

# The Changing Seasons

*Spring 1983 . . . the worst weather in 40 years produced some of the best birding in memory, with a few key misses*

*Paul B. Hamel*

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN better than to volunteer to write a Changing Seasons report for one of the volatile seasons. Winter or Summer would have posed tough problems of their own; interpreting range expansions, contractions, and rare extralimital occurrences is not always easy. But Spring—when everyone with binoculars is out looking at brightly plumaged males unobstructed by vegetation, notching a new abundance here, a lifer there, a new county record, a first specimen for the state, or searching for a species new to North America—is not susceptible to rationalization. Yet I did volunteer for the job.

Initial inkling that my judgment was bad in this matter came when the weather upstaged news of the first American woman in space. "Worst weather in 40 years," *Newsweek* (101(24), June 13, 1983) proclaimed. It is axiomatic that the aeroplankton I write about are at the mercy of the weather; so are the people who search for them. Reports of consistent weekend rain in the Northeast were also noteworthy. When the weather is strange, the birds must move under conditions less predictable than normal. In Spring, overshoots and early dates occur when the winds are warm and southerly; March was like that and birding was often wonderful. When cold fronts descend from the north bringing rain and snow, migratory movements are retarded, pile-ups of migrants occur. The birding is good, but the birds may be in trouble; April and May were like that, stranding lots of early arrivers and dooming many.

The weather pattern for the first six months of 1983 was: Winter part I, Spring part I, Winter part II, Spring part II. Early arrivers were earlier than normal, setting records all over North America. The late arriving thrushes and other species often were delayed by storms, piling up in concentrations that were prodigious by local (and continental) standards, particularly at the middle and higher latitudes. The resulting plethora of overshoots, fallouts, and strandings cre-

ated a perplexing mess for the reader desiring an orderly migration. Blair Nikola's account of the season in the Northeastern Maritime Region presents an insightful discussion of the relationship of weather and migration in that area, while Craig Faanes maps the effect of a single storm in the Northern Great Plains, and Dan Gibson portrays the spring pattern for the entire Alaskan fauna.

Few of the Regional Editors had anything good to say about the weather in their territory, but often they noted that hardy souls out in the field were treated to excellent birding. "Wettest on record" was a common phrase, except for Hawaii and West Indies where serious drought conditions prevailed. George Hall commented that in the Appalachian Region "It was a crazy season." Enough said.

WE TREAT THE MIGRATION on two levels. We synthesize from observations, document climatic effects, and assess the status of rare species; that is our scientific duty. On another level, however, the wonder and excitement of the season leads to intense fieldwork of a different motivation. Call it monitoring, brushing up on identification, or some other euphemism; it is really the oneupmanship of rabid birding. I call it the game of Bird Baseball (thanks to Charlie Wooten), and an important part of my task here is to outline the boxscore from the stats provided by the Regional Editors. Instead of waiting until later, here it is, for those who prefer the sports page first and the business news later.

## MAJOR LEAGUE RECORDS

THREE, PERHAPS FOUR, species new to the North American list presented themselves to observers this spring, so my A.O.U. Check-list is now hopelessly out of date before I've really used it. Not surprisingly, all these new species were found along the coasts. You pick the rookie of the season:

1. **Western Reef Heron** (*Egretta*

*fularis*), an African bird, visited Nantucket, Massachusetts.

2. **Common Buzzard** (*Buteo buteo*) will be a first if the Alaska records committee agrees to its eligibility.

3. **Hobby** (*Falco subbuteo*), on Attu Island, was an Alaskan and North American first, as was

4. **Black-winged Stilt** (*Himantopus himantopus*) on Nizki Island (excluding those in Hawaii).

Not far behind these outstanding finds were the second Arizona and North American **Fan-tailed Warbler** in the Huachuca Mountains; the second North American specimen of **White-collared Swift** found on the beach at Padre Island, Texas; and the third North American record of the **Little Egret**, an obliging individual that was photographed in Newfoundland near the site where the first of its kind was found 19 years ago.

## FIRST STATE AND PROVINCIAL RECORDS

ADDING FUEL TO the notion that sooner or later every species will be found in every locality were not fewer than 34 first state or provincial records, an additional two dozen seconds, and countless 3rd, 4th, or 5th occurrences. The difficulty of telling, from my vantage, whether or not a White-winged Dove is the first for Maine makes these estimates conservative ones. In any case, my bias that a migration season, particularly Spring, is a volatile time for the moving fauna, seems amply reinforced.

Spring 1983 was a rewarding time to be afield (probably in one's raincoat). These occurrences are the stuff for birding talk, amazement, and justification for keeping close tabs on the Rare Bird Alert. But what do they mean biologically? Where, in all the 400-odd manuscript pages of Regional Reports, does the sport of birding blend into the science of ornithology?

BACK TO THE HEADLINES

**I**N THE COMMENTARY that follows I have attempted to document the effects of a stochastic and poorly predictable weather pattern on the irrepressible surge of north temperate migrants in Spring 1983. The only ammunition available are the Regional Reports, the volunteer efforts of dedicated individuals who interpret data they receive and fashion narratives from them. Custom has it that the Changing Seasons writer, at this point in their narrative, admonish the Regional Editors to standardize accounts, to screen the observations more carefully, to send the reports in on time, to make specific notes about significant records, and to pay attention to the coverage of the entire fauna I choose not to do that because their job is thankless enough. Instead, thank you all for helping me out.

Migratory movements involve individual decisions made by individual birds, facilitated by their flock mates perhaps, but nonetheless individual. Arduous study has revealed numerous aspects of the location or map sense and the directional or compass sense involved with movements. Photoperiod and other rhythmicities apparently govern the hormonal events that determine the season of migration. The proximate triggers in the decision to fly or not to fly on a given night are not so clear, however. And yet it is the results of these decisions that put the birds where they are when we go birding for them. Early records are cases in point. Do they represent individuals who survived because of moderate conditions on the winter grounds and, by moving north at the normal speed arrived early because their route was short? Or were these birds wafted by extremely favorable winds to progress at abnormal rates? The large volume of overshoots this year argues for the second while not precluding the first explanation. Another possibility is that expanding populations produce a wider variance in migratory responsiveness, and this is expressed as early arrivals. Finally, birders are better at their craft; this doubtless produces many firsts.

The overpowering question is why, on a given night, does an individual migrant decide to fly? Adaptation to the proper combination or sequence of conditions must be strong because the penalty for errors is so severe. The risk of an over-water flight is obvious, symbolized by skeletal remains of an Ovenbird on a Gulf Coast beach or an *Empidonax* sp. feather puddle in the Dry Tortugas. An addition-

al severe risk, however, presents itself when very nasty weather arrives very late, as happened in so much of the continent in May 1983. I marvel at how the variation of the migratory response is tailored, on a continental scale, to the prevailing variation in weather, perhaps most strikingly the 3-5 day pattern of frontal passage (in spite of the weekend effect); see Tom Imhof's Central Southern account. This spring was an interesting opportunity to examine a rare event, for the "worst weather in 40 years" was a weather disaster of continental proportions with which the moving fauna had not had to deal in perhaps 10 or 15 generations of Indigo Buntings, Blackpoll Warblers, or Swainson's Thrushes. My mouth is dry from speculation; the haphazard (in a statistical sense only) data in the reports can tantalize, but not quench, the thirst. Large scale queries need masses of data that are broad in geographic scope, long in temporal duration, and detailed in coverage. What I want is some sort of not yet achieved Dow-Jones index to the season. But let's look carefully at some of the data we do have.

**I**T IS IMPOSSIBLE to consider an account such as this one a true summary of the spring migration because of variations in intensity of coverage and of reporting across the continent. The remarkable thing is that, in spite of this and of my considerable misgivings that any meaningful synthesis could come from the reports, I found several phenomena in Spring that were remarkable and probably real: (1) an extensive epidemic and die-off of Common Loons along the Gulf Coast retarded the migration of the birds that survived; (2) the warm early—cold late conditions this Spring led to some exciting overshoots, particularly east of 100°W and north of 40°N; (3) much of the trans-Gulf migration was displaced a degree or two toward the east, particularly after early April; and (4) House Finches will soon be everywhere. When computer summaries such as that conducted by Adams (1982. *Am. Birds* 36:820-826) are justified by the incoming data, the day may arrive when far more numerous and subtle phenomena will be identifiable with precision.

#### LOONS THROUGH FRIGATEBIRDS

**E**NOUGH REPORTS of **Common Loons** were made to set off a major alarm (see S. A. in Central Southern Region account). Thousands died last winter

along the Gulf Coast, from (apparently) a gastroenteritis caused by a fluke, ultimate blame may be drought conditions that changed the salt—freshwater balance in estuarine waters. Imhof and Kale set a tone of concern. Kale predicted some staying for the summer, and so I have two on the reservoir overlooking my home Eastern regions reported late and heavy migrations at middle latitudes, perhaps reflecting birds in poor condition, while regions at higher latitudes reported lower than previous numbers. Although weather may be the cause of these observations, I cannot dismiss the specter of a population stressed by disease. Western regions reported average or better numbers.

Are Horned Grebe numbers declining?

The fun of pelagic birding, noted along both coasts, was highlighted by discovery of unparalleled concentrations of Wilson's Storm-Petrels: 50-75,000 in Hudson Canyon on May 28, 5700 on May 14 off Ocean City, Maryland, and reported as common off Florida until late May. Norton reported pelagic work in the Caribbean is in its infancy; and LeGrand noted a persistent effort by Haney off Georgia who singlehandedly added four species to the Georgia list. In Hawaii, Manx (Newell's) Shearwaters survived the effects of hurricane *Iwa*.

White Pelicans are doing well almost everywhere, and happily, Brown Pelican populations are recovering; three cheers for the processes of the Endangered Species Act! Double-crested Cormorant populations seem to be expanding all over eastern North America. Finally, Pyle really rubbed it in with his tale of three species of tropicbirds seen from dry land at the same time off Kilauea Point.

#### HERONS THROUGH WATERFOWL

These two groups showed, in a nutshell, the differential effects of the mild winter and bizarre, wet spring. Like Spring's weather, the heron story is a mixed bag. Canadian reporters were delighted by a good showing of "southern" herons too far north, particularly Cattle Egrets. Doug Kibbe, on the other hand, wondered whether Cattle Egrets were reaching a breeding range limit in the Niagara-Champlain Region. Perhaps, yet these persistent birds are still expanding in the San Francisco Bay area and Middlewestern Prairies. Please keep looking for them. Reporters in the West were enthusiastic about Great Blue Heron numbers. Their eastern counterparts

said little save for Hall and Boyle *et al.*, who noted that the birds were more numerous in their areas than normal. Armistead wrote that herons were "under-reported" along the Middle Atlantic Coast. Norton sent the good news that Reddish Egrets are common in the West Indies. Wood Storks, now listed as Endangered in the East, were noted by LeGrand from Georgia while Kale said nothing about them in Florida. The flamingoes in Reno, Nevada, and Scarlet Ibis in Wellington, Florida, must have startled and pleased those who saw them (purists excluded).

Waterfowl, in contrast to the waders, provided a more coherent story. Mild winter weather should mean less stress on the birds at that season, enabling lots of healthy birds to move onto the breeding grounds relatively early. That's what happened. The wet spring in the prairies made available considerable areas of quality breeding range. Unless the dry summer interrupted things, this story should be followed by good production and reasonable numbers in the fall. Of interest were the good numbers of scoters in California and Rhode Island, possible increases in numbers of Cinnamon Teals, and audacious Blue-winged Teals breeding in Hawaii for the second year, as well as in Phoenix. Imhof suggested that the increasing number of reports of Ross' Geese reflects better educated birders; I agree. Finally, several reporters mentioned Barrow's Goldeneye, including a flock of 54 on the Middle Pacific Coast.

#### RAPTORS THROUGH CRANES

REPORTS OF HAWK migration were mixed, indicating that the strange weather affected the normal unfolding of events. Observers in the Midwest were unimpressed while Whitefish Point Bird Observatory in Michigan was recording large numbers of birds, particularly of Goshawks and Rough-legged Hawks. Broad-winged Hawks, for example, "bypassed" the Southern Great Plains but showed up unexpectedly in Oregon and in higher than normal numbers in Colorado, Wyoming, and the Prairie Provinces. Their movements were "poor" in the Northeastern Maritimes but "spectacular" in Niagara-Champlain. Webster provided a useful discussion of their migration through his South Texas Region.

The exciting news was the frequent overshoots made by kites; for example, a

Mississippi Kite turned up 3 weeks early in Oklahoma. Mississippi and Swallow-tailed kites made good news all over the continent, prompting Kale to the optimistic statement that populations of those elegant birds are increasing; let's hope so. Evens *et al.* sounded a tempering tone with respect to White-tailed Kite populations in the Middle Pacific Coast.

Most reports of raptor numbers were good tidings this season. No one was even lukewarm in endorsing increases in Osprey populations. They may, at last, be shedding the pall of DDT. Bald Eagles appear to be on the increase in the East. Witzeman noted that the Arizona desert population is also doing well, and Kingery reported the first Utah nest of these birds in 60 years. A pair of Goshawks nested in Warren, Pennsylvania, and the large numbers of birds returning north suggested that moving farther south than normal last fall had survival value for the big accipiters.

A moderating note to all the good news was the report of low reproductive success by Red-shouldered Hawks in Maryland; other regions reported decent numbers of these birds without particular comment.

Falcon numbers were reported as normal or slightly higher. Reports of American Kestrel concentrations in several areas merited more space than I am according to them.

#### SHOREBIRDS THROUGH PUFFINS

SHOREBIRD MIGRATION was variously reported as uneventful to spectacular. Attempting to summarize the counts is folly. In the Regional Reports are many tallies that will help those interested to piece together the situation on a species-by-species basis. Among those 19 species listed as best of the season in 20 regions were: American Golden Plover in Nevada, Wilson's Plover in Hudson-Delaware, Black-necked Stilt in Massachusetts, Black-winged Stilt in Alaska, American Avocet in Niagara-Champlain, Greater Yellowlegs in Hawaii, Spotted Redshank on the Southern Pacific Coast, Whimbrel in interior British Columbia, Bristle-thighed Curlew on the Northern Pacific Coast, Long-billed Curlew in Ohio, Black-tailed Godwit in Quebec, Hudsonian Godwit on Middle Atlantic and Middle Pacific Coasts, Bar-tailed Godwit in Florida, Surf-bird in South Texas, Red Knot in South Dakota, White-rumped Sandpiper in Northwest-

ern Canada, Curlew Sandpiper in the Western Great Lakes, Ruff in Manitoba, and Red Phalarope in Arizona.

Jaeger migration in the Atlantic was treated by East Coast editors from the West Indies to the Northeastern Maritimes. Gulls of all sorts occur all over North America with impunity, and they did again this winter and spring. But the appearance of the first (or was it the second?) Ross' Gull in Colorado defied explanation, particularly in view of Gibson's amazement at the first of its kind to be found in the Aleutians.

Caspian Tern numbers were reported in favorable terms all over the continent, and reports of inland Arctic Terns should help to clarify the movements of those birds. But the Black Skimmers in Waco were probably disoriented.

While no one mentioned puffins, Evens *et al.* did credit El Niño with providing observers the chance to see Xantus' Murrelets off the Middle Pacific Coast.

#### DOVES THROUGH WOODPECKERS

SCATTERED AND UNEVEN reporting of these species, many of which are non-migratory, left some unanswered questions. How did that White-winged Dove ever get to Maine? Norton wrote of several endemic West Indian parrots and Kale warned of impending increases of Monk Parakeets in Florida. Barn Owl numbers are always of concern because the birds are so secretive. Does the mixture of gloom and optimism in the reports indicate stable populations? Several western editors mentioned Barred Owls as nesting in their areas. In the Northeast, Nikula mentioned a nesting box project for them. The congeneric, and apparently declining, Spotted Owls were mentioned by but one editor. Their status is too uncertain to ignore mention. My impression, right or wrong, from reading the reports is that *Strix varia* may be usurping terrain from *S. occidentalis*. Please clarify. Did the numbers of Boreal, Hawk, and Great Gray owls in the lower 48 indicate a climatic shift that is enabling these birds to extend their ranges? The several reports of three-toed woodpeckers late and south supported such a speculation. But the apparent range expansion by Chuck-will's-widows indicated the reverse, so I have left the dilemma to the one who will pen the Summer season. In any case Whip-poor-will numbers may be declining.

## FLYCATCHERS THROUGH CREEPERS

**F**LYCATCHER MIGRATION this Spring brought mixed reviews. Some eastern editors were enthusiastic about the timing and volume, while more southern and western writers were less impressed. Imhof noted an Eastern Kingbird as early along the Gulf Coast on March 19, one was on Long Island by March 28, and another had reached Chatham, Massachusetts, by April 4! Most editors did not comment on the numbers of Eastern Kingbirds, but Hall indicated they are fewer than previously in Appalachia. Webster was impressed by a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher in South Texas and wrote a solid account of the movement in this region in relation to weather. Olive-sided Flycatchers were noted as more numerous than usual at higher latitudes. Vermilion Flycatchers made neat additions to the state lists in Wisconsin and Iowa. Kale wrote a somber caution to those eager for a new winter *Myiarchus* in Florida. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers overshot their northern breeding limits in many areas, including Ontario.

Enormous numbers of Swallows were noted in South Texas and elsewhere; they ran into horrible weather that killed many at higher latitudes. Tree Swallows were noted almost everywhere save the Middle Atlantic Coast, and the Middle Pacific Coast where higher than normal numbers of Violet-green Swallows filled the void. The range of Common Ravens in the East is definitely expanding to the south; McCaskie indicated that the mechanism maintaining the raven-Common Crow range boundary in southern California, at least, is poorly understood.

Hubbard described Mountain x Black-capped Chickadee hybridization in the middle Rio Grande valley in New Mexico, what brought the birds into contact in the first place? Better see each one before the A.O.U. merges them. Kibbe pointed out an interesting observation of large numbers of Blue Jays moving north while local birds fed young. See Slagsvold (1982. *Ornis Scandinavica* 13:145-148) for a possible explanation.

Kingery noted an interesting effect of the strange weather: last year Bushtits in Lyons, Colorado, were feeding young on May 22; this year they were still building nests on that date. Evens *et al.* made a like remark about Bushtits in their area.

Why is the breeding range of Brown Creepers edging south?

## BULBULS THROUGH VIREOS

**T**HE WEEKEND STORMS of spring at the middle latitudes grounded large numbers of thrushes all over the continent, giving observers a glimpse of the size of the thrush fauna. Reports of all species, save the southern Wood Thrush, indicated that prodigious concentrations were observed from the Rockies to the eastern seaboard. The magnitude of the groundings left the Regional Editors generally in awe. Faanes and Harris both noted the masses observed during the major storm of May 9-14 in the Northern Great Plains. American Robins also were very numerous in New Brunswick and Niagara-Champlain. On the other hand, South Texas observers reported few thrushes. Reporters in southern California and Arizona were pleased with the numbers of Rufous-backed Robins there.

Gosselin and Weir both reported that Blue-gray Gnatcatchers appear to be extending their range north in eastern Canada. Mockingbirds made similar gains in the Northern Pacific Coast and in the Western Great Lakes.

Cedar Waxwings appeared to be on a delayed schedule this Spring. Observers in southern latitudes remarked on large numbers at late dates almost throughout. Movement through the Middlewestern Prairies was reported as normal, however. Meanwhile, Gibson puzzled over the origins of Bohemian Waxwings reported in two different parts of Alaska.

LeGrand was excited to report seven species of vireos in the Southern Atlantic Coast this Spring, thanks to the second Black-whiskered Vireo recorded in the Region. Norton was concerned for several species in these taxa because the destruction of habitat caused by hurricane *David* in Dominica and Grenada was extensive.

## WARBLERS THROUGH SPARROWS

**J**UST AS THE THRUSH migration was widely noted, that of warblers, grosbeaks, and buntings was, in many areas at least, outstanding. In the Southern Great Plains, editor emeritus Fred Baumgartner crystallized sentiment by saying "We just experienced our first big migration of warblers in 34 years. . . ." Only Webster in South Texas complained of a poor passage; and, judging from Kale's ecstatic account of movements through Florida, trans-Gulf migration this Spring may have been displaced a little farther east than normal. Compare their accounts

of oriole numbers. Rose-breasted Grosbeak numbers reported indicated that many birders got better than usual looks at these birds. Summer Tanagers and Blue Grosbeaks were reported to be extending their ranges north. Lazuli in the Mountain West, Painted in the Northeast, and Indigo buntings in the Central South were noted in remarkable concentrations.

Great-tailed Grackles gobbled up more territory at the northern, eastern, and western edges of their growing range, and Bronzed Cowbirds increased in Louisiana. The low winter finch count, noted universally especially with respect to Pine Siskins, was to be expected after small flights last fall and the intervening mild winter. House Finches in the East are marching inexorably west: "explosive" in Michigan, doing well in Kansas, noted also in Ontario, Quebec, Maine, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Manitoba.

A most poignant note (see S. A. in Hawaii Region account) was struck by Pyle in recounting trips into the Hawaiian montane forests and Alakai Swamp on Kauai, where three observers seeking endangered forest birds met only limited success. His tale of the 'O'o'a'a (*Kauai Oo*, *Moho braccatus*) is sad. In a similar vein, Norton reported that several West Indian endemics, particularly Semper's Warbler and the Black Finch on St. Lucia, escaped detection this Spring.

## A FINAL NOTE

**E**VERY YEAR DURING the time covered by this report, the avifauna of the North American continent moves north. Were it not so predictable, the event might be treated more often with the amazement it merits. But the migration happens so regularly that it is a commonplace; we set our biological clocks by it. Indeed, for some including this writer, the event is an annual requirement for mental health. So we leave the esthetic appreciation and wonder to poets, concerning ourselves instead with the more prosaic analyses of climatic events, population trends, and novel occurrences. Before you go on to examine the commentaries of the Regional Editors, I ask you, Reader, to linger for a few seconds on the incredible spectacle of the movable fauna.

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