

Changing Seasons

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One of the many out-of-range birds discovered around North America this spring was this Greater Antillean Pewee near Boca Raton, Florida, in mid-March 1995. This little flycatcher provided a first record for North America. Photograph/Giff Beaton.



Two major themes always seem to dominate our view of the spring migration season. One theme is the migration itself—the timing and magnitude of the normal passage. The other theme involves our year-round preoccupation with rarities, birds outside their normal ranges. Hardcore scientists may belittle this obsession with rare birds, but especially in spring, it has a valuable edge: This is the beginning of the breeding season, and birds that stray out of range in spring may be pioneering an extension of breeding range. At least, we can always raise that possibility, if we need any reason to justify our actions as we head out to the nearest vagrant trap.

In this column I will begin by discussing the rare birds, before going on to an assessment of the normal migration. Dessert first, then the main course.

Part 1. Invaders from the four winds

Stray birds from outside our borders always cause excitement. This spring, there were marked invasions at each of the four corners of the continent.

Northeast: If only we could blow up Newfoundland...

North of the 45th parallel, most of the storm systems move from west to east. This is a fact much appreciated by birders in Britain and Ireland, who regularly

record stray birds from North America—misguided birds that have been aided, in their off-course migrations, by winds from the west. Every year, British birders enjoy windfalls of Nearctic vagrants. Birders in Holland, Germany, and elsewhere on the continent sometimes talk about all the great birds they might find if only the British Isles were not standing in the way, shortstopping those rarities. Jokes about a Dutch birder's plot to get rid of Britain have circulated more than once.

Occasionally, storms over the North Atlantic set up strong winds from the east or northeast, and if these occur at the right time of year, they may intercept migrant birds traveling between Europe and Iceland. Such unlucky migrants may fly downwind until they hit the outer coasts of Labrador or Newfoundland. In recent years, with increased birding coverage in Newfoundland, we have begun to realize the magnitude of these windfall flights. This season saw one of the best European fallouts ever there.

From April 25–28, gale-force winds from the northeast buffeted eastern Newfoundland. As soon as the winds abated, the stray birds began to show up. Greater Golden-Plovers, the most frequent spring storm-waifs, appeared in good numbers, with at least 90 birds scattered about the region. Pink-footed Goose, reported only a couple of times previously (Newfoundland and Quebec), made a big showing, with five at four locations. Some other birds (including ducks and Northern Wheatears) were probably associated with the blow, but the biggest excitement was the confirmation of Common Redshank at three different locations in eastern Newfoundland. This distinctive sandpiper had long been considered overdue to show up in North America. A full account of the invasion, required reading for anyone interested in vagrant birds, is given by Blake Maybank in his column on the Atlantic Provinces Region.

As major and exciting as this event was, it was barely felt to the west and south of Newfoundland. Single Greater Golden-Plovers in Nova Scotia and in St. Pierre et Miquelon represented the only overflow of the flight. Birders in the Maritimes may be forgiven if they sometimes fantasize about the birds they could find if only Newfoundland were not in the way.

Northwest: The vagrant weather was just a little too good

Among tickers and rarity-hunters, the annual search for Siberian strays in the western Alaskan outposts is now so well

known that it is almost taken for granted. It is hard for many to realize that this is a relatively new tradition. As recently as the early 1970s, the idea of scouring western Alaska for Asian vagrants was a novel concept. During the last two decades, however, it has become a major annual reality. Even birders who will never go there wait for the vicarious excitement of the spring report from Attu Island, at the western end of the Aleutian chain, and from the other Alaskan outposts.

Even if this vagrant-hunting is driven by an unscientific desire to build up life lists, it has still produced a tremendous amount of valuable data. One of the things we have learned is that there is a strong connection between bad weather and good birds in western Alaska. Birders visiting there every spring pray for storms to come across from Siberia.

This season, those prayers were answered a little too well. As explained by Thede Tobish, a low-pressure system over the Aleutians combined with a high-pressure system over the mainland to set up windy, rainy weather over the Bering Sea. No doubt these conditions must have dropped many interesting birds on Attu—but there were no birders there to record them. For the first time since regular Attu expeditions began in the 1970s, the trip was weathered out.

The Pribilof Islands and Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, had their usual coverage, and researchers were on Buldir and Nizki in the western Aleutians. Reports from these sites suggested that it was an extremely good year for Asian shorebirds. Passerines provided excitement: A bird at Gambell was apparently a Brown Tree-pipit, only a second for North America and far from the species' usual range. On St. Paul in the Pribilofs, a group of Eurasian Skylarks arrived in May and proceeded to set up territory, with a nest found at the end of the month. This was the first definite North American breeding record for non-introduced skylarks, although nesting was suspected at the same site a quarter-century ago. The most tantalizing report involved an Accipiter, thought to be a Chinese Sparrowhawk (*A. soloensis*), seen on Nizki Island. Eastern Asia has several kinds of Accipiters, at least a couple of which would seem more likely than Chinese Sparrowhawk to reach the Aleutians. It's anyone's guess what birds might have been on Attu this year.

Southeast: The possibilities go on and on

The Bahamas are separated from the east coast of Florida by only a narrow strait,

but these islands host quite a few resident birds that do not ordinarily occur on the mainland. One by one, over the years, several of these Bahaman birds have been confirmed in Florida. Some of these, having been detected once, have continued to turn up more often. This spring, for example, Florida had two single La Sagra's Flycatchers, a Bahama Mockingbird, and a Thick-billed Vireo, all relatively recent additions to the state list. Joining them on the state list this season was a new bird, Greater Antillean Pewee. This little flycatcher looks somewhat like an offbeat Empidonax, and it may have been overlooked in the past; kudos to Brian Hope for identifying this one. Now that birders are tuned in to the species, it undoubtedly will be found again.

Moving from the east coast of Florida to the state's southwestern extremity: In my opinion, the famed Dry Tortugas, isolated in the Gulf some 75 miles west of Key West, represent one of the great under-birded sites in North America.

I can already hear the howls of protest: "Under-birded? When I visited the Tortugas, there must have been a hundred other birders there!" Right. But you visited in late April or early May, didn't you? The rest of the year, these islands receive very little attention from birders. Even though the overwhelming majority of the birding coverage occurs during a few weeks centered on late April, some of the most exciting rarities have been found during rare birding visits at other seasons: Ruddy Quail-Dove in December, Variegated Flycatcher in March. The implication is that Caribbean or tropical strays could turn up there at any time of year.

Certainly the April-May birding peak has produced many records of interest, and this year offered several examples, including Fork-tailed Flycatcher, an apparent Loggerhead Kingbird, and two different Red-footed Boobies. The Fork-tailed was photographed by ace birder Kevin Karlson, who has documented many interesting birds at the Tortugas. Karlson also photographed the rarest bird of the spring there: A dove of the genus *Leptotila* (in early April, before most of the birders had arrived). The tropical genus *Leptotila* includes the White-tipped Dove, which reaches southern Texas, but the one photo I saw suggested that the Tortugas bird was not a White-tipped. If its identity can be confirmed, it will probably be a new species for North America.

Southwest: No water barriers here

At the other three corners of the conti-

nent, any extralimital bird that shows up is one that has made a serious commitment: A bird that has crossed a substantial amount of water to get here. In the Southwest, no such water barriers stand in the way of dispersal. The lack of such obstacles has made it easier for birds from the tropics not only to stray in, but also to experiment with expanding their breeding ranges northward into our territory.

Rufous-capped Warbler has been playing games with the United States-Mexican border for more than two decades. For a while in the 1970s, it seemed to be becoming almost regular in the Big Bend region of Texas, but then it disappeared from there. Also in the 1970s, it nested once in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona, but then it vanished. It has turned up a dozen times since, often remaining for months, but almost always in a different place each time. The three birds this spring were, again, in new spots: one in a park near Uvalde, far above the border in south-central Texas, and two in French Joe Canyon, an Arizona site almost untouched by birders in the past. The Arizona birds, at least, were acting highly territorial. Will this species ever establish a nesting population north of Mexico?

Two more hesitant invaders continued in Arizona: Flame-colored Tanagers were found nesting in Madera Canyon again, and Streak-backed Orioles nested again on the San Pedro River. These are heartening signs, but we are still looking at isolated pairs, not a well-established population. In Texas, a Short-tailed Hawk came north out of Mexico and took up residence at Lost Maples, in the southern Hill Country. Three different records of Broad-billed Hummingbird in Texas this season might hint at a potential for range expansion into that state.

In New Mexico, a Buff-breasted Flycatcher photographed in the Peloncillo Mountains furnished the first definite state record in over fifty years. The species formerly nested in southwestern New Mexico (and over much of Arizona), before fire suppression and overgrazing eliminated the open, grassy pine forests that it favors. With better forest management, there is the possibility that the flycatcher could come back.

Part 2. The return of the neotropicals

It's a sad thing to realize that on beautiful spring and fall days, there are still millions of Americans (and Canadians, too) sitting inside, in front of their television sets, missing out on one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the world: bird migration. Literally hundreds of millions

of birds, perhaps billions, are moving across the face of North America twice a year, following ancient instincts, guided by innate navigational systems of baffling complexity. Those of us who go afield during migration season are catching glimpses of the marvels of the universe.

Spring migration in 1995, perhaps more than in most seasons, revealed the effects of weather on the migration of small birds, particularly those coming north from the neotropics. Effects of weather on the more visible movements of hawks and many water birds are already well known, so most of the following comments refer to songbirds.

Spring weather and the timing of migration

The season's weather for an entire continent usually cannot be described in a few words, of course, because there is so much regional variation. However, some broad patterns emerged this spring. West of the Mississippi, it was a wet season in many areas; flooding made headlines in Kansas City and New Orleans, and in northern California it was one of the wettest springs ever. Toward the east and north-east, the season tended to be on the dry side in most areas.

Temperature patterns varied more than rainfall, but in many areas there was warm weather early in the spring and cooler weather later. A surprising number of regions commented on the same phenomenon: early-arriving birds in March, then a slow period, then a good, but delayed, migration of other birds in May.

Across much of the continent, major storm systems moved through during the spring. This was especially notable in mid-May, when storms caused fallouts of migrant birds in a multitude of regions from coast to coast.

May 13 happened to be a Saturday, and designated as International Migratory Bird Day, so many observers were in the field. Weather systems happened to drop big fallouts of migrants in many areas on that day. The 13th was singled out as a peak day in areas as diverse as North Dakota, Iowa, and western Massachusetts. May 10 was cited as the day the floodgates opened in Ontario, while May 10–13 was the peak passage in eastern Ohio. Around the same dates but involving different weather systems, northern California had notable migrant fallouts during the period May 12–18. Another big northeastern fallout occurred late in the month, with big numbers of migrants (especially Blackpoll Warblers) reported May 24–25 in Montreal

and on Cape Cod.

Many regions, therefore, regarded this as an outstanding spring for neotropical migrants. However, this reaction was not universal. The ongoing scarcity of migrants was lamented in the Atlantic Provinces and on parts of the Gulf Coast. Even within a region, reactions varied. From the western Great Lakes, Jim Granlund reported that "both Michigan and Minnesota observers commented that the warbler, vireo, and thrush migrations were the best in recent memory, while Wisconsin birders wondered where all the birds had gone." In every case, local weather undoubtedly had a major effect on birders' impressions of the migration.

Spotlight on spotted thrushes

Among songbird migrants, birders usually pay most attention to warblers, but thrushes often come second. Even though there are only five species (or six—see below) of brown-backed, spot-breasted thrushes, they are often taken as a gauge of the quality of a migration season. Recently there has been concern that these thrushes, like some other neotropical migrants, are in serious decline.

Impressions of the thrush migration this spring varied markedly from region to region. Thrushes in general were considered very scarce in Florida and along the southern Atlantic Coast, but numerous on the northern Great Plains. Gray-cheekeds were scarce in the Appalachians but perhaps up in numbers on the middle Atlantic Coast and in northern Texas. Good numbers of Veeries were reported in northern Texas and the Appalachians. Swainson's Thrushes were slightly improved from recent lows in West Virginia, and were seen in good numbers in parts of the West and Midwest, with major fallouts in the Prairie Provinces. Reflecting the delay of the latter part of the migration, Swainson's were very late in arriving on their breeding areas in Idaho and western Montana.

This spring, some brave observers tangled with the identification of Bicknell's Thrush, now certain to be split from the Gray-cheeked. A few Bicknell's identified in Quebec were in areas where expected, but it's hard to know how to interpret the report of three possible individuals in Indiana and western Ohio. These birds, identified mostly by their chestnut-colored tails, were farther west than the breeding range or known migration route of Bicknell's, and they may have been variants of the regular Gray-cheeked Thrush. For more on identification of

these difficult birds, see the excellent article by Ian McLaren in the October 1995 issue of *Birding* (Vol. 27, No. 5, pp 358–366).

Measuring our sample of the migration: The Kirtland's Ratio

To borrow a statistic from the following season, the annual Kirtland's Warbler census in the summer 1995 had very heartening results: more than 700 singing males were tallied. This is the highest total in decades, and it provides yet another example of success owing to the Endangered Species Act.

However, I looked at this figure from another angle. Assuming there are about as many females as males, the census total suggests that approximately 1,500 Kirtland's Warblers made the northward migration during spring 1995. How many of these were seen by birders during migration? Five: one in North Carolina, one in Virginia, one in Ohio, and two in Ontario. In other words, roughly one out of every three hundred Kirtland's was actually intercepted by the intense birding coverage of eastern North America.

Some people may argue that this ratio cannot be applied to other migrants. After all, Kirtland's Warbler has a shorter migration route than most neotropical migrants, merely going from the Bahamas to Michigan, not from the deep tropics to Canada. And researcher Harold Mayfield has suggested that many Kirtland's might make most of the journey in one continuous flight. Still, I'm tempted to use this measure, "the Kirtland's Ratio," as a ballpark figure for our detections of migrant warblers and other woodland songbirds.

Think about it from this perspective. Think of all the migrant songbirds you saw last spring, and then multiply that by all the birders that were afield during the season. Then consider the possibility that we—all of us, put together—still managed to miss 299 out of every 300 passerines that made the northward trip. Even if the Kirtland's Ratio is off by a substantial margin, it still becomes obvious that we are missing most of the birds that pass by. We are seeing only the very tip of the iceberg, only the edge of the river, only a tiny fraction of the throngs of migrants.

If these throngs were to disappear, the Earth would lose much of its mystery and wonder. The time to save the migrants is now, while they are still numerous, while we are seeing only the early warning signs rather than full-blown disaster. ♣