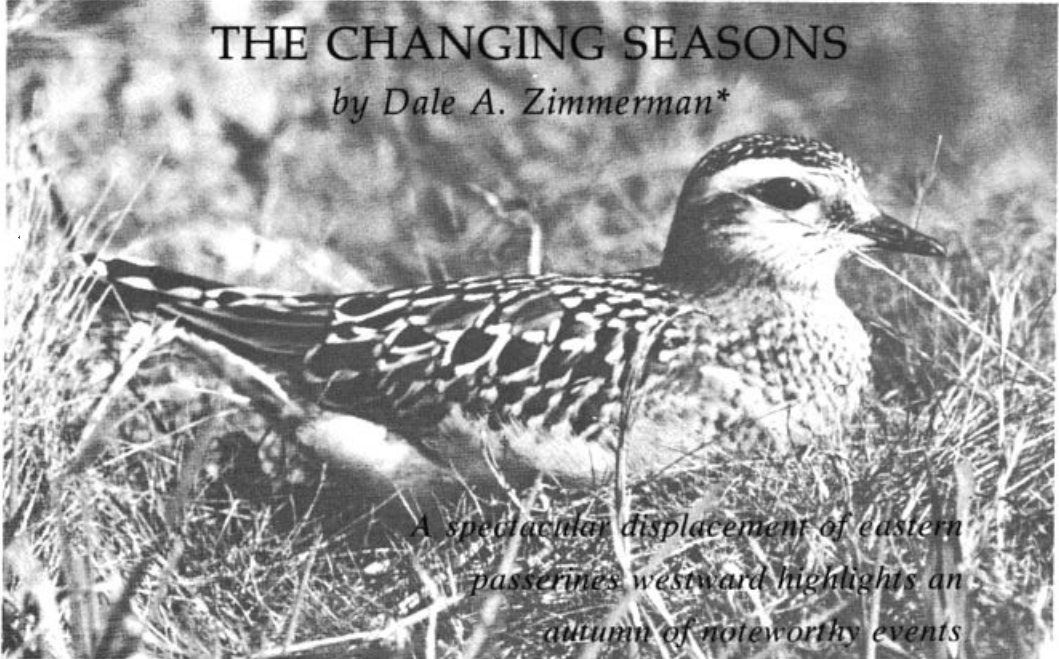


# THE CHANGING SEASONS

by Dale A. Zimmerman\*



*A spectacular displacement of eastern passerines westward highlights an autumn of noteworthy events*

*Dotterel, Farallon Islands, Sept., 1974. Photo / Pieter S. Myers from P.R.B.O.*

"This has to be the most exciting fall season on record" wrote Guy McCaskie of autumn, 1974, in Southern California. While not all Regional Editors so labeled it, avian activity in many areas was intense, intriguing and complex. Their reports reflect observations on an overwhelming number of species. (Over 430 were recorded in McCaskie's region alone!) This fall, as always, there is good news and bad, reports of great movements and minor ones; and there are the usual enigmas. But underlying all is the truism that nothing in nature remains static. Change is omnipresent, and serious observers can materially aid in monitoring the fluctuations. I'd like to issue a plea for more follow-up information on previous seasons' important finds and population figures. (Where did all those White-tailed Kites go? Were there *no* Peregrines this year on the Texas coast which boasted 400 sightings last fall?) Unevenness in reporting is a problem, but bird activity varies tremendously too. Even in the comparatively small South Texas Region, Editor Fred Webster writes that all localities tell a slightly different story this fall. And George Hall details the vastly different results from two large banding stations only 90 miles apart in the Appalachian Region. How different our interpretation might be if we had data from only one of those two spots. Local happenings may or may not reflect what goes on elsewhere; we never know until all the reports are in. If so many ob-

servers had not taken time to record their impressions of Golden-crowned Kinglets in each region we would have no idea of the virtually nationwide irruption of the species this year. Here in the West, the outstanding event was the eastern wood warbler invasion, and rarities produced considerable excitement in Texas and Alaska.

*Taxonomic comment* — Now elevated to specific status, Thayer's Gulls miraculously appear. Westward, the few reports of "Yellow-shafted" Flickers and "Slate-colored" Juncos may reflect lessened observer interest following recent taxonomic shifts. The species remains the sole taxon of importance to many birders, despite some readily identifiable subspecific phenotypes. "Great White" Herons evidently are spectacular enough to provide an exception.

*Migration hazards* — Interesting observations on low altitude migrant flight are given by pilot Robert Coggeshall in the Southern Great Plains Region. In places birds didn't fly high enough. TV towers claimed thousands of victims this fall in at least nine states and two Canadian provinces. A dark 600-foot stack on the giant new Phelps-Dodge smelter in southwest New Mexico killed 150 passerines Sept. 18, introducing hazard into a heretofore safe (and clean) piece of air-

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\*Department of Biological Science, Western New Mexico University, Silver City, N. Mex. 88061.

space. One wonders whether Manitoba's warbler disaster of last spring was responsible for the "disappointing" parulid passage there this fall.

#### RARITIES

Regionally, first place for exotic occurrences once more would go to our northernmost state. Gibson's and Byrd's Alaskan summary again has a decided Palaearctic flavor. A few years ago we'd not have imagined a regional report in which Whooper Swans did not merit boldface type. This season's account embraces seven species not listed in *Birds of North America* (Robbins *et al.* 1966), bringing to at least 16 the number of such birds recorded from Alaska in 1974; nine are not treated even in the "accidentals" section of Peterson's western guide. Yet many of the recently reported Asiatic shorebirds may appear annually in the Aleutians. September also brought a true accidental — North America's first **Marsh Sandpiper** (*Tringa stagnatilis*). Among other regions, South Texas ranks high with two apparent **White-collared Swifts** (*Streptoprocne zonaris*) near Rockport, two **Black-crested Coquettes** (*Paphosia helenae*) at Corpus Christi and more of these tropical hummers reported from Edinburg. A **Rufous-tailed Hummingbird** at Brownsville and a **Golden-crowned Warbler** in Starr County were but the second A.O.U. area records of their species in the 20th century. Texas' **Brown Jays** now number 25-40. The Middle Pacific Coast Region contributed a **Dotterel** and a **White Wagtail**, both records substantiated photographically.

Among the many lesser rarities are a few deserving special mention. Note that, in addition to the aforementioned Mexican forms, numerous other southern landbirds strayed northward. Among exciting pelagics were two Black-browed Albatrosses off Cape May and a probable one near e. Florida, **Harcourt's (Band-rumped) Storm-Petrel** off Florida, 6 **Black-capped Petrels** off Cape Hatteras, and Manx Shearwaters in both Florida and Maryland waters. Westward, New Zealand (Buller's) Shearwaters appeared in Alaskan territory and there were record numbers off California. A Little Blue Heron astride the international boundary contributed to both the British Columbia and Washington lists. There were reports of Wandering Tattlers in Arizona and Utah (though an earlier "tattler" near Tucson turned out to be a Spotted Sandpiper). Other shorebirds of note included a Rufous-necked Sandpiper at the Salton Sea, Curlew Sandpipers in Québec, Connecticut, New York and California, Bar-tailed Godwits on both coasts, and numerous Ruffs. Mew Gulls were seen in New Jersey and Virginia. The Black-headed Gull photo-

graphed in British Columbia prompted emergence of a 1972 record from Washington Key West again had Lesser Black-backed Gulls **White-winged Black Terns** remained in the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, and Alabama's first Noddy Tern was found on Dauphin Island. Perhaps not all those "Caribbean" Coots should be considered as such; see the Florida report.

Incongruous for a place reporting Barrow's Goldeneyes, Las Vegas, Nev., also had a Common Ground Dove. Groove-billed Anis appeared in Arizona, Nevada, California and east to Florida. A Buff-bellied Hummingbird was photographed in New Orleans. Almost unbelievable is the report of a Golden-fronted Woodpecker in northern Michigan. One was reported from Florida too, but so was a xanthochroistic Red-bellied Woodpecker, prompting exceptional caution in extralimital identifications of *C. aurifrons*. A Tropical Kingbird strayed to Florida, a Gray Kingbird to Connecticut, but more surprising were the thick-billed Kingbirds at San Francisco and on Vancouver Island. A Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher was new to California. Wheatears visited Québec, New Jersey and Virginia. Both Red-throated and Sprague's Pipits showed in southern California. Yellow-green Vireos were reported there and (less positively) from Arizona. Smith's Longspurs again appeared in Colorado and one was collected for New York's first record.

#### POPULATION TRENDS

*Grebes through Ibises* — Horned Grebes were unusually numerous in the Middlewestern Prairie, Southwest and Southern Great Plains Regions. Eared Grebes, normally common out West, were down almost everywhere except on the Pacific Coast. In southern New Mexico Horned Grebes outnumbered Eareds two to one, a surprising turn of events. Possibly the Eared Grebes shifted to the Central Southern Region's waterways where there were many reports. Western Grebe numbers were good. From Florida we learn that Cory's Shearwater, not the Greater, is proving to be the most common *Puffinus* off the peninsula's east coast. White Pelicans nested in numbers comparable to 1973's at Great Salt Lake but lost ground in places. Brown Pelican observations from the Southern Atlantic Coast Region indicate slow recovery of the population there. Alabama also had encouraging counts, but the species remained scarce in Florida. Fairly good numbers were reported from the Middle Pacific Coast, with the percentage of immatures varying locally from 25 to 40%. Farther north, half of the pelicans on Tillamook Bay were immatures. There is so little

good news of Double-crested Cormorants that a southbound movement of 14,000 off North Carolina certainly is welcome. Similarly outstanding in a generally poor-to-mediocre heron picture is a report of several thousand Green Herons moving at night over one W. Virginia locality. The White-faced Ibis is rapidly declining in Nevada and Utah.

*Waterfowl* — Swans did very well, especially in Alaska, although Trumpeters fared poorly in South Dakota where breeding ponds dried up. Mountain West Editor Hugh Kingery in effect questions the policy in certain western states of open seasons on Whistling Swans while espousing protection of the few Trumpeters. Is there a legitimate excuse for the hunting of swans anywhere in America? Black Brant produced essentially no young last summer. Snow Goose reports were mixed, with low numbers in Alaska but good counts from the Yukon. Some 30 per cent of 100,000 Snows in Nebraska were immature, but a group in Br. Columbia were said to be “virtually all adult birds” and but one per cent of the Salton Sea flock were young. Canada Goose numbers were down in the Northwest but set a record high in New York. Mallards are doing exceptionally well. The continue to replace Black Ducks in the Northeast. Pintails, Ring-necked Ducks and Redheads all enjoyed fairly heavy flights in the West, and there were some faintly encouraging signs in Canvasback numbers. Despite good counts from Wisconsin to Missouri, Vernon Kleen tells us half of the Canvasback population is threatened by industrial pollution in the upper Mississippi River. A phenomenal 1500 Barrow’s Goldeneyes in Washington preceded record numbers farther south to be dealt with in the winter summary. Oldsquaws, Harlequin Dicks, scoters and Hooded Mergansers all seemed to be present in more places, in higher numbers or both. Ruddy Ducks are decreasing in the Mountain West — possibly eastward as well.

*Diurnal Raptors* — An unusually heavy *Accipiter* migration occurred in Alberta. At Duluth, Minn., Goshawks were below the last two years’ epic numbers but nevertheless reached 1300 this fall, and there were numerous reports from the Appalachian Region. Western observers saw few. Cooper’s Hawks unexpectedly outnumbered Sharp-shins in some areas. On balance, both species made a reasonable showing in the East, with especially good Sharp-shinned counts in Ontario and along the coast. Cooper’s Hawks evidently remained scarce in the Southern Great Plains. The Southwest Region’s report implied a poor *Accipiter* showing in New Mexico, but the two smaller species were in at least normal numbers through the southern counties and in adja-

cent Arizona; a good proportion of those seen were immatures. Single Swallow-tailed Kites in Texas were noteworthy, as was the one at Cumberland, Md. — first for the Alleghenies since 1908. The only White-tailed Kites reported were two Floridian birds. In the Southern Great Plains, Frances Williams reported Red-tailed and Marsh Hawks “abundant” — a term seldom associated with these species today. They were fairly common in parts of the Southwest, with gratifying numbers of immature harriers. But in southwest New Mexico and southeast Arizona, where formerly a large proportion of autumn Red-tails were young birds, recent years have shown a discouraging reversal. This fall we found only one immature for every eight or nine adults. Is this happening elsewhere? Red-shoulders generally remained scarce, but they may be expanding their Californian range. Both this species and the Red-tail reportedly are “doing well” in the Appalachian Region where George Hall continues to note apparent improvement in the overall hawk picture. It is also heartening to hear of a good hawk season in the Ontario and Hudson-St. Lawrence Regions. This was the best autumn of 18 at the Montclair, N.J., hawk lookout, with 9000 more raptors than any previous year. Most sightings there were of Broad-winged Hawks which may be more than holding their own. At least 85,000 Broad-winged were reported across the country this fall. A large mid-September movement in Illinois, and the massive flights in the Central Southern and Southern Texas Regions Sept. 20-22, may have involved some of the same flocks. In Texas their movements definitely were correlated with advancing cold fronts. At San Francisco’s Pt. Diablo, Laurence Binford observed 30 migrating Broad-winged, two of which were of the extremely rare dark phase—as was one of the 18 birds he saw there in 1972. These hawks may represent some far western breeding population. I believe most records of this species’ melanistic phase are from the West, additional information would be welcome. Ferruginous Hawks increased in the Southwest and Southern Pacific Coast Regions but were less numerous farther north. Swainson’s Hawk flights seemed normal for recent years.

Bald Eagle numbers suggest a poor breeding season although few reports contain age data. Two large groups were reported: 100 in British Columbia and 359 in Glacier National Park. Only 109 immatures were among the latter — below last year’s 117 young birds in a total of 157 eagles. Except in some mid-continent areas the ratio of young to adults was low. This was especially true in the East where only one immature (of 17 eagles) was seen from Hawk Mountain, and

another single (of 14 birds) along the southern Atlantic Coast. Golden Eagles may be increasing in the Midwest. Hawk Mountain reported 33, the Appalachian Region 26. Out west the few data submitted reflect no patterns.

A few Gyrfalcons appeared in northern areas across the continent. Three regions experienced local increases in Peregrines. However, despite high interest in this falcon fewer than 230 sightings were reported — far below last year's figure. Few reporters seem to have heeded Kenneth Able's appeal for age data on Peregrines. We don't know to what extent our remaining birds are reproducing (though the scanty total may itself provide the answer). Merlin numbers, up a year ago, crashed alarmingly. Reports at hand show only 34 recorded in the East, apart from Florida where, however, the species was outnumbered by Peregrines. Among all regions from the plains to the Pacific I can account for only 50 Merlins, excluding the Middle Pacific Coast where these and Peregrines were "well reported." American Kestrels, scarcely mentioned by many reporters, did well in the Mountain West and Southwest. Prairie Falcons received little comment. Osprey numbers were lower than last year's (very low on the Middle Pacific Coast), except for possible slight increases from the Mt. West to the Appalachian Regions.

*Owls* — We receive few data on Barn Owls, hence great interest centers around the flight at Cape May. The Screech Owl, once common in so many areas, now rarely has its name printed in our pages. This fall, records of it tripled in the Mountain West. Flammulated and Spotted Owls both bred at Zion National Park. There were two or three pairs of the latter, bringing a little good news of this splendid creature which is disappearing from so many of our mountain canyons. Both Barn and Great Horned Owls staged a comeback in southwest New Mexico and southeast Arizona where populations have been low for several years. In the Appalachians, Barred and Great Horned Owls were found more frequently than usual. It would be pleasant to think that owls as well as their diurnal counterparts are beginning to increase.

*Larids, Jaegers* — Little Gulls were reported in several inland localities and on both coasts. Franklin's Gulls are swiftly recovering from the crash of 1972-73. The only "large" count of Least Terns (600) came from Padre Island, Texas; the species was reported more often than usual in the southern Great Plains. It was a good jaeger season in the Middle Pacific Coast Region. Inland, probable or identified Parasitic Jaegers were seen in Alberta, Montana, and Arizona. At least 45 jaegers, mostly Parasitic, were noted near the

Great Lakes. Long-taileds appeared in Missouri and Arkansas.

*Cranes, Shorebirds* — Of 15 young Whooping Cranes produced in Canada only two made it to Texas along with 47 adults. Low-to-usual Sandhill Crane numbers were reported from several places, and nothing like last year's big flocks were seen in the northern Great Plains. No figures were reported from important New Mexican refuges which normally host thousands of cranes. Large numbers of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers appeared in the Northwest. Sightings of Buff-breasted Sandpipers were fewer than last fall but still there were encouraging reports of both this species and the Hudsonian Godwit. Baird's Sandpipers evidently had a very good year. Red Phalaropes were recorded in numerous localities

#### STATUS CHANGES AND RANGE EXTENSIONS

Brandt's and Red-faced Cormorants nested again in Prince William Sound, Alaska, the latter species colonizing four more islands. Cattle Egrets reached British Columbia, and they appeared "in force" in Colorado for the first time. Either the Monk Parakeet or its novelty is dwindling; only five birds were mentioned this fall. Anna's Hummingbird pressed onward in Colorado, across New Mexico to Midland, Texas, but no records came from the Rockport area which reported them so freely not long ago. Again there was an influx of Anna's Hummers into the Northern Pacific Coast Region, and the species' continued presence in Alaska is indeed remarkable. Red-bellied Woodpeckers are permanently established in Colorado where they push northwestward. Colorado's Blue Jays appear there to stay, and some day we may have to refer to the "Common Jay" if Blues and Steller's continue to hybridize as they do at Boulder. Blue Jays moved westward in Colorado and on to Washington and Br. Columbia. Carolina Wrens continued to occupy new territory. The opportunistic Great-tailed Grackle evidently nested in Nevada and further explored in New Mexico and Colorado.

#### IRRUPTIONS

Rough-legged Hawks invaded widely, some reaching southern New Mexico by mid-October while numbers were still moving through Michigan in late November. There were fewer on the Pacific Coast than last year, however. Snowy Owls, scarce in the West, were building up to a notable invasion farther east. Near Duluth, Minn., 300 Saw-whet Owls were banded, and a noticeable movement occurred through the Mid-

dlewestern Prairie Region. Smaller numbers were banded at Cape May, and a few reached Virginia and Arkansas. Both three-toed woodpeckers were sighted rather often coast-to-coast, and Red-breasted Nuthatches were very widespread. Kinglets, too, especially the Golden-crowned, attracted attention almost everywhere. The latter reached at least minor invasion proportions from the southern Pacific Coast (on the Channel Islands for the first time) to the lower Rio Grande Valley. A Winter Wren reached the Channel Islands too. This species invaded eastern Colorado and was relatively plentiful elsewhere. Veeries received comment from several editors because of large numbers, early or late dates, or as a first documented state record (California). Numbers of Mountain Bluebirds occurred from Alaska to the Southwest; several places reported them abundant in contrast to last year. Philadelphia Vireos seemed more numerous than usual, making news from Florida to Oklahoma. Red Crossbills failed to irrupt despite a few false alarms like the birds in Amarillo, Texas, Aug. 23. White-winged Crossbills remained common in parts of the northern Rockies, and they were sporadic in the Northeast. "Winter finches" in general were scarce, however. Lark Buntings were especially abundant through the Southwest.

#### LONGITUDINAL DISPLACEMENTS

*Western birds in the East* — Eared Grebes again reached eastern Lake Erie. Also noteworthy were a White Pelican in Vermont, Black Brant at New York City, Ross' Geese in many places east to Québec, and a good scattering of tree ducks. Franklin's Gulls appeared in Québec and New York. There were extraordinary reports of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers in Iowa and Illinois. Rufous Hummingbirds were expected in the Central Southern Region but the one in Minnesota was not. Apparently fewer than 20 western passerines travelled east. Only three warblers were among them: a Townsend's in Wisconsin and single Black-throated Grays in Pennsylvania and Florida.

*Eastern birds in the West* — Displacement once again favored western birders with many species, at least 46 of them passerine. Two Black-billed Cuckoos in western Texas closely followed one which provided a new state record and first regional specimen in New Mexico. An eastern Yellow-billed Cuckoo was captured on the Farallon Islands. Vireos scored well with White-eyed in Colorado, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated each in three western states, and Philadelphia in California. The Brown Thrasher in Alaska was that state's first mimid. Northern

Orioles of the race *galbula* were seen in New Mexico, California and Oregon. Nevada received its first Painted Bunting. There were Sharp-tailed and Le Conte's Sparrows in California again, and a Sharp-tailed provided a provincial and regional "first" in British Columbia. Washington's second Swamp Sparrow was of interest in view of 30 reported from central California. Unprecedented longspur numbers reached the Pacific.

#### THE GREAT WARBLER INVASION

The spring of 1974 witnessed an impressive surge of predominantly eastern wood warblers into the West — 18 species in all. Scarcely three months later there followed a veritable explosion of eastern parulids, with 25 species — many in unprecedented numbers — reaching the Pacific Virginia's, Lucy's and Red-faced Warblers, and the Painted Redstart also appeared in California. The Middle Pacific Coast recorded 652 individual vagrant warblers, providing the most spectacular invasion on record to quote Regional Editors Stallcup, De Sante and Greenburg. In both coastal California regions the now usual eastern species appeared in larger than expected numbers, and 5 or 6 of truly rare occurrence turned up; 17 appeared in the Mountain West Region where over 150 rare parulid records were logged. Frequently overshadowing all other species was the Black-throated Blue, which "irrupted" in the Mountain West and elsewhere. It was reported from 12 localities in the Southern Great Plains (where normally "extremely rare"); there were seven Southwest sightings, 19 near Denver, 23 from Nevada, and the total of 30 in southern California was eclipsed only by 38 Palms, 57 Tennessees, and 69 Blackpolls.

Six Connecticut Warblers in California make one reported from Arizona seem less unlikely, it would be new for that state. Arizona did get its first Canada Warbler this fall, Nevada its first Palm. New for Washington were the Cape May and Magnolia. British Columbia had its first Chestnut-sided. The Northern Pacific Coast Region also hosted Black-and-white, Tennessee, Blackpoll and Palm Warblers — all real rarities there. The Golden-winged was new to Oklahoma. Dozens of second, third and fourth state records resulted from the incursion. There was not merely one grand movement; the birds kept coming. For example, Chestnut-sided Warblers already were in coastal California by Sept. 2, yet some struck an Oklahoma TV tower a month later. Blackburnians were first seen on the coast Sept. 5, a day later than one in New Mexico, another struck a Dallas tower Sept. 15, and still others appeared in Nebraska and Oklahoma during October. Golden-wingeds were in southern

California Sept. 14 but others hit the Oklahoma tower on Oct. 8. The invasion of the Pacific Coast began in mid-August and was still evident three months later.

Stressed by all the California editors is the fact that increased observation alone was not responsible for the many 1974 reports of parulid rarities. McCaskie indicates there were "not appreciably more" observers in his region this fall; and moreover, it was the "old well-worked spots," not new areas, that yielded the unusual birds. It was much the same in the Southwest and, I suspect, elsewhere. Clearly more birds were involved this year. We're still left with more questions than answers, of course. Was weather repeatedly displacing large numbers of migrants over a three-month period? Have westward drifters survived in sufficient numbers over the years to have produced progeny now retracing in force their modified migratory pathways? Did some of last spring's strays remain in the West to breed, thus swelling numbers this fall? Are intrinsic or extrinsic factors interfering with navigational ability of ever-increasing numbers of eastern (but of fewer western) birds? Or were there just many more warblers produced this year in the usual breeding areas, thus impressively augmenting the now usual west-southwest drift of many traditionally eastern species?

Answers seldom are obvious and space precludes much discussion. However, I would agree with Stallcup *et al.* that much of the explanation lies in wind conditions resulting from high pressure systems over Canada early in August, about the time many species begin their southbound flight. The resultant NE winds must have started numbers of birds drifting off course to the Southeast. Then, in late August-early September, a second high over the northwestern part of the continent likely continued the displacement. Again, prevailing NE winds from mid- to late September across the northern plains, the Rockies and the Great Basin obviously favored south-western movement. Finally, there followed a period of weak fronts, often with E and S winds, into early November. We had many days of E winds across southern New Mexico as well, and I cannot avoid the obvious association of 1974's autumnal air movements and the appearance of eastern birds. As the winds favored the latter, they operated against western species which often wander east. As noted above, remarkably few landbirds moved in that direction.

But did the wind account for it all? As McCaskie says, "What weather factor or factors could bring Tropical Kingbird, Red-throated Pipit, Sprague's Pipit and Black-throated Blue Warbler all to one spot on the same day?" Even assuming

all had arrived some days before they were found we are left with no full explanation. Of the eastern warblers, some so prominent in the fall flight (e.g. Black-throated Blue) were rarely if at all represented in the West last spring. Some southern species (Worm-eating, Prothonotary, Hooded, Blue-winged) of 1974's spring displacement were very rare or absent in the fall. There seems to be little direct correlation between this year's spring and autumn phenomena. (If it is true, however, that less experienced immature birds are unable to reorient once displaced, such birds from this fall's flight which survive the winter should be expected to return to their breeding grounds via the "wrong" route they first used. Western observers should be alert for this next spring.) The present situation may be the culmination of annual westward drift over a period of years, followed by the gradual establishment of new routes and possibly some new breeding areas. (Remember the Parulas which nested in California?) Perhaps we're now witnessing on a grand scale the same sort of thing we have seen before in one species at a time. In 1957 there were but three New Mexican records of Indigo Buntings. Since then the species has become rather widespread here, not only as a migrant but nesting regularly even in the southwest portion. It now seems firmly entrenched. Colorado's Blue Jays provide another example.

Looking eastward for some clue we find no uniform lack of warblers there. Douglas Kibbe writes of good flights through the Western New York-Western Pennsylvania Region. George Hall's illuminating report reveals poor or normal migration in places but "unusually heavy" warbler movement in Ohio, West Virginia, and northern Georgia. So despite poor showings in some spots, it seems that great numbers of the very species which moved west also passed along traditional migration paths. With only eastern data at hand nothing would appear odd. Enormous numbers of young must, therefore, have been raised this year on these warbler's boreal breeding grounds. One wonders just what conditions prevailed in the northern and northeastern forests last summer, for most of this fall's westbound warblers nest in that zone; so do eight of the species discussed above under "irruptions." Whatever the causes, several years' longitudinal displacements of increasing magnitude show beyond doubt that the western status of some "eastern" warblers has changed markedly. No longer can some of these — like the Blackpoll in California — simply be termed vagrants. They have passed that point. What we shall have to call them a few years hence is one of the most intriguing questions of all.