

Changing Seasons

KENN KAUFMAN

In the Midwest, several species of grassland birds seemed to respond very favorably to the cool wet conditions of this summer. Henslow's Sparrow, a threatened species, was found at a number of new sites. This one was at the Kingsbury Wildlife Management Area, Indiana, June 3, 1996. Photograph/Dick Plank.

The first time I wrote this column, for the March 1977 issue of *American Birds*, I was barely out of my teens. I don't recall now just how I managed to wangle an invitation to serve as the guest columnist, but I do remember that to write it I worked round-the-clock for five weeks. (It helped that I was unemployed at the time.) Since then I have written in this space many times. Although I find each season's reports no less fascinating now than I did twenty years ago, I have at least learned to go through them and write the summary a lot faster.

How to write the Changing Seasons

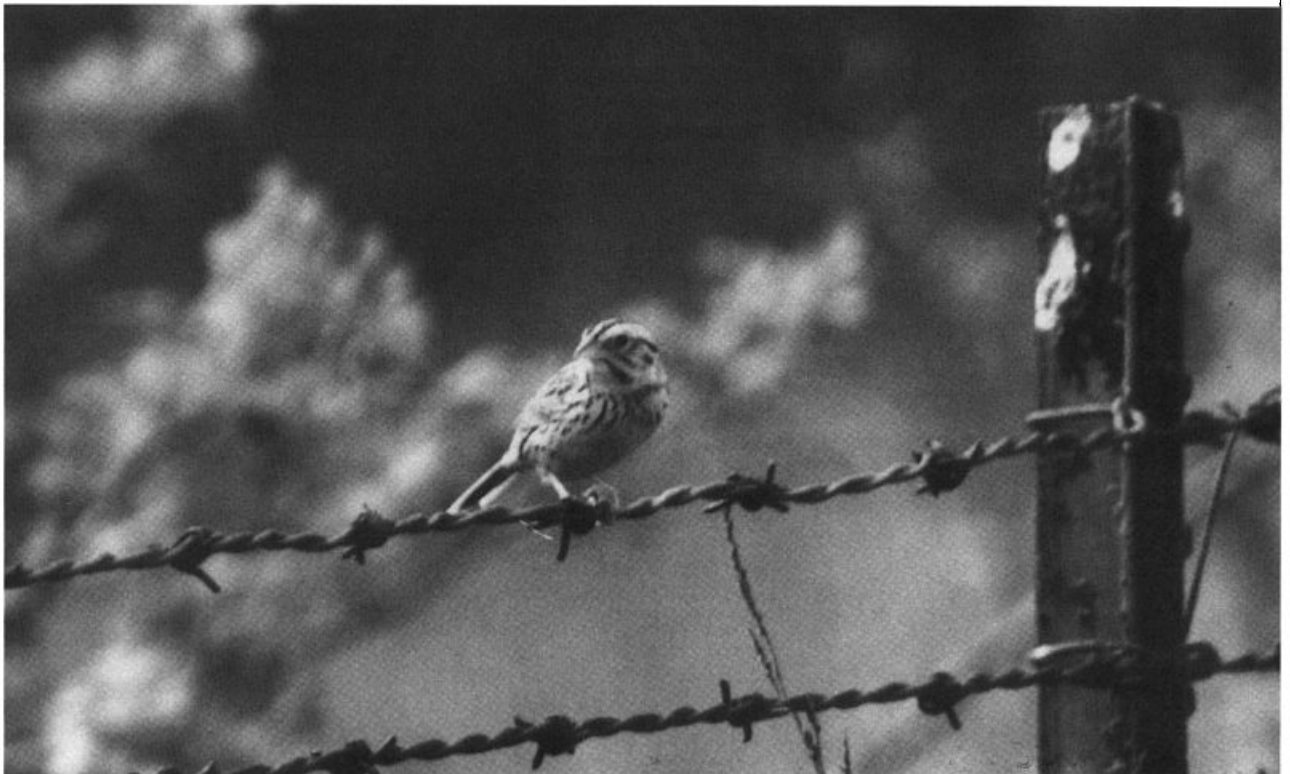
Not long ago, a prospective future columnist asked me to describe in detail how I go about researching and writing this column. It was a question I'd never consciously considered before, but it occurred to me that the answer might be of interest to anyone who regularly reads the regional reports. After all, this column is just a summary of (and commentary on) the ones that follow in these pages. Many readers of the regional reports are probably summarizing and analyzing for themselves as they go through them. This kind of active reading can make the publication more valuable and educational. Here, then, is a discussion of how I go about writing this column, as illustrated by the summer of 1996.

Reading all the regional reports

This might seem obvious, but a basic first step for writing this column lies in reading all the regional reports. I know a lot of top experts who faithfully read the reports from their own region, from surrounding regions, and from selected more distant ones; but few have tried reading *all* of them in any one season. For someone who has never tried it before, this can be a little daunting—there is an awful lot of information here. But it adds up to a very educational picture of current knowledge on bird distribution.

If we are reading all the reports, in what sequence is it best to read them? The order in which they appear in this journal, proceeding from northeast to southwest across the continent, is not a bad approach. For a while I was reading them that way every time, but then I noticed that I was putting an inordinate focus on northeastern events: By the time I had read my way west to the Rockies, it had taken the edge off my curiosity, and I had already formed opinions about what were the most significant events of the season. Now I vary my approach, starting sometimes with the west and sometimes with the midwest.

Some of the columns do make up natural groups and are best read together. I might read all the Pacific Coast reports, for example, in sequence from north to south; or all the reports from the area around the Great Lakes. If



something major happened in some general quadrant of the continent, it is likely to stand out in the composite picture of several adjacent regions.

For the person writing the Changing Seasons, there is never a lack of fascinating material. The ultimate problem, if we may call it that, is that there is too much good stuff every season. Whoever writes in this space has to zero in on a few specific patterns out of the many available.

Watching for repeating patterns

As I peruse the regional reports, I'm always watching for species that are mentioned for similar reasons in different regions. This kind of thing is easier to spot if I read series of adjacent or nearby regions together; that way I'm more likely to remember that a given species has been mentioned.

In this season's reports, for example, I read through all the Pacific Coast reports in sequence, from Alaska south. Caspian Tern was mentioned in the Alaska column, but it was not until after I had read two more reports that I decided to go back and make note of all these mentions and then look for more.

The picture that emerges is that Caspian Tern, unlike some smaller terns, is continuing to do very well in some areas, expanding its range and perhaps increasing in numbers. The species is a recent colonizer in Alaska, and this year it was found nesting near Cape Romanzof, well to the west of presumed breeding areas in Prince William Sound. In British Columbia, numbers seen along the southern coast continue to rise and wanderers are being seen widely elsewhere in the province, and this summer the Yukon Territory had its first record. A count of 800 was made at one spot in Puget Sound, Washington, where no consistent breeding area is yet known. Several reports came from northern Idaho, where Caspian Terns were rare until recently. In southern California, at least a thousand pairs were nesting at the south end of the Salton Sea, where the species is only recently established.

Looking farther afield for other records to back this up, I read of Caspians that were deemed noteworthy in Nebraska, Saskatchewan, western Texas, Tennessee, and Arkansas, plus some notable nestings in Florida. Whether or not any of these others are really relevant or related, there is no question that the species is doing very well in the northwestern quadrant of North America.

Looking for keys to significant widespread trends

The regional editors for *Field Notes* collectively possess an awesome amount of expertise on bird distribution, and I usually locate my best clues to significant events by paying close attention to what these editors seem to find most interesting.

This season, I was struck by several key phrases. For one, the Texas editors quoted Paul Palmer's assessment that the continuing drought was "the dominant reality" in the Lone Star State. This could be very significant. In a migration season, if an area is affected by drought, the migrants may pause more briefly than usual and then move on; but in the nesting season, severe drought can have a major impact on breeding success.

At the other extreme, of course, flooding also can wipe out nesting attempts. But rains that are merely excellent, not excessive, can be quite beneficial, creating lush plant growth and high insect populations that allow many bird species to thrive. This season, Ken Brock wrote from the Middlewestern Prairie Region that cool and wet conditions "resulted in a generally favorable breeding season, especially for grassland species." Since grassland birds include several species of concern, this struck me as something worth following up.

Following up on patterns and trends: drought conditions

In pursuing patterns related to the Texas drought, I read through that region's column looking for mentions of species being affected by those conditions. Then I checked the introductory paragraphs of the columns for all the surrounding regions to see which of them might have been under the same dry pattern.

Ongoing drought continued to be a serious problem over much of Texas, except for the far western part of the state. To the north, in Oklahoma, the severe drought of the spring turned into a patchwork, with some areas getting even dryer and others having locally heavy rains. Dry conditions prevailed over much of the Mountain West. In the Southwest, June continued the drought of the spring, although good rains arrived in July in some areas, especially in New Mexico. Farther afield, the northern Great Plains were rather dry toward the west, but that region is generally still in good shape after three wet summers in a row.

Effects of dry conditions on birdlife are often hard to determine without detailed attention, so effects on endan-

gered species are perhaps most likely to be reported. In Texas, many Black-capped Vireos evidently failed to nest at all. At Kickapoo State Park, for example, out of a hundred pairs of Black-capped, only three successful nests were reported. Golden-cheeked Warblers also were affected; many pairs at Balcones Canyonlands either had failed nests, late nests, or failed to nest altogether. Across their range, Golden-cheekeds were reported to be only spottily distributed this summer. Among species not considered endangered, several other examples were mentioned. For example, many Prothonotary and Kentucky warblers were reported to have abandoned their nests in some areas of north-central Texas owing to dry conditions. No doubt many other birds in Texas had similarly poor breeding seasons.

Farther west, only a few specific consequences of the drought were reported. Lark Buntings were scarce in the parched grasslands of eastern Colorado. Black-throated Sparrows, which like dry conditions, pushed north to establish their second and third Wyoming records. Increased numbers of Northern Mockingbirds in northern Colorado, and at higher elevations than usual in New Mexico, were thought to be related to the drought. Many birds in the Southwest probably at least delayed their nesting; in the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico, the local Hermit Thrushes began singing in earnest only after the onset of the rains in July.

Following up on patterns and trends: the effects of good rains

A relatively cool and wet breeding season was featured in the Middlewestern Prairie report, and tied to some notable bird events there. In checking columns for adjacent regions, I found that the similar conditions had prevailed around the western Great Lakes, in southern Ontario, and in the northern Appalachians. In fact, cool and wet conditions were noted over much of the northeastern quadrant of the continent, although their effects on birdlife were not always apparent.

In reading the reports from the Midwest, I was especially interested in the notes on Henslow's and Grasshopper sparrows. Henslow's in particular is a species of concern, widely perceived to be declining. However, as Ken Brock noted, "Henslow's Sparrows apparently took advantage of the widespread damp weedy fields created by the heavy spring rains and expanded to many new nesting sites. Henslow's were deemed plenti-

ful in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Missouri." Henslow's were also present in "surprisingly good numbers" in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Pursuing the theme of grassland sparrows a bit further, I looked at the Northern Great Plains report. That region had had very good rains for the last three summers, and many birds have benefited. According to Gordon Berkey, Le Conte's Sparrows in the Dakotas had "another fabulous summer," and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows were found in some areas where unusual. Baird's Sparrows were "down from the last two years but still in good numbers."

The mention of Baird's Sparrows touched off yet another association. The status of the species in Nebraska is poorly known, and in the past it has been hard to find there even as a migrant, but the Rosches discovered three territorial males in the northwestern part of the state this June. And in far western Ontario, a singing male north of Rainy River established the first record of Baird's Sparrow for the province. Could both of these occurrences have reflected the recent good breeding success of the species at the core of its range?

Following up on patterns: Dickcissels in drought and plenty

Among the grassland birds under discussion in these regions, one stood out as a bird that may have been responding to both wet and dry conditions. The Dickcissel is more mobile than most birds in its habitat; when conditions are bad, rather than staying and suffering like most grassland birds, it is likely to move elsewhere. And that is apparently what happened last summer.

Writers of the Changing Seasons often draw on their own experience of the season under discussion, in addition to the published accounts in the regional reports. In my case, I am thinking back to last May, when Jeff Cox and I were birding around northeastern Oklahoma. Dickcissels were superabundant then, with flocks everywhere; even in the woods, we were constantly hearing the buzzy calls of Dickcissels flying overhead. But in that drought-stricken region, the birds were not singing on territory, as they would have been in other years: They were just passing through.

In reading the summer reports, I was not surprised to learn that Dickcissels were scarce or absent on many breeding bird survey routes in Texas where they are usually common. I would venture that the same would have been true on

Oklahoma routes. So where did those birds go? Read the regional reports from farther north. The Middlewestern Prairie Region was "awash with Dickcissels; this prairie species was both widespread and unusually numerous." The birds were "widely dispersed and present in good numbers in Wisconsin, as evidenced by reports from about 30 counties, some where they have not been found in years." They made "a strong appearance" in western Nebraska, and their numbers were up in the Dakotas.

However, the birds did not simply keep moving north from the parched land in Texas and Oklahoma; they spread eastward as well. The Appalachian region had a "major invasion," with reports from twelve localities, several with confirmed nesting. Along the Atlantic seaboard from Connecticut to Georgia, the number of summering Dickcissels drew notice. On the middle Atlantic Coast, Marshall Iliff reported, "Dickcissels invaded the Region in droves, staging the biggest movement into the Region since 1988. Some 42 (!) different locations were reported for the species in 12 Maryland and 10 Virginia counties. Both 1996 and 1988 were drought years in the Midwest and the correlation with Dickcissel numbers is obvious." As long as we specify that the "Midwest" under discussion here consists of Texas and Oklahoma, not the upper Midwest, Iliff's analysis is right on the mark.

Selectively reporting on long-term trends

In any given era, some species of birds will be in the midst of long-term increases or declines, their ranges expanding or contracting. Regional editors report on these ongoing trends, and the Changing Seasons columnist must do the same, but to give updates on every such trend every time would use up all the available space. It becomes necessary to be selective, to give progress reports on just a few of these advances or declines in a particular season. Then the columnist must seek references to the chosen species in all regions where it might be mentioned.

The Eurasian Collared-Dove, first actually identified on this continent just over a decade ago, is a hot topic wherever it occurs. Its march west and north from Florida is continuing to make news. Even within Florida it is still filling in gaps, with an invasion of Hillsborough County reported this season. At the leading edge of its advance, the

spread along the Gulf Coast has reached Texas, with a colony now at Smith Point just east of the Houston area. The species may have nested in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but more surprising was the appearance of half a dozen at Rocky Ford in southeastern Colorado. Some birders, I know, have been suspicious of these outlying reports, thinking that they must represent local escapes; but the history of this species' spread across Europe included many such outpost or "satellite" colonies being established well ahead of the main population front.

Dealing with outstanding isolated occurrences

Finally, in some seasons there will be a single event that seems to demand mention in this column, even if it affects only one or a few regions. Such an event might even be the occurrence of a single bird, if it is outlandish or controversial enough. The columnist must be alert for such items while reading all of the reports.

In the case of summer 1996, an example of such an isolated event was the passage of hurricane *Bertha*, which came ashore in North Carolina the evening of July 12 and moved north-northeast very rapidly, heading out to sea past New England and the Maritimes by late on the 13th. The reports of birds associated with this storm were mostly quite sparse, with a couple of impressive exceptions, these graphically demonstrated the effects of location and timing.

Because *Bertha* came ashore at night, and effectively closed the outer beaches to birding coverage, North Carolina recorded few birds of interest with the storm. Some terns and skimmers and a few Wilson's Storm-Petrels at inland lakes represented the extent of the storm fallout there. At the northern end of its path, *Bertha* brought only a couple of Sooty Terns to New England, and the storm's only noted effect in the Maritimes was to wash out some kittiwake nests in New Brunswick. Along the central Atlantic Coast there were only a couple of places that produced good sightings—but those couple were spectacular.

Ned Brinkley and others positioned themselves strategically at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, and after the storm had passed they recorded a remarkable variety of seabirds moving out of the Bay and back into Atlantic waters. Among their choice sightings were three species of shearwaters, three species of storm-petrels (including Band-rumped), more than 25 Black-capped Petrels, and two Herald Petrels! Farther north, birds

returning seaward from Delaware Bay were pushed close to Cape May by west winds. Observers there also saw Black-capped Petrels, Band-rumped Storm-Petrels, and others, including Sooty and Bridled terns. It was, in Paul Lehman's assessment, "the best fallout of hurricane-related seabirds in New Jersey ever."

In both of these cases, the great majority of the birds were seen shortly after the storm had passed, quickly making their way back to the open ocean. As might be expected, the birds were following the bays rather than taking the most direct route overland to the sea. For observers who want to sample the avian fallout from hurricanes, the importance factors of timing and location are clearly demonstrated in this case. The full accounts given in the Hudson-Delaware and Middle Atlantic Coast reports make very worthwhile reading.

Unused material: opportunities for more active reading

In the course of discussing how to write this column, I have given detailed examples of some notable events among North American birds during summer

1996. However, these examples were only a few among many, perhaps many that were equally worthy of discussion.

So now it's your turn to read through the regional reports and construct your own Changing Seasons column. I guarantee that you'll find more trends and patterns worth analyzing. For example, look at Bald Eagle and Double-crested Cormorant. These two have been on the comeback trail ever since DDT was outlawed, and this season they drew some significant comments. Neotropic Cormorant also is increasing and spreading north in some areas. Some more questions to consider: Why are Merlins doing so well in parts of the northeast? What are we to make of this summer's Red Crossbill invasion on the eastern plains, from Oklahoma to Wisconsin? Which two species in the United States may have become extinct after the passage of hurricane *Iniki* in 1992? What other outstanding phenomena have I failed to mention? I urge you to read as many of the following reports as you can, looking for more of the patterns that give our observations their significance.

BIRD SLIDES

5000 SPECIES
from all over the world



SLIDE SETS

Endangered species, Owls, Bird families, Eastern warblers, Herons, Raptors, Shorebirds, Waterfowl

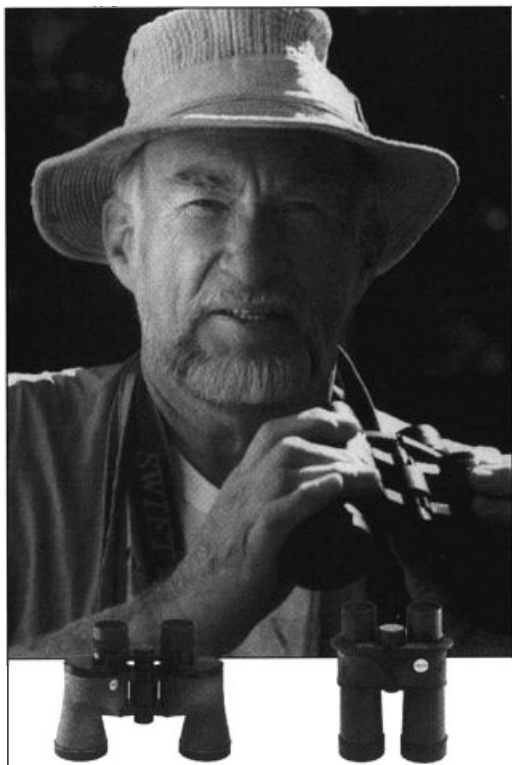
INDIVIDUAL SLIDES

Selected from over 65,000 images and custom duplicated to suit your needs

Request our free North American catalog or send a list of species desired, indicating age, sex, behavior or color phase. Catalog slides are \$3.00 each, non-catalog slides are \$4.00 each, with a minimum order of 5 slides. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. (These slides are for non-commercial use only and may not be duplicated.)

VISUAL RESOURCES for ORNITHOLOGY

Write: VIREO/Academy of Natural Sciences
1900 Ben Franklin Parkway Phila, PA 19103



Swift 804ED Audubon®
8.5x, 44 Wide Field

Swift 827 Audubon®
8.5x, 44 Showerproof

Warren Harrington, photographer, birder and lecturer. In some far off corner of the world, look for a man with a wide brim hat and a pair of Swift Audubons.

"Gotcha!"

On the way to his 2,290th life bird Warren Harrington and his Swift Audubons® tracked down a real poor sport.

The Rufescent Tiger-Heron has never been known as "birder friendly". It hides, camouflaged in the tall reeds, then streaks away like an arrow at the first sign of anacondas, jaguars or birders. Just getting to the remote nesting area in northwest Ecuador means out-boarding up a tributary of the Amazon, then paddling across the lake in a dugout canoe to the La Salva Lodge. The jungle can be murder on binoculars and camera gear. What the smug Tiger-Heron didn't count on was Warren's persistence and his Swift Audubon advantage: Binoculars rugged enough to withstand the heat and humidity; powerful and sharp enough to identify a poor sport hidden in the tall reeds and a field of view wide enough to capture it in flight.

Warren's companions on the trip were Dennis Sheets from Falls Church, VA. (2,030 Life Birds) and Jose, the native guide whose only English was the names of every bird in the jungle. Together they identified 177 species including the rare Zig Zag Heron. In addition to the love of birding they had another thing in common. They all carried Swift binoculars. Serious birders know what they're looking for—and what they're looking with.



Swift Instruments, Inc.
952 Dorchester Ave., Boston, MA 02125
In Canada: Vision Canada LTD., Pickering, Ontario L1W 3S1



Swift Instruments supports INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY.

Discover the entire Swift line of binoculars at better specialty stores. For the name of your closest Swift retailer call 1-617-436-2960.

