

# changing seasons

Spring Migration, March 1–May 31, 1998

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While it is not a certainty that a mild winter will be followed by a mild spring, that certainly was the case in 1998. As documented in last season's reports and by our collective experiences, the winter of 1997–1998 was among the mildest on record. I think there can be little doubt that the mild climatic conditions resulted from a combination of factors. Some of these we can identify: The apparent long-term, worldwide warming trend, irrespective of the potential causes, and the predictable effects of a strong El Niño event. Doubtless other factors, including stochastic short-term climate fluctuations, were involved. During the spring of 1998 most of the continent experienced a continuation of this warm and relatively benign weather. As you read the introductory paragraphs to the regional reports, all of which I urge you to read, you will find numerous references to this climatic pattern, which was perhaps most succinctly phrased by Ron Ridout in the Ontario regional report: "What an unbelievable spring it was—if you like summer!"

There were exceptions to this general pattern, of course. Early March brought the some of the coldest weather of the "winter" season to the southeastern states. A significant snowstorm in late March resulted in a notable mortality of early migrants in Minnesota. It was apparent that the effects of El Niño were rapidly abating, especially over the southernmost regions, most of which were in or approaching drought conditions by the end of the period. A slow-moving low pressure area off the middle Atlantic Coast during the first two weeks of May brought an extended period of light easterly winds to New England and rainy weather to the Mid-Atlantic states. Only on the immediate Pacific Coast did the effects of the El Niño event linger. Here heavy and persistent rains occurred through much of the season.

## EARLY ARRIVALS, AND LATER, SEEMINGLY INVISIBLE MIGRANTS

The effects of this season's weather on some of the spatial and temporal patterns of migration were obvious and quite striking. Much of the northward migration of waterfowl seems to have taken place prior to the season, in February. The only comments on significant concentrations of such species were from Québec and Montana. There were many record-early state, provincial, and territorial arrival dates in the area east of the Rocky Mountains. I counted no fewer than 78 such records noted by the regional editors. A remarkable 32 of these records were in March. As Kaufman noted in the winter season column, the mild weather allowed individuals of many species to winter well to the north of their typical ranges. This pattern no doubt contributed to many of the early arrival dates. Also contributing to the early arrivals in late March and early April was a spell of extremely warm weather and strong southerly winds in the northeastern regions, during which Boston experienced one day with a high of 91 degrees!

After a lifetime of birding in Florida and years spent reading the glowing accounts of the spectacle of spring migration in more northern areas, I thought that this was finally my year to experience this phenomenon. In preparation for moving to northern New Jersey, I spent from late April through the end of May there, and was in the

field on more than half of those days, visiting areas that guidebooks described as some of the best spring migration locations in the Garden State. The arrival of the local nesting birds was a spectacle, with each day seeming to bring new birds to territories, and there was the challenge of learning all those songs that Florida birders hear so few of they never really learn well, if at all. Transient species, however, seemed to be virtually nonexistent. After reading all the regional reports, I am relieved to find out that I was not the only one missing the transients. The weather patterns over most of the continent during this period apparently allowed the majority of transients to pass over undetected. Only a few major fallouts were noted. Also, seeing what transients might have been present was hampered by the early emergence of deciduous foliage, which was noted to be two to three weeks ahead of schedule in many regions. Only during the last two weeks of May did observers note significant passages of transients. Many of these were considered to be late and migration in some regions was still occurring at the end of the period, so the low numbers of transients noted during the normal peak periods cannot be ascribed solely to overflights and concealing vegetation.

A few quotes from the regional reports will provide a taste of the lack of apparent migration during much of the season: "one of the poorest showings of migrating neotropical species in years" (Québec). "Observers across the province declared it the worst spring ever for finding birds" (Ontario). "[T]his was by far the most boring excuse for bird migration I have ever seen in over 26 years of birding" (Middlewestern Prairie). "Warblers and thrushes were universally noted in low numbers, and sometimes only a few individuals of a species were seen very late in the season" (Northern Great Plains). This spring's migration brought rave reviews only from the Texas region and those along the Pacific Coast.

## ALL ABOARD THE SIBERIAN EXPRESS!

There were two patterns of bird distribution in the spring of 1998 that can only be classified as astounding phenomena. Both of these had their origins in unusual weather patterns over the northern Pacific Ocean.

If you had put aside enough money for your long-awaited Attu trip, but found some trivial reason to not go in 1998, say a daughter's wedding or the birth of your first grandchild, give yourself a quick kick or two. The results from this spring's Attu trips were unprecedented, and the birds seen at other outposts in the "Russia Zone" were also remarkable. This phenomenon could not have been predicted, as in fact lore has it that El Niño years are off-years for the Siberian Express; but as detailed in Tobish's Alaska Region report, unique weather conditions produced tremendous fallouts over an extended period. The final tally from Attu was 41 Asian species and two additional forms, including the first Yellow-throated Bunting (*Emberiza elegans*) for North America. This result smashed the previous high of 38 species in 1982. Other extremely notable rarities seen this season amongst the masses at Attu were Green Sandpiper, Great Knot, Pin-tailed Snipe, Red-flanked Bluetail, and Oriental Greenfinch. The diversity and abundance of the vagrants seen there this season is staggering. For 26 species, 17 of which are Asian, there were daily totals besting previous Attu highs. Imagine these daily

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totals: Eyebrowed Thrush—180, Olive-backed Pipit—225, Rustic Bunting—193, and Brambling—366! Now imagine that these astounding high counts were all on the *same day*, May 17th! I will spare the more than 99.9 percent of readers who missed this spectacle all the gory, or glorious in case you were there, details. I am sure that those readers will eventually force themselves to read the Alaska Region report. I had to read it. It was almost painful, but that could have been from me kicking myself.

The second most striking phenomenon of the spring season was also unprecedented, and also had its origins in same weather pattern that produced the great fallouts at Attu. This weather pattern disrupted the migration patterns of many Bristle-thighed Curlews, sending them careening into the northern Pacific Coast. The Oregon/Washington Region recorded fourteen individuals, as well as rumors of seven more. Each state had previously had only one report each. The curlew invasion extended south into northern California, where two or three were reported. There had been no previous reports from that state. No doubt related to the Bristle-thighed Curlew phenomena was the appearance of one or two Gray-tailed Tattlers in California, where the only prior record was from 1981. The amazing curlew fallout was either missed by local observers, or did not extend north along the coast to British Columbia, but I must wonder if the record high numbers of Pacific Golden-Plovers reported in that region were not related to the same weather pattern.

#### RARA AVES

In spite of the apparent lackluster migration over much of the continent, there was no shortage of rarities out there to be found. According to my reckoning there were at least two-hundred reports highlighted by boldface in the regional reports. I have extracted a few for your pleasure, and there are many more gems awaiting you in the regional reports.

Among this season's rarities were three that properly warranted the British term "megas." One was a holdover from last season, one was among the most remarkable "megas" ever in the southeastern states, and the third turned out to be a *post-facto* identification. First, the Nutting's Flycatcher in Arizona's Patagonia Lake State Park lingered from the winter until March 21, allowing hundreds of birders the chance to see this rarity. Second, if it were not for the presence of numerous Bristle-thighed Curlews on the Pacific Coast, the White Wagtail found on the coast of South Carolina certainly would have taken the top honors among this season's vagrants, outside of Alaska. The wagtail was present at Huntington Beach State Park from April 16 to April 21, and provided the opportunity for many eastern birders to chase the first of this species to be verified in eastern North America. The details of this report suggests that the wagtail was of the race nesting in far eastern Asia and adjacent Alaska. The early date, well before the species arrives at its northern breeding grounds, seems to suggest that this bird may have been a northbound migrant that had originally become displaced during the previous fall, and which had successfully overwintered somewhere in the Americas. And finally, four British birders videotaped an unusual flycatcher at Big Bend National Park on April 4. They originally identified the bird as a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, which would have been a very rare find in Texas. However, review of the video by members of the Texas Rare Birds Committee revealed that the bird was actually a Piratic Flycatcher, a first for Texas and probably the third for North America. The northern limit of the breeding range of this species is in southern San Luis Potosi, more than 300 miles from the closest point on the International Border in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and more than 600 miles from Big Bend. The two previous North American

records were, oddly enough, also *post-facto* corrections of previous misidentifications. I understand that a manuscript documenting these records is in preparation.

As observers become more finely attuned to characters useful for separating basic plumaged Arctic and Pacific loons, an increase in reports of the former, especially on the Pacific Coast, seems inevitable. This spring an Arctic was identified on the Oregon Coast, providing that state's first report. The pelagic waters off North Carolina's Outer Banks continue to regularly produce remarkable rarities. This spring's best were a Bermuda Petrel and possibly three Fea's Petrels. No doubt the most outstanding pelagic report from Pacific waters was a Murphy's Petrel seen outside the Continental Shelf off Westport, Washington. One must wonder about the origins of Nebraska's Bean Goose, its second. However, as Grzybowski's regional report points out, the bird appeared to be of the Siberian race, which is apparently very rare in captivity. At least two Pink-footed Geese continue to wander the eastern flyways. This season one was in Connecticut in late March, and what could well have been the same bird was in Québec in mid-April, providing that province with its third record in as many years. The Pink-footed found during the past winter in Pennsylvania was still present there when the Connecticut bird was found. I urge you to read Simon Perkins's essay in the New England regional report for the reasons that this bird should be considered a true vagrant and not an escapee. Always enigmatic, Garganey were reported from three states: Texas, Nebraska, and California, and yes, all were males. Equally enigmatic was a Limpkin heard calling in Maryland: its second ever. Exciting anywhere away from their high Arctic nesting grounds, this season's Ross's Gulls, both one-day wonders, were in Massachusetts and Manitoba.

Birding festivals and competitions are increasing in number every year. These events, particularly contests, concentrate large numbers of skilled observers and might be expected to result in significant finds. Participants in this year's Texas Birding Classic located a nearly moribund King Eider that provided the first documented record for the state. This eider was later brought in for rehabilitation. A second for Texas was a Black Noddy, which is extremely rare in North America anywhere but at the Dry Tortugas.

Perhaps Green Violet-ear should be renamed Wandering Hummingbird? This season's were in Oklahoma and at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas. The former was that region's second, and the latter was a local first. A Cuban Pewee at the Dry Tortugas may well have been from Cuba and was probably the state's fourth. Of the four records, two are from the Dry Tortugas and two are from the southeastern coast. The latter two are more likely to have originated in the Bahamas. Yes, this is a comment on the appropriateness of the English name. Prior to the past winter there had been only one documented report of White-throated Robin from North America. One, or possibly two, remained from the winter at Bentsen State Park, and another two were discovered during the spring season at Santa Ana. This makes you wonder what might have happened in the northeastern portion of the species's range, which reaches to within about 250 miles of southern Texas. My guess would be that a significant natural or man-made disturbance would have been required to disperse this many birds that far from their normal range.

As Kirtland's Warblers apparently reach population levels that may exceed the available suitable habitat in their traditional range, we might expect more peripheral vagrants in the spring. This season such a vagrant was found well beyond where it might have been expected, in Manitoba. A real shocker was an American Tree Sparrow found in mid-April at St Marks National Wildlife Refuge on Florida's

northern Gulf Coast. The location, which is heavily birded through the winter, and the time of year suggest that this bird may have wintered to the south of where it was discovered. Equally shocking, another Tree Sparrow was reported this spring from an oil platform off the coast of Louisiana. Last winter's flight of redpolls into the northeastern portion of the continent was reflected by two very remarkable southerly occurrences this spring. A Common Redpoll was at a feeder in central Georgia in mid-March, providing that state's first record in "many" years. Absolutely mind-boggling was a report of one at the Dry Tortugas in mid-May. If one assumes that birds moving in spring must be moving north, this redpoll would have to have spent the winter somewhere in the Caribbean area or even farther south.

Almost every season brings a few of the "it was bound to happen eventually" first state or provincial reports. This season was no exception, as there were a number of not-unexpected firsts. A spectacular alternate-plumaged and very cooperative Pacific Loon was a first for the District of Columbia. Nevada had its first Neotropical Cormorant and Black Turnstone, while a White-faced Ibis provided a first for Rhode Island, which becomes the fourth state in the New England region to record this species. In the west, observers recorded Utah's first Iceland Gull and Idaho's first Bell's Vireo. Florida had its first verified records of Tropical Kingbird and MacGillivray's Warbler. However, there were previous sight reports of both of these species.

#### **A FEW NOTABLE PATTERNS**

The only pattern of widespread vagrancy noted by the regional editors was a remarkable influx of eastern warblers into western Texas, as well documented in that region's report. This involved numerous individuals of 22 species. The pattern of vagrancy apparently extended over a considerable period of time, from mid-April through the end of the period, and seemingly did not have an obvious causal factor in the season's weather patterns. The influx of these eastern warblers apparently extended into New Mexico, where the number and diversity of such vagrants were also higher than normal. The pattern extended no farther to the west, as unusual numbers of eastern vagrants were not reported from Arizona or along the Pacific Coast.

One of the more interesting patterns from this spring's report is that of doves on the move. The Eurasian Collared-Dove story is far from over, and could White-winged Dove be the next great continental colonizer?

In the eastern section of the continent Collared-Doves seem to have nearly completed their march through Georgia and appear to be well-established in coastal North Carolina. In the central section of the continent they seem to be spreading with more rapidity than in the east. This spring they bred for the first time in Texas, Arkansas, and Nebraska, and they were reported at two locations each in Kansas and Oklahoma. Farther north on the Plains, there were reports from South Dakota and two locations in Montana. The first ever were reported from Minnesota and Wisconsin. In the western part of the continent the species was recorded for the first time in Wyoming and Oregon. Whether these last two originated from the California or "eastern" populations cannot be determined. How long will it be before this species crosses the international border into Canada, if it hasn't already done so?

The situation with White-winged Dove leads me to speculate that there are dramatic changes occurring in the status of this species, which seems to be developing a penchant for spring wanderlust. This spring White-wings were reported from 12 regions, including a first ever for Tennessee. For a comparison, let's look back a decade to the spring of 1988. During that spring period extralimital White-wings

were reported from only three regions. Several of this spring's regional reports contained comments on this pattern. Southern Great Plains: "Also continuing a recent surge in observations for White-winged Doves . . ." Texas: "White-winged Doves extended their range in the n. Panhandle . . ." One reached the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec, and others were reported from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In coastal North Carolina observers described apparent territorial behavior. Interestingly, this pattern is also apparent in the introduced population on the Florida peninsula, as there were a number of reports this season from north of the known breeding range in that state. One must wonder whether some of the vagrant White-wings reported along the East Coast are derived from the Florida population. Inca Doves appear to be on the move as well as they have been in the past, if to a lesser degree. In the Central Southern Regions, range expansions were noted in Arkansas and Louisiana.

As one might expect, and as was described in the Winter season report, the mild winter resulted in the discovery of numerous species lingering north of their typical ranges. The reports from this season emphasize that many individuals remain undetected during the winter. The regional reports contain at least 30 individuals of a variety of species that the regional editors considered to be previously undetected winterers, as the dates of the observations seem to be too early for spring migrants. Among the most interesting and perhaps hardy were four Virginia Rails in Nebraska, a Philadelphia Vireo in Louisiana, an Orange-crowned Warbler in Wisconsin, and a White-throated Sparrow in Alaska. Perhaps in the same category was Maine's remarkable first Virginia's Warbler, which was found on Monhegan Island in late May. While it is possible that this bird was a spring vagrant, it seems just as likely that it might have been a fall vagrant that overwintered in the east. Considering the mild winter and the temperate maritime conditions afforded by the insular location of the record, one must wonder if it had not spent the winter at the location of its discovery.

#### **ODDS & ENDS**

A unique study of bird migration across the Gulf of Mexico was undertaken this spring involving the cooperation of the Federal government, two universities, and several oil companies. In addition to more traditional onshore counts of migrants and radar studies, observers were stationed on several offshore oil platforms during the migration period. As might be expected, when experienced observers are placed in unusual locations, unusual birds will be found. These offshore observers tallied many incredible sightings, including a number of species not previously known to be trans-Gulf migrants. Please see Cardiff's essay in the Central Southern region for more details. The project will be active during both the spring and fall seasons for the next two years, and we should look for more amazing results.

I am sure that many readers realize that bird populations on the extreme edges of a species's range tend to wax and wane. Sometimes this can occur for no apparent reason. These may well be stochastic phenomena. After having a tenuous foothold in southeastern Arizona during the 1970s and early 1980s, Black-capped Gnatcatchers apparently disappeared for a number of years. The past few years these birds have reappeared in small numbers. This season a nesting attempt was reported from the Baboquivari Mountains, and another male was also reported near Patagonia. Over-collecting has been suggested as contributing to the demise of the previous populations in the state. I would suggest that cowbird parasitism and loss of potential habitat to development might be the major detrimental pressures at this time to this nascent population

When Shiny Cowbirds first colonized Florida a couple of decades ago, their arrival caused warnings of dire ecological consequences for the native avifauna. The rapid proliferation of the species to the north and west after its initial colonization of southern Florida seemed to support this interpretation. Yet, when we look at this season's reports of the species, we may see indications that the plague may not be as virulent as first thought. With the exception of one in inland Georgia, the species was reported only from coastal locations ranging from North Carolina to Louisiana, and there were no reports of overwhelming numbers of individuals at any particular location. The geographical distribution of this season's reports parallels other species of Antillean origin, particularly Gray Kingbird. I suspect, but might not be willing to bet, that the Shiny's distribution may be stabilizing, and that persistent populations will be limited to coastal areas of the southeastern states. Not that this is an entirely positive outcome.

There always seem to be a few oddities reported in every issue of *Field Notes*. This spring was no exception, and these mostly involved hybrids, and not just your typical reports of Brewster's and Lawrence's warblers and mongrel waterfowl. Yes, there were a number of the expected hybrid waterfowl reported. I counted six reports of hybrid Blue-winged × Cinnamon Teal, and a lesser number of American × Eurasian Wigeon. Keen-eyed observers also spotted a male Common Goldeneye × Hooded Merganser in Illinois, and two male Common × Barrow's Goldeneyes in Québec. The latter are a real identification challenge as pointed out in that regional report. Perhaps more interesting were the several reports of apparent Tufted Duck × scaup hybrids. These were variously reported as a male Tufted associating with a female Tufted × Greater Scaup in Nova Scotia, both male Tufted × Greater Scaup and Tufted × Lesser Scaup in Colorado, and a male Tufted × scaup species in Washington. Although many of these sightings are probably the result of increased observer awareness, I am tempted to agree with Maybank's observation in the Atlantic Provinces report that Tufted Ducks are probably breeding somewhere in North America, but if they are going to become established they might need to select mates a little more carefully. And, if you are among those who think that those "little brown jobs," the sparrows, make for some tough identifications, consider a report of an apparent Clay-colored × Field Sparrow in the New England region. Eastern birders may need to increase Fox Sparrow-awareness, as the two western races are potential splits. At least one observer in Maryland was aware enough to pick out an apparent "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow this season. This is probably the third report in eastern North America of this population that nests in the inland montane west. The other western form (species?), the coastal "Dusky" Fox Sparrow, would seem to be a very unlikely candidate to be a vagrant to the east.

Finally, there was mixed news in the reports from the far-flung isles of Hawaii and the West Indies. Lesser Frigatebirds were found nesting this year at Tern Island in the French Frigate Shoals, Hawaii. This is probably the first nesting report of this species within the political boundaries the United States. In the Bahamas, Neotropical Cormorants were discovered to be nesting at New Providence. How long will it be before the Florida region gets its first, long-overdue record of this species? Unfortunately, I could find no good news about Hawaii's beleaguered native avifauna, and Norton raises serious questions about future of the West Indian Whistling-Ducks.

Disclaimer: Many of the reports mentioned above, and others to be found in the regional reports, are yet to be reviewed the appropriate records committees. Some may eventually be rejected as lacking sufficient documentation.

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### STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE REGIONAL REPORTS

#### Abbreviations used in place names

In most regions, place names given in *italic* type are counties. Other abbreviations:

Cr.	Creek
Ft.	Fort
Hwy	Highway
I.	Island or Isle
Is.	Islands or Isles
Jct.	Junction
km	kilometer(s)
L.	Lake
mi	mile (s)
Mt.	Mountain or Mount
Mts.	Mountains
N.F.	National Forest
N.M.	National Monument
N.P.	National Park
N.W.R.	National Wildlife Refuge
P.P.	Provincial Park
Pen.	Peninsula
Pt.	Point (not Port)
R.	River
Ref.	Refuge
Res.	Reservoir (not Reservation)
S.P.	State Park
W.M.A.	Wildlife Management Area

#### Abbreviations used in the names of birds:

Am.	American
Com.	Common
E.	Eastern
Eur.	European or Eurasian
Mt.	Mountain
N.	Northern
S.	Southern
W.	Western

#### Other abbreviations and symbols referring to birds:

ad.	adult
imm.	immature
juv.	juvinal or juvenile
sp.	species
v.t.	video-taped
†	written details were submitted for a sighting
*	a specimen was collected
♂	male
♀	female
CBC	Christmas Bird Count