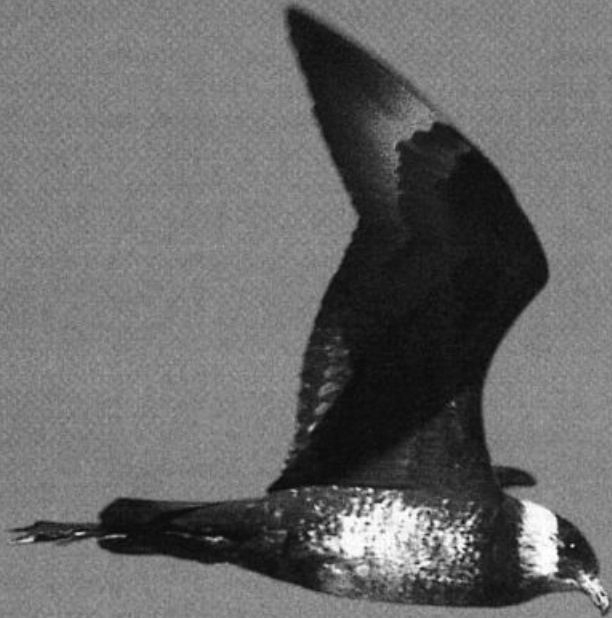


changing seasons



Fall Migration: August–November 1999

Jaegers are normally rare to uncommon transients through the interior of North America, but fall 1999 produced larger numbers than usual in many locales. A Southwestern rarity and only the fifth recorded in Arizona, this adult Pomarine Jaeger was at Paloma Ranch, Maricopa, 8–12 Oct 1999. Photograph/James Burns.

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I beg Rich Stallcup's indulgence for borrowing his book title *Birds for Real* as a theme for this Changing Seasons. *Birds for Real* is the underlying basis of *North American Birds*: we are observers, writers and readers concerned with the actual presence of birds in geographic settings and with the reasons underlying what we discover.

Like many of you, I have recently had the misfortune to see publications in which computer-generated maps purport to show where birds "should" occur. One draft (later corrected) that I saw displayed all sizable water features as habitat where grebes and loons winter; the author did not realize that almost all of the water the maps displayed is absent or frozen in winter. So much for ground-truthing the "data."

Users of *North American Birds* learn about birds the old-fashioned way: we observe them. Our system of regional reports written by dedicated volunteer editors provides a lasting record of bird reports, careful analysis and commentary. The numerous Special Attention boxes scattered throughout the reports provide a more detailed look at phenomena of special interest. No other venue pro-

vides such coverage for North America.

This fall's reports provide both a composite of large-scale continental movements (Northern Saw-whet Owls, White-winged Doves, Common Redpolls), significant multi-regional happenings (jaegers, skuas, Cave Swallows) and unique, fascinating local events (the Great Fallout in Florida, American Oystercatcher breeding in Canada, pelagic owling). The relentless engulfing of temperate (and not-so-temperate: et tu, Saskatchewan?) North America by Eurasian Collared-Doves is chronicled here better than in any other venue—see the paper by Christina Romagosa and Terry McEneaney (1999, *North American Birds* 53:348–353). The vacuum-nozzle effect of hurricanes on seabirds can be found in most of the East Coast reports.

One of the most spectacular, if involuntary, broad-scale movements this fall was of Cave Swallows sucked into northeastern North America in unprecedented numbers. A powerful northbound weather system inhaled the birds at some unknown southerly location and spat them out in small packets (with help from a timely nor'wester) from Michigan to Quebec and along most of the eastern seaboard. This species has been reported at Cape May every year since 1992, but observers hardly expected 35 of them this year! The largest number (44) were reported in the unlikely locale of Lake Erie, where they were seen at several places in s. Ontario, with most in the Pt. Pelee area (see the cover). New England, which had not reported the species before, had several small flocks in New York and Connecticut. See Margaret J. C. Bain's excellent account of this event in the Ontario report, the SA box in the New England report and other regional reports.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl made every effort to become the Southern Saw-whet Owl this fall, with astonishing counts from banding stations including very high proportions of immatures, typical of peak years. The most detailed account of this year's huge continent-wide Saw-whet movement can be found in Marshall Iloff's Middle Atlantic Coast report. Studies in that region are finding that adult birds move weeks earlier and prefer montane regions, while coastal movements involve juveniles early and adults (stragglers?) later in the season. Peak one-night counts included 173 at Kiptopeke, Virginia, 136 at Cape May, New Jersey, 54 at Boise Ridge, Idaho, and 31 in Quebec. Boise Ridge averaged 38.8 owls per night for nine days in early October and had a seasonal total of 848 Saw-whets. They also captured 2 Boreal Owls—were these local birds at the edge of their range or birds moving to an as-yet-unknown wintering ground? In 1999 the same station banded only 60 owls. Speaking of owls, Louisiana found three species (one of which was a second state record) well offshore on oilrigs; see the regional report for details. A Saw-whet came aboard ship 70 miles off Montauk, NJ. Pelagic owling here we come!

More customary seabirds were well reported, with many unusual records. Skuas appeared in remarkable numbers, with notable sea-

sonal accumulations including 34 South Polar in the Oregon-Washington region, one in the Aleutians, eight at the Farallons off central California (double the previous seasonal high), high counts at other California locations, and a record 7 in one day off Cape Hatteras. A high of 33 skuas, including at least 11 Greats, was off the Atlantic Provinces.

Jaegers also made an impressive showing, with unimaginable numbers at Lake Champlain, where 23 birds, more than all previous Vermont records combined, were seen from one observation point during a five-week period. Many New York records were made at the same time, and movements on nearby Lake Ontario were also substantial. Jaeger movements were described as "unprecedented" along Lakes Michigan and Erie (with daily counts of up to 27 birds) and high throughout the Middlewestern Prairie region, Southern Great Plains, Ontario, and the nearshore Gulf of Mexico. Even regions with limited habitat such as Idaho, Appalachia, and Arizona (Fig. 1) found many jaegers in fall 1999. Only the western Great Lakes reported lower than usual numbers. The fact that there are still no specimens of Pomarine or Parasitic Jaeger from Vermont and that many of the 1999 birds could not surely be identified to species (though most seemed to be Pomarine) argues for limited collecting during flight years to establish a baseline from which future researchers and observers can work.

Common Redpolls made what looked to be a record-setting surge across much of the continent, penetrating early to quite southerly locales (e.g. southeastern Delaware on the record early date of Oct. 31, central Oregon, southeastern Colorado, northern Virginia), but numbers were not especially high and the incursion was more limited in the Midwest. The November outwash seemed to release whatever energy the movement had, perhaps simply because the birds arrived where food was adequate. By late fall the front of the movement came to relative rest.

There were other movements of more mundane species. Imagine the sight of over a million American Robins accompanied by "tens of thousands" of goldfinches, bluebirds, waxwings, blackbirds and sparrows working their way down Delaware Bay and arriving en masse at Cape May (the same day as the huge nighttime Saw-whet movement)

Of rarities there were plenty, and I will let you candy-dive in the reports to find the ones that excite you. A few stand out: North America's first Yellow-browed Warbler at Gambell on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska; an Oriental Cuckoo there for dessert; a Eurasian Kestrel in Washington; a Harlequin Duck at Midway Island, Hawaii; Ontario's first Heermann's Gull; Common Cranes in Quebec and Indiana; eight Common House-Martins in the West Indies; a Red-necked Stint in New Jersey; a Violet-crowned Hummingbird in extreme northwestern California (the Region's second); many other wandering hummers, including the first documented Broad-tailed Hummingbird for Oklahoma; a Red-billed Tropicbird and Snow Bunting (have these species previously met?) in Alabama; a Ringed Kingfisher and Tropical Parula at the same time and location in Louisiana; and a spectacular fallout of migrants in n. Florida, including the state's second verified Kirtland's Warbler—the first was in 1896 The presence of a young bird confirmed breeding of American Oystercatcher in Canada. Two species of southwestern or Mexican origin reached maritime e. Canada. Two different Wandering Tattlers banded in Alaska appeared in Hawaii, the first time banded tattlers have been shown to take that route.

In addition to the more spectacular rarities, some reports of less rare birds are nonetheless attention-grabbers: a Brown Pelican chowing down on a Greater Shearwater; Alaska's second Ovenbird speci-

men found already neatly frozen for the state's second fall record, three Red-bellied Woodpeckers arriving on a fishing boat 45 miles out in the North Atlantic; and one-half of a Yellow Rail found in northern California. Given the documented tendency of Northern Saw-whet Owls to eat only half of prey items, perhaps the rail was in the wrong place during this flight year for owls.

Species make convenient units through which to study birds and to organize our published thoughts about them. This makes sense up to a point. However, to be more useful to our readers, we ought to report identifiable subspecies when such reports would help us understand the species in the full breadth of its ecological setting. Sometimes the lack of such a documented record makes trends and status difficult to determine. As Dale Zimmerman put it 25 years ago in the Changing Seasons for the fall migration of 1974, "now elevated to specific status, Thayer's Gulls miraculously appear."

We need to understand birds as populations. In that regard, no better widespread mechanism is available than identifiable subspecies. The late Allan Phillips pointed out that many subspecies come pre-marked by nature and that "fear of subspecies is not only unscientific; it can hamper rational efforts to conserve 'biological diversity'" ("Why neglect the difficult?," *Western Birds* 6:69–86). Not all subspecies can be identified in the field or even in the hand (consider the wood-pewees or the Pacific-slope and Cordilleran Flycatchers), but in many cases they do not need to be caught or collected (though careful measurements or even tissue samples from a banding station can be of great help in identifying some).

With this in mind, it is heartening to see a report of an in-hand Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow in Maryland. Likewise, a report of another non-species, a hybrid calidrid in Newfoundland thought to be a White-rumped Pectoral Sandpiper, is a useful reminder that birds do not always play by the field guide rules. Observers in the Pacific Northwest have had serious discussions for years about what features (if any) allow "pure" pink-footed gulls to be identifiable in the field, yet no one, myself included, routinely includes counts of them in published field notes. Hybrids simply do not get reported, yet most large gulls in some winter flocks are probably hybrids. That piece of information is an important one that does not get into *North American Birds* very often or very clearly.

Our attention to Birds for Real—actual data gathered and published for posterity—allows the Hudson-Delaware regional editors to note that in 1977 there were 60 Peregrine Falcons reported at Cape May all season. This year there were 833. Thank you, Rachel Carson, and kudos to The Peregrine Fund. Looking back 50 years to the 1949 fall migration report, we can read Ludlow Griscom's account of 15,000 American Black Ducks at one site in Massachusetts and a "rare" American Redstart in California. Upon such record-keeping is the foundation of truly useful field ornithology built.

The late Patrick O'Brian included in his novels many specific birds correctly identified as well as some that escape the firearms of science, at least in a hypothetical 1805. His co-leading character Dr Stephen Maturin always insists on the greatest care in scientific accuracy: what other serious fiction includes a detailed discussion of frigatebird bone structure? We hope that the content and spirit of the reports you will find in *North American Birds*—a plain statement of Birds for Real as we understand them—meets Dr. Maturin's high standard.

I thank David Fix for many useful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

