

The Changing Seasons

Winter 1979-80. A mostly mild season produces unprecedented numbers of lingerers.

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AS AN EDITOR OF this analysis for numerous migration season reports I have often faced the dilemma of trying to make connections between events that were not obviously related or detect patterns hidden in a seeming jungle of nearly random events. Perhaps those kinds of problems are characteristic of the seasons of great flux in most bird populations. If for no other reason, the winter season past was remarkable in that similar conditions and parallel trends characterized virtually the entire continent. With the major exception of the southeastern states, an unusually mild fall was followed by a mild and dry winter with less-than-average snowfall in most areas. The bird themes, repeated over and over in the following reports, were of generally dispersed populations, little action at feeders, an almost complete absence of winter irruptives, and unprecedented numbers and variety of lingering individuals, including many western vagrants in the East.

LATE LINGERERS

THE NUMBER OF SPECIES of neotropical migrants that attempted to overwinter in far northern climes was absolutely astounding. Many Christmas Bird Counts (hereafter, CBCs) will read like a trip list during late fall migration. It would be impossible to summarize entirely this phenomenon in the space available—what follows is a personal selection of highlights with apologies if your favorite record is not mentioned.

The Northeastern Maritime Region experienced a remarkably mild December following an equally mild fall. There was a complete absence of snow until late February, as any cross-country skier can attest. The species recorded as at-

tempting to overwinter included Blue Grosbeak, Chipping Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow in Maine, and Pine Warbler (at least through February) and Indigo Bunting in Nova Scotia. Swainson's Thrushes were noted on three New England CBCs and Barn Swallow, Short-billed Marsh Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, and Blackpoll Warblers, and American Redstart were all seen in December. Interestingly, the lingerers came from a broad spectrum of taxonomic and ecological affinities. Thus sprinkled among the warblers were reports of White Ibis, Turkey Vulture (part of an almost continent-wide pattern), Osprey (the regional editor wisely notes that none was properly documented, but they fall within the pattern established in several other regions), White-rumped Sandpiper, Marbled Godwit, and Forster's and Common Terns.

Other areas in the north added to this list. Québec dittoed Turkey Vulture (stealing food from dogs!), Osprey and Swainson's Thrush plus Tennessee and an incredible Worm-eating Warbler. Niagara-Champlain also had Turkey Vulture and Osprey along with four heron, five crane-rail, and eight warbler species, including Nashville and Northern Waterthrush. In Ontario, fully 45 per cent of the 74 noteworthy species reported during the period fell into the very late category. On New Year's Day at London one could have seen Barn and Rough-winged Swallows and four species of warblers including Yellow. A swift on January 4 was unprecedented (needless to say!), as was a Green Heron in December and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks wintering at Pickering (apparently successfully) and Kirkland Lake. The

Hudson-Delaware Region noted that open water resulted in waterfowl counts being up by 25 per cent or more, a theme echoed from the Appalachian, Prairie Provinces, Western Great Lakes, and Middle Pacific Coast regions, among others. The absence of those same waterfowl was also noted in their more usual wintering areas (e.g., Southern Atlantic Coast, Southern Great Plains). Also in Hudson-Delaware were 20 species of shorebirds (including Whimbrel, Willet, Pectoral Sandpiper, and another Marbled Godwit) and 15 of warblers (including a Nashville of the western *ridgwayi* race, Black-throated Blue, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, and American Redstart), along with Louisiana Heron, the ubiquitous Turkey Vulture, Forster's Tern (50 in New Jersey), Black Skimmer, Great Crested Flycatcher, and an *Empidonax* flycatcher in Queens County, N.Y., that some people would have liked to have had in their hands.

THE TREND WAS similar in the Appalachian Region where many species tallied record counts on CBCs and both yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, House Wren, Veery, Nashville and Cape May Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting were reported. Across the northern tier of states and provinces the story was much the same. The Western Great Lakes listed nine Virginia Rails, Gray Catbird, White-eyed Vireo, Nashville, Magnolia and Cape May Warblers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. The Middlewestern Prairie Region noted Osprey in three states, Ruddy Turnstone, Baird's Sandpiper, Eastern Kingbird, an *Empidonax* flycatcher, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Cape May

and Black-throated Blue Warblers. Farther west the numbers became less impressive, but the phenomenon was still obvious, with Least Sandpiper, Lewis' Woodpecker, House Wren, Swainson's Thrush and MacGillivray's Warbler in Colorado, Orange-crowned Warbler at Calgary, numbers of Virginia Rails and Soras in the Northern Rocky Mountain-Intermountain Region, and first winter records in Oregon of Long-billed Curlew, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Turkey Vulture and Northern Oriole.

I think it significant that the lingering phenomenon seems to have been less pronounced southward. Although the Mid-Atlantic, Southern Atlantic Coast and Florida Regions had some vicious winter weather (LeGrand notes that northeastern North Carolina had perhaps the relatively most severe winter in the country; Tallahassee had its lowest maximum temperature since 1917 during the storm of March 1-3, which sent a chill all the way to the Rio Grande), it did not come until late in the season and should not have greatly affected the detection of lingerers. To be sure, there were some extraordinary records (Whippoorwill singing in Virginia in January, Ruby-throated Hummingbird in Virginia, *Chaetura* swift in Georgia, Tennessee Warbler in Virginia and Georgia, Yellow Warbler in South Carolina, Chestnut-sided and Northern Waterthrush in Virginia, etc.), but in both numbers and variety, neotropical migrants seemed relatively fewer than one might expect in these more southerly areas in this kind of year.

THESE EXTRAORDINARY winter records raise a number of interesting questions, some potentially answerable, but not with the available information. First, do unusually mild conditions such as prevailed last fall directly induce birds to abort migration at an early stage or does such weather simply allow the usual laggards to survive long enough to be detected on CBCs and the like? There is an important difference between these two possibilities. Recent work by Gwinner, Berthold and others has led to the conclusion that much of the timing of the onset, duration, etc. of migration is controlled by endogenous rhythms. If so, the behavior should be moderated to only a slight degree by extrinsic factors. Information on the ages of the lingering individuals would bear on this question. If they were largely birds of the year one could not be sure that they did not repre-

sent natural genetic variants in the population that would be selected against in a normal winter and perish early in the season. On the other hand, if a significant proportion of adults was involved, one would be forced to conclude that their migratory programs had been dramatically modified, since it is very unlikely that they had previously overwintered in far northern areas. We know from banding returns that many migrants overwinter at the same localities year after year. If most of the birds involved in these winter records were in fact immatures, then those that survived should return to the same localities next winter. If, on the other hand, many were adults, winter site fidelity in migrants must be less rigid than we have been led to believe. A bit of judicious collecting would have yielded some valuable information on these questions.

WESTERN VAGRANTS IN THE EAST

THERE WAS AN EXCEPTIONALLY large number of western birds in the East this winter, the number undoubtedly inflated by the mild conditions that allowed many to survive until CBC time

and later. The invasion was widespread and included a wide variety of species and ecological types. Its roots certainly lie in the autumn migration season and presumably will be discussed at length in that report.

Three Western Grebes in New England were all of the dark phase, I am told. However, none of the reports mentions the color phase of individuals of this species. Recent work (see Ratti, 1979, *Auk*, 96:573-586; also *Continental Birdlife*, 1979, 1:85-89) suggests that we may some day be referring to two species of "Western Grebes" and observers should begin to record the color phases of all birds seen. Also in New England, in addition to the Lucy's Warbler of the late fall, were a Black-chinned Hummingbird and the largest number of Western Tanagers (14) in recent years. Western Kingbirds were widely distributed and Ash-throated Flycatchers were unusual in Virginia, Louisiana, and the upper Texas coast. A Painted Redstart subsisting on suet, peanut butter and bird seed in western New York provided that state's first record (third in the Northeast) and was doing fine until a cat apparently discovered its roost site. Black-throated Gray Warbler and



Painted Redstart at suet feeder, Dansville, N.Y., Dec. 19, 1979 through Jan. 24, 1980. Photo/D.P. Kibbe.

Mountain Bluebird visited Ontario and Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) and Townsend's Warblers were in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, respectively. Two Black-throated Sparrows in Illinois were unusual, as were Anna's Hummingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, Say's Phoebe and three Western Wood Pewees in Louisiana, one of the country's current hot spots for rare birds. Given the events in Maine few years ago, one hopes that the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher far out of range in Mississippi was examined carefully. Varied Thrushes made one of their irregular forays eastward with five reports in the Midwest (east to Ohio) and several in Texas. Green-tailed Towhees and Lark Buntings also invaded Texas in impressive numbers, and three Black Phoebes, a Phainopepla and two Rufous-crowned Sparrows were found well east of their usual range in that state.

IRRUPTIVES

WITH THE EXCEPTION of the Varied Thrushes just mentioned, most of the continent was without noticeable numbers of the usual irruptive species. Snowy and other "winter owls" were scarce nearly everywhere, except in Michigan and the Duluth-Superior area where Snowies were in good numbers and Hawk Owls were more numerous than usual. Rough-legged Hawks were below normal nearly everywhere except a few northern areas (southern Alberta, southwestern Saskatchewan, northern Wisconsin, and northern Minnesota). Goshawks, which seem to have declined markedly in most areas compared to a few years ago, were reported in good numbers only in the boreal forests. Great Gray Owl, the highlight of last winter, made only a pitiful showing (one each in Maine, Massachusetts, Québec, New York, Ontario) except in southeastern Manitoba, where its numbers were high for the third consecutive year.

"Winter finches" were largely absent south of the breeding areas (notable exceptions were northern New Hampshire and northeastern Vermont and the Southwest, where Pine Grosbeaks and Cassin's Finches were on the move). In many areas they were replaced by American Goldfinches and Purple Finches that did not move southward to the normal extent. In the Appalachian Region even Tree Sparrows were scarce, presumably because they remained north of

the area.

Bohemian Waxwings were numerous in the boreal forests of the Pacific Province, but remained there. Farther south large flocks appeared throughout western Wyoming, western Colorado, Utah and other areas of the mountainous West. Red-breasted Nuthatches were virtually absent everywhere except in California where they remained in large numbers following the large fall flight.

In a slightly different category, Ancient, and to a lesser degree, Marbled Murrelets staged a major invasion on the West Coast. As usual when this occurs, Ancient Murrelets appeared at some far inland localities (two in Montana in early December). On the coast, the flight which began in fall continued well into winter. In northern California, numbers declined somewhat in January-February, but birds were present throughout the period. The movement reached southern California in December with Marbled Murrelets reaching Imperial Beach, 150 miles south of the previous southernmost record.

POPULATION TRENDS

APERUSAL OF THE REGIONAL reports leaves the impression that both Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons are doing acceptably well. However, it would be hard to make a rigorous case, because too many regions do not report full details. In the case of Bald Eagles, the ratio of the age classes is critical to an evaluation of the health of its populations. All observers should report this information, as it surely exists for many areas as a result of the eagle surveys. It should appear in these pages with every report as long as the species is considered in trouble.

On less global scales, several other species were mentioned repeatedly across the regional reports, especially species on the increase. Are fewer species noticeably declining or do we just not take note of them? In the East, southern species have been expanding northward for a number of years. This year Red-bellied Woodpecker was the banner species, with the largest incursion on record in New England, at least two in Québec, one in Vermont, 15 in Ontario, and continuing to do well in the northern part of the Appalachian Region. It seems to be repeating the general pattern shown by the Tufted Titmouse (which made news in Québec and was

found on 70 per cent of Vermont CBCs) and much earlier by the Cardinal (which has just now completed the sweep of Vermont).

Perhaps the most widely mentioned species was Lesser Black-backed Gull, which has continued to increase steadily in the entire Northeast. It has spread well into the southeastern states with six reports in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region and a new high of 13 in Florida. At least in the Great Lakes area it is increasing inland (1-2 in Ohio, Indiana's third record) and in Texas it has wintered south to the Mexican border. Especially in areas where observers are familiar with the species, immatures are being seen—the only question would seem to be exactly where they are breeding.

House Finch continued to push westward and southward in the East. In some parts of the Appalachian Region it was reported to be the most common winter bird. In the Southern Atlantic Coast Region it continues to increase; the current range reaches Morehead City, N.C., and Augusta and Columbus, Ga. In Tennessee and northern Alabama it outnumbered the Purple Finch. Interestingly, the species is spreading *eastward* in Nebraska from its natural range in the West. The two fronts will surely meet in the not-too-distant future.

HABITAT MATTERS

AT LEAST THREE regional editors mentioned the potential threat of widespread firewood cutting to forest species, especially cavity nesters. One has only to read accounts of the natural history of New England in the nineteenth century to realize just how dramatically the landscape can be altered by logging activity. Although it is very unlikely that our forests will suffer the kind of impact wrought on the New World tropics, species requiring large standing dead trees could begin to feel the pinch. In the arid West where large trees are confined to riparian areas, the threat is much greater. South of our border in Mexico, natural habitats are being destroyed on a massive scale and at an unprecedented rate. Veteran borderland observer John Arvin believes that recent incursions of Mexican birds may have been directly induced by the destruction of appropriate habitat south of the border, forcing even adults to disperse in search of new places to live.

If he is right, we should be in for some exciting discoveries in the border states.

In southern Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Virginia, Brant were noted grazing in farm fields of rye and winter wheat, an expansion in the kinds of areas used for feeding by this species.

RARAE AVES

ALMOST EVERY REGION had at least one startling rarity not already mentioned (e.g., in discussing western vagrants in the East). I shall review some of the most outstanding, region by region. Arctic Loon in Massachusetts and Burrowing Owl (Florida race) in Connecticut took top honors in the Northeast. A Black Vulture at Scottsville, N.Y., was unprecedented in winter. An adult Mew Gull was in Ontario and a gray Gyrfalcon in New Jersey. Offshore from Virginia a Yellow-nosed Albatross and Sooty Shearwater were interesting. Barrow's Goldeneyes in Maryland and perhaps Virginia were well south of that species' usual winter range. The Black-tailed Godwit in North Carolina raises doubts about the Hudsonian reported in Florida. Four Chestnut-backed Chickadees were the first for Alberta, which also had its third Yellow-billed Loon. Wisconsin had its first Sage Thrasher and Michigan enjoyed a wintering Bewick's Wren. Something peculiar happened to Heermann's Gulls. In

California, one far inland at L. Henshaw was thought quite unusual, but how does one explain the one in Tulsa (first Oklahoma record) or the one in Lorain, Ohio, that provided the first record east of the Mississippi River?

In Texas, Anna's Hummingbird inundated the coastal region with 20 reports from the upper coast, 15 from the central coast and ten around San Antonio. Its status in the state has changed entirely in the past few years. The White-collared Seedeater has been virtually absent from its former haunts in the lower Rio Grande Valley for over a decade. Many think it was extirpated by massive agricultural applications of pesticides. For a number of years persistent reports have emanated from the dusty Mexican town of San Ygnacio, far upriver above Falcon Dam. It now appears that the species can be found there consistently and up to 25 were reported dispersing from a roost in mid-January, certainly the largest number of seedeaters seen at one time in this country for very many years.

The Central Southern Region report had a striking array of boldfaced birds. A Red-footed Booby at Gulf Shores, Ala., constituted the second record for the Gulf of Mexico. But in Cameron Parish, La., a new bird was added to the U.S. list when a female **Blue Bunting** (*Cyanocompsa parcellina*) was collected. Watch for more news about this com-

mon Mexican species from South Texas in the spring report. The Brambling in North Dakota was much farther from where one might be expected than the one in Cordova, Alaska, but both were most unusual. An Elegant Trogon no doubt added some color to the winter in Big Bend and the obliging Golden-crowned Warbler drew crowds in Brownsville. Colorado and Nevada each got state records—Great Black-backed Gull and Pyrrhuloxia, respectively. Not to be outdone, Arizona got two, Great Kiskadee and Field Sparrow. McKay's Buntings were exciting both at Homer, Alaska, and in Oregon where one provided the first state record. Washington



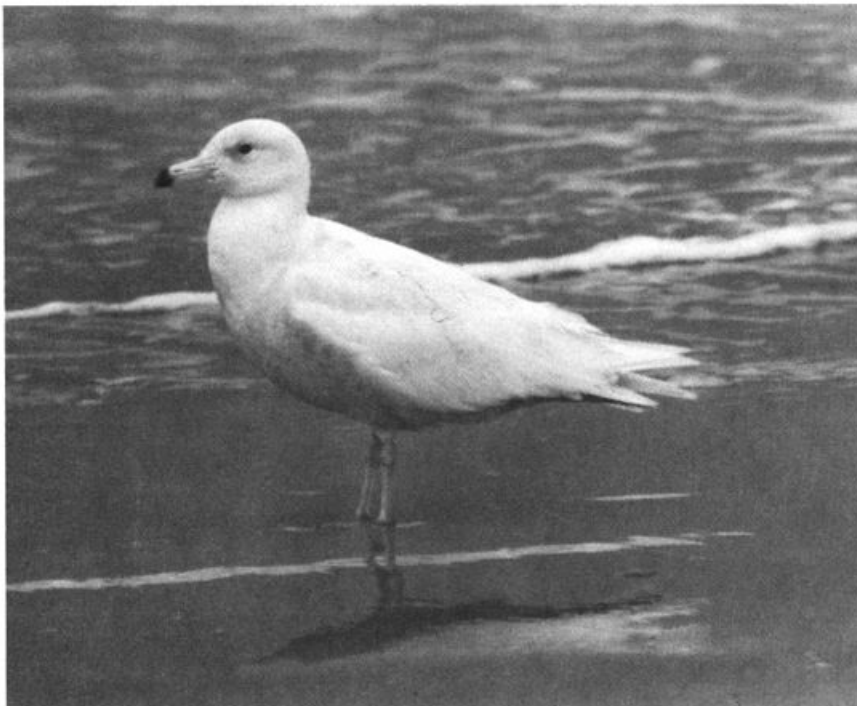
McKay's Bunting, at the South Jetty of the Columbia River, Oreg., February, 1980. First state record. Photo/ Jeff Gilligan.

had its first Red-shouldered Hawk, Black Phoebe and Scott's Oriole. A *Pterodroma* petrel seen briefly from the Farallon Islands, Calif., was apparently not a Cook's. Southern California had the first Sharp-tailed Sandpiper to overwinter in North America; Olivaceous Flycatcher and Grace's Warbler were also noteworthy there. The Hawaii report notes the presence of an apparent second Short-tailed Albatross, the first swan ever to occur in the islands, and three very rare Parakeet Auklets.

FINAL WORDS

YOU SHOULD NOT FILE away this journal without reading two entries. Hugh Kingery tells the bizarre story of a Belted Kingfisher-cum-Accipiter, and the Alaska report contains the account of an *Alice in Wonderland* Bald Eagle.

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First-winter Glaucous Gull, Boca Chica, Texas, Jan. 17, 1980. Photo/ Greg Lasley.