the season under discussion; and in reading these reports we can review our own memories of the season, and see how our own observations fit into the larger picture of avian events.

Someone who has "been there" in a most impressive way is Thomas H. Rogers of Spokane, Washington. Tom edited the regional reports for the Northern Rocky Mountain/Intermountain Region (subsequently the Idaho/Western Montana Region) for a remarkable four decades; with this issue, he hands over the editor's pen to

For me, reading the latest round of regional reports conjured up three dominant images of the summer of 1994. All three of them (with apologies to easterners) were related to scenes west of the Mississippi River. Two were images that I actually saw, while the third was merely one that I wished I had seen. And all three images had something to do with water.

The first image reflected a lack of water: the heat and drought that gripped the Southwest during early summer. The second image was based on an abundance of water: the green of the northern prairies this past June, all the marshes brimming with water and with birds, responding to the good rains of this year and last. The third image... well, I'll tell you about it later. If you've already scanned the regional reports, you'll probably guess before I get around to mentioning it.



Downy young King Rails (part of a brood of six) at Goose Lake Prairie State Park, Illinois, July 7, 1994. The species apparently had a good season in this region. Photograph/ Joe B. Milosevich.

Dan Svingen. In thanking Tom Rogers for his years of service to the birding community, we also have to admire his unrivaled perspective on the birdlife of the interior northwest. Few could hope to match that kind of knowledge. But anyone who has been birding for more than six months can look back at the season reported here and find recognizable images.

Parts of the west were burning up this season.

Take my word for it. I was there. Tucson in late June had a solid week with daily highs above 110° F, while some lower-elevation areas to the west had it even worse. Combined with the heat was a serious drought in many regions that contributed to a major season for forest



fires in the western United States and southwestern Canada.

Fires are natural events, of course, in many habitats. Some of this summer's fires burned unnaturally hot and long, but mainly in areas where fire had been unnaturally suppressed for decades. In one such area, the Chiricahua Mountains of southeastern Arizona, tens of thousands of acres burned this summer. It will take time to assess the results, but I do not expect long-term damage to bird populations there. Some birds will probably benefit. For example, I predict that within about seven years the Chiricahuas will have far more Buff-breasted Flycatchers than at any time in living memory.

The effects of forest fires are all local. (They are disastrous effects, obviously, for the living things that happen to be in the path of the fire, but they have little impact a few miles away.) Effects of drought, on the other hand, can be widespread, although they are usually difficult to track. Specific examples may be detected where birds are being monitored or studied closely. Harris' Hawks in southeastern New Mexico had drastically reduced breeding success this season, evidently because the dry conditions resulted in a general lack of prey. Similar factors may have been at work in the breeding failure of Northern Goshawks in southwestern New Mexico.

In the Mountain West, insect-eaters

were thought to be in reduced numbers. In the same region, hummingbirds were felt to be exceptionally abundant at feeders, perhaps reflecting the lack of natural foods in this dry year. On a similar note, Dave Jasper told me in June that the hummingbirds around Portal, Arizona, on the east side of the Chiricahua Mountains, were coping with a virtual lack of flowers: "They've got nothing to eat here but insects and sugar-water." These effects may have contributed to a northward dispersal by Costa's Hummingbirds, with unusual numbers found in northern California and others north of normal limits in Nevada and Utah.

It is tempting to draw some connection between the aridity of the season and the big northward push of Black-throated Sparrows. The record invasion of these "desert sparrows" to Oregon and Washington, which began at the end of April, continued into the summer. The species also was found in record numbers in northern California, and was more common than usual in Idaho. Farther afield, Alberta had its second confirmed record, and two in British Columbia were very rare there. Perhaps indicating that the species dispersed in all directions (not just northward) were three male Black-throateds found on territory on the coastal slope of southern California; they are ordinarily found only to the east of there.

Female Cinnamon Teal with young in Morton County, North Dakota, July 9, 1994. Second confirmation of breeding in the state. Photograph/Gordon Berkey.

How green was my prairie...

Many bird people got to see the northern Great Plains for the first time this summer, while attending one bird meeting in North Dakota or heading for another one in Montana. Although I had seen that region before, I had never seen it looking like it did this June. North Dakota was a green state, the hills covered with wildflowers and tall grass, the low spots brimming with water and with waterbirds. Ducks were everywhere, and American Bitterns stalked the roadsides in marshy country.

Some birding visitors may not have seen anything unusual about the situation—imagining, perhaps, that the prairies are always like this. But when I talked to the Regional Editors from central North Dakota, Gordon Berkey and Ron Martin, they were appropriately impressed with the verdant condition of the area that they know so well. A general sense of good news for grassland birds and marsh birds extended south into the southern Great Plains (where rails and Least Bitterns were thought to be doing well), north into the Prairie Provinces, and east into parts of the Middlewestern Prairie Region.

Grebes, coots, rails, and ducks appar-



ently had a very successful breeding season throughout the northern plains area. Baird's Sparrows were numerous in the Dakotas. Bobolinks were mentioned as doing well this year in Saskatchewan and on the Middlewestern Prairies.

Sedge Wrens and Le Conte's Sparrows, two denizens of wet meadows, were far more abundant than usual on the northern prairies this year, occupying huge areas that would have been dry grassland in an ordinary season. Most remarkable, however, was the sudden appearance of Yellow Rails in many places (if "appearance" is the right word for a bird that is so seldom seen). Yellow Rails were heard at a number of Saskatchewan locations, Montana had its fourth record, and amazing numbers were heard at various places around North Dakota. Very interesting was the contrasting report that the species was apparently absent this season at Churchill, Manitoba, near the northern end of its breeding range. I have found Yellow Rails to be very common (at least in some seasons) in the Churchill marshes; if they were actually absent this year, it could mean that the northbound rails simply stopped as soon as they encountered good habitat conditions, and never made it as far as Churchill.

Of course, not every species is promoted by wet conditions (even if the majority of bird species on the northern prairies would appear to be). In Saskatchewan, poor breeding success by Swainson's Hawks was attributed to the wet weather in June. Lark Buntings were largely absent from the northern end of their breeding range in the Prairie Provinces and northern plains; either conditions were too wet for them there, or conditions were so good farther south that the buntings were shortstopped on their way north.

Observers detected a few positive notes on warblers and other neotropical migrants.

If you'd like to get a warm feeling about our migrant songbirds for a change, read the accounts from the Appalachian and Middlewestern Prairie regions. This season, there were a number of positive comments on the status of neotropical migrants in those areas.

At the well-watched Powdermill Nature Reserve in southwestern Pennsylvania, Northern Parulas and Kentucky and Chestnut-sided warblers were all in their best numbers in years. Ovenbirds were in high numbers in some Appalachian censuses, and Prothonotary and Swainson's

Curlew Sandpiper in basic plumage (with Sanderlings) at Bolivar Flats, Texas, June 26, 1994. Fifth documented state record. Photograph/Gail Diane Luckner.

warblers were found nesting at noteworthy northern sites there. Censuses in the Frozen Head State Natural Area in eastern Tennessee suggested that this must be a very important breeding area for the beleaguered Cerulean Warbler.

The Middlewestern Prairie Region yielded favorable reports on Ovenbird and on Chestnut-sided, Yellow-throated, Cerulean, Kentucky, and Hooded warblers. There were also records of nesting, or probable nesting, of several warblers near their limits of range. In northern Illinois, hard-working Scott Robinson found significant breeding populations of several warblers, including Golden-winged, Mourning, and Black-throated Green. His surveys turned up 20 species of warblers in Ogle County, for the highest known diversity in the state. These populations may well have been there all along, so their discovery does not necessarily indicate an upturn for the species involved, but it is good to know that they are there.

Of course, there were negative indications as well, at least on a local level. New England this season reported no

breeding confirmations at all for Golden-winged Warbler, a species that continues to fade toward the north. Surveys in Rhode Island showed an ongoing decline in numbers of Veeries. Both Veeries and Wood Thrushes were down on surveys in Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. Conversely, Veeries apparently are increasing their summer range in New Jersey and on eastern Long Island.

More disquieting was something that Ron Ridout pointed out: Preliminary reports from monitoring studies in northern Ontario suggested a general lack of passerines there this season. We may tend to assume that populations of warblers and other migrants in the undisturbed northern forests are probably all right; in reality, such assumptions may not be warranted.

Cones and caterpillars supported good numbers of crossbills and cuckoos.

Most of our coniferous trees show a lot of variation from year to year in their production of seeds. For a given species of pine or spruce or fir, most of the trees in one region will have either a good season or a bad season, depending on precipitation and other climate cycles. This regional variation in cone crops is the driving force behind the wanderings of our crossbills, birds that travel far and wide in search of cones to twist open. This season, many White-winged Crossbills began singing in the forests of New Brunswick in late July. A heavy cone crop was developing there, and veteran observer Stuart Tingley predicted a population explosion of White-wingeds there. White-wingeds were also singing in Newfoundland by late summer, and fair numbers of Red Crossbills were in Nova Scotia. Good numbers of crossbills also appeared in parts of Quebec, including adults feeding recently fledged young. Across northern Ontario, numbers of crossbills (especially Reds) were building up in July, in response to a cone crop described as "massive." By contrast, cone crops were poor in the Adirondacks in upstate New York, and few crossbills were seen.

Cuckoos are not so famously nomadic as crossbills, but their summer numbers in a given locale may vary tremendously from year to year. This is most pronounced in the east, where populations of certain caterpillars may hold the key to cuckoo abundance. This year, both Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos were unusually common in regions from Massachusetts through the northern Ap-

palachians to eastern Ohio. At least in New England, high populations of tent caterpillars were specifically mentioned in relation to the cuckoos.

In most parts of the west, Yellow-billed Cuckoos continued in their precarious status of recent years. However, it was encouraging to hear that at least 50 were found in their southern California stronghold on the South Fork of the Kern River. Atlas workers found the species at several points in Colorado, and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo that strayed north to the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia was the second there in three years.

Ramifications of the winter of 1993–1994 were still being noted during the summer.

Carolina Wren is not the only species to be affected by harsh winters, obviously, but it seems to be the bird of choice for assessing the damaging impacts of such winters on birdlife in general. Since it is a permanent resident even at its northern limits, and vocally conspicuous, it is more easily monitored than many other species that might be similarly impacted by weather. This season, from New England to the middle Atlantic Coast to the Appalachians and the western Great Lakes, reporters indicated that Carolina Wrens were in sharply reduced numbers. Wisconsin, for example, had only one report. Observers in Connecticut and Massachusetts felt that numbers were sharply down; Wayne Petersen suggests that the Christmas Bird Counts of the 1994–1995 season will provide the best confirmation of this. In the Hudson-Delaware region, official Summer Bird Counts provided solid evidence to back up impressions of declines (on one Philadelphia count, Carolina Wrens dropped from 21 to two).

Otherwise, there were few mentions of winter's impact on summer's birds. Red-necked Grebes left over from the winter invasion remained into summer in Maryland, New Jersey, and New York. Brown Pelicans probably suffered some mortality from the severe cold, and their nesting numbers were reduced on the middle Atlantic Coast. Eastern Bluebird numbers were conspicuously lower in Quebec, but drew few mentions elsewhere.

Some long-term northward expansions continued this season.

In California, Black Skimmers were found nesting in the San Francisco Bay region for the first time, at two sites. The species has become so common in southern California that it is hard to remember what a recent arrival it is

there; the 1961 edition of Peterson's western field guide did not list the skimmer at all, even as an accidental.

Mississippi Kites have been gradually increasing and spreading northward for many years, especially on the Great Plains. This year they were found nesting in Nebraska for the first time. There were also noteworthy numbers in Indiana and Missouri, and the species continued its summer presence in south-central Virginia.

Pied-billed Grebe, very widespread on this continent, has its regional ups and downs. (For example, it has declined in recent years in the northeast, although a pair did nest in Boston this season.) At the northern edge of its range, however, it may be expanding. Pied-billed Grebes nested in the Yukon for the first time this year. In the Magdalen Islands of Quebec, where they were first found breeding only about two decades ago, Pied-billeds increased this year to 27 nesting pairs. Meanwhile, the Magdalen Islands population of Horned Grebes—the easternmost in North America, and well isolated from the main range—has continued to decline. There is a possibility that competition between the two grebes could be a factor in the decline of the Horned.

Not surprisingly, Great-tailed Grackle is continuing its northward conquest. In the western part of the Middlewestern Prairie Region, numbers continued to expand. At least six Great-taileds were found in southern Idaho this season, and local nesting was suspected. In northern California, the species nested in Mono County for the first time; three individuals were at Malheur in southeastern Oregon for the second summer in a row.

Observers noted a few other terns of events.

Roseate Tern is now getting the kind of attention it merits as an Endangered species. One positive effort in Massachusetts deserves mention: A gull control program on Ram Island in Buzzards Bay has allowed terns to recolonize the island, where they last nested in 1972. Some 76 pairs of Roseate Terns and 160 pairs of Common Terns nested there this year.

Elsewhere the news was mixed. Canada's largest breeding colony of Roseate Terns, off West Pubnico, Nova Scotia, was back up to 33 pairs. In the Magdalen Islands, Quebec, no nesting of Roseates was confirmed and Common Terns had a poor season; the suspected cause was predation by foxes, which have multiplied following the closure of the trapping season there. Summer sightings of Roseates

in New Jersey and Maryland raised the possibility that the species might be nesting somewhere south of Long Island.

Least Terns are also drawing attention. As noted by Bob Paxton *et al.* in the Hudson-Delaware region, "Their readiness to try new sites is what saves them." Least terns in several areas are now relying heavily on gravel roofs as nesting sites; recently some 90% of the nests in Maryland have been on rooftops, and many in Florida are using roofs as well. In the interior, where the species still depends on traditional sites on the ground, Least terns were doing well on the southern Great Plains. Along the lower Mississippi River, a remarkable 650 nests were located during June surveys; it was thought that the 1993 floods, scouring the river islands of vegetation, might have opened up more nesting areas for the terns. Unfortunately, when the river rose in July, nest failure was estimated at 95%.

Last image of summer: flight over water.

No, I was not there. But I'll guarantee that no one who was on that boat will ever forget the vision of the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross over Cordell Bank, off the coast of northern California, on the 17th of July last summer.

In the southern oceans, where most of the world's albatross diversity is centered, there are still several species of albatross that have never yet been known to stray north of the Equator. But the Light-mantled Sooty is perhaps the ultimate: the most beautiful, the most graceful in a family of incredible fliers. When I have gone as a lecturer on trips to the Antarctic I have seen how this species would work its magic on the non-birding passengers. The most jaded staff members on the ships, those who were openly amused at the birders, would stop their work and come out on deck when a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross was spotted. Even where

it's expected, it's a stunning bird. But what would it feel like to go out on a pelagic trip off the California coast and see this apparition from the south, thousands of miles from any place where it had been seen before? One boatload of observers found out this season.

Of course, since it was seen off California—the capital of spirited debate in the birding world—the albatross sparked controversy. One of the arguments, predictably, involved what English name to use. Should it be called Light-mantled Albatross, disregarding the fact that several other species have lighter mantles? Or should the modifier "Sooty" be applied, and if so, should it be hyphenated to "Sooty-Albatross," continuing the recent trend toward awkwardness and ugliness in bird names?

The major debate, however, centered on the question of origin. Seabirds seen far out of normal range in recent decades have been tarred with suspicion: Could the birds have been transported thither by humans? Such questions have involved not only birds off California—such as the Swallow-tailed Gull nine years ago, which is still being kicked around—but also such oddities as White-chinned Petrel in Texas, Gray Gull in Louisiana, *et cetera*. The usual argument against such birds is that there is no pattern of records for the area between the normal range and this outlying occurrence. No intervening records implies no pattern of vagrancy, hence no way the bird could have arrived naturally.

Of course, this kind of argument was raised relative to the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, a species never before found north of the Equator. But that argument misses an essential point: What is *really* rare between the Equator and Cordell Bank is *coverage*. A few patches of water off California may get birded several days a year, but farther south the coverage is

negligible. We scarcely know what birds occur regularly in most quadrants of the ocean, let alone what might occur rarely.

Diehard skeptics may invent some scenario in which the albatross was carried north by a mischievous sailor and then released. But I can suggest a more logical explanation: Some birds wander, a few wander out of normal range, and a very few wander far out of range. Most of the latter are never seen by humans, so we are prone to disbelief when they do appear.

We can only guess how many times in a decade (or in a century) one of these southern albatrosses might cross the Equator. For such a stray, in the endless emptiness of the Pacific Ocean, actually to be intercepted by a boatload of birders is a circumstance that rattles the imagination. A one-in-a-billion chance, maybe. But it happened.

The end of the story reveals just how easy it would be for such a bird to go undetected. Naturally, after the first sighting, follow-up trips were hastily arranged. Anxious boatloads of birders plied the Cordell Bank on subsequent days. But by that time the albatross had lifted its long dark wings and flown away, and vanished again forever in the vastness of the Pacific. ♣

Birders of a feather should flock together—especially with Spring coming!



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