

The Changing Seasons

*White-tailed Eagles in the Aleutians,
Bachman's Warbler in Louisiana,
Gray-breasted Martin in Florida,
Steller's Eider in Massachusetts.
What a dull spring it was!*

by John P. Gee

THE ABOVE IS BUT A SAMPLING of the many exciting observations described in the Regional Reports which follow. This introduction will summarize the weather and migration of the spring of 1977, and highlight some of its interesting aspects. However, only a few of the many diverse threads of information contained in the Regional Reports can be tied together here. Therefore I hope the sample given above will encourage the reader to review the rest of this issue in detail.

Weather

SPRING ARRIVED EARLY this year, and almost the entire continent was warmer and drier than usual. Prevailing winds were from the south and southwest. There were few

cold fronts to interrupt the flow of warm air (and migrants) towards the north. Foliage leafed out very early. In the eastern part of the continent the warm and early spring contrasted sharply with the record-breaking cold of the past winter. In the West, however, there was no such strong contrast between winter and spring, since the winter was mild and dry and during the spring severe drought conditions continued in many areas. The dryness of this spring extended the drought to other parts of the continent, as well.

This generalized description of spring across the continent does not, of course, apply equally, everywhere, all of the time. Greatest departures from normal temperatures occurred over the center of the continental land mass, especially north and south of the Great Lakes

and in the Great Plains. There, April arrived in mid-March, and the months of April and May produced conditions more like summer than spring. Vernon Kleen sums it up when he opens his Middlewestern Prairie Region report with the question, "What happened to spring?"

However, along the northern Atlantic coast, temperatures averaged closer to normal. Although it was drier there than normal, the amount of precipitation varied and weather conditions were less stable than over most of the continent. An unusual snowstorm which hit the northeastern United States during the second week of May deposited up to fifteen inches of snow in some hilly inland areas and produced strong northeast winds which pushed an immense number of pelagic birds into Cape Cod Bay.

The Pacific coast also had more variable weather than most of the continent, but the unusually cool and damp May in northern and central California did not produce enough precipitation to break the Middle Pacific Coast Region's worst drought in history. Some drought-affected areas of the interior received much-needed rain this spring, notably the Canadian provinces and adjacent states of the Northern Great Plains Region, which received abundant rainfall in May after a very hot and dry March and April. Wyoming and the eastern edge of Colorado also benefited from these rains.

P RINCIPAL EXCEPTIONS TO the general weather pattern occurred in the southern extremities of the United States. South Florida had one of its wettest "dry seasons" in recent years, with one early May mini-tropical storm dumping over eleven inches of rain on Miami in one day. South Texas experienced generous precipitation during the last half of April, as well as moderate rainfall during May. Southern California had a stormy spring. Temperatures in all three of these areas were near normal or even below normal, hence relatively cool compared to the above-normal temperatures elsewhere.

Despite the regional variations described above, the weather this year was less varied than is normal for the season, and the general description of a warm, dry spring was applicable to almost all of the continent. Even Alaska reported a warm and sunny spring

Migration

T HIS SPRING'S MIGRATION was more interesting from the continental viewpoint than it was from the viewpoint of many Regional editors who described the migration in such terms as "lackluster", "on and off", "all too normal" and "poorest in years". Given the general weather pattern described above, it is not surprising that most areas of the continent experienced poor grounding conditions during the greater part of the spring. However, many rarities and unusual observations were reported, and some areas, particularly those on the periphery of the continent, had good waves and fallouts of migrants. The weather conditions which tended to make this year's migration better for birds than for birders also caused a great deal of overflying and an unusual number of earliest-ever arrival records.

During the first half of the spring season the northern parts of the continent had better birding than the southern ones. In the north the unusually warm weather, which commenced with the late-February thaw, resulted in an early break-up of ice and good flights of waterfowl and other birds which migrate early in spring. Principal waves occurred in mid-March and early April. During the same period, many early arrival records were established. Concentrations of waterfowl and other flocking birds were spotty because of overflying, but overall numbers were good for most species. In the East, diving ducks were unusually numerous, perhaps because the severe winter forced many to winter farther south than usual. In the West, the drought caused considerable displacement of waterbirds and other migrants, and added to the tendency towards overflying already caused by prevailing southerly winds and few interruptions in the form of cold fronts

I N THE SOUTH, HOWEVER, most observers had little to report during March and early April. The few cold fronts which reached the coasts of the southern Atlantic states and Gulf of Mexico were too weak to produce much fallout of birds. Dauphin Island, Alabama, for example, reported its "worst late March and early April ever". A number of individual winter residents and migrants lingered longer than usual in the south, at the same time that

other individuals were producing earliest-ever records in the north. Therefore, the tendency in the south was to label migration late, while in the north it appeared to be ahead of schedule.

After the middle of April the picture changed. The southern extremities of the United States, as well as portions of both coasts, had more rain and more variable weather than previously, and many of these areas experienced good fallouts of migrants. Southern California was especially exciting during this period. There, the storms of late April and May grounded large numbers of migrants, and, in this one region, the fallout was every bit as apparent inland as on the coast.

The South Texas coast also had good fallouts, which were associated with the rains of late spring. For example, on April 30, during a sample half-hour count on Mustang Island, 1628 passerines, plus uncounted hundreds of swallows, were recorded flying in a northward direction low over the dunes. During the heaviest showers of that day as many as 60 birds sheltered in single salt-cedar trees, but, whenever the rains slowed, the northward flight resumed. On the upper and middle Atlantic coast several relatively late cold fronts produced good waves of migrants in May, one of the most spectacular of which followed the unusually late snowstorm mentioned earlier. In the Hudson-Delaware Region, thousands of swallows were stalled by the front, and, immediately afterwards, classic "Big Day" conditions were encountered on the coast, but not inland.

In most of the rest of the continent the lack of grounding conditions resulted in a dull and spotty migration of passerines and other birds which migrate later in the spring. Observers in the interior, especially those in northern regions, complained that migration was virtually over by the beginning of May, while observers on the southern coasts reported that migration was behind schedule during the second half of the season. From the continental viewpoint, it appears that the bulk of migrants moved through about on time during the second half of the season. While there was still considerable overflying, and a number of individuals arrived early on their nesting grounds, the impressions of many observers

were naturally affected also by the timing of grounding conditions, or lack of them, in their areas.

Winter mortality

BECAUSE THE EASTERN PART of the continent had just endured one of its severest winters on record, eastern observers were particularly interested in assessing the extent of winter mortality. For many species the available evidence indicates that the amount of winter kill varied greatly between different localities, and it is questionable that the overall damage was as great as expected. There is no doubt, however, that both kinglets and the Carolina Wren suffered great losses. Other species which were or may have been reduced by winter mortality, at least in some areas, include Bobwhite, Belted Kingfisher, Common Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, House Wren, Winter Wren and Mockingbird. Despite the well-documented winter kill of Brant, good spring flights were observed on the middle and northern Atlantic coast, and inland in Ontario. Suspected heavy winter mortality of the Great Blue Heron was stressed in "The Changing Seasons" for last winter. However, the spring reports on this species are too diverse to allow any conclusions to be drawn at this time. The Red-bellied Woodpecker seemed to have been practically unaffected by the harsh winter.

Even the Carolina Wren appeared this spring in new northern nesting localities, and it is continuing its range expansion despite heavy winter losses in many parts of its range. It remains to be seen how quickly this year's and future nesting seasons will restore decimated populations, and whether last winter's losses were serious enough to have a long-term effect.

Regarding the flicker, Tom Imhof in the Central Southern Region report noted that flickers have greatly declined in the Birmingham area in recent years, and he suspects that Mirex, an insecticide used for fire-ant control, may be to blame. It might be pertinent that the Appalachian Region, immediately to the north of the Central Southern Region, also remarked that flickers are down in numbers.

A few highlights

THIS SPRING NEARLY 950,000 offshore migrants were counted from land during 54 days of observations from Pigeon Point, California. By far the most numerous species was the Arctic Loon, with over 400,000 individuals counted, and next was the Bonaparte's Gull, with approximately 180,000. However, 43 species were recorded, including 277 Black-footed Albatrosses, and other interesting pelagics.

Red-necked Grebes, which occurred in the northeastern regions in unusually large numbers last winter, were observed in enormous numbers this spring. The Niagara-Champlain Region furnished an interesting report of a noisy concentration of courting grebes which remained in Lake Ontario near Rochester, New York, for three weeks, peaking at 1210 birds on April 10. Although the Red-necked Grebe is normally rare in the Niagara-Champlain Region, a similar concentration was recorded once before, in April 1958, in the same general area.

Like many birders, I am absolutely intrigued by pelagic trips. Even when the results are disappointing, as all too often happens, I look forward to what may be seen next time. Readers who feel as I do should refer to the three trips described in the Florida Region report. One produced 420 Audubon's Shearwaters and 449 other pelagics. Another produced 13 Black-capped Petrels! Other pelagic highlights included sightings of the rare Mottled Petrel in Hawaii, and the first Scaled Petrel to be found alive in the Middle Pacific Coast Region. Birds blown into Cape Cod Bay by the northeaster of May 10-11 included no less than 10,000 Leach's Petrels, as well as other pelagics. Continued regular sightings of Manx Shearwaters around Cox's Ledge, offshore Rhode Island, suggests the possibility that a small nesting colony may already exist nearby, and the presence of Laysan Albatrosses throughout the spring at Kilauea Point, on the northern tip of Kauai, suggests that this species may try to extend its breeding range to the southern islands of Hawaii, as the Red-tailed Tropicbird has done.

Because of the drought, White-faced Ibis

numbers were down at their principal nesting grounds in Nevada, but unusually large numbers were present in Oregon and Montana. White-faced Ibis also established many new locality records in the Southern Great Plains Region, and vagrants included the Hudson-Delaware Region's first, which was also the fourth for the eastern United States. Both *Plegadis* ibis species are present at Cat Island, Alabama, for the second year, and it will be interesting to see whether interbreeding occurs.

A FIFTEEN MILE-WIDE COLUMN of migrating Snow Geese in North Dakota must have been an awe-inspiring manifestation of this spring's spectacular Snow Goose migration in the Northern Great Plains Region. White-fronted Geese created excitement in the East, where vagrants were more numerous than usual. Eurasian waterfowl made a poor showing in Alaska, probably because of overflying owing to the warm, calm weather. Both the Hooded Merganser and Wood Duck appear to be doing very well, with many reports of new nesting localities and larger numbers than usual. Notable rarities included Bahama Duck in Florida and Masked Duck in two places in Texas, as well as in Florida, the Steller's Eider in Massachusetts and the first confirmed report of Harlequin Duck in Mexico.

One of the most interesting raptor reports is Bob Paxton's comment on this spring's coastal hawk watches at Sandy Hook, New Jersey in the Hudson-Delaware Region. It was determined that there is a spring flight comparable to the better known autumn flights on the coast, and there is evidence to support the theory that the coastal migrants form a separate population, with a different geographic origin, from the ridge migrants.

Turkey Vultures continue to expand their range northward and eastward. They returned to the eastern Canadian provinces and adjacent states in greater numbers than ever before, and much earlier than usual. The Mississippi Kite reoccupied former range in southern Illinois and appeared in other mid-western and Great Plains localities north of its present range. The reports on Cooper's Hawks, Bald Eagles, and Peregrine Falcons were mixed but on the whole discouraging.

Nineteen Goshawk nests were found within a fifteen-mile radius of Sharon, Connecticut, and Goshawks nested in New York State at a spot where Cooper's Hawks formerly nested, tending to support the idea that the decline of the latter may be connected with the current widespread success of the former. See the Alaska Region report concerning the White-tailed Eagles seen at Attu Island in May

Almost every region reported an exciting shorebird migration, even while many editors found other aspects of this spring's migration dull. Both the eastern and the western parts of the continent reported unusually large numbers of shorebirds that migrate through their regions in autumn but are usually more or less confined to the Mississippi Valley and Great Plains in spring. An example is the Wilson's Phalarope, which continues to increase in numbers, especially in the East. The Northern Phalarope, an even greater rarity in most regions, was also widespread and much more numerous than usual this spring. Red Phalaropes were found inland in Minnesota and Ohio, and in California.

Among the outstanding rarities was Alaska's first Spoon-billed Sandpiper since 1914, Connecticut's first Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, and a Bar-tailed Godwit that returned to the same beach in New Jersey for the fifth time in six years.

HOWEVER, HUGH KINGERY'S REPORT OF this spring's concentration of shorebirds at Bear River Refuge eclipses all other shorebird reports. On April 29, 250,000 Marbled Godwits, 200,000 Long-billed Dowitchers, 150,000 American Avocets, 50,000 Black-necked Stilts, 15,000 Willets and 13,000 "peeps" were at Bear River. The drought conditions which reduced waterfowl numbers at Bear River must have encouraged the concentration of shorebirds, and the drought also reduced shorebird habitat elsewhere in the region.

The star performer this spring among the Larids was undoubtedly the Arctic Tern. It was reported up and down the entire Atlantic coast. Florida had its first confirmed record and New York its second unrelated to a tropical storm. It was encountered inland in Québec, Ontario and New York. It had its

best spring ever in the Northern Pacific Coast Region. White-winged Gulls continue to increase and, consequently, more and more are reported lingering late in spring. This year, they were mentioned by virtually every regional editor. Bonaparte's Gulls were unusually numerous, with large numbers reported in many interior localities, both in the East and the West. Two adult Franklin's Gulls at Cox's Ledge on May 27 constituted a first record for Rhode Island. The Florida Region report contained interesting comments on roof-top nesting of Least Terns and predation by Burrowing Owls!

Individual Burrowing Owls wandered far to the north of their usual range, with vagrants found as far north as Québec, Ontario, New York, Minnesota, and Oregon. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird was recorded for the first time in the Northern Pacific Coast Region, but in the East the number of Ruby-throateds observed was very low. This species will bear watching during the next few years. Florida had its first spring record of the Cuban Emerald Hummingbird. See the Middle Pacific Coast Region's account of the reaction of Vaux's Swifts to a late cold spell in California, and the consequent reaction of the national press, which played this up as an "attack of birds", *à la* Hitchcock.

FLYCATCHERS ESTABLISHED MANY early records. Western Kingbirds and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers appeared several places in the Northeast where they are very rare or unprecedented in spring. Both phenomena were undoubtedly related to the weather conditions which encouraged overflying. Willow and Acadian Flycatchers continued to expand in the Northeast. Olive-sided Flycatchers were more numerous than usual, particularly in the south-central part of the continent.

During a Las Vegas, Nevada, windstorm in early May, 1000 swallows of six species huddled on the ground for protection from the winds, and a few days later, fifty Western Wood Pewees were observed doing the same thing. A female Gray-breasted Martin in Florida represented the first record for the United States. Purple Martins were at an all-time high in West Texas. In the western states Purple Martins appeared in new areas

and in larger numbers than usual. Cliff Swallows were numerous in the Northeast, and New Jersey observers considered 1977 the best year ever for Cliff Swallows. Two adult Bahama Swallows were seen at Big Pine Key in Florida.

The Common Raven is increasing in the Adirondacks and it appears to be expanding elsewhere in the central Appalachians. The continued northward expansion of the Yellow-billed Magpie indicates that this California endemic soon will no longer be restricted to the State of California. The White-eyed Vireo continues to expand northward in the eastern half of the continent.

Most observers complained about the lack of warbler waves, and most Regional editors considered this year's warbler migration unimpressive, except in the few regions which had satisfactory grounding conditions during the height of warbler migration. Nevertheless, the more regularly seen rarities were observed in good numbers and there were also reports of exceptional rarities. The Bachman's Warbler, which was seen in Louisiana, was a female found in Cameron Parish on April 16 and 17 by Bob Newman and others. Other outstanding rarities included Rufous-capped Warblers in Arizona and Texas, an adult male Hermit Warbler in Connecticut and an adult male Townsend's in New York. Thirty-four warbler species were found in Southern California, which would have been good for an eastern state or province, much less a part of a West Coast one.

FOLLOWING THE PRECEDENT already set by other blackbirds, the Great-tailed Grackle is expanding its range. It established first breeding records in Nebraska and Arkansas and was found further north in California and further west in Colorado than ever before. Boat-tailed Grackles occurred in new areas in the Central Southern Region. A group of at least twenty Boat-taileds occupied an area in coastal Alabama consisting of pecan orchards, a cemetery, a small pond and extensive row crops, marking the first such in Alabama away from marine habitats. A single male Boat-tailed spent part of April at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge near New York City, which is north of the northernmost known breeding colony at

Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey.

Orchard Orioles were in excellent numbers in the Northeast. The species nested for the first time in Vermont, climaxing seven years of increase, after being absent from the state for 60 years. Bobolinks were unusually numerous in the West and Southwest, and the migration of Bobolinks through the Hudson-Delaware Region was the heaviest in many years.

Alaska had its second Scarlet Tanager record and Montana its first. An unprecedented nine Scarlet Tanagers were reported from Colorado. This species also made news because it arrived in Michigan and Minnesota during the first half of April, which was exceptionally early. Summer Tanagers were noted less often than usual north of their breeding range, however, Hepatic Tanagers were numerous and widespread. Wyoming had its first record and Colorado its fourth.

A Greater Antillean Bullfinch, seen in South Florida in April, furnished a first record for North America. Florida also had its first Lazuli Bunting. Other noteworthy records include a Pine Grosbeak in North Carolina, a Painted Bunting in New York, a European Greenfinch in New Brunswick, a Le Conte's Sparrow in Wyoming and a Black-throated Sparrow in Oregon. House Finches continued their phenomenal expansion in the East and appeared unharmed by last winter's cold weather. Nests were found as far west as Cleveland, Ohio, and as far north as Brunswick, Maine, and Plattsburgh, New York. Individuals in Michigan, North Carolina and Ontario are a portent of continued expansion in the future.

Alaska, as usual, produced a crop of exciting Palaearctic passerine records. New species for North America were the Red-breasted Flycatcher and the Grey Bunting. Other species recorded this spring included Eye-browed Thrush, Dusky Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Grey-spotted Flycatcher, Indian Tree Pipit, Brambling, Rustic Bunting and Reed Bunting. However, Alaska's spring extended well into June, and many other exciting records remain to be reported in the next issue of *American Birds*.

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