

# The Changing Seasons: Far fetched

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The spring of 2006 put most of us in mind, well, of the spring of 2005, in the eastern half of the continent, in any case: that is, it was warm, but there was some “weather” in May that slowed migration, so that the early part of the season saw an abundance of early arrivals (and few concentrations of migrants), but the latter part of migration slowed, as birds awaited favorable winds. Overall, conditions were driest in the Southwest, wettest in the Northeast and Northwest—as is true in most years—but generally warmer in the East, cooler in the West, a crude pattern familiar from many springs past and a function of the average position of the jet stream.

In Canada’s Atlantic provinces, temperatures ran about 3.5° F above average; next door, in Québec, temperatures were 3–5° F above normal, relatively warmer in the north, and set records in many cases; and Ontario also had a warm spring, likewise with a cool-down in mid/late May. Reports from the East generally agree that the season was warmer and drier than normal, with a wet mid-May that in some cases was extreme. For instance, while March in Massachusetts was the third driest in 112 years, May was the second *wettest* ever there, with over 50 cm of rain (and devastating floods) in some locations in northern Massachusetts. The effects of the mid-May storms were negligible in the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico states, where warm temperatures and moderate weather was reported throughout the period. Eastern Texas had some good soaking rains to relieve parched conditions there.

The Midwest had a more active weather pattern, as is typical in spring, with strong storms passing between late March and early April in the central Midwest. Between late March and early May, the Midwest recorded temperatures well above the average; April in Illinois and Indiana, for instance, saw temperatures that averaged 5–6° F above normal, “resulting in an early leaf-out and giving the impression of late arrival times for many groups of birds; actual arrival dates, however, proved to be about normal,” according to Jim Hengeveld, Keith McMullen, and Geoffrey Williamson. From Minnesota to Michigan, Iowa to Missouri, unusually warm weather continued through much of April but abruptly ended on 9 May, particularly in the north, as a large low-pressure system

stalled over Lake Michigan, bringing over a week of rain and cool temperatures. This period of cool, wet weather extended into Appalachia, and Brainard Palmer-Ball and Chris Sloan report mortality in some species such as Purple Martin in Tennessee and Kentucky. It is interesting that this mid-May cool-down oc-

and very dry, reaching “extreme drought” proportions from New Mexico north to southeastern Colorado.

Regular readers of this column will be unsurprised to read the words “lackluster” and “uneventful” and “dull” and “slow” in two dozen regional reports in reference to passerine migration. Warm spring seasons with relatively few cold fronts make the job of writing this column both easier and more difficult! The height of migration, in May, saw fallouts of passerines in the Midwest and western Gulf Coast, but along most of the northern East Coast, into Canada, the northeasterly winds shut down migration of most birds through about 22 May. Blake Maybank, writing of the migration in the Atlantic Provinces, adds that in addition to the effects of contrary winds, “I suspect we are witnessing the persistent effects of the massive mortality events of spring 2005”—thus the low numbers of migrants but typical diversity. In the mid-Atlantic states, southerly winds blew mostly in early April, 23–25 April, 4–5 May, and 24–28 May, with strong land-bird migration noted from New England through Virginia during those windows but little migration documented during mid-May at all. As a result, “overshooting” species (kites, doves, and their ilk) were also mostly below average across the board, from the Rockies to eastern Canada. In the Midwest, observers lamented the rather dull, warm April, with few concentrations of migrants, and the mostly slow May; the cold, wet period in the middle of May led to local backups/fallouts of warblers in Iowa and in northeastern Ohio (which recorded 38 species of warblers) but to a “dead stop” to migration in Michigan and Wisconsin. Gulf Coast states had a rather mixed experience of the spring. Western Florida and Alabama had dry weather and few fronts; one seasoned observer remarked that it was “as though migration had not taken place.” To the west, however, Louisiana birders experienced a better migration than average, and several cool fronts coincided conveniently with weekends. As in the East, superlatives on migration were scarce in the regional reports from the West. Evidence of heavy migration was spotty and local: several good waves of western migrants were noted in Southern California, especially 22 April–4 May and 7 May; storm-groundings of



Spring 2006 was most memorable for fallouts of shorebirds, from Alaska to Atlantic Canada. This striking adult Lesser Sandplover in breeding plumage was photographed on the edge of Sitkin Sound, along the east side of Clam Lagoon, Adak Island, Alaska on 16 May 2006. Photograph by John Puschock.

occurred at nearly the same time as the coastal Atlantic storms.

As often seems to occur, the spring was warmer overall in the eastern prairies than farther west: March/April was warmer than usual in Manitoba but rather cool and often wet from Alberta westward through British Columbia and north into Yukon and Alaska. Mainland Alaska reported *La Niña*-like conditions, mostly cooler than average, cloudy, but with a week of 70° F weather in mid-May. To the south, Idaho and Montana also saw its warmest weather in May, while the Pacific Northwest’s extremely wet winter gave way to a wet, cool, late spring, with precipitation heaviest in the first half of the season, setting local records in Mono County and Humboldt County, California. From southern California to western Texas, north into the Great Basin and southern Rockies, conditions were warm

and the mostly slow May; the cold, wet period in the middle of May led to local backups/fallouts of warblers in Iowa and in northeastern Ohio (which recorded 38 species of warblers) but to a “dead stop” to migration in Michigan and Wisconsin. Gulf Coast states had a rather mixed experience of the spring. Western Florida and Alabama had dry weather and few fronts; one seasoned observer remarked that it was “as though migration had not taken place.” To the west, however, Louisiana birders experienced a better migration than average, and several cool fronts coincided conveniently with weekends. As in the East, superlatives on migration were scarce in the regional reports from the West. Evidence of heavy migration was spotty and local: several good waves of western migrants were noted in Southern California, especially 22 April–4 May and 7 May; storm-groundings of

shorebirds came in mid-May in Colorado and Wyoming; and a good flight of Veery and Gray-cheeked Thrush was documented in Colorado.

## I beg your pardon?

*Picture this.* The time is July 1976, a year of a great bicentennial celebration in the United States, the two-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Bell-bottom blue jeans, disco, pop-tarts, corn-dogs, and the environmental movement in full flower. At the Democratic National Convention in New York City, a lifelong birder named James Earl Carter, Jr., is nominated as the party's candidate for President of the United States. During one of the endless festivals of the summer, you duck into a tent, on a lark, to ask a psychic what birding will look like 30 years from now, in the futuristic-sounding year of 2006. She gazes into her crystal ball.

"I'm seeing a Verdin in Washington state; a Southern Lapwing in Maryland; White-tailed Hawks in Massachusetts and Jersey; maybe a Broad-billed Hummingbird in Nova Scotia. Whooping Cranes and whistling-ducks all over the place. Eurasian Collared-Doves nesting everywhere; they reach Yukon that year. Great Tits in Wisconsin. Eh? No, wise guy—the bird. *Breeding* in Wisconsin. Maybe another report of Ivory-billed Woodpecker; I'm getting ... Florida? Yes, Florida. Oh, plus all those splits—vireos, golden-plovers, sharp-tailed sparrows, murrelets, orioles, towhees, thrushes, flycatchers, gulls, geese, sapsuckers, what have you—vagrants of those, all over. Ooh, but hybrids, hon, watch out for hybrids. What a mess with those. Who knew?" She pauses ominously.

Your jaw drops and you shake your head, trying to take it all in. "That'll be \$5," she reminds you. Still in shock, you press for more. "What?" she says. "No, nothing else goes extinct that I can see. No, no splits in the warblers, hon, sorry; but no more lumps, either. And Kirtland's Warbler is doing well, yes. You'll get your Kirtland's. No, doll, no more birder-presidents. Enjoy this one. That'll be \$10."

Far fetched? *Welcome to Birding 2006. Keep your hands inside the roller coaster at all times.*

## North of Normal

It seems that when these far-flung vagrants pop up in the mailbox, as they do increasingly often, I hear an evermore familiar voice saying: "What next?!" Just as we get used to far-flung White-winged Doves and Mississippi Kites in spring, we have to get our heads around non-migratory birds of the border states—White-tailed Hawk, Verdin—in the Northeast and Northwest, respectively. Like Marvin Gaye, we

may wonder "What's going on?"

Or could we take a different philosophical attitude: perhaps we should relax our view of "normal" distributional ranges when it comes to birds. Some schools of Buddhism teach that every situation is but a passing memory. So it is with our attempts to conceive of the actual distribution of a bird species—they are outdated as soon as we have described them. More than any other single factor, this is what makes our birding, and this journal, so perdurable and so fascinating: birds do not stay put. Even when we try to map their whereabouts in real time (such as in maps, as on <www.ebird.org>), we trade in illusion, in a sense. Birding can reassure, can calm us—like seeing old friends during the holidays—and the commoner birds are our companions throughout our lives. But birding also shocks us, presents us with visitors we scarcely expect. And as we adjust to these, incorporate and accommodate them, new, even less-expected visitors appear. And we need not even see these birds ourselves: as a birding community, we register shock and wonder vicariously, at the birding experiences of others. We may, when we are green and new to birding, envy such experiences; when we ripen, we come to marvel at them, allow them to inspire us and sharpen our anticipation and discernment. This journal's great task, and privilege, is to digest our experiences and make sense of them, to prepare and sharpen our minds for the surprises to come. We never do justice to a season of birding. But let's begin with the least surprising, with the patterns we know best, before pondering the singular and the strange.

Doves—those perennial components of nearly every spring "Changing Seasons" essay in recent memory (most thoroughly in Leukering and Gibbons [2005])—marched onward and upward in 2006 but not quite with the gale-force barnstorming we have seen in other spring seasons. White-winged Doves were just "average" in their appearances, aside from the 22 reports from Colorado and Wyoming and six in Indiana; Missouri and Northern California each reported two, and sightings of singles, mostly in May, came from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New York, New Jersey, North Dakota, Minnesota, Illinois, Delaware, Virginia, and the mountains of Alabama. Inca Dove was seen in Nebraska and Missouri and noted as holding on or expanding in Colorado, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Eurasian Collared-Dove consolidated gains in the Southeast, particularly southernmost Virginia, and single birds made it to New York, New Jersey, Ontario, and Pennsylvania—none to New England or Canada otherwise. However, in the northwestern sector of the

continent, the species was on fire, with massive gains in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia, Idaho, and Montana. Northern California and many locations in Mexico are reporting increases as well. Reports of escapees in Guerrero, Mexico and in Petersburg, Alaska make understanding the "natural" spread of this species tricky—not least because some of the birds that escape are mixed with what we are now instructed to call African Collared-Dove (formerly Ringed Turtle-Dove), a specimen of which was found at Daytona Beach, Florida this season. Good documentation of the spread of *Streptopelia* doves is thus still very much warranted: the situation is not nearly as straightforward as it may seem.

Spring regional reports are also usually replete with records of kites "overshooting" their southerly ranges, and this season was no exception. Mississippi Kites are invariably the most numerous of the three widespread kites, and in spring 2006, 15 extralimital birds made it to Cape Cod (one), Cape May (and two other New Jersey sites; eight total in the state), and Pennsylvania (four), as well as to Calumet County, Wisconsin and Furnace Creek Ranch, California. Almost as widespread north of regular range, single Swallow-tailed Kites appeared in nine locations, all the in the East: two in Virginia, one in Maryland, two in Pennsylvania, one in Connecticut, one in Massachusetts, and two in Ontario. White-tailed Kite, the least prone to wanderlust, appeared in Nevada (two), Louisiana (two), Arkansas, and Osage County, Oklahoma; reports are increasing in Arizona and New Mexico, where the species appears to be in a mode of expansion (one as far north as Becker Lake, Arizona), and in the Pacific Northwest.

In the West, birders have been finding Crested Caracaras well out of range in recent years, in numbers that have been comparable to kite's counts. In spring 2006, single birds were found north Washington (one) and Oregon (two), as well as to Monterey, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma Counties, California (up to six total). In core range—in the United States, mostly southern Arizona and Texas—the species is expanding a bit: both states reported caracaras in extralimital locations, and New Mexico reports came from three sites. The trajectory of these remarkable flights is not just to the north and northwest, however; as in other recent seasons, some caracaras are apparently moving toward the northeast as well. This season, one was found on 15 April in Kankakee, Illinois. Given the northward expansion of caracaras in Florida (this season saw one in Orange County 31 May), it is tempting to wonder whether some

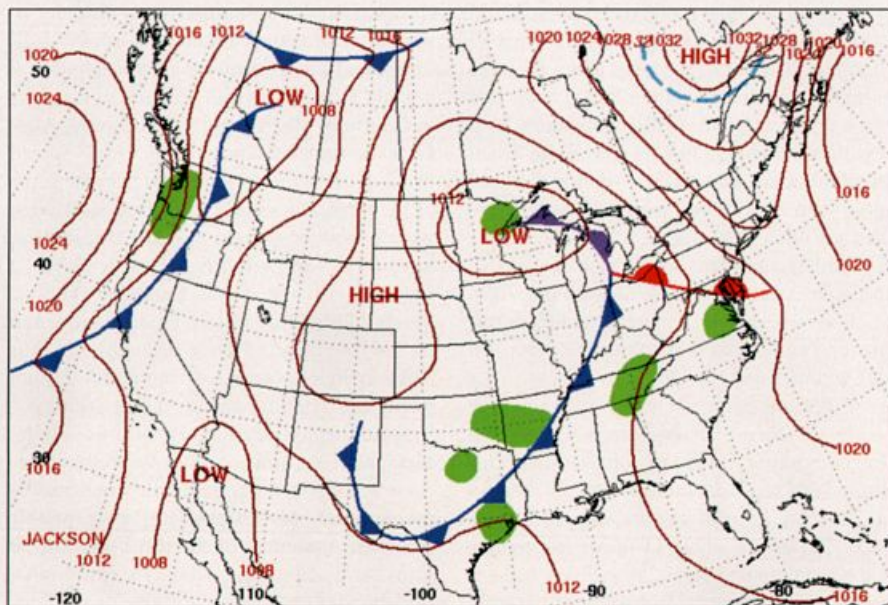


Figure 1. Surface weather map for 21 April 2006 at 0700 E.S.T. Graphic courtesy of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, United States Department of Commerce.

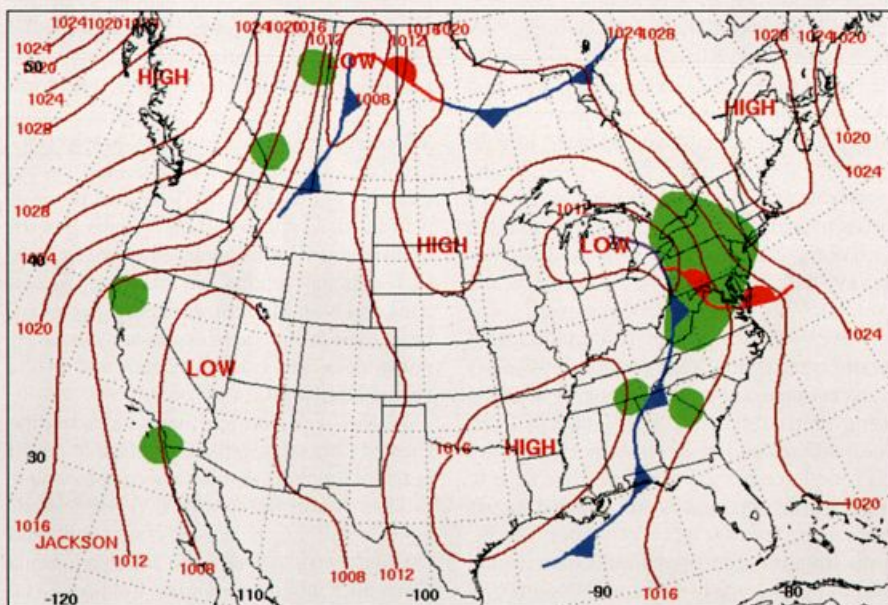


Figure 2. Surface weather map for 22 April 2006 at 0700 E.S.T. Graphic courtesy of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, United States Department of Commerce.

of the recent eastern reports, as in New Brunswick, might refer to Florida birds; however, the absence of records in the Southeast otherwise suggests that the vagrants are mostly from the West.

Other raptors whose distributions lie mostly south of the U.S.–Mexico border are also being detected well north of usual range in the border states. Short-tailed Hawk leads this list, although most records are coming from new areas in border states, such as the Davis

Mountains Preserve (23 April+), the first for the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, and Rattlesnake Springs (24 April), only the second ever for New Mexico. Elsewhere in Texas, a pair was seen displaying in Bentsen (30 April), and another was at the Santa Margarita Ranch (25 April). We should recall that the species was barely known in Texas only a few years ago. Less widespread were reports of wandering Common Black-Hawk (northern California), Gray Hawk (new areas in Arizona and

New Mexico), and Harris's Hawk (Cherokee County, Oklahoma). But birders living within a few hundred kilometers of these species' range edges should keep an eye out for them.

Far less expected this season were reports of several extralimital White-tailed Hawks in Texas, as far north as Granger Lake, Williamson County (23 April). However, only a psychic could have foreseen the appearance of a White-tailed Hawk in Hadley, Massachusetts (22–24 April)—or of one at the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey (25 April), or one in North Truro, Massachusetts (27 April). At least two White-tailed Hawks, possibly three, were touring the East in late April! Normally, in light of the recent wandering of other southern raptors, our inclination would be to consider these birds wild; but photographs of the Hadley bird show an odd pattern of wear or damage to primaries, not unusual for birds held in captivity. Does this bird's condition then cast doubt on the wild provenance of the New Jersey bird or the Cape Cod bird, which apparently did not have damaged primaries? The Special Attention boxes in the New England and Hudson-Delaware reports are most instructive on these points. In weighing the evidence against the larger context—southern raptors straying to the north—one is tempted to discount the primary damage in favor of the notion of a "flight" of White-tailed Hawks in spring 2006. Were weather patterns conducive for bringing raptors from Texas to the Northeast in the last days of April? It would seem that they would favor movement of birds from southern Texas toward the Northeast, rather similar to the scenarios we see with Cave Swallows in November: an advancing low-pressure system crosses Texas and the prairies, pushing southwesterly and southerly winds ahead of it, 20–21 April (Figure 1)—effectively a pipeline toward the Northeast. The subsequent weather patterns (Figures 2, 3) show that the New Jersey-to-Massachusetts corridor would be literally the end of the line for a buteo using warm, southerly winds: this area had precipitation ahead of the warm front, a high-pressure area to the north, and lows to the east and west. Thus, it seems plausible that these White-tailed Hawks could have gotten to New Jersey and Massachusetts on favorable winds.

In the western-raptors-east department, we should point out not just the Illinois caracara but also number of dark-morph Western Red-tailed Hawks (subspecies *calurus*) in the East: one in Forsyth County, North Carolina (16 March); one in Jefferson County, Kentucky (30 March); one at Presque Isle State Park,

Pennsylvania (31 March); and one wintering at Gatineau, Québec (through 6 April). Two Harlan's Hawks in Hopkins County, Kentucky on 12 March also merit mention. These records are from the margins of range, or well beyond them, but my impression is that such records are increasing slowly, with greater attention to butes over the years.

In spring, the general pattern of "overshooting" has been that most eastern birds stay east, most western birds west—the birds are mostly north of their usual latitudinal limits. Longitudinally displaced birds, which are not called "overshooters" (though there may be some common mechanism), are also well known in spring, if fewer in most years: California's unpredictable mid-May-through-early-June influx of eastern warblers and other Neotropical migrants; and the less-impressive scattering of western passerines in the East, usually most pronounced in the Northeast. The spring of 2006 was far below average in California for eastern birds but above average for western birds east, good examples this spring being Western Tanagers (Québec, Maine, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Louisiana, plus 12 in the Western Great Lakes region); Golden-crowned Sparrows in New Brunswick (two), Nova Scotia (two), and Massachusetts (one); and a Lark Bunting singing in a Bangor, Maine spruce bog 28 May! Some of the tanagers and sparrows in these cases were clearly overwintering birds, but a few were migrants on the move, probably from extralimital wintering areas. Other species that appear to be moving as much eastward/westward as they are to the north include Glossy Ibis, actively expanding westward (many in Colorado, three in Arizona, seven in New Mexico, and three in Idaho), White-faced Ibis, continuing to expand eastward, and White Ibis, making a few more appearances out West (New Mexico, Colorado).

But most eastern birds stay east, western birds west, even when overshooting. Vagrant Swainson's Warblers, for instance, stayed mostly in the East: at St. Louis, Missouri 22 April; near Winnipeg, Manitoba 8 May; in the Toronto, Ontario area 12 May; at Headlands, Ohio 20-21 May; and in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania 25 May. Anhinga—which certainly wanders but mostly to the north of its southeastern range in North America—made it north to Exton, Pennsylvania 4 May (potentially a first documented for the state) and to Kidder County, North Dakota 9 April (one soaring with Sandhill Cranes was also a state first). Reports of Magnificent (or unidentified) Frigatebirds, when not tied to

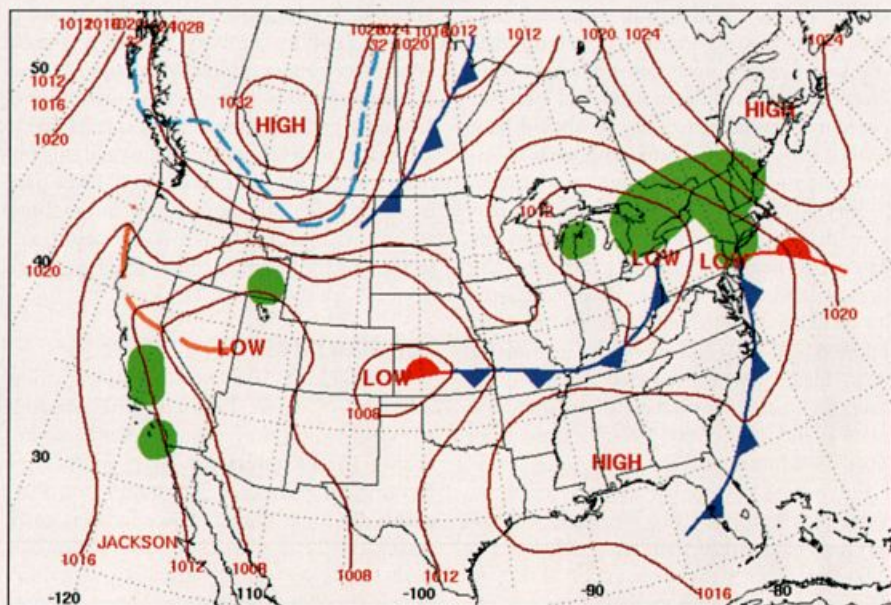


Figure 3. Surface weather map for 23 April 2006 at 0700 E.S.T. Graphic courtesy of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, United States Department of Commerce.

tropical storms, are normally coastal but rarely as widespread as in the second half of May 2006: two were in Maine (20 May), one in Massachusetts (17 May), two in New Jersey (18 May), one in Virginia (26 May+), as many as eight in North Carolina (22 April, 15-26 May), and singles in South Carolina (27 May) and Georgia (24 May). Such records have shown distinct increases in recent seasons.

In the West, similarly remarkable were Hooded Orioles at Grand Junction, Colorado 26-30 May (first for the state) and at three Washington sites (2-24 May; sixth through eighth state records)—recalling their sorties as far north as the Yukon in spring 2005 (Leukering and Gibbons 2005). Reports of vagrant Broad-billed Hummingbirds came from Colorado Springs, Colorado 13 April (third for the state); Las Vegas, Nevada through 31 March; Johnson County, Kansas 26 April (state second); near Ramona, California 14-18 April; and at El Centro, California 20-21 April. Although the orioles were best characterized as "overshooting," at least some of the hummingbirds may well have wintered not far away—though not the Colorado Springs bird, which had wintered, and been banded, in New Iberia, Louisiana! Still unimpressed? How about an apparent Broad-billed Hummingbird in Halifax, Nova Scotia 23 May—not photographed but pretty well described, it would represent a first spring record for the Atlantic coast of North America. For a species of the Southwest, the arc of vagrancy described by these records—from

southern California to Atlantic Canada—is quite unusual and difficult to characterize using terms such as "overshooting" or "expanding." Certainly no other hummingbird species has such a pattern at this season.

Species with both eastern and western populations typically show the most widespread patterns of spring vagrancy, though we register such records when the birds are north of usual range, and so the degree of longitudinal displacement (the vector of vagrancy, if you will) is difficult to divine. Painted Bunting, whose vagrancy has been well canvassed in this journal (Mlodinow and Hamilton 2005), turned up this spring in Salt Lake City, Utah 10 May (a state first), Cumberland County, Kentucky 26 May (state second), and Bashaw, Alberta 4 May (also second). Black Rails, which also have a broad but discontinuous breeding range in North America, appeared in Illinois, Indiana (two), New Mexico, and Pebble Beach, California.

Whistling-ducks, which have eastern populations but which in the West probably (or mostly?) stray from Mexican populations, also showed widespread, scattershot patterns this spring, on par with records from spring 2003 (Brinkley 2003). Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were "all over," from the Caribbean to Baja California. Four were in Georgia on Little St. Simons Island 16 May, and 20 were at the Altamaha Wildlife Management Area, not far away, 28 May. Flocks of 11 were seen in Beaufort County, North Carolina through 16 May and at Isle of Palms,

South Carolina 23 May. In the Midwest, Missouri had two on 13-15 May at Pertle Springs, Johnson County and one on 14 May in Greene County, while Indiana had its third record in Tippecanoe County 20 April-1 May. Farther west, in Oklahoma, four were in Alfalfa County 24 May and one in McIntosh County 10 May (the species is found regularly in that state only at Red Slough, in the state's southeastern corner). Farther-flung Black-bellieds were seen in Baja California Sur at Lagunas de Chametla, where recently reported, and 11 at Salinas Punta Colorada 22 May added a new site for that species in the state. Eighteen in the Bahamas on Grand Bahama Island 28-29 May probably came from Florida—a first record for that country.

Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, well outnumbered by extralimital Black-bellieds, continued their widespread wanderings. One was in Lafayette County, Wisconsin 23 March (a state second); one in Robertson County, Tennessee 19 April-19 May was nearly as rare; one in Lake County 3 April was just Illinois's fifth since 1933; and three visited Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, New York 28 May into June. In the West, two at Moro Cojo Slough, Monterey County, California 24 April and another in Tulare County five days later were deemed genuine vagrants, following the winter flight of the species (one in Scottsdale, Arizona was last seen 31 March). Four at Imperial Reservoir, Pecos County, Texas 10 May were most unexpected in that far corner of the state and could well have come from Mexico.

With the Hooded Orioles, Broad-billed Hummingbirds, and whistling-ducks, a striking array of even scarcer vagrants is beginning to show patterns of pioneering northward flights. Among those in spring 2006 were a Mexican Duck in Colorado, a Hepatic Tanager in Kansas, a Bronzed Cowbird in Oklahoma, and a Common Moorhen in Washington (and another north of normal in Nevada). A White-crowned Pigeon in Mississippi, a Mangrove Cuckoo and multiple Black-whiskered Vireos in Texas, and Gray Kingbirds in Texas (and Missouri) made for a memorable Caribbean flavor to the western Gull's spring. From well south of the U.S. border, one or two Piratic Flycatchers in Texas were noteworthy. And from possibly farther south, Southern Lapwings in Florida (6 May into June) and Maryland (17 June), however improbable, also have a history of expansion and vagrancy, sufficient at least to make those records seem plausible (see the S.A. boxes in this and the next issue).

In terms of precedence, however, these birds pale next to the Verdin that turned up at

Tillicum, Washington 25 May. This is not a species kept in captivity, nor is it a bird known to wander widely or migrate (a few extralimital Texas records notwithstanding). Certainly, great expanses of this species' habitat are lost to development, but would this explain a bird 1200 km out of range? If the past is any guide, this apparently anomalous record will probably get some "context" records in the future, as with other vagrants from the Southwest and Mexico.

## Eurasian birds

While a lucky few flock to Alaska each spring in hopes of exotic Eurasian birds arriving with storms, most of us stay closer to home, taking in the migration of Nearctic and Neotropical birds, as well as home-grown vagrants. We may forget, however, that early spring can be a great time to find Eurasian birds in our backyards, particularly waterfowl but also finches. Areas nearer major coastlines or flyways have the greatest concentration of such records, while deserts and mountains have far fewer records of Eurasian taxa, but interior states such as Montana have been finding a rather impressive array of Eurasian birds in recent years. Records of Old World geese and swan are far fewer than those of ducks. This spring, a Pink-footed Goose was found at Saint-Mathias-sur-Richelieu, Québec 25 March, and single Barnacle Geese were at

Masson, Québec 5 May; at Southbury, Connecticut 15-28 March; at Eisenhower Park, New York until 6 March; and at the Great Swamp Conservancy, New York 9-10 April. (See the Hudson-Delaware report for a note on population increases in this species.) Late March was the time to see Bewick's Swan, considered a subspecies of Tundra Swan: one was found in Skagit County, Washington 23 March; Wisconsin had its first in Rock County 24 March; and singles were reported at Freezeout Lake, Montana and in Delta, British Columbia 25 March.

Eurasian Wigeon is the most widespread of the Old World ducks in North America; a majority of regions reported the species, some in the hundreds! Eurasian Teal—the shorthand for what this journal has called "Common (Eurasian Green-winged) Teal"—has seen a resurgence of records, perhaps owing to observer diligence. It was nearly as widely recorded as the wigeon, though not in such numbers, with reports from Newfoundland (two), New Brunswick (two), Québec (six), Maine, Connecticut (two), Massachusetts, the Hudson-Delaware region (three), Virginia, Maryland, Ontario (two), Pennsylvania, Oregon/Washington (six), and Northern California (nine). Garganey, a teal rather scarce in the 1990s but perhaps slightly increasing in recent years in North America, put in appearances in Iowa (7 April), Guadeloupe (through

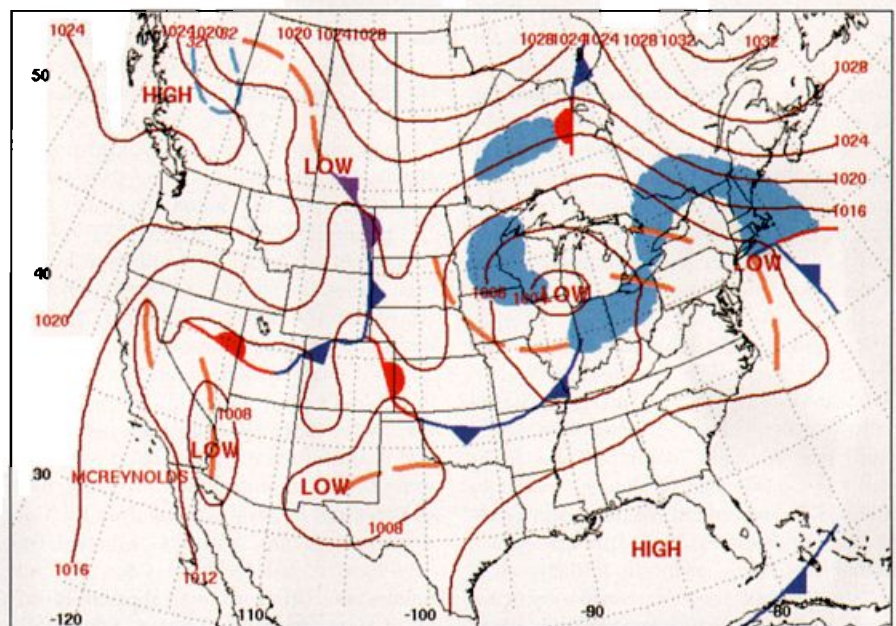


Figure 4. Surface weather map for 13 May 2006 at 0700 E.S.T. The coastal low-pressure system off the Northeast pumped easterly winds into the coast and beyond, as far as Québec. With the storm, about 55 Red Phalaropes and at least 140 Red-necked Phalaropes into interior areas, mostly in New England. At the same time, a strong low-pressure feature stalled over Lake Michigan, bringing migration to a halt over much of the Midwest. Graphic courtesy of the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, United States Department of Commerce.

27 March), Ontario (5 May), and Baja California (through 28 April); and rarer still, a Falcated Duck could still be found around Eugene, Oregon through 20 March. Away from Alaska, Tufted Ducks were most readily found in eastern Canada (Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Québec) and along the Pacific coast (California, Oregon, Washington), as is typical, but two were in Vermont and singles in Michigan and Virginia as well. That pearl among mergansers, Smew, was found just once outside Alaska: at Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Montana 12 May—a first for the state. (Go, Montana!)

Underappreciated across most of the continent, early spring also offers a chance, however small, to encounter Eurasian finches on the move. These are probably birds that wintered somewhere in the New World—or, in several recent cases, escapees or their offspring. There must have been a movement of Bramblings on 8 April, when single males showed up in Bellevue, Idaho (the state's third) and in Buffalo County, Nebraska (the state's second). In the Pacific Northwest, where rare but more regular, singles were in Duncan, British Columbia through 18 March, in Monmouth, Oregon 26 March–16 April, and Eugene, Oregon 1–13 April (the tenth and eleventh for that state). European Goldfinches were found in Maine (late April) and Massachusetts (16 April; 15 May), and a Eurasian Siskin turned up in New Brunswick 29–30 April (see <<http://homepage.mac.com/maryspt/PhotoAlbum9.html>>), the latter only the second for the province. Finally, in addition to the trickle of Siberian shorebirds, cuckoos, and passerines to Bering Sea islands in Alaska, there were several dead ardeids of interest found at Buldir Island in late May and early June: two Great Egrets (Asian subspecies *modesta*) and North America's first Intermediate Egret.

## Shorebirds & Gulls

Most spring seasons pass with few superlatives regarding shorebirds, which typically move through most regions quickly en route to breeding areas. This season was different in that regard, with almost half the regions reporting interesting phenomena. The most easily grasped of these was the fallout of Red and Red-necked Phalaropes that spanned much of the Northeast, from Québec to Maine, south to New York. The fallout was clearly a product of the intense low-pressure system that affected the area (and migrants of all sorts), 12–21 May (Figure 4). Birders were quick to get afield, scanning local lakes and wetlands, posting their discoveries and en-

couraging others to get out and turn up more phalaropes. The results were most impressive, particularly inland. Québec birders described the 13–19 May fallout of 10 Red Phalaropes, plus dozens of Red-neckeds, as “unprecedented”; the province had just four May records of Red Phalarope since 1960. Neighboring Vermont apparently lacked phalaropes on Lake Champlain but had four Red and a Red-necked 14–20 May, while New Hampshire posted 32 Red-neckeds and seven Reds 12–15 May and Maine two Reds 13 May. As in the similar 2005 phalarope fallout (Leukering and Gibbons 2005), Massachusetts took the lion's portion: 82 Red-necked and 27 Red Phalaropes 12–16 May. In southern New England, three Reds and a Red-necked were in Connecticut 13–16 May, and neighboring Pine Plains, New York had a Red at the start of the storm, 13 May. The southernmost of the sightings may well have been a very late Red in breeding plumage found off Hatteras, North Carolina 17 May!

It is interesting that during the same window in the West, a fallout of shorebirds at Table Mountain, Wyoming 16 May included 47 Red-necked Phalaropes; 250 were counted on Duck Lake, Colorado three days later. Though unrelated to the fallout in the Northeast, the phalaropes were clearly moving across a broad front in mid-May: another 71 Red-neckeds were at Riverton, Missouri 13 May; and 653 were found between sites in Garden County and Sheridan County, Nebraska, 15 May. Back at Table Mountain, observers tallied remarkable counts of Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated, Pectoral, and Stilt Sandpipers, both dowitchers, and singles of Snowy Plover and Hudsonian Godwit; these and other species, particularly White-rumped Sandpiper, were found in Colorado over the next 24 hours. The brevity of such fallouts, which are usually fairly local in nature, is clearly discernable in a skim of the adjacent regional reports. To the south, in Arizona, 30 Red-necked Phalaropes at Gila Bend 13 May provided one of the few shorebird highlights, while to the west, a paucity of storms meant that shorebirds were hard to come by in the Great Basin: a Ruddy Turnstone, a White-rumped Sandpiper, and four Red Knots in Utah; and a Sanderling in Nevada. The message to take home: get out while the weather is still messy and the birds are grounded; most will be gone as soon as skies start to clear. (Take a day off work; it's only money.)

In recent springs in the East, strong southwesterly airflows have been noted in conjunction with the appearance of “western” shorebirds—Western Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper,

Long-billed Dowitcher in particular, species whose main migration routes lie well west of the Atlantic coast. New York and New England had notable records of all three species, but even states as far south as North Carolina had above-average counts of Stilt Sandpiper, for instance. In the Atlantic provinces of Canada, large spring flights of shorebirds are most unusual, as most species appear to turn inland toward nesting areas before reaching that latitude. During the second part of May, largely after the coastal storm had passed to the south, high counts of Black-bellied Plover, Red Knot, and other species from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland prompted speculation that the dominant airflow in late May (from the southwest), rather than a low-pressure event, was responsible for an eastward shift in the migration of these species. Birders who watch the weather maps, not surprisingly, are often the ones who discover fallouts and unusual birds.

If there is any doubt about the high quality of shorebirding in the Southern Great Plains and the Missouri River Valley, a perusal of the relevant regional reports will dispel that doubt. Joe Gryzbowski and Ross Silcock noted not just across-the-board early arrivals but also high counts of many shorebird species on unprecedented early dates—perhaps another indication that the phenology of shorebird migration has begun to shift noticeably as the earth warms. Climate change will almost certainly effect a poleward shift in the breeding ranges of shorebirds, as with other birds, but as most shorebirds nest to the north of human population centers, we rarely witness such shifts firsthand: we experience these birds mostly as migrants. For species of the High Arctic, such as Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, and Sanderling, there is no land to the north of their nesting areas, and it is unclear how climate change will affect their ability to reproduce. But we observe “southern” shorebirds to the north of typical range with increasing frequency. This season, single Wilson's Plovers were boldfaced rarities in Saline County, Kansas 1 May and Bayfield County, Wisconsin 13–14 May; the pattern of inland and northerly records continues. Black-necked Stilts continue to spread northward along the Atlantic coast as well as into southern-central Canada; Manitoba's first nest of the species was discovered at Whitewater Lake 23 May. Not usually a shorebird regarded as “southern,” an American Woodcock near Medicine Hat 7 April was a first for Alberta. As with the other “north-of-normal” birds, we expect more such records in springs to come.

Though related to shorebirds, gulls have far fewer adherents, fewer champions, fewer fanatics—those folks often marginalized (or lauded) as “larophiles.” This may be because gull identification requires such painstaking attention to detail or high tolerance of uncertainty; or because hybrids, or potential hybrids, or uncertain species limits, produce on-line discussions that range from acrimonious to agnostic. A beginner seeking clear guidance on larger gulls may find the lack of consensus, and the level of discussion, bewildering. Despite these difficulties, the small army of gull enthusiasts did their usual fine job of proving that nothing is impossible in the genus *Larus*. In the West, vagrant Iceland Gulls were in Wallula, Washington; Calgary, Alberta; and Pierre, South Dakota. Western Lesser Black-backed Gulls, increasing annually, were at Moses Lake and Lake Lenore, Washington; at Vernon Creek, British Columbia; and Calgary, Alberta. Another “eastern” species increasingly detected in the West, Great Black-backed Gull was reported in North Dakota (two: second and third state records), South Dakota (first state record), and Wyoming (second state record). Also in the West, Slaty-backed Gulls kept up their string of appearances from Washington (its tenth), to Oregon (its eleventh), to California (four birds through early March were about the state’s tenth through twelfth). British Columbia also had three Slaty-backed, and Calgary, Alberta, had one at the end of March, followed by a Western Gull in April and a Glaucous-winged Gull in May! Not to be outdone by western Canada, Newfoundland’s St. John’s hotspots turned up two more Slaty-backed Gulls, a Glaucous-winged Gull, and yet another Yellow-legged Gull, in addition to the “usual fare” such as Common Gulls. European Herring Gull, which has been reported several times in Newfoundland, was documented for the first time in Florida this spring—despite buzz about a split (already a *fait accompli* in Europe), there was no stampede to see this bird. But things do change in the birding world; its obscurity today may turn to celebrity tomorrow, as with Newfoundland’s Yellow-legged Gulls. Smartly plumaged gulls that would brighten *any* birder’s day, Heermann’s Gulls made it to Utah and New Mexico, and two Ross’s Gulls were observed together at Sept-Îles, Québec in late May.

## Numbers

Some counts are so impressive that they deserve some sort of spotlight in this column. The numbers say it all; we wish we had been there for:

- 210 Eurasian Wigeons on the Samish Flats, Skagit County, Washington, 2 March;
- 395 Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 28 February;
- 700 Bald Eagles near Beaver Cove, British Columbia, 7 May;
- 1000 Lewis’s Woodpeckers at the San Joaquin Experimental Range, Madera County, California, 23 March;
- 1000 Painted Buntings in northeastern Kenedy County, Texas, 4 May;
- 1100 Black Swifts over Swan Lake, Vernon, British Columbia, 22 May;
- 1300 Band-tailed Pigeons at Lake Whatcom, Washington, 6 May;
- 1322 Long-billed Curlews in Finney County, Kansas, 4 April;
- 1460 Northern Flickers at Headingly, Manitoba, 16 April;
- 7500 Mountain Bluebirds near Gardiner, Montana, 7 April;
- 10,005 Lesser Yellowlegs at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri, 13 May;
- 75,000 Wilson’s Phalaropes at Reed Lake, Saskatchewan, 14 May; and
- 400,000 Western Sandpipers at Bandon, Coos County, Oregon, 2 May.

## Hidden in plain sight

One measure of the increasing sophistication in North American birding in recent decades is, I believe, the marked increase in reports of apparent hybrids. Some of these birds are relatively straightforward and expected: examples from this season’s reports include a Flame-colored Tanager × Western Tanager hybrid in Miller Canyon, Arizona; Indigo Bunting × Lazuli Bunting and Hermit Warbler × Townsend’s Warbler hybrids in California; a Golden-crowned Sparrow × White-crowned Sparrow hybrid in Washington; hybrid wigeon (and intergrade Green-winged Teal) at many sites but mostly in the Pacific Northwest; and *Aythya* hybrids, mostly scaup × Ring-necked or Tufted Ducks, in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California. *Anas* hybrids, less often reported, included a so-called Brewer’s Duck (Gadwall × Mallard) in Nebraska and a Mallard × Northern Pintail hybrid in the Yukon. Single male Cinnamon Teal × Blue-winged Teal hybrids, reported annually in the West, were more surprising at Jug Bay, Maryland 11 March and the same day at Viera Wetlands, Florida; another was at Juneau, Alaska 18 May. Much less expected was an apparent Green-winged Teal × Blue-winged Teal hybrid in Henderson County, Kentucky. As Glossy and White-faced Ibises expand rapidly, apparent hybrids between the two are turning up all

over: one at Harvard Marsh, Nebraska; one at Red Slough, Oklahoma; two in Jefferson County, Idaho; one in Belen, New Mexico; and up to five between Fremont County and Jefferson County, Colorado.

Gulls and geese produce more of the hybrid (and intergrade) reports in this journal than any other groups, and the Pacific Northwest appears to be the epicenter for both Oregon and Washington had Snow Goose × Canada/Cackling Goose and Blue Goose × Canada Goose hybrids, while Northern California had something resembling a Brant × *minima* Cackling Goose hybrid. Blue-morph Ross’s Geese, some of which arguably may have had hybrid derivation, were reported from Minnesota, its first, and from Oregon, where nearly as rare. In Kentucky, an apparent Ross’s Goose × Snow Goose was photographed in Warren County. In addition to the usual large gull hybrids, there were several less-expected combinations: an apparent Franklin’s Gull × Ring-billed Gull hybrid was found in late March at Pierre, South Dakota (surely more likely here than Pallas’s Gull), the Laughing Gull × Ring-billed Gull hybrid came back to a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant on Chicago’s south side for another season; a possible Herring Gull × Glaucous-winged Gull hybrid was at a well-checked landfill in southern Manitoba; and an apparent Great Black-backed Gull × Herring Gull hybrid was seen twice in April at Presque Isle State Park, Pennsylvania.

Some suspected hybrids are sufficiently subtle that they evoke shrugs among our esteemed editors at the journal; we present them as cautionary tales, if not ironclad evidence of hybridization. Among these this season were a possible Snowy Egret × Little Egret hybrid from Nantucket, Massachusetts; apparent Black-chinned Hummingbird × Ruby-throated Hummingbird hybrids in Oklahoma; a possible Boreal Chickadee × Mountain Chickadee hybrid banded in the Yukon; and a possible Northern Mockingbird × Bahama Mockingbird hybrid at Boca Chica Key, Florida. We genuinely appreciate receiving photographs of such birds, however much they may perplex us. Perhaps biochemical studies will give us a window on such birds in the near future.

Another measure of birding’s refinement in North America is the increasing detection of cryptic (that is, hard-to-identify, subtle) species, secretive species, or just plain rare birds buried in large flocks of common ones. In this last category, one would have to place most of the geese mentioned above, as well as the Common Crane found among the large Sandhill Crane flocks in Buffalo County, Ne-

braska 17 March; and the Pacific Golden-Plover found near Edna, Texas 13 April. Since the split of Blue-headed Vireo, birders have watched carefully for vagrants from this complex; this season, a Plumbeous Vireo in Oklahoma and a Cassin's Vireo in Illinois were prizes in late April and early May, respectively. Vagrant swifts are the stuff of apocrypha: even those that are photographed (no mean feat, but getting a lot easier with the newer camera technology) are often left unidentified to species or even to genus. Thus the observers who documented Vaux's Swifts in New Mexico in late April and a Black Swift in Ontario in late May are to be commended for their careful attention to detail and for their courage.

Finally, some "hidden" birds are found because observers are looking specifically and patiently for them: a Sprague's Pipit in Iowa; a Long-eared Owl in Virginia; a Long-billed Murrelet in the Aleutians at Adak. Though we might easily gloss over such records while reading the reports, each one represents a breakthrough by birders who were well prepared with an understanding of the distribution, migration, habitat, behavior, vocalizations, and/or plumages of these shy or subtle birds. Drawing on this understanding, they discovered birds that in turn advanced our shared knowledge about these species. This is what *North American Birds* is all about. But hey, if a noisy, gaudy Southern Lapwing falls into your lap—well, we're all about that, too.

### On the loose

Keeping up with Whooping Cranes has suddenly become a challenge for writers of this column. Most of the reports presumably refer to birds associated with the introduction efforts at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, Wisconsin, but the birds are apparently prone to wander widely. In Ontario, one was at Chesley 6 April, one at Sault Ste. Marie 13 April, two at Sandford 14 April, and two others in the Peterborough area that day; the latter two flew southward into New York state the next day. Other cranes visited Iowa: five subadults loitered in Winnebago County 6-26 May, and a flock of seven went as far west as Palo Alto County 19 May. In Indiana, three stopped in Greene County 7-10 March. Farther west, in Manitoba, a yearling Whooping Crane not associated with any reintroduction effort spent April through June near Niverville, becoming, according to Rudolf Koes and Peter Taylor, "probably the most-watched bird ever in the province." The popularity of Whooping Cranes—even those wearing satellite transmitters—is incon-

testable. Like the reintroduced California Condors, their larger-than-life presence recalls, if faintly, the avifauna of prehistoric America. This stands in contrast to the lukewarm reception of Trumpeter Swans in the East, which, rightly or wrongly, have been associated with usurpation of habitats needed by other wetland species—and in contrast, for different reasons, to reports of that other giant, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, which evades cameras with, as of press time, unsurpassed skill (see the latest reports online at <[www.ace-eco.org/articles/78.html](http://www.ace-eco.org/articles/78.html)>). As birders, most of us struggle to bring our appreciation of birds into alignment with our understanding of science generally and bird conservation specifically—however problematic certain reintroduction projects may seem, or indeed however problematic basic documentation of a species, historical or current, may seem. Were Trumpeter Swans widespread in the East in early colonial times? Should that encourage us to support "restoration" efforts here? Are Ivory-billed Woodpeckers still among us? Should we help in the search for that species? And what does it feel like to watch Great Tits in Wisconsin, where birders reported them in four counties this spring? Was the reaction to finding them nesting in that state an outcry for the immediate eradication of this exotic? And, in the thick of all these questions, what role does the "countability" of a given bird—whether an exotic, or a hybrid, or a reintroduced bird, or a phantom listed as "Code 6"/Extinct—play in our attitude toward a bird? And what role should such a structure play?

Even the fortune teller of 1976 could not have prepared us for the hodge-podge of odd issues and far-fetched birds that assail the birder of 2006. We find slippery slopes everywhere we turn—exotics, reintroductions, tantalizing sight reports, aberrant birds identified as other species, "possible" hybrids, vagrants thousands of kilometers out of range, and birds whose provenance is shrouded in mystery. Our heads may spin on some days, now all the more rapidly because of instant communication over Internet and wireless devices, with rumors, leaks, distortions, and misidentifications flowing more rapidly, right along with extremely valuable, timely information. Filtering the flow becomes more and more challenging. I receive weekly emails that purport to depict some arcane rarity or hybrid or (my favorite) "quiz bird"—and in some of these, alas, I am not able to locate an actual bird.

I have begun to think that modern birding would do well to pull back from the maelstrom of information at our finger tips and

take a Zen approach to the torrent: observe it, and your reactions to it, without pressing yourself to make decisions about it. Perhaps, in so many cases, we could learn more about the judgments we make in birding, and about the birds, if we suspend the judgments for a moment, listen to our thoughts, and attempt to understand what motivates our thinking at a more fundamental level. Modern birding need not overwhelm us; our connections with birds should bring us into the moment, should bring us into closer contact with their reality, not away from it. When our technology accelerates communication too much, perhaps we can leave the gadgets at home and just go birding again.

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