

Changing Seasons

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Immature female Blue-winged Warbler at Galileo Hill, California, September 24, 1995. When the first issue of *Audubon Field Notes* was published, the first California record of this species was still several years in the future. Since that time, our knowledge of eastern strays in the West has grown dramatically; some eastern warblers visit California in substantial numbers, but the Blue-winged is still a genuine rarity there.

Photograph/John C. Wilson.



THIS ISSUE LAUNCHES Volume Fifty of this publication. Our fiftieth year seems like a logical time to pause and look back, to consider the enterprise in which so many people have participated. This has been truly an interactive publication, with thousands of people taking part as observers, reporters, sub-regional and regional editors, and readers, all tracking the birdlife of a continent. Everyone who has been involved can take pride in this unbroken record of our avifauna.

Since the first volume appeared several years before I was born, I had to go to a major library to trace the history of these reports. One question I pursued had to do with this column, "The Changing Seasons." Did the column begin with Volume One, Number One?

The answer, surprisingly, was no: the column began *before* then. To understand why, we need to know a bit of history.

The history of the Regional Reports

Anyone who has watched birds for a while knows that the classification and naming of species will change from time to time. (Witness the Northern Oriole, which has just been re-split into Baltimore and Bullock's orioles a mere 22 years after those two were lumped.) Perhaps appropriately, the same kind of thing has happened with this bird publication.

The magazine of the National Audubon Society was called *Bird-Lore* for many years, until it was changed to *Audubon Magazine* in 1941. *Bird-Lore* promoted and published the first Christmas Bird Counts. It also, in 1917, began publishing a few short columns of bird sightings under the heading of "The Season." The first installment of "The Season" had reports from six regions, each centered on a major popu-

lation center, with the westernmost at Kansas City. Over the next twenty years, the number of reporting regions gradually increased. With the September/October 1939 issue of *Bird-Lore*, a new format was introduced: "The Season" was published as a supplement, not within the body of the magazine. Perhaps to quell any grumbling from hardcore birders, that issue of *Bird-Lore* also introduced a new column that summarized and analyzed the regional reports. Famed field ornithologist Ludlow Griscom was tapped to write this new column, "The Changing Seasons," and he wrote it for almost every season for years thereafter.

At the beginning of 1947, the format changed again. "The Season" had been a stand-alone supplement for seven years, and it was growing in size and in popularity, but not everyone who belonged to National Audubon cared to receive these bird reports. Accordingly, *Audubon Field Notes* was launched as a completely separate publication.

Actually, Volume 1, Number 1 of *Field Notes* had no "Changing Seasons" column — but only because Ludlow Griscom apparently just missed that season. He was writing the column both before and after that date. We can notch back a year from that initial issue and look at the "Changing Seasons" covering the fall of 1945, which appeared in *Audubon Magazine* for January/February 1946.

Some interesting parallels can be seen between the autumn seasons of 1945 and 1995. In both years, there was a notable southward push of Red-breasted Nuthatches. In both years, there were relatively few storm fronts to reach the Atlantic Coast in early fall, so the migration of warblers was considered disappointing. But the similarities are far outweighed by the differences, and most of those differences have to do with the vastly greater amount of birding coverage in the 1990s.

Ludlow Griscom passed away years ago, in the late 1950s. What would he think if he could examine the Regional Reports as they appear today? I am willing to bet that he would be delighted at the great numbers of skilled, conscientious observers, and delighted at the level at which our sight records are now documented. Probably Griscom would be fascinated, too, to see how the increase in observers has led to the discovery of whole new patterns of bird occurrence — phenomena that inevitably would have been missed by a smaller network of birders.

Western hummingbirds in the East

As long ago as the 1940s, it was recognized that a handful of Rufous Hummingbirds might make it as far east as the Gulf Coast in fall or winter. But I am sure that no one then would have predicted the hummer extravaganza that now occurs in the Southeast practically every year.

Although this is regarded as a relatively new phenomenon, it may be mostly our awareness of it that is new. Harry LeGrand, former regional editor for the Southern Atlantic Coast region, wrote to me recently that "If folks didn't leave their hummingbird feeders out during the winter, we wouldn't be having these hummingbird 'invasions.'" And of course he has a point. Western hummers in the East often show up late in fall, sometimes well after the local Ruby-throateds have departed; now that birders are aware of this, many are leaving their feeders out late into the fall just to see if something might turn up.

Still, as with any such movement of vagrants, there is variation from year to year; and the fall of 1995 apparently was an unusually good one for western hummers out of range. This was suggested in

a number of eastern regions. The Hudson-Delaware region had six *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, and the Middle Atlantic Coast region had seven, both well above recent norms. North Dakota got its long-overdue first record of Rufous Hummingbird, Florida had unprecedented numbers of *Selasphorus* and *Archilochus*, and Texas observers noted that western species were clearly more numerous than usual in the eastern half of the state.

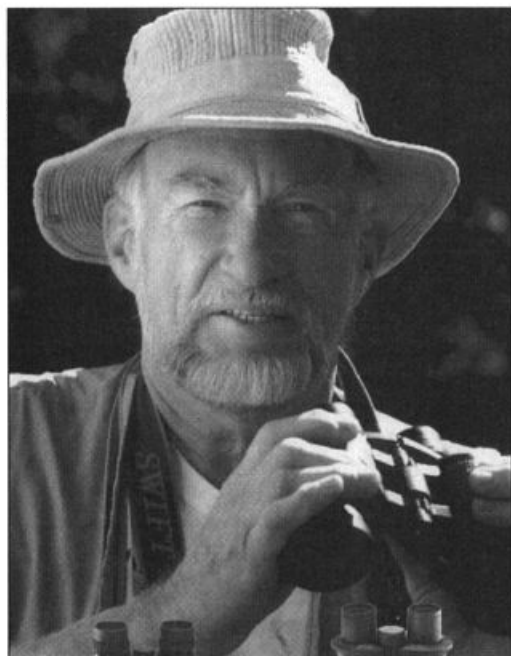
The states along the Gulf of Mexico generally put on the biggest hummer show, and this season Alabama stole the limelight from the usual star, Louisiana. Alabama's most amazing hummer of the fall was a Green Violet-ear, far from its usual haunts in the uplands of Mexico and southward, but the state also had Buff-bellied and Anna's hummingbirds, two that would have been most unexpected just a few years ago. Banders also documented a fifth record of Allen's Hummingbird in Alabama. This underscores the fact that it is not safe to assume all *Selasphorus* in the East "have to be" Rufous. If the bird is not a diagnostic adult male, it should be identified as '*Selasphorus* sp.' until proven one way or the other.

Incidentally, the "new" field mark mentioned in the Middle Atlantic Coast column has been illustrated and discussed a number of times since Gary Stiles first elucidated the situation in 1972. Those tail feathers can be very reliable for identification of most individuals, if you can examine razor-sharp photos taken at point-blank range; this is not quite the same as being able to identify the birds in the field!

The owls of autumn

In mid to late autumn of 1995, various parts of the East experienced the biggest invasion of Northern Saw-whet Owls on record. Figures like 600-plus at Cape May, New Jersey, 1000-plus at Kiptopeke, Virginia, and 100 at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, are truly mind-boggling to birders who have had to struggle to see just one saw-whet. At the farthest-flung extent of the invasion, saw-whets reached South Carolina and even Bermuda.

Although the numbers tallied here are record-setting, we have to understand that the period of record does not go back very far. Those big counts are for saw-whets banded, captured in mist-nets



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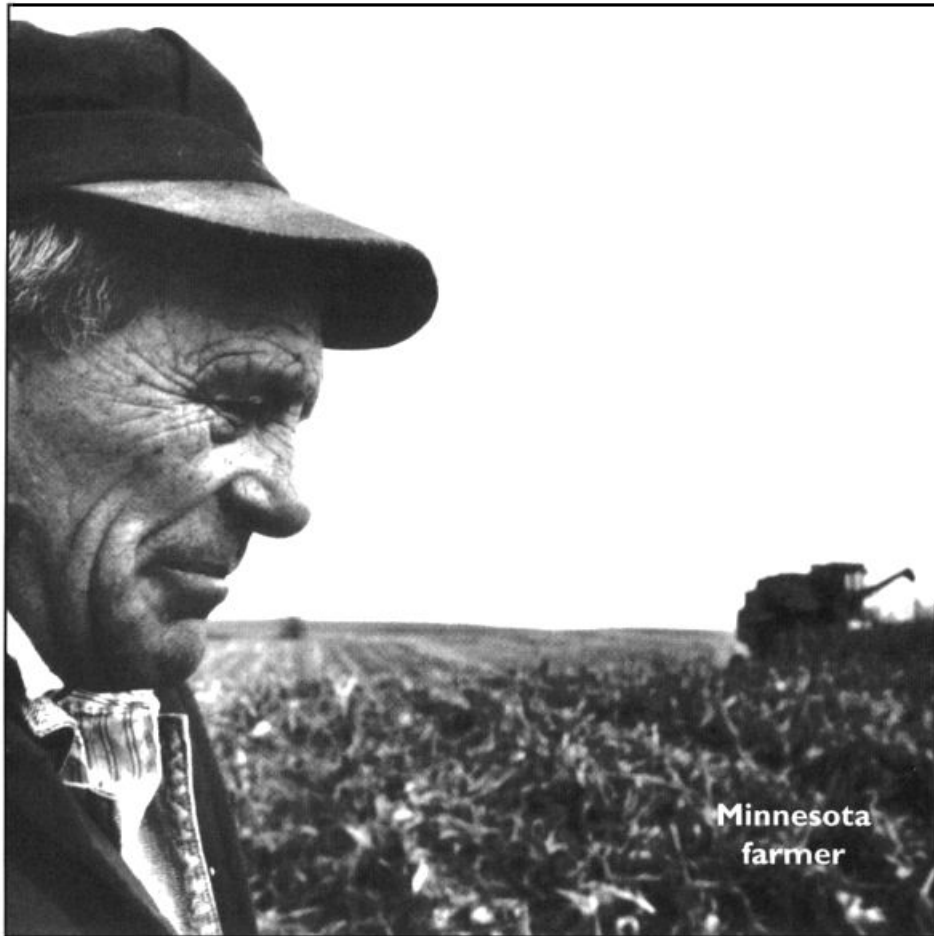


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strung at night — and large-scale owl banding is still a relatively new phenomenon. If a flight like this had occurred just twenty years ago, it would have gone largely undetected, although observers probably would have found a few more than usual.

Consider the example of the Middle Atlantic Coast region this fall. Banders at Kiptopeke, at the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, handled an amazing >1000 saw-whets this season. But throughout the entire remainder of that region, only eight individuals were seen anywhere *away* from banding sites. Without the nighttime sampling of the mist-nets, we would have had no concept at all of the magnitude of the flight.

Sea-going migrants on inland waters

True pelagic birds, such as albatrosses and shearwaters, are almost never found inland except under extreme circumstances. But we have another whole class of part-time seabirds, species which spend the non-breeding season on salt water but which may migrate overland. Examples include scoters and some other sea ducks, jaegers, and the few genuinely sea-going gulls, like Sabine's and Black-legged Kittiwake. For a birder in far inland areas, the hope of finding one of these birds is reason enough to keep checking local lakes in fall.

If we scan our local pond year after year and finally find a Sabine's Gull there, we have no way of knowing whether that bird is an isolated stray or part of a major movement. That is, we have no way of knowing until we check the appropriate issue of *Field Notes*. Those who found Sabine's Gulls last fall will be interested to know that autumn 1995 was an exceptionally good year for these boldly patterned wanderers on inland waters. Record numbers were found in the Middlewestern Prairie Region, and sample tallies elsewhere included ten in Arizona and a remarkable 22 in New Mexico. Even in Alaska (where Sabine's nest along northern coasts), more migrants were seen close to shore than usual, and one was found deep in the interior of the state. Autumn 1995 was also a good season for other part-time seabirds inland; see the various regional reports for notes on scoters, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and others.

Eastern vagrants west

When Ludlow Griscom wrote the first "The Changing Seasons" column, covering summer 1939, he singled out the most outstanding "freak record" of the

season, a sighting of an Indigo Bunting at Berkeley, a first for California. To see how things have changed, consider the autumn of 1995. Guy McCaskie writes that Indigo Buntings were scarcer than normal this season as strays in southern California, with *only* 28 reported! Part of this change since 1939 may reflect an actual increase in numbers — the Indigo has been expanding its breeding range westward during this century — but it largely reflects the massive increase in numbers and intensity of birders in the West.

Until at least the late 1950s, it was considered axiomatic that western birds often strayed east (following the general flow of weather systems) but that eastern birds only occasionally strayed west. Today, of course, we understand the situation to be the opposite: eastern strays going west vastly outnumber the western birds trickling eastward. Fortunately, western compilers have kept good records of the numbers of eastern vagrants, so we can speak with confidence about trends there. For example, the four Canada Warblers found in southern California this season made about a normal number, but the five Black-throated Greens were more than recent averages, while Bay-breasteds have become almost nonexistent as strays there. Over long periods, such tallies may even tell us something about total population levels.

A wealth of other patterns, surprises, and questions

In Griscom's day, the Eurasian Collared-Dove was in the process of expanding its range across Europe, but there was not a hint of the species in North America until the 1980s. Now it is here in force. This season, the doves continued (not surprisingly) to expand their range. They are now established north to coastal North Carolina, and increasing and spreading in the Gulf states. One found in the Muskogee area of Oklahoma this fall was conservatively treated by Joe Grzybowski as "origin uncertain," but it easily could have been the vanguard of the advancing horde just a little farther southeast. During the spread of this species across Europe, outlying colonies and singletons were often found well out ahead of the main population front.

But there were many other avian phenomena of the season, as there always seem to be — far too many to touch on in one column. There was a big flight of Red-breasted Nuthatches in the East,

and chickadees were also on the move in parts of the Northeast. There were many mountain birds moving into the lowlands in parts of the Southwest. There was an obvious shift in the southbound path of a few species: Warblers and other migrants were "monumentally scarce" on parts of the Atlantic Coast, but were seen in better-than-average numbers in parts of the Midwest. In particular, Black-throated Blue Warbler was found unusually often west of its usual route, in the western Gulf states and the southern Great Plains. There were record numbers of Northern Cardinals and Red-bellied Woodpeckers moving north into the Maritime Provinces, and record numbers of southbound Peregrines counted at some points on the Atlantic Coast. And we could go on and on...

No doubt Ludlow Griscom would have enjoyed reading all of these reports, looking for the patterns and the surprises, seeing how the network of observers and reporters had grown by the time of Volume 50.