Changing Seasons

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At 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, May 11, 1996, some friends and I were standing in the dark in Cape May, New Jersey, listening to the sounds of all the birds leaving.

May 10th had been a great day for birding in southern New Jersey, for those of us with the guilty pleasure of not being at work on a Friday. Migrants, dammed up by days of cool, rainy, cloudy weather, had been everywhere in the woodlots.

But now the sky was clear, and the birds were on the move. From overhead in the darkness came the soft callnotes of warblers, thrushes, sparrows, and others, nocturnal migrants on their way north. The birds we were hearing at midnight had probably come from well to the south, but they represented the same species that had been all over Cape May County on Friday, birds that would be long gone come dawn. It was, we mused, almost as if some perverse spirits of the wild had known that Saturday was scheduled to be the World Series of Birding.

Although we (and they) did not know it, the birds were heading north into another weather system, weather that would create one of the biggest migrant fallouts in many years in some parts of the northeast. In fact, fallouts of migrants were among the most newsworthy avian events of spring 1996.

From the Appalachian region, veteran George Hall wrote, "Many people called it 'the best migration in ——.' The missing words depended upon when the speaker started birding. Indeed, in many ways at some places it was a revival of 'the good old days.'" Similar superlatives were used by several other regional editors in the northeastern quadrant of the continent. In all cases, however, their comments referred to specific migration events, touched off by weather. Almost all of those events were centered on either May 11 or May 18, both of which, in 1996, happened to fall on Saturdays.

This season's reports from northeastern regions showed, once again, that impressions of spring landbird migration are based largely on "the two Ws"—weather and weekends.

The set-up: a cool, wet spring

Generally speaking, spring migrant songbirds go when the going is good: On clear, warm nights, with light winds blowing in the direction the birds want to go. Cold weather, winds from the north, or especially rainy or overcast skies, all have the effect of holding back the migrants. Spring 1996 was notable for such retarding or dampening influences on migrants in many eastern areas. Parts of Pennsylvania saw subzero temperatures in March. In New England, the winter's exceptional snowfall continued to mid-April, and then cool weather prevailed for another month. Near the Great Lakes, fresh snow fell during the first week of May. Ontario saw its coldest and wettest spring in nearly 50 years. Similar conditions were noted widely in nearby regions.

Predictably, such weather appeared to slow down the northward advance of many species. Several regions reported that arrival dates for various birds averaged two weeks (or even more) later than average. (Of course, birds migrating north out of the tropics do not call ahead for weather reports—they probably leave the tropics on about the same schedule every year, and major weather delays will occur only after they have reached our area.)

Thus, by early to mid-May of this year, a higher-than- normal percentage of the migrant populations were probably stacked up in the southern or central United States.

As another consequence of the weather, trees were slow to leaf out in many areas of the northeastern states and southeastern Canada. When migrants finally did arrive, they were easier to see in the sparsely foliaged trees. Insect emergences were probably delayed or reduced, so that treetop migrants like warblers and tanagers often were found foraging on the ground. Ease of observation probably contributed to the high counts of many species.

The final ingredient for a memorable spring, of course, was the way in which the conditions happened to mesh with the calendar.

The weekend of May 11

On the upper Texas coast it is an annual pastime to complain about how terrible the migration is in each particular spring. (This has been standard practice at least since the early 1970s, when I started visiting there.) This spring the complainers were justified: The weather was great for birds and lousy for birders, with dry conditions and south winds, and the northbound migrants passed overhead with almost no groundings on the coast.

Somewhere in the central states, however, those migrants must have encountered persistent cool or wet weather, halting their progress well into May. Similar

trends held farther east; most of the Gulf Coast saw little in the way of fallouts, while areas farther inland saw concentrations build up. Winds from the west-southwest helped to shift migrants into the southern and middle Atlantic coast states, and then a stationary front in early May held them there. In places like Maryland and especially southern New Jersey, numbers of migrants stacked up through May 10.

On the night of May 10, with the sky finally clear again and with light winds from the south-southwest, massive numbers of birds moved north. The birds that we heard over Cape May were part of a much larger movement (for example, at the same time, in Baltimore, Rick Blom was hearing scores of thrushes passing overhead).

Moderate numbers of birds from this movement undoubtedly came down inland in New York and New England, but the real phenomenon was along the coast and it was caused, of course, by weather conditions.

From New England, Simon Perkins describes what happened May 11:

"'Amazing,' 'astonishing,' 'extraordinary,' 'stunning,' 'unbelievable,' 'simply incredible.' These were a few of the superlatives used by the fortunate birders who, on the weekend of May 11–12, witnessed what may have been the biggest local migrant fallout in living memory... During the two days prior to Saturday, May 11, the winds swung south, and the dam broke. But the second, more critical, piece of the equation had yet to arrive. As countless thousands of migrants arrived from the south, a classic backdoor cold front arrived from the northeast. When the two waves collided, the results were spectacular. The wind in coastal Massachusetts went abruptly from southwest to northeast, fog descended, the temperature plummeted roughly 20 degrees in a little more than an hour, and the door slammed shut. When the birds hit the wall, they dropped where they were. Most of the action was on the coast as many of the birds apparently became disoriented in the fog, found themselves out over the water, and then struggled to regain the shoreline, a phenomenon more typical during Autumn migration... A few of the constituent species, including Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Hermit Thrush, which typically occur in their maximum numbers in central New England earlier in the season, occurred in peak numbers during this event. Other species, such as Magnolia Warbler, Black-and- white Warbler, and Ovenbird, occurred in numbers not seen in the region for decades, and Lincoln's and White-crowned sparrows were found in numbers unprecedented in spring."

Various localities recorded hundreds of migrants from this fallout, from Connecticut to Maine, but almost entirely along the coast. In the Maritime Provinces, the fallout was even more restricted, being noted mainly on offshore islands. Blake Maybank describes the situation:

"Southerly and southwesterly winds prevailed in May, and evidently, on the evening of May 10, a strong movement of birds occurred to the south and west of the region. The birds became caught up in the clouds and rain of a slow-moving frontal system, and could not see to land at dawn, and so continued flying. At noon May 11, the winds over southern Nova Scotia and New Brunswick shifted to the northeast, forcing birds down through the clouds to "ground" level, which, unfortunately for many of the birds, was over the Gulf of Maine and the Bay of Fundy. As well, there was thick fog and heavy rain. Observers on Brier Island, Bon Portage Island, Machias Seal Island, and Grand Manan noticed the first trickle of birds in the early afternoon, and many fishermen reported exhausted birds landing on their boats. By evening many birds of numerous species had arrived. For example, at 2 p.m., when the first sodden birds arrived, we [on Brier Island] had tallied only a single warbler, but by dusk we had 15 species of warbler, plus many other new species for the day. By the next morning the true scope of the fallout was evident. Many birds were species that normally breed in the Region, but the presence of rarities and the abnormal number of certain species suggests most of these birds were not intending a visit to the Maritime Provinces."

However, the fallouts of this weekend were not limited to the coast. Farther west, migrants ran into a separate set of weather fronts that forced them down in record numbers.

In a band stretching across parts of West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, birders observed what Ken Brock referred to as "the mother of all fallouts." Although remarkable numbers were recorded from May 9–17, it was the 11th that produced most of the biggest counts of warblers, including 2000 Yellow- rumpeds in central Iowa, 400 Palms at Lake Chautauqua, Illinois, 49 American Redstarts in Boone County, Missouri, and 62 Ovenbirds in Indiana Dunes State Park.

Noting the many West Virginia records on that date as well, George Hall points out that May 11 was not only a Saturday, but also designated as the North American Migration Count. This official count was the incentive for many birders to be out in the field, including many who ordinarily would not have gone out on a day with such wet, cold conditions—conditions that created the very fallout that the birders enjoyed.

The weekend of May 18

Just a few days later, the Calendar Gods smiled upon the birders once again, as another major fallout was again focused on a weekend. Saturday the 18th was the biggest day in some areas, such as parts of Maryland and the inland areas of the Hudson-Delaware region, the latter experiencing "the best warbler migration in 10–15 years or more." Sunday was bigger on the coast, as described by Bill Boyle *et al.*:

"May 19 brought an excellent flight to the New Jersey coast from Cape May to Sandy Hook, and truly staggering numbers to New York City area and Long Island, where a morning fog brought the migrants down in wave after wave from Breezy Point to Orient Point. Veterans of many decades, such as Tony Lauro and Manny Levine, experienced the best fallout in a lifetime of birding. Kurtz, birding at Jamaica Bay, found thousands of birds in the first few hours, including 150 Bay-breasted Warblers in one small area known as the North Gardens. Although the numbers of neotropical migrants have surely declined in the past several decades, it is encouraging to know that the right combination of conditions can still bring such a spectacular fallout."

This weekend was also memorable around the western Great Lakes and across much of Ontario. Both areas experienced one of their biggest migrant fallouts in several years. Sample counts from Ontario May 18 included 70 Chestnut-sided Warblers and 60 Black-throated Blue Warblers at Rondeau, and 150 Nashville Warblers and 250 Magnolia Warblers at Toronto. As the weather responsible for the fallout moved east across the province, Prince Edward Point received its big numbers on Sunday, May 19, including 142 Blackburnian Warblers and 250 Bay-breasted Warblers.

Fallout afterthoughts

In considering these migration events, I cannot ignore a point being raised more and more often by regional editors: The conditions that make for a memorable migrant fallout are usually bad for the birds themselves. Many examples could be gleaned from the accounts of this season's events.

In New England and the Maritimes, for example, migrants were sharply concentrated on the immediate coast and islands during the May 11–12 fallout. These were obviously birds which, having been caught out over the open water, had actually made it back to land; many presumably did not. Among those that did make landfall, many probably perished from the combination of exhaustion and scarcity of food.

Even far inland from the coast, fallout weather spelled bad news for the migrants. On May 11 at Chicago, hundreds of warblers stressed by cold and by lack of insects were foraging on the ground along roadsides, oblivious to danger, many of them being hit by passing cars. A week later around the western Great Lakes region, such birds as Scarlet Tanagers and many treetop warblers were again foraging on the ground with the thrushes and sparrows. Mortality during these events certainly must have been high.

Another point driven home by this spring's reports was the extremely patchy nature of migrant fallouts. These events are highly localized in time and space. The fallouts of those two May weekends seemed very widespread, but this was at least partly because widespread weather patterns set up similar conditions in several areas with lots of birders—like coastal New England, Long Island, and Chicago. On these same weekends, there were many places where birds were scarce. (I can attest to the fact that Cape May County did *not* experience any great fallout May 11—we were scraping for leftover migrants that day.)

Some large areas did not see any migrant concentrations at all. Yves Aubry and Pierre Bannon report that many parts of Quebec experienced "by far the poorest warbler migration in many years," even though Quebec is sandwiched in between other areas where the birders were ecstatic over the numbers they saw.

The timing of these events also has a major impact on how they are perceived by birders. I have already made much of the fact that the biggest fallouts of the season, at least in areas with lots of birders, occurred on weekends. Of course there are some birders in the field every day of the year, but no one can deny that weekends get the heaviest coverage. I am convinced that the overall tenor of the northeastern regional reports for this season would be quite different if May 11 and 18 had been Wednesdays, say, instead of Saturdays.

A push of "eastern" migrants also reached the edge of the West

Eastern Texas, especially the upper Texas coast, failed to produce much in the way of hoped-for migrant fallouts this season. However, western Texas had exceptional numbers of stray individuals of eastern species. These included multiples of various species, from Wood Thrush to Scarlet Tanager, and a wide array of warblers. Perhaps most notable were two west Texas reports of Swainson's Warblers, both surprisingly early in the season (the few other western records, to my knowledge, have been between mid-May and mid-June).

One of the new "hot" birding regions of North America is New Mexico, where a growing corps of active observers and researchers is continuing to make discoveries. This season the finds came thick and fast. Eastern warblers were found in surprising numbers and variety at the vagrant traps on New Mexico's eastern plains and along riparian corridors. No fewer than 38 species of warblers were well documented in the state this spring, including ten considered rare enough to merit printing in boldface.

Part of the reason for the great warbler show in New Mexico was the greatly increased coverage (which included quite a number of active birders and also several banding operations). But it was also apparently a better-than-average season for actual numbers of such strays. This is indicated not only by the reports from adjacent western Texas, but also by results to the north in Colorado and Wyoming. The "southeastern" group of warblers was especially well represented, as indicated by the following numbers. Hooded Warbler: at least nine in New Mexico, six in Colorado; Worm-eating Warbler: four in New Mexico, six in Colorado, one in Wyoming; Kentucky Warbler: three in New Mexico, one in Colorado; Prairie Warbler: New Mexico's third and Wyoming's first; Louisiana Waterthrush: New Mexico's ninth and Colorado's sixth.

This westward invasion of eastern migrants seems to have been concentrated in the area just east of the Rockies Regional reports from farther west, as far as I could determine, did not indicate any increased numbers of eastern warblers this season.

Pelagic birding: the continuing frontier

It was in the 1970s, when I was a teenaged birder, that I was first amazed by reports from offshore. *Different* birds were being found out there, birds that were not even in the field guides; previous assumptions about normal ranges were being overturned. That sense of amazement has been renewed virtually every year since. After two more decades, there seems to be no end to the surprises concerning seabirds in North American waters.

One of our most experienced observers of marine life, Rich Rowlett, spent this spring on shore for a change—looking out to sea. Rowlett was monitoring Gray Whale migration past Point Piedras Blancas on the central California coast, but he also kept track of the birds that passed. Some of the migrant birds he tallied were of great local interest—for example, all five loon species (including single Arctic and Yellow-billed loons), four "white-bellied" Brant, and two Tufted Puffins. Surprising seabirds picked out by his experienced eyes included Manx Shearwaters (a relatively "new" presence in California waters), Flesh-footed Shearwaters, and Laysan Albatrosses, but the prize observation was of a Shy Albatross May 28. Only one record shy of establishing a North American first, this species had been collected once off Washington, 45 years earlier.

In the always-exciting waters off North Carolina, Brian Patteson and company managed to photograph a Cahow (Bermuda Petrel) this May, following a couple of persuasive earlier sightings. The record will now undergo the tough scrutiny of the American Birding Association Checklist Committee.

The ABA Checklist Committee recently voted not to accept the Cape Verde Islands Petrel. The latter bird was reported again this May in North Carolina, and it is undoubtedly occurring there almost regularly in very small numbers—but the ABA was undoubtedly correct not to accept it. Why this seeming contradiction? Because the identity of the birds being seen in Carolina waters is highly likely, but almost impossible to prove. Until recently, this bird was considered merely a local form of the Soft-plumaged Petrel, a species

found mainly in the Southern Hemisphere. When the Cape Verde Islands Petrel was raised to the status of full species, so was another bird, the Madeira Petrel. Both of these "new" petrels nest on islands in the North Atlantic, and they are extremely similar in appearance.

The Cape Verde Islands Petrel is more likely to stray to North American waters, mainly on the basis of sheer numbers—it is merely threatened, while the Madeira Petrel is seriously endangered! Without a specimen to examine, the Carolina birds may well remain simply "birds in the Soft-plumaged Petrel complex;" and because of the conservation status of these forms, it would be unthinkable to collect one for identification. This mystery may be destined to remain unsolved.

Finally, for all pelagic pundits, see if you can guess which region reported the following. A boat trip April 13 turned up several notable seabirds, including multiple Mottled Petrels, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Newell's Shearwaters, and Dark-rumped Petrels, plus one Bulwer's Petrel, and their rarest pelagic prize of all: Parasitic Jaeger! Yes, you're right. The Parasitic, among the seabirds seen most regularly from land on the North American mainland, is the rarest of the three jaegers in mid-ocean settings, and one seen this spring was only the second for Hawaii! So even in the 50th State, where ocean makes up most of the surface area, the sea still holds mysteries and the chance for new discoveries.

This brief look at Spring 1996 has touched on only a few of the avian phenomena of the season. Many others would be worthy of attention. For example, drought conditions in Texas and the southern plains, as well as in Hawaii, were serious enough to cause major problems for nesting birds. No doubt there were many other patterns of occurrence not mentioned here.

I urge you to read on, to enjoy the fine analyses by our corps of regional editors, and to find those patterns for yourself.