

The Changing Seasons

by P. William Smith*

*the early spring was early, and the late spring late.
In between, it was almost a normal season.*

Each Changing Seasons conscript probably begins as did I, in the best tradition of Diogenes, seeking the kernels of migration meaning buried in the several hundred pages of manuscripts prepared by the Regional Editors. It must be akin to looking for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in east Texas — one has that prescient feeling that they're not there (if anywhere); yet one still tries, and wonders if failure might be due to one's own shortcomings, rather than to the absence of the quarry. Yes, to someone searching for the quintessence of the season, the Regional Reports are indeed the Big Thicket.

But if not any major truths, what have I found in my perusals? Alas, I can but tantalize with a few choice selections from among my discoveries, and to point out a common thread or two. The real news of the Spring of 1976 lies not in this summary, but in the reports which follow.

MIGRATION: SOUTH

If anything can be said to have been universal about the southern spring, it was that April was unusually warm, except in the southern Great Plains, and generally dry, while May was colder than normal and unusually wet. This pattern caused vegetation to be far advanced, with trees mostly leafed out by mid-April.

Migration near the Gulf of Mexico was different in many respects from that perceived inland. The prevailing southerly winds and fair weather through most of April, and in some sections early May, caused migrants to continue inland without pausing near the coast. Northerly winds and rain hit Florida on May 1 - 3, coastal Texas on May 13, and the Gulf states May 14 - 15, causing great fallouts of migrants to occur on those and subsequent dates when similar conditions occurred. Obviously, the adverse weather precipitated the birds crossing the Gulf at the first landfall; in fair weather they would have passed

inland undetected. Since the weather fronts occurred later than average this year, many observers considered the migration late along the coast; as Imhof points out, these conditions gave coastal observers a comparatively rare opportunity to sample the birds that normally pass through on the later dates.

Inland, stable weather patterns in the Southeast "allowed transients to move through . . . in a steady but unspectacular flow" (Teulings). Migration, as usually detected by inland Easterners, consists of a series of waves caused by certain weather patterns, when those patterns do not occur, the birds simply flow through largely unobserved. Farther inland, migration peaked in Tennessee about the second week in May, as normal. Still farther west, migration in the southern plains was widely judged to be excellent, with the peak in the first two or three weeks of May, exactly when coastal observers were complaining that migrants hadn't arrived yet!

Somehow, in most observers' minds, migrants are synonymous with transient landbirds; summer resident landbirds, waterfowl, and to some extent shorebirds often receive less attention. Where summer residents were commented upon, they were largely considered to have arrived normally. An interesting phenomenon, apparently first noted 50 years ago but not widely known, is the steady westward stream of waterfowl migrants a few miles offshore in the Gulf during April. These were thought to be birds which winter in Florida and migrate up the Mississippi Flyway, especially Lesser Scaup. Another interesting report was that of a large number of shorebirds attracted to a lighted athletic field in Huntsville, Texas, in the wee hours of a mid-May morning. Is this technique slated to follow the squeaker and the tape recorder as the next means of bird attraction?

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MIGRATION: NORTH

The weather in the north generally followed the same pattern as in the south — unusually warm during the early part of the season, especially in mid-April, and cooler than normal in May. Within this general pattern there were many subcycles of alternating warm and cold spells; returning residents and transients often were confronted by cold and snow in mid-May, and insect-eaters had real problems in many areas. Precipitation was largely subnormal except in the more northerly and easterly sections, which had much rain in addition to the cold in May.

Despite a variety of weather conditions, there was almost universal agreement that the migration was dull. By dull, observers largely meant an absence of waves of transients; residents seemed to return to most areas on a largely normal schedule. There was one exception to this general pattern — a strong influx with many early arrivals in the mid-April warm spell. "Overshoots" were also especially common in this mid-April wave. I believe that overshoots and early arrivals are variations of the same phenomenon of birds "surfing" the warm fronts a little too aggressively; individuals which drop within their normal range but before their normal arrival date are called "early arrivals," while those which land beyond their normal range are "overshoots."

Where buildups did occur after April, it was largely late in the period after the early May weather had ameliorated (and after many observers had encased their binoculars), and involved mainly the later-migrating birds. Especially perverse weather around the central Great Lakes at the end of May caused a great migration disaster, with hundreds of thousands of birds lost.

Increasingly, I am convinced of the perceptual nature of migration as discussed in the Regional Reports; in other words, what people detect and report may reflect only a superficial portion of the complete migration picture, the proverbial "tip of the iceberg." One dimension of this problem, as noted by several editors, was the early foliage which made it difficult to see the birds at all. This was compounded by the cold May weather which inhibited singing by the birds arriving or passing through; thus far more birds may have been present than most observers perceived. Banding studies, from which some drew their conclusions about the season, are biased, since most birds do not migrate at mist-net level. An observer encountering perhaps two thousand birds considers it a good day, yet 200,000 migrants were estimated to have died over Lake Huron on a single day in late May.

A fascinating aspect of migration cited by several northern editors was the late return of the Blue Jays and Black-capped Chickadees which had irrupted southward last fall. Similar late northbound movements were noted for several other species, substantially after regional breeding had commenced and probably too late for breeding anywhere. While various observers and editors speculated on what was happening and why, this phenomenon should receive special study. Perhaps the fact that many of the eastern vagrants which appear on the West Coast do so in mid-June, is related.

MIGRATION: WEST

Western editors generally have little to say about the weather and its impact on migration, perhaps because there is less variation in either compared to the East; this season was no exception. Weather was warm and dry in most areas east of the coast, with the worst drought in the Central Valley of California in over 100 years. A freak cold spell in the Southwest in mid-April, with snow in the mountains along the Mexican border, may have had a bad effect on Painted Redstarts and other recently-arrived insectivores. Along the northwest coast, there was a warm spell in late April followed by cooler weather in May; precipitation was at least average.

Although the common migrant landbirds received relatively little attention, both California editors supplied extensive arrival date information. While warbler waves are not typical of the west, heavy movements of Yellow-rumped and Black-throated Gray Warblers occurred in the Portland, Oregon area in late April and early May during weather conditions which sounded much like those which cause such waves in the East.

Sea watches at various locations along the Pacific Coast provided many interesting records as well as excellent data about the abundance of loons, scoters, and other seabirds. We can only hope that this very worthwhile activity, so common in Europe but so rarely practiced in the Americas, will be continued here and established elsewhere.

Of course, the heavy interest on the part of westerners in locating eastern strays continued, and there were many such reports from all over the West. Clearly, the major determining factor here is the number of observer-hours per tree, which is orders of magnitudes higher in the sparsely vegetated areas where most of these reports emanate, than elsewhere in the country. Theorists must not forget that there are over half a dozen recent records of the Black-throated Gray Warbler from coastal New Jersey, an area about the size of San Diego County, California, but with vegetative conditions such that any observation is entirely

fortuitous and usually unreplicable. I suspect that like traffic accidents, individual strays may have any number of causes, yet in the aggregate occur at rates that can be studied and predicted with the laws of probability. The theory of stochastic processes seems particularly applicable, as evidenced by the Hudsonian Godwits which appeared all over the West during a very brief period in mid-May; it seems plausible that they originated from a single unusual event and then wandered largely at random.

RANGE CHANGES

It is interesting that almost all range changes noted in the regional reports were northward expansions; those climatologists who believe the earth is getting colder certainly are not taking their clues from the birds. Mostly affected among the landbirds were a dozen or more species from Chuck-will's-widow to Blue Grosbeak, which in historical times have had their northern limit around the 40th parallel, more or less, at least east of the Appalachians. It may not be coincidental that this is within, or downwind from, the most heavily industrialized parts of the continent, perhaps giving credence to the "greenhouse effect" theory of other climatologists. Also expanding in the same area were the so-called southern herons and terns, but this may have been due in part to population pressures resulting from 50 years or more of protection.

Expanding southward, at least in the East, were the gulls; Great Black-backed are now nesting south to Maryland and may be moving westward along the Great Lakes. Garbage proliferation as well as protection is probably involved here. The House Finch continued to radiate outward from its introduction in the New York City area about 35 years ago; it is now reported north to Maine, south to North Carolina and west to Ontario and Ohio. The only native species mentioned as significantly expanding westward was the Common Grackle, which apparently is even displacing Brewer's Blackbirds in Colorado.

In the West, Inca, Ground, and White-winged Doves seem to be expanding northward, and Hooded Orioles, too; perhaps this could be related to increased urbanization of the region. Less explicable was the proliferation of White-tailed Kites north to Oregon and Louisiana, as well as Swallow-tailed and Mississippi Kites north to the Carolinas.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Good numbers of Common Loons were reported from the East Coast and Great Lakes, and

over 600 were counted passing a New Jersey hawk lookout; concern for their status in the Appalachian region seemed unwarranted on a wider geographic basis. Spring seawatches at Goleta and Pigeon Points in California reported 35,000 and 55,000 loons respectively, about 90 per cent of which were Arctic; the peak date at Pigeon Point was April 21, but the birds were still passing at the end of May, as they were at the mouth of the Columbia River at the rate of 3000 per hour on June 1. As usual, there were several putative Arctic Loon reports from the East. Observers who have expressed concern about the Red-necked Grebe should be cheered by the report of 1000 at Manitoulin I., Ontario.

Procellariophilia is probably a terminal disease of coastal birders, but it continues unabated and many outstanding observations resulted this spring. Off northern California, there were an estimated 1000 Black-footed Albatrosses at the end of May, as well as three Laysan; several of the former were also seen in the Santa Barbara Channel where they are decidedly uncommon. All pelagic species seemed in good numbers along the Pacific Coast, and no less than seven Flesh-footed Shearwaters were noted. In the Atlantic, Northern Fulmars were in good numbers south to Maryland, certainly breeding must be expanding on this side of the Atlantic. Similarly, Manx Shearwater reports continued to grow, and several were seen off islets in Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, starting in late April, an area quite suitable for breeding. Although Cory's has historically been the fall shearwater along the Atlantic Coast, there were good numbers off New Jersey for the third successive spring. Storm-Petrels were in numbers and variety along the Pacific coast, with a first Wilson's for Oregon and an invasion of Fork-tailed in southern California waters. In the Atlantic, about 50 Leach's Storm-Petrels at the edge of the continental shelf, over 100 miles off the New Jersey coast, on May 11 may have been indicative of when and where these rarely observed migrants are normally. But certainly, the record for pelagic chutzpah was the Laysan Albatross cruising over Desert Hot Springs, California, perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the oasis effect.

The spring of 1976 saw one of the most amazing and virtually continent-wide irruptions of "southern" herons. Little Blues were sprinkled across the northern tier of states and southern Canada west to Manitoba, and also in Colorado, Kansas, west Texas, Arizona, and central California. Louisiana Herons, which are rare inland anywhere, were north to Maine and Québec, inland in the Southeast, up the Mississippi drainage to North Dakota and Manitoba, and also in Oregon and California. Yellow-crowned Night Herons

reached Québec and Manitoba and nested in Wisconsin. Quite possibly this explosion was related to the warm mid-April weather over much of the continent, although many of the birds were not discovered until May. Reddish Egrets were also expanding in Florida, and the Texas population has now moved as far up the coast as southeastern Louisiana.

Seaducks belied their name with some 5000 Oldsquaw at Manitoulin I., Ontario in May, 3000 of them on May 19. Unusual numbers of Oldsquaw were also along the Ottawa River. At the end of May, 1300 White-winged Scoters were also at Manitoulin I.; could these have been from the remarkable concentration of 25,000 in coastal Maryland in late April? Scoters were sprinkled elsewhere through the interior, with perhaps the most surprising being a male Surf at Willcox, Arizona for the state's second spring record. On the West Coast, seawatches noted 16,000 scoters passing Goleta Pt. and 30,000 passing Pigeon Point, both in California, and 1200 per hour were passing the Columbia River mouth on May 31. These were all almost entirely Surfs, with only traces of the other species.

As has been fairly usual in recent years, a number of Turkey Vultures made it to southern Canada, and more than the ordinary number of Black Vultures were noted north of their usual range in the East, as far as Provincetown, Massachusetts. There were several Swallow-tailed Kites in the Northeast during or just after the April 18 warm spell, and 12 in northeastern South Carolina on April 17 may have been part of that movement; five were also reported in Texas, far more than usual. Vagrant Mississippi Kites were noted north to Cape Cod, Indiana, and Illinois, but 23 in northeastern North Carolina were surely more than vagrants.

Perhaps the single most interesting migration story this spring involved fabulous numbers of Broad-winged Hawks in the Rio Grande Valley, with peak numbers of 25,000 at McAllen, Texas March 20 and 100,000 or more at the Santa Ana Refuge March 27. These huge flights were noted by others on the same days somewhat farther north, but no large concentrations of Broad-wingeds were reported northeast of a line from Corpus Christi to Austin; what happens to these birds? Broad-wingeds were still migrating in south Texas in early May, and were first noted at hawk lookouts in the New York/New Jersey area on April 13. More than the usual number were observed west of their normal range, with reports from Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

"Clapper" Rails from the Colorado River population were again found in a few spots in Central Arizona. Perhaps observers are looking for rails in the wrong places; 30 Virginias and Soras were found in a dry fescue field in Louisiana in April. A new Yellow Rail colony was found near Ottawa, Ontario, and a single bird was recorded near Duncan, B.C. Black Rails at Clemson, South Carolina and Havana, Illinois were unique inland. In California's parched Central Valley, Common Gallinules were reduced to climbing willow trees to feed on catkins!

Snowy Plovers were rather widely reported up the Mississippi Valley, in the Great Plains, and in the Southwest; hopefully some genuine expansion is underway. A Mountain Plover in Michigan was accidental. Long-billed Curlews were reported down in the Northwest owing to continued agricultural development of their habitat. An Upland Sandpiper in the Death Valley area was only California's third spring record.

There was a remarkable variety of Eurasian shorebirds in the Aleutians this spring, more than could be accounted for by increased coverage. Especially numerous were Wood Sandpipers and Long-toed Stints; the former were expected to remain to breed. Virtually every editor east of the Rockies commented on the abundance of White-rumped Sandpipers; it is hard to conceive of a migrational irregularity being so widespread, yet there were no unusual numbers southbound last fall, and so large a population explosion seems implausible. Four Baird's Sandpipers at three different locations in Arizona were virtually unprecedented, but all except one appeared at the same time as other "eastern" shorebirds. Only four Curlew Sandpipers were reported along the East Coast this spring, but Stilt Sandpipers were seen in record numbers in the East and have certainly lost their formerly casual status in the region. A Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Nova Scotia in early April was amazing.

Only about eight godwits were reported along the East Coast from Virginia northward this spring, but the annual Bar-tailed was one of them, this year at good old Newburyport, Massachusetts. Something obviously happened with Hudsonian Godwits in the western plains and beyond; among the wide ranging reports were the first records for Arizona and Nevada (five birds), as well as one near Vancouver, B.C., all on May 14 or 15! Ruffs are now almost commonplace in parts of the East, and this spring they were especially widely seen, west to Alberta. Phalaropes, too, were widely reported across the continent; the importance of sewage lagoons in the proliferation of Wilson's and Northern reports (as well as for other shorebirds) was much commented upon. In Ontario, a pair of

Wilson's was suspected of breeding at sewage impoundment there.

As early as 1913, Walter H. Rich (as quoted by A C Bent) was speculating about it; Ludlow Griscom called it "one of the last New England 'ornithological mysteries'." This year, another chapter was written in the story of the source of summer skuas off the East Coast, with the fortuitous collection of a South Polar Skua, *Catharacta maccormicki*, near Cape Hatteras. A few days later, another skua almost certainly this "species" was observed off New Jersey. Still, it is at best premature and probably erroneous to conclude that the mystery is now solved. Several other skuas were reported from Maryland to Nova Scotia, mostly in late May. On the West Coast, five skuas were reported off Southern California; while local wisdom is that only *maccormicki* appears there, specimens in eastern museums may refute such a premise (*vide*, Allan R. Keith).

California Gull populations at Bear River, Utah, have doubled over the past twenty years and were up elsewhere in the West; a May report in Illinois may be predictive. A Laughing Gull at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge may have been Oregon's first, other unusual reports were from west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, and near Montreal. Up to seven Franklin's Gulls were near Annapolis, Maryland during the last half of May — unprecedented but not really surprising in light of the steady increase in reports from the Great Lakes and farther east. A Franklin's Gull was exceptional at Rimouski, Québec, and two in west Texas along the Rio Grande were most unusual. Several Sabine's Gulls off the East Coast were mostly in April and early May, when there are few pelagic observations, but if this is the time to look for them, what was one doing in Chesapeake Bay May 21? Along the California coast, excellent flights of Sabine's were noted at both Goleta Point and Pigeon Point on May 18; more sea watches would undoubtedly uncover many more sightings, since they are certainly not rare offshore there.

Gull-billed Terns were expanding northward along the East Coast, but one at a Nogales, Arizona sewage pond was probably a vagrant from the Gulf of California. Caspian Terns were widely observed inland this year, and 54 seen moving up the James River near Hopewell, Virginia may give some indication of how they get there. Oregon's second Least Tern was noted at the mouth of the Columbia River May 31, and in Florida, Black Skimmers started nesting on rooftops along with the Least Terns which had been noted doing so previously.

A Razorbill on the northeast gulf coast of Florida in mid-April was truly remarkable; one was also picked up dead on a South Carolina beach. Off Southern California's Channel Islands,

no less than 24 Horned Puffins were observed in late May; until a few years ago this species was considered at best casual south of Alaska.

It has long been known that Barn Owls, often considered fairly sedentary, in fact migrate, but most such observations have been in the fall. This spring, 47 Barn Owls were noted at Annapolis, Maryland, between mid-March and mid-May. A presumed Burrowing Owl in Ontario was certainly surprising, but perhaps less so in light of the expansion of this species in protected prairie dog colonies in the northern plains. In Florida, on the other hand, continued development doesn't bode well for this species. A sporting Saw-whet Owl was reported joining a frisbee match at a Missouri college!

Whip-poor-wills were noted as being common at Gypsumville, Manitoba, some 200 miles north of the U.S. border but according to the A.O.U. Check-List, at the traditional northern limit of their range. Utah also had its third aural record of this species. "Antillean" Nighthawks were reported north to Mullet Key, Florida, near St. Petersburg, if some incipient ornithologist needs a good subject for a thesis, this should be it. Chimney Swifts were observed using chimneys both in Tucson, Arizona, and Ventura, California, but apparently no breeding in these areas has yet been proven. An almost incredible Anna's Hummingbird was reported nesting in the Davis Mountains of Texas, and Washington's first nest was located near Tacoma. Wandering Red-headed Woodpeckers invaded much of the Northeast, but breeding was down in a last Maryland stronghold and this species is hardly more than a relic in most of the East, though it is still doing well in the Middlewest.

Flycatchers were generally reported in good numbers in the south and plains, but were poor in the north perhaps owing to the cool weather. Many vagrants were observed, including a Western Kingbird in Ontario; Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in Georgia, Tennessee, and Illinois; a Wied's Crested Flycatcher and a Black Phoebe in Florida, a Western Wood Pewee in Massachusetts; and a Vermilion Flycatcher in Nebraska. Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers were noted again in Big Bend National Park and it seems only a matter of time before breeding is proven there.

The thrush migration was superb in the central states and great plains, with the Gray-cheeked being especially numerous west of its normal haunts; Colorado compilers were besieged with reports of a species only first confirmed from that state in 1973. Strangely, the thrush migration around Austin, Texas was very poor; there must be some correlation between these facts but it is elusive indeed. The mid-April warm spell, coming at the height of the kinglet migration, caused huge numbers to be reported, such as 6000 Golden-

crowned and 2000 Ruby-crowned at Prince Edward Point, Ontario, on April 19. Only a handful of "Migrant" Shrikes, the race of the Loggerhead which occupies several hundred thousand square miles of the East and North, were reported over its entire range.

Black-capped Vireos were called abundant on the Edwards Plateau of Texas, and the first Gray Vireo's nest east of the Pecos River was found. Black-whiskered Vireos were found in northwestern Florida and at Cameron, Louisiana, part of a puzzle discussed in *American Birds* 29 865. Bell's Vireos were reported in Florida and Ontario; these should be looked for elsewhere in the East.

Several Yellow-headed Blackbirds in the northeastern and middle Atlantic states seem to be part of a gradual eastward expansion of this species. Similarly, a number of Brewer's Blackbirds were reported in the same area, but in the past, some of these have turned out to be something else. A first Great-tailed Grackle for Missouri probably presages continued range expansion for this species. There were three Western Tanagers in the East, in Florida, Georgia, and Massachusetts; like the Brewer's Blackbird, these birds have sometimes turned into something else on closer observation.

A Pyrrhuloxia in the Oklahoma panhandle may have provided a first state record. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak migration was very good in most areas; unfortunate indeed were the 96 "lured to their death in a Birmingham (Alabama) Office Park building with bad reflections." Dickcissels continued scarce in the East, though a pair may have nested at Pendleton, South Carolina; one which came aboard a boat 250 miles off New Jersey was certainly lost. Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins, after a banner flight in the Appalachians and elsewhere inland, lingered well into May in most areas; a few of the latter may have bred south of their normal range. Red Crossbills, also on the heels of a major flight, either actually nested or were suspected of doing so at Southern Pines and Raleigh, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Springfield, Illinois. These nestings were in most cases quite early and few if any were successful. A Lark Bunting at Pymatuning, Pennsylvania at the end of May was accidental.

Le Conte's Sparrows were again found nesting near St. Fulgence, Québec, a location about 250 miles due north of the Maine - New Hampshire border, and a few others were reported from the Midwest. A bird thought to be this species near Braddocks Bay, New York turned out to be an aberrant Henslow's; sight record enthusiasts should read and reread Kibbe's report. Two Sharp-tailed Sparrows at California desert oases in late May were unprecedented. Cassin's Sparrows were apparently in unusually good numbers on the

Edwards Plateau of Texas and in southeastern Colorado. Washington's first Black-throated Sparrow was at Point Grenville, and British Columbia's first coastal Brewer's Sparrow was near Vancouver. A Golden-crowned Sparrow was also reported from southwestern Louisiana.

ACCIDENTALS

Tickers, myself included, invariably await this portion of the summary with abject anxiety, preparing for the self-flagellation that accompanies being at the wrong outpost of North American government (if not avifauna) at the the wrong moment. As usual, places such as Attu Island, in the eastern hemisphere about as far from mainland North America as Venezuela, and the Dry Tortugas, those life rafts for adrift Antillean waifs, were the focal points of the future grist for the A.O.U. Check-List mill. This year, the Aleutians were truly remarkable for Asiatic strays, with several species of waterfowl and shorebirds and such goodies as a number of Eye-browed Thrushes, six Oriental Greenfinches (first "North American" record), three Hawfinches, and a few Rustic Buntings. At the Tortugas, both a Bahama Mockingbird and a Tawny-shouldered Blackbird were found in mid-May. Other Florida rarities included one or more Bahama Swallows in the lower keys, and a Stripe-headed Tanager at Hypoluxo Island near Palm Beach. In Texas, three different sightings were made of birds believed to be Rufous Mourners, a Mexican cotinga. A Slaty-throated Redstart in southeastern Arizona was only the second United States record; it apparently met an untimely death in an unseasonal snowstorm. Finally, a Garganey at Bombay Hook, Delaware for two weeks in late April gave every indication of being wild and was probably a genuine wanderer.

CONCLUSION

At this point, I cannot help but feel like those pundits who follow the evening news on television, ready to give an instant analysis of all which has gone before. Like TV, the material in *American Birds* is highly edited and represents the most unusual, whereas the story of the season, and migration in general, is probably better represented by the unheralded swallows returning to Capistrano, the "buzzards" returning to Hinckley, Ohio, or the Wood Thrushes returning to the Smith's backyard in Holmdel, New Jersey all on essentially the same date as prior years despite weather conditions. If I have been, as Davis Finch might say, too starkly enumerative, it has been intentional, for I eschew any claim to inductive brilliance based on the mass of material assembled by the regional editors. I'm afraid Mother Nature will have to keep her secrets a while longer, but perhaps it is fitting that it should be so.