

Changing Seasons: Spring 2000: The Millennium's Last Spring

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Now that the true Millennium's last spring is past, let us pause for a moment and ponder. Why do we bird? Yikes, a rather philosophical question to open "Changing Seasons." Fear not. I am neither so wise, nor so stupid, as to attempt to tackle that question. Perhaps, though, I am just wise enough, or just ignorant enough, to suggest one possibility. It is because, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince observed, "one never knows."

Every time we go into the field, we never know what we will find. This lack of foresight, more than anything, explains why birders continue to get up at God-knows-what-time every day they can for the entire month of May. While it might be difficult to explain to a non-birding spouse, co-workers, or the others on your high school soccer team, this lure of the unknown, of finding something "new," is something all birders relish. Indeed, this addiction to discovering an avian surprise, whatever the degree of rarity, separates birders from bird-watchers.

Sometimes, one does not even need to go birding to find something exciting. People who were not even looking for birds at the time found two of this season's highlights! Mark Janos was drinking coffee on his porch in a suburb of Pueblo, Colorado, one morning when he heard and eventually saw a singing Yellow-bellied Flycatcher—a potential first state record. Or picture this: you are driving on the parkway, running a bit late. For some reason, you notice a flock of gulls and observe an unusually large, long-winged bird among them. Pelican? Gannet? Cormorant? Nothing fits. The bird abruptly makes a U-turn and flies straight toward you. It is an albatross! This is exactly what happened to Shawneen Finnegan while she was driving to her art opening at the Cape May Bird Observatory Research Center. Amazingly, this albatross was, presumably, first seen by park rangers at Fire Island, New York, and was responsible for sightings in four, if not five, states (see S.A.s in the Hudson-Delaware and New England regions). Most of us, of course, are not this lucky; we must actually go birding to find such amazing things. This spring, birders also reported a number of surprises, including numerous early arrival dates throughout the United States and Canada, a multitude of regional rarities, and what might be the last in a long series of first North American records from Attu in spring (at least for some time), a Rufous-tailed Robin (*Luscinia sibilans*).

"WINTER" INTO SPRING

With yet another preceding mild winter, some may question if winter had ever arrived this year. Carolina Wrens, a bird that epitomizes northward expansion during warm winters, remained throughout

the winter in scattered northern locations. Their presence in parts of Québec caused that region's editors to ask if the wrens are establishing a permanent presence in that region. Red-bellied Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Northern Cardinals continued similar seasonal expansions. More extraordinary, Rufous Hummingbirds were seen until mid-March in Tennessee and mid-April in North Carolina. Farther south, Georgia's second and South Carolina's first Calliope Hummingbirds also remained into the spring period. While these may not be part of an unequivocal expansion per se, the successful wintering of hummingbirds is certainly increasing in parts of the Southeast.

As Michael Patten noted in the last "Changing Seasons" (Patten 2000), a number of northern species appeared in the opposite locations from those in which we would expect if only global warming were involved in these range alterations. Lingerers from the finch invasion of last fall and winter included Red Crossbills in Georgia until late April, Evening Grosbeaks on the Outer Banks of North Carolina 29 April, and a dead Common Redpoll found at Torrance Ranch, Nevada, in May. Two of Florida's first three state records of Rough-legged Hawks remained until 19 April. Exceptional March gulls included an Iceland in Washington, an Ivory Gull along the Wisconsin/Minnesota border, and a probable Slaty-backed in Texas. Coloradoans, meanwhile, experienced "gull-mania" by recording the state's first Slaty-backed Gull, its second and third records of Iceland Gull, and enough Lesser Black-backed and Thayer's Gulls that obtaining accurate counts was all but futile (see the Mountain West S.A.). Lest anyone conclude that these gulls were part of a massive push from the north, consider that California Gulls, which required documentation on some Denver area Christmas Bird Counts five years ago, outnumbered Herring Gulls throughout the winter and spring for the first time ever in Colorado (personal observations).

Gulls and loons are predominantly "winter specialties," at least in the Lower 48. While ducks, geese, and blackbirds are some of the earliest spring migrants, the first birds in the season that really cause "spring excitement" are shorebirds. From the Pacific Northwest to the Great Lakes and the Texas Panhandle, many commented on excellent diversity and numbers of shorebirds. Tens of thousands of American Golden-Plovers in central Illinois must have been a spectacular sight. The same must have been true of the six Pacific Golden-Plovers at Brady, Washington, which established a new spring daily high for the Lower 48 for that species. Snowy Plovers bred at Bolivar Flats, the first time in 70 years for that part of Texas, and one in Indiana established

that state's fourth record. Wilson's Plovers captured headlines on both coasts, with California recording its ninth and one in New York breaking the early arrival date for this regional rarity by a month. A Wandering Tattler at Antelope State Park, Utah, furnished another rare inland record for this coastal shorebird. Minnesota recorded its first Long-billed Curlew in nearly a decade, which is encouraging for this historic breeder in that state. Hudsonian Godwits showed up in a number of unusual locations, including one in Oregon providing the third spring record there, and eight at American Falls Reservoir providing only the fifth Idaho record. More than quadrupling Indiana's previous high count, 52 Marbled Godwits briefly touched down south of Bloomington. Well-documented White-rumped Sandpipers in southern California and in Arizona caused excitement; each locale has ten or fewer previous records. A Baird's Sandpiper at Napatree Point furnished the first spring record for Rhode Island and one of only a small handful of spring records from the Northeast. Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, much more unusual in spring than in fall, were found in Orange County, California, and at New River Mouth, which provided a first spring record for Oregon. Along with the more regular coastal reports of Curlew Sandpipers, individuals were recorded in Illinois and Wisconsin, and a rarely-reported basic-plumaged bird was found in the Florida Panhandle. Also of note was Oregon's second spring Stilt Sandpiper. Newburyport Harbor, Massachusetts, a traditional Ruff hotspot, was seemingly one of the few locations where the species was not found this spring. Ruffs made impressive appearances elsewhere, with reports stretching along the East Coast from Connecticut to South Carolina; others appeared in Oregon, California, and Illinois. While not your typical shorebird, an American Woodcock recorded by Colorado birders was the first displaying in the state.

Following the trend of recent years, this spring brought a number of early migrants to the United States and Canada. It may be tempting to suggest this trend results from growing numbers of birders getting out early in the season. However, given the cornucopia of states and provinces with early arrivals, many of which established regional early arrival dates, most of these early reports are best treated as *bona fide* early birds. Just as surprising as the number of records is the variety of unrelated species that arrived early. A Black-crowned Night-Heron was found 7 March in Ontario. Point Pelee's record-early Mississippi Kite on 6 May was eclipsed by early arriving kites in Massachusetts, which included a Swallow-tailed on 27 March and a Mississippi on 29 March. A singing Whip-poor-will in Maryland on 9 March was the earliest for that state. The regional reports are filled with record-early passerine reports. An astonishingly early Philadelphia Vireo appeared in North Dakota on 28 April. Two Yellow-throated Vireos appeared in Maryland by the end of March. A Yellow-throated Warbler on 2 April may have been New York's earliest, and a Black-throated Green arrived in late March in Illinois. A Canada Warbler seen in Ohio on 26 April attests that early arrivals were not necessarily limited to birds that winter in parts of the U.S., nearby Mexico, or the Caribbean; this species winters almost exclusively in northern South America. Yet, given the mild winter, how can we be certain that birds like the Indigo Bunting on 3 April in Pennsylvania and Rose-breasted Grosbeak on 5 April in Oregon did not winter nearby?

RARITIES, HYBRIDS, AND OTHER MUSINGS

Perhaps the most exciting manifestation of "one never knows" is the discovery of some type of "first." Whether a first county record, first provincial record, first regional record, or even a first North American record, any type of "first" is sure to get the blood boiling. The number of significant firsts is obviously very limited, but any record for which there are fewer than five to ten records, the so-called mega-rarity, is bound to cause excitement. These sightings have an added dimension

of importance. It is well-known that detailed recordkeeping allows us to track the expansion of non-native species such as Cattle Egret and Eurasian Collared-Dove (Romagosa and McEneaney 1999). Perhaps less obvious is how documentation of Yellow-billed Loons (Patten 2000) and other rarities have allowed us to recognize changes in North American distributions. For instance, the now widespread and common Herring Gull was once considered uncommon to rare in parts of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain Region (Bailey and Niedrach 1965). While most mega-rarities probably will not change their North American status in the next few years, some, like Herring Gulls and Eurasian Collared-Doves, undoubtedly will.

This season, Eurasian Collared-Doves and, to a lesser extent, their North American emulators, Inca and White-winged Doves, continued their tireless expansion throughout portions of North America, as detailed in the various regional reports. Dove expansion, I must admit, is somewhat akin to the split of Gunnison Sage-Grouse. While each is fascinating in its own way, neither drives our enjoyment of birding. More exciting expansions included Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina, southern New Jersey (four), and Maryland, as well as nesting pairs in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia.

Birders found a number of other remarkable vagrants this spring. Eared Grebes made it all the way to Ontario and Alaska, the latter providing only the second state record. Anhingas in New Mexico and Iowa provided each state with its third record. A Tricolored Heron at Cardinal Marsh was Iowa's third. A Wood Stork arrived in Arizona at the end of the season. Ibis staged impressive wanderings, with two White Ibis in New Mexico and another, Colorado's third, at Barr Lake. White-faced and especially Glossy Ibis continued their impressive peregrinations (see Patten and Lasley 2000, this issue). Odd cormorants included a Neotropic in Illinois and two Greats in Ontario. In March, Wisconsin hosted a Long-billed Murrelet and its first Smew, an adult male. Some suspect the latter may be the same bird that was seen in Minnesota last spring. A Common Teal (or do we have to still call it Eurasian Green-winged Teal?) in Montana established a rare record away from the coasts. An adult male Tufted Duck in Colorado, only the second recorded in the state, may not have been as astonishing as the estimated 1,000 Greater Scaup at the same location. The continuously increasing number of reports of out-of-range kites included White-taileds in Wisconsin and Minnesota, the latter state's first. Aplomado Falcons were reported in two astonishing locations: an oil rig off Texas, likely one of the introduced birds, and another at the Sandia Hawkwatch in New Mexico, probably a genuine wild bird. Not typically thought of as a potential vagrant, the record of a Willow Ptarmigan in Cumberland, Maine, in mid-May fell within the four-week span of New England's other four records (see the New England S.A.). Pennsylvania recorded its long-overdue first Long-tailed Jaeger. A White-winged Tern in Québec finally ended the five-year drought of North American records. Just outside the official spring season, but well within the expected spring migration timing was an Arctic Tern at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, Illinois, on 3 June.

Texas hosted its eighth Mangrove Cuckoo; all have been of the expected *continentalis* subspecies from eastern Mexico. A shelter belt in Morton County, Kansas, hosted a Flammulated Owl, rarely noted in migration and Kansas's first. A minimum of 150 Vaux's Swift was observed in Reno, while an exhausted White-throated Swift was picked up in downtown Minneapolis. A Violet-green Swallow at an offshore platform in Louisiana in late March would add another first state record as a result of the Migrants Over the Gulf Project. Rare hummingbirds included Texas's fourth Berylline, Washington's second Costa's, and New Mexico's fourth Ruby-throated. A Lewis's Woodpecker in Ontario was among Canada's finest rarities. While not

the most beautiful bird of the season, a Hammond's Flycatcher banded at John Heinz N.W.R. was the first for Pennsylvania. Eastern Phoebes wandered west, providing Washington's third and Oregon's sixth records. Fork-tailed Flycatchers lived up to their reputation as one-day wonders in both Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Georgia recorded its first Bell's Vireo, while North Carolina recorded its fifth Black-whiskered Vireo. Rarely found far from its breeding and wintering grounds, a Plumbeous Vireo in Minnesota earned the title "Vireo of the Season." A Redwing in Québec established only the ninth North American record of this Eurasian thrush. Birders in New York found the state's first Sprague's Pipit while looking for a Western Meadowlark, itself a good New York bird.

A Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at Santa Ana N.W.R. highlighted the rare warblers, with Townsend's in North Carolina and Ontario and a Black-throated Gray in Minnesota only slightly behind. Wyoming recorded its second Prairie Warbler and Idaho its second Northern Parula. New York and Colorado each recorded a Swainson's Warbler this season. Continuing last year's spring wanderings, Painted Buntings were again found far from their normal haunts, including birds in Ontario, Illinois, Wyoming, and Nevada. On the heels of the recent split, Georgia added its first known Spotted Towhee this season. Colorado birders finally used appropriate techniques to find Baird's Sparrows, which resulted in as many spring reports as previously accepted state records. A Le Conte's Sparrow banded on the Isles of Shoals was the first recorded in New Hampshire. A Gray-headed Junco in Louisiana was the most southeasterly sighting ever of this sub-species. Montana recorded only its second Great-tailed Grackle and third Lesser Goldfinch.

THE "UNCERTAIN" RECORDS

As Patten (2000) discussed, it is often impossible to know if a bird arrived naturally at some given location. While outlining some useful criteria to help determine the wildness of a bird, he concluded that some may not fall neatly into one category, as has again occurred this season. Topping the list of "natural occurrence uncertain" birds this spring was a Black-backed Oriole near Imperial Beach, California, which, if wild, would be the first for the ABA area. Three, and possibly five, Greater Flamingoes in South Texas were of the expected Caribbean subspecies, raising hope that these birds were genuine vagrants (see the Texas S.A.). A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in New Jersey fits with the pattern of increasing reports of this species along the Atlantic Coast and would be the state's first. The origin of a White-faced Whistling-Duck in Florida, where the species is commonly kept in captivity, may never be known.

While uncertainties over origin create one problem for records committees, other concerns may be raised over the potential for a hybrid. Consider the Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, which rarely hybridize. When such a hybrid is found, such as one this spring in Montana, it usually raises interest even when both parent species are regular breeders in that region. With alternate-plumaged male teal, this does not present much difficulty for identification. But female, juvenile, or eclipse-plumaged male hybrid teal would be nearly impossible to identify. Hybrids, almost by definition, are very rare, so rare that they elicit comment even in the core ranges of the parental species. But, if we accept that some aspects of migration are controlled by genetics (Berthold 1996), a hybrid possessing genes from a species that is regular in a region would become more likely than would a vagrant. This spring, a male Cinnamon Teal was found in Thunder Bay, Ontario. A bird the regional editors reported as a "female teal" later joined it. While the specific identity of this bird is unknown, eliminating a hybrid from contention is difficult. Another cautionary tale comes from Arkansas, where American Black Ducks, Mottled

Ducks, and a probable Mottled Duck x Mallard were all reported at one location.

A similar point is raised by a bird considered to be a hybrid Black-capped x Blue-gray Gnatcatcher that has been seen in Chino Canyon, Arizona, since 1996. Within the normal range of Black-capped Gnatcatcher, one would seldom need to consider a hybrid. Once a bird is out of range, however, it usually lacks any potential mates. At this point, if a bird is going to breed, it will need to do so with another species. The result is a much higher potential for hybrids where the species is rare, than within the species' core range. A host of other factors complicates matters to the degree that assessing the likeliness of a hybrid versus that of a pure bird becomes as complicated as determining if a bird is wild. Unlike the origin question, which may be impossible to resolve, careful observation of any vagrant and thoughtful consideration of potential hybrids will likely lead us to the correct identification.

One final type of uncertain record is that for which details are never received. The Internet and e-mail increase our ability to share information in a rapid manner. Through these media, we are able to learn of rarities more quickly than ever. In recent issues of *North American Birds*, however, a distressingly voluminous cry from regional editors concerns birds reported to various state list servers, or elsewhere in the so-called "e-world," for which details are never produced. Sandy Williams writes in this issue's New Mexico regional report how some reports of rarities "never got beyond the ephemeral level of an Internet rumor." It is not the regional editor's responsibility to monitor e-mail and list serves—detailed written reports should still be sent directly to the regional editor. Undoubtedly some of this arises from the growth of birding and a lack of understanding in how to document rarities or why rarities need to be documented. Luckily, several fine references explain how to write detailed documentation (Dittmann and Lasley 1992, Wilds and Hilton 1992). Written documentation encourages us to look more carefully at birds, making us far better birders.

ATTU—THE END OF AN ERA, AND BEYOND

Many will remember the last spring of the Millenium not only for what it brought but also for what it brought to a close. This spring marked the end of the most prized trip for any North American birder, a late spring trip to Attu. By the time you read this column, birders will have completed a September scouring of Attu, bringing an end to foreseeable organized trips there. Changes in military and FAA regulations, aging airplanes, and a variety of other difficulties have forced ATTOUR to abandon trips to the island after 22 years of bird tour operations. We owe Larry Balch and the many others responsible for these tours our thanks for conducting what Thede Tobish calls "an irreplaceable chapter of Alaska and North America's avifaunal history."

To readers of this publication, Attu needs no introduction. Even birders who have never been there can imagine it, sitting out at the end of the Aleutian Islands, forcing the international date line to angle around it and the other western Aleutians. This proximity to Siberia makes it a regular stop for some Siberian species such as Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Wood Sandpiper, Long-toed Stint, and Brambling. Yet many of these species can be found elsewhere in North America, albeit with more difficulty. There is something different about that island, however. Something else that propels us to endure canceled flights, leaky roofs, and constant dampness like no place else: vagrants—and Siberian ones in particular.

The lure of birding Attu is comparable to the lure of everyday birding magnified a thousand times. On any given birding day in North America, one never knows what one will find. On any given

Table 1. First North American records from Attu Island, Alaska, of various Eurasian bird species.

Species	Date	Source
Yellow Bittern	17–22 May 1989	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Lesser White-fronted Goose	5 June 1994	American Birds 48:330
Eurasian Hobby ^a	2 July 1982	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Green Sandpiper	13 June 1978	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Pin-tailed Snipe ^b	25 May 1991	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Oriental Pratincole	19–20 May 1985	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Great Spotted Woodpecker	9–31 October 1985	Wagner 1989
Lanceolated Warbler	4 June–15 July 1984	Tobish 1985
Narcissus Flycatcher	20–21 May 1989	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Asian Brown Flycatcher	25 May 1985	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Siberian Blue Robin	21 May 1985	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Rufous-tailed Robin	4 May 2000	Alaska region, this issue
Red-flanked Bluetail	5 June 1978	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Black-backed Wagtail	4 May 1913	Thayer and Bangs 1921
Pine Bunting	18–19 November 1985	Wagner 1990
Yellow-breasted Bunting	26 May 1988	Gibson and Kessel 1992
Eurasian Siskin	4 June 1978	Roberson 1980
Oriental Greenfinch	22 May 1976	Byrd et al. 1978

^aTechnically, this bird was seen 32 km northeast of Attu Island. North America's second hobby was seen on Attu Island proper 20 May 1983 (Gibson and Kessel 1992).

^bThere is an earlier record of the Pin-tailed Snipe from Kure Atoll, Hawaiian Islands, 13 January 1964 (A.O.U. 1998).

day on Attu, however, one does not know what first North American record one will find. Attu is responsible for 18 first North American records (Table 1), including such one-time wonders as the Yellow Bittern, Pine Bunting, and this year's Rufous-tailed Robin. North American breeding of White-tailed Eagle, Black-backed Wagtail, Whooper Swan, and Brambling were first recorded on Attu. While vagrants will continue to occur on Attu, it will become virtually impossible for us to know about most of them. Of the 18 first North American records documented from Attu, the vast majority were found by ATTOUR leaders and participants.

Expectations were high for the final spring tours to Attu, and this year's trips produced some incredible sightings, undoubtedly highlighted by the first North American record of Rufous-tailed Robin. Other highlights included Far Eastern Curlew, Great Knot, Black-tailed Gull, Oriental Cuckoo (present at the same time as Common Cuckoo), Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler, two Lanceolated Warblers, seven Red-breasted Flycatchers, seven Common Rosefinches, and a male Bullfinch.

So, with the premise of birding Attu now a mere memory, where can we turn to in North America for a Siberian fix? Considering coverage, or the virtual lack thereof, other places in the western Aleutians have hosted their share of vagrants. Alaska's and western North America's first Little Egret was found dead this spring on Buldir, which in the past also hosted North America's first Jungle Nightjar and Oriental Scops-Owl (A.O.U. 1998). The Wood Warbler and Mugimaki Flycatcher were first recorded in North America from Shemya, while Black-winged Stilt on Nizki and Chinese Egret on Agattu provided other North American firsts (A.O.U. 1998). Nevertheless, these locations will prove no easier to reach than Attu. It seems that Paul Lehman's experience on Gambell, recording North America's first Yellow-browed Warbler (Lehman 2000), suggests this to be the next Alaskan birding frontier. Autumn, with many more individual birds and young, inexperienced birds, will likely provide the next round of excitement for Alaskan birding. At this point, it

seems that fall on St. Lawrence Island, or some other remote outpost, may be the next place where the next "one never knows" bird may come in the form of a first North American record. Moreover, if those locations cannot excite us with a first North American record, we still have Arizona, south Texas, south Florida, and growing numbers of pelagic opportunities for our continued explorations.

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