The Changing Seasons

An exciting Autumn 1979 Season more remarkable for the variety than the numbers of birds found.

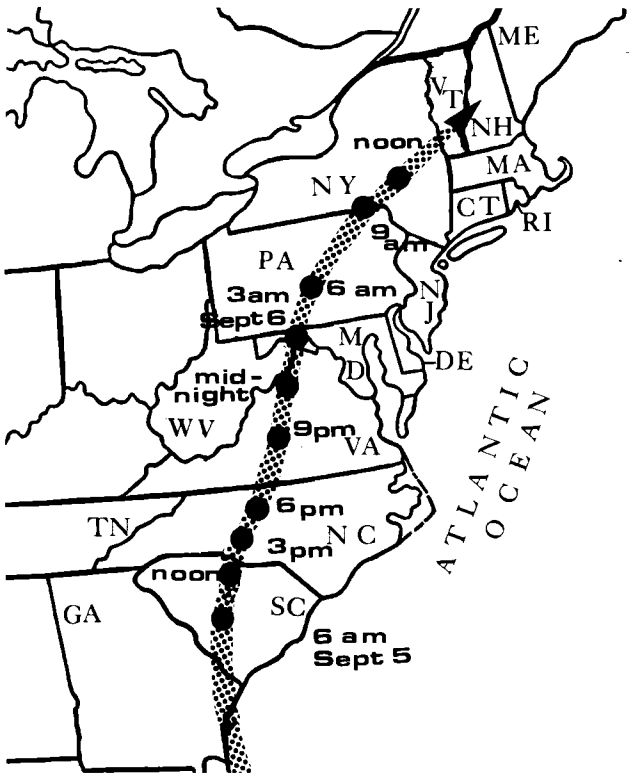
Paul DeBenedictis

THE FALL MIGRATION usually provides much ornithological novelty. The fall of 1979 was especially rich in such surprises. Two major Atlantic hurricanes, *David* and *Frederic,* came ashore in September, the first bringing with it more tropical seabirds than any Atlantic storm since hurricane *Donna* in 1960. Readers of these pages cannot but notice the recent emphasis on "eastern birds west." This fall a strong counter flow provided many unprecedented reports from the eastern half of the continent. Moderate numbers of palearctic species were found, and only in terms of north to south displacements was this season quiet compared with recent years.

HURRICANE *DAVID*

IT MAY BE HELPFUL to begin this summary by recalling some pertinent ornitho-meteorological lore established in earlier storms. First, hurricanes can be potent movers of birds, but the numbers and species composition of the birds moved depend critically on the path of the storm. Second, winds around a hurricane tend to be strongest northeast of the storm's center, and ornithological records correspondingly tend to be concentrated east of a hurricane's track. Third, most birds which are carried ashore by a hurricane depart quickly — within two days — after the storm passes. Finally, birding activity tends to be most intense during daylight hours on weekends. These basic ideas, coupled with the uneven distribution and a less-well documented but, in my opinion equally important, overall improvement in the abilities of bird watchers complicates comparison of different storms.

Hurricane *David* was born in the tropical Atlantic (*ca.,* 10°N, 36°W) on about August 25 and had achieved hurricane strength at approximately 12°N, 49°W by August 27. *David* developed into exceptionally deep low pressure center, with winds well in excess of 125 mph at the storm's maximum, and had a rain shield 400-600 miles in diameter. *David* crossed the northern Lesser Antilles on August 29 and moved through the Caribbean just south of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, turning north through Haiti on September 1. After grazing the western Bahamas, *David's* center was located just east of Miami, Florida, on Monday morning, September 3. It traveled slowly up the east coast of Florida to about Cape Kennedy during daylight hours on Monday. Off Jacksonville the next morning, it continued northward and came ashore approximately at Charleston, South Carolina, on Tuesday evening. During daylight Wednesday *David* moved approximately from Columbia, South Carolina, to Greensboro, North Carolina, and passed west of the heavily populated mid-Atlantic that night. Daylight Thursday saw the storm's center move from about Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to Concord, New Hampshire, and on Friday morning the remnants of the storm were moving northeast from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to disintegrate in the North Atlantic. This



path kept *David* in contact with the Atlantic during most of its trip northward, but only New England birders could reach favored coastal vantages on a weekend within two days of *David's* passage. Any reconstruction of the ornithological events must accommodate this fact.

Virtually no storm-driven birds were found west of the path of *David's* center; not one report came from the Ontario or Québec Regions. Eastward the story was utterly different! Records of approximately 28 species of seabirds were more or less closely associated with *David.* Tubenoses were poorly represented: one Audubon's Shearwater from the Southern Atlantic Coast Region, two Sooty Shearwaters each from the Middle Atlantic Coast and Hudson-Delaware Regions, a Black-capped Petrel from the Appalachian(!) Region, and a handful of Wilson's Storm-Petrels from the Southern Atlantic Coast and Hudson-Delaware Regions. White-tailed Tropicbirds were reported from both the Florida and Southern Atlantic Coast Regions, and an even more unusual Red-billed Tropicbird came ashore in Florida. Frigatebirds were inconsistently reported in ones and twos from as far north as Connecticut, but reports from this entire area during August make it unclear how far any of them had been transported. Records of phalaropes, jaegers, several gull and tern species, and the like, from along the entire Atlantic coast clearly were storm-related, but were reported too inconsistently to be analyzed. For example, Black Skimmers must have been widely affected but were mentioned specifically only from coastal New Hampshire. Probably the great increase in both the number and regularity of records, especially northward, has somewhat dulled the sensitivity of observers to such species as Gull-billed, Sandwich, and Royal terns, all of which have figured prominently in past hurricanes. The mid-week passage of *David* also must have allowed many of these birds to return to more normal haunts without detection. Sooty, Bridled, and Noddy terns remain sufficiently noteworthy that most are reported. The numbers of all three are truly impressive (Table 1), especially considering that several regional editors did not attempt to enumerate all reports. No land birds were known to have been transported by *David,* but several Regional Reports vaguely note groundings of migrants that occurred in close association with *David's* passage.

Hurricane *Donna* (*AFN* 15(1):1961) followed a similar path in 1960, crossing the Florida peninsula twice before moving northward just offshore to New England. Numbers of birds reported from New England were comparable to the fallout from *David,* but to the south *David* produced far more individual birds. *Donna* produced only about 232 Sooty and 100 Bridled terns overall, as well as about 100 Noddies. The difference probablyis the result of both the change in numbers and quality of birders over the past 20 years, and also the more easterly path of *Donna's* center. The very different character of the New England fallout from the two storms supports the latter claim especially well; by remaining offshore until reaching New England *Donna* should have been less effective in bringing birds ashore south of New England but better able to carry a richer set of species to eastern New England than was *David.*

Table 1.
Tropical tern totals from Hurricane *David.*

Region	*Sooty Tern*	*Bridled Tern*	*Brown Noddy*
Florida	300+	50+	102
South Atlantic Coast	300+	120+	10-12
Middle Atlantic Coast	32+	2+	
Hudson-Delaware	115	6	1
Niagara-Champlain	16		
Northeastern Maritime	170	7	

HURRICANE *FREDERIC.*

A NATURAL EXPERIMENT is the (near simultaneous) occurrence of two natural phenomena that differ in only a few characteristics. The contrast of hurricanes *David* and *Frederic* provides an exceptionally fine natural experiment on the transport of birds by major storms. *Frederic* was born just five days after *David* at almost the same point in the tropical Atlantic, grew into a storm of similar magnitude, and followed a near identical path across the Lesser Antilles and eastern Caribbean. Only on reaching Cuba did these storms begin to diverse significantly. *Frederic* spent two days slowly losing strength as it moved west along the south shore of Cuba, then turned north across western Cuba to break into the Gulf of Mexico on the evening of September 10. The next two days saw *Frederic* moving slowly northward and re-intensifying before it came ashore at Mobile, Alabama, on the evening of Wednesday, September 12. During daylight Thursday, September 13, *Frederic* moved north-northeast from about Meridian, Mississippi, to about Nashville, Tennessee. Its remnant low pressure center moved from southwestern Pennsylvania across the eastern Great Lakes during daylight Friday, and essentially had vanished by Saturday, September 15.

While the east coast of Florida surely was affected, only the Central Southern Region reported significant numbers of birds associated with *Frederic.* There observers found Sooty and Cory's shearwaters, Long-tailed Jaeger, inland Laughing Gulls, and several tern species including Sooty, Bridled and Noddy terns. An Arctic Tern in northeastern Florida on September 14 and three Cave Swallows in the Dry Tortugas on September 9 may have been associated with *Frederic,* but no other species were mentioned from Florida. Northward a Laughing Gull from Tennessee and an amazing 10,000 Common (rather, Abundant!) Terns from the east end of Lake Ontario were coincident with *Frederic's* passage, but the absence of reports from intervening areas much reduces one's confidence in the causal association of these events.

The major differences between these two storms were that *Frederic* affected a much smaller area (ornithologically) and carried far fewer birds than did *David.* The more easterly path taken by *Frederic* left only Cuba and the Dry Tortugas as sources of birds to be storm transported. Although recent field work has demonstrated previously unsuspected populations of warm-water seabirds in the Gulf of Mexico, numbers of individuals involved are small, especially compared to the variety and numbers of birds reported from inshore Gulfstream waters off the Atlantic Coast By moving inland *Frederic* diminished much more rapidly than did *David* and also more quickly lost its ability to gather and perhaps to retain birds which might appear elsewhere as storm-driven vagrants. The contrast between these two storms suggests that hurricanes do not transport most birds very far once they lose contact with oceanic waters.

My initial impression of both storms was to be almost as surprised at what did not appear as it was to be impressed with what was found. We must assume

that *David's* lengthy inland passage is the reason why so few tubenoses were involved. Why were no boobies, and so few frigatebirds noted? These groups are seldom hurricane-transported and one wonders what behavioral traits exempt them from being transported as frequently as are the three tropical tern species so markedly affected by both *David* and *Donna*. One must also wonder what each of these storms might have transported had Caribbean and Bahamian seabird populations been more than a shadow of what they were 300 years ago. Much remains to be learned about hurricane transport of birds. Because it is such a dangerous and costly phenomenon to observe, we can be glad that the progress being made is being made slowly. At the same time, it is clear that much fieldwork needs to be done. Badly needed are detailed reports of seasonal status, species composition, and population sizes of seabirds in the Gulf of Mexico. (See this issue, pp. 122-132.) An investigation of the waters between the Bahamas and the Florida peninsula would provide a much-needed comparison with our rapidly expanding knowledge of seabirds off the Carolinas (Lee and Booth, *AB* 33: 715-721; 1979) and north (e.g., Finch *et al AB* 32:140-155, 281-294; 1978). Studies such as these would give much better insight as to what birds really to expect as storm-transported victims.

THE MIGRATION

ONLY THE ATLANTIC coast from Chesapeake Bay south reported more than average numbers of migrants. The consensus from the Northeast was that the Autumn 1979 would have been dull were it not for western vagrants and hurricane-related seabirds. This difference in viewpoint was generally, but not surprisingly, attributed to the pattern (or lack) of strong frontal systems in each Region. October was a generally cool month, but November was rather uniformly mild. The result was such a profusion of "late records" that most Regional Editors could include only the most exceptional. Devotees of such reports will find a rich lode in this issue. Otherwise, the Regional Reports provide little insight to the general character of the migration of the more regular species in any Region.

I have already noted the generally weak character of north-south (and also by implication south-north) movements this fall. It was not that birds didn't go south this season, but rather that the passage was generally unexceptional in terms of numbers of "regular" species. Each migration season has a distinctive flavor. The events that made this season stand out are detailed in the sections below. Some notable trends did not fit well into these broader categories. The saga of the Whooping Crane continues to be chronicled in the several Plains and Rocky Mountain Regional Reports; 76 returned to Aransas N.W.R., this fall. Buff-breasted Sandpipers were mentioned in more Regions than ever before. They were less frequent than usual in the East but relatively more abundant in the West. Eared Trogons continued to be found in the Southwest without firm evidence of establishment. A potential oil-pollution disaster in the South Texas Region seems to have been averted so far, although it remains to be seen what the damage from pollution of the Mexican coast and the long-term consequences everywhere may be.

No southern South American vagrants were reported. The Northeastern Maritime Region emphasized a strong anomalous movement during the late fall. Elsewhere, five reports of Ground Dove — one each from Delaware, Virginia, Nebraska, and South Carolina, and two from Illinois — also may represent the same, but also could have been of southwestern vagrants. Because southeastern and southwestern populations of Ground Dove are subspecifically distinct, this is a case where a specimen could have provided additional insight that no other means of documentation permits. Reports of Groove-billed Ani were even more striking. Singles were found in Illinois, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia, two from Wisconsin, and 11 from northern Florida, mostly during October. Obviously a part of post-breeding dispersal, these records and reports from the previous few falls ring suspiciously like the advances that sometimes precede an explosive population increase and range expansion. For this reason, Groove-billed Anis deserve special attention in the future.

SEABIRDS

THE ATLANTIC EXPERIENCED warmer-than-average surface temperatures this season. Perhaps as a consequence, impressive numbers of Audubon's Shearwaters were found off the mid-Atlantic, and stragglers appeared north to New England waters, whence Cory's Shearwaters also continued in high numbers from the early summer. Tropical terns, except for hurricane-driven birds, were less abundant. Two albatrosses, one a Yellow-nosed, were found off New England and White-faced Storm-Petrels were seen off New Jersey and Virginia. Large skuas, when identified, seemed to separate into the Great Skua from cooler waters and South Polar Skuas from warmer waters. Buried in the Niagara-Champlain regional report is one of the highest single-day counts of jaegers made in the continental United States, this is the third such count from the southeast corner of Lake Ontario. Sabine's Gulls were reported about twice as often as usual both offshore and inland east of the Mississippi.

Pacific Coast seabird observers reported a generally unexceptional season. Identity of the few "black and white" shearwaters found off the Pacific Northwest remains problematical, although (Black-vented) Manx is most likely. Very high numbers of Least Storm-Petrel occurred off southern California, but tropicbirds were scarce and boobies nonexistent If it proves regular, the discovery of a warm-water Pacific seabird fauna relatively close to California this fall, highlighted by two *Pterodroma* species, a Galapagos Storm-Petrel, and a Red-tailed Tropicbird, is one of the major findings of this season. Most of the species involved were known to occur farther offshore, and several already had been recorded from cooler waters closer to shore. As this avifauna includes several other species as yet unknown from North America, we can be sure that California birders will continue to monitor it Because field identification of several of its members is difficult, we hope this effort will be accompanied by judicious collecting.

RAPTORS

HAWK WATCHING HAS BECOME an increasingly well organized and independent part of field ornithology. Particularly good summaries of activities from the East are in the Hudson-Delaware, Middle Atlantic Coast, Ontario and Appalachian Regional Reports Mississippi Kites were found in high numbers over much of the Southeast, and straggled north of their more traditional range. This increase follows widespread reports of the species from

the Northeast during the late spring and summer. Two most encouraging notes were the record flight of Peregrines along the entire Atlantic Coast, and the continued although less spectacular increase in Merlin numbers from the same sites. While not so impressive, numbers of both falcons from mid-continent were comparable to or better than last year's, so this increase does not seem to be merely the eastward displacement of migrants but rather the result of a very successful nesting season. Closer attention to the ratio of adults to immatures would have made such a conjecture less speculative.

In the hope that encouragement helps, I heartily echo the praise given in last fall's Changing Seasons to those dedicated hawk watchers in the West. This autumn pioneering efforts from Bozeman, Montana, and the Goshute Mountains, Nevada, were added to reports from previously monitored sites in the Mountain West, Northern Pacific Coast, and Middle Pacific Coast Regions. The description of the site in the Goshutes suggests that it has the potential of being one of the outstanding hawk watches in North America. Alas, with all the birding activity in central California, Point Diablo still continues to get spotty coverage and reporting. No doubt, the next few years will see radical changes in our perception of hawk migration in the West.

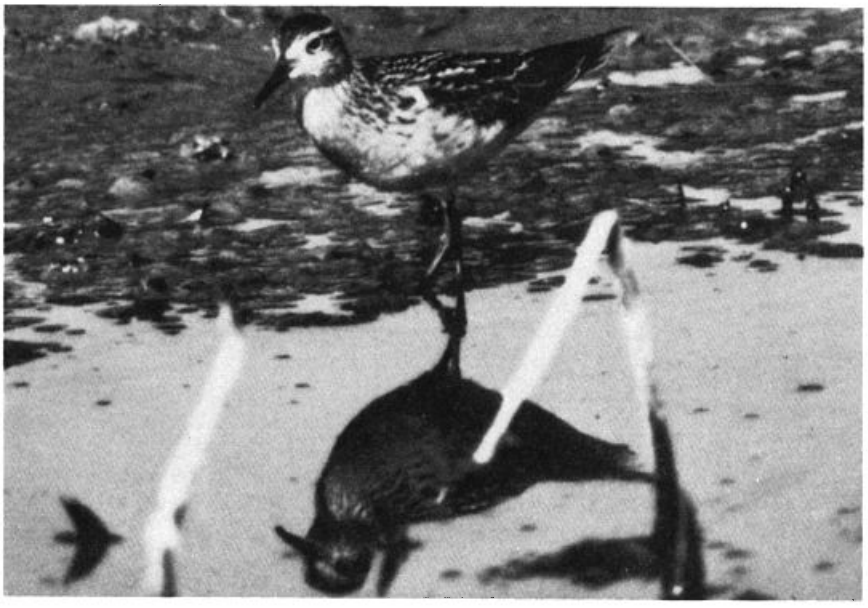
IRRUPTIVE SPECIES

DIDN'T.

PALAEARCTIC VAGRANTS

ONLY A MODERATE number of palaearctic species was reported this fall, and palaearctic waterfowl were notably scarce. In the eastern half of the continent, the continued increase of Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers remains evident, with 22 individuals reported from seven regions, including single birds inland at Niagara Falls, Ottawa, and two from the south shore of Lake Erie. Ruffs were relatively scarce, but Curlew Sandpipers were perhaps more frequently (or more skillfully) detected than in past years. Only two other palaearctic "peep" were reported: a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper from Saskatchewan and a Little Stint from Ontario, the latter becoming the first North American specimen of this difficult species (two prior records of spring adults were substantiated by photographs). Other notable reports include: an Eurasian Kestrel at Cape May, New Jersey; Spotted Redshanks from New Jersey and Ohio; and a Black-tailed Godwit from Pennsylvania. Palaearctic passerines went virtually unreported in the East. Beside the shorebirds noted above, a Bewick's Swan from Saskatchewan was the only notable report from the mid-continental regions.

Alaska, usually the main source for reports of palaearctic species, was quite compared to recent autumns. The list from Alaska seems less exciting because by now one almost expects an addition to the North American list in it each fall. It didn't materialize this season. Pacific Coast observers found an interesting variety of Siberian species, but more individuals have occurred in prior years. Waterfowl were scarce, although Tufted Ducks were found in all three Pacific Coast Regions. American Golden Plovers, which typically include some of the Siberian race *fulva,* were plentiful, but Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, although widespread, were not. Numbers from Alaska are hard to interpret given the paucity of data from that state. Observers found a total of 21 Ruffs south of Alaska, perhaps significant following the record numbers from Alaska last spring. The more unusual shorebirds found included a Mongolian Plover in Oregon, a Dotterel in Washington, and Curlew Sandpipers from both Washington and southern California. Multiple Middendorff's Grasshopper Warblers from the western Aleutians highlight the short list of palaearctic passerines from Alaska. California's somewhat less problematical Skylark briefly returned to Point Reyes, and elsewhere California observers found both White and Yellow wagtails. Two Red-throated Pipits from Washington help fill the gap between prior Alaskan and central California records; the careful reader will discover that five (!) species of Motacillids were found in California this fall, a remarkable feat in any state except Alaska.

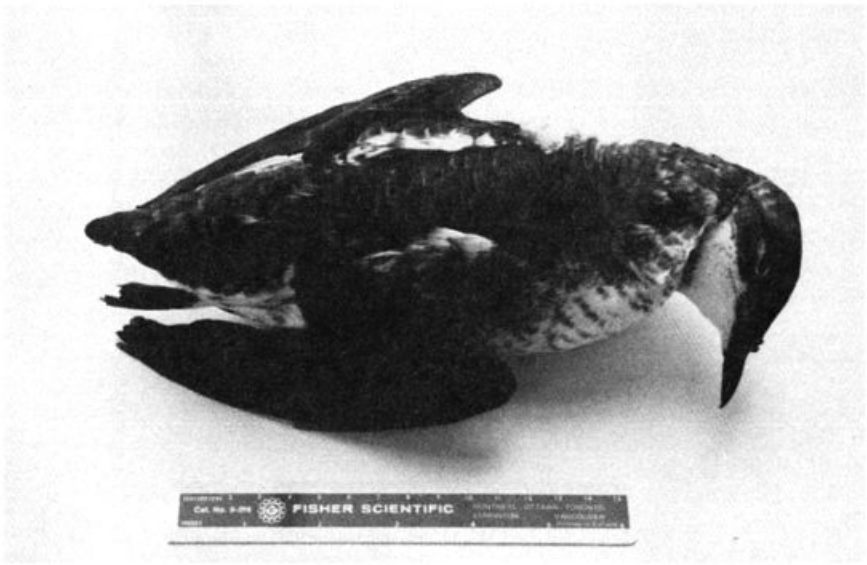


Imm. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Goleta, Calif., Sept. 19, 1979. Photo/James M. Greaves.

WESTERN BIRDS EAST

EASTERN OBSERVERS found the most diverse set of "western" birds since at least 1976, although numbers of individuals were unimpressive. About 45 of such species were noted in regional reports from east of the Mississippi River. The composition of the list was as extraordinary as its length. Loons, grebes (in particular) and waterfowl did not contribute much to the total. The now annual flow of Swainson's Hawks this fall produced reports from Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Virginia as well as nine each from southern Louisiana and from Florida. More surprising were reports of Ferruginous Hawks from Minnesota, where the species is rare, and New Jersey, where it is both unprecedented and as yet unsubstantiated. The northeasternmost Surfbird was found at Presque Isle, Pennsylvania, in August. California Gulls appeared at several new locations — Minnesota, Ohio, and Virginia — as well as the New York and Florida localities whence came last year's records. Almost unbelievable was a Michigan Heermann's Gull, for not only

was it previously unknown from the East, it is exceptionally rare inland even in the West. Several Atlantic Coast Regions noted high numbers of Forster's Terns, but these could have come from eastern instead of western populations (in this instance, subspecific differentiation is less well established, so only banding recoveries could reveal the origin of the birds). An Ancient Murrelet in Minnesota in late October correlates with a large influx on the Pacific Coast plus an intervening report from Montana. The Marbled Murrelet in Québec is less easy to explain! These records emphasize that observers, particularly on the Great Lakes, should not assume that small alcids seen in the East necessarily are Dovekies. If these birds originate from the Arctic Ocean as has been postulated, then Crested and Parakeet auklets may be expected to turn up in the future as well. A White-winged Dove was photographed in Nova Scotia. Louisiana got its long anticipated Anna's Hummingbird this fall, but was outclassed by a Massachusetts Black-chinned Hummingbird. Now we can be certain that to identify "female" *Archilochus* hummingbirds wintering in the East, one must examine the bird in hand; there are no known field marks that permit separation of "female" Ruby-throated from "female" Black-chinned Hummingbirds, and not enough winter specimens exist to estimate the proportion at which these species actually occur in the East. Western Kingbirds continued in good numbers after a strong showing during the late summer, being especially numerous in the Northeastern-Maritime Region. Although poorly reported from the mid-Atlantic coast, about 32 were mentioned from the several coastal regions south of New England, and about 18 others were reported from inland regions. Other "western" flycatchers were scattered: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers from Illinois, Maine, and New York; Say's Phoebe in Florida, Maine, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania; Ash-throated Flycatchers from Massachusetts and Rhode Island; and three Vermilion Flycatchers from Florida. A Clark's Nutcracker in Pennsylvania was all the more remarkable because this did not appear to be a flight year for the species. The only western berry-feeding birds east were a Mountain Bluebird and a Townsend's Solitaire found in Minnesota. Sage Thrashers were found in both Arkansas and Louisiana, and a Rock Wren in Michigan. The only "western" warblers east (this season) were a Black-throated Gray from Louisiana and an unprecedented Lucy's (!) from Massachusetts. Western Tanagers were noted only from Maine and New Hampshire. Dickcissels and Clay-colored Sparrows were widely noted. More unusual sparrows included Green-tailed Towhees from Louisiana and Maine, Black-throated Sparrows from Virginia and Wisconsin, a Chestnut-collared Longspur from Massachusetts, and a McCown's Longspur in Louisiana.



Marbled Murrelet, Oka, near Montréal, Qué., November 1979. First record e. of the Rocky Mountains. Photo courtesy of Redpath Museum.

I THINK IT IS a common impression that a reason why so many more "eastern" birds are found in the West than *vice versa* is that there are more eastern migratory species. This impression is incorrect. A quick count from a California checklist produced about 129 species of regular migratory landbirds there, of which 71 also occur regularly in the East (10 of the latter have distinctive western races that could be identified in the field). The same tabulation from an upstate New York checklist produced 128 species of migrants, of which 69 regularly occur in the West (the counts don't agree because Syracuse lies north of the range of several species on the California checklist). Both faunas contain about the same proportion of distinctive species like wood warblers and of cryptic species like *Empidonax* flycatchers. Both lists lack a small number of mid-continental species that would be noteworthy on either coast. The western checklist is longer because it includes more non-migratory species. Wind drift seems to play little role in the differential, as it should favor west-to-east displacements. I think that the reasons why the numbers of vagrants found on the two coasts differ so much are more complex. First, a glance at an atlas (or a set of avian distribution maps) shows that "eastern species" tend to range farther west than "western species" range east. This artifact of geography means that "western species" must be farther off-course to reach the East than most "eastern species" must be to reach the West. Assuming that there is a selective premium on birds to navigate appropriately, and that for this reason smaller navigational errors are more likely than are larger errors, the differential is not surprising. Second and by analogy with several "inverse square" laws of physics, even if numbers of birds at the source of populations were the same, the unequal distances which they must traverse also means that the number of birds per unit area will be less in the East because the populations will have expanded into an ever increasing area the farther they travel from their source. Finally, I think that "island effects," long famous for their seeming ability to attract vagrants, are easier to visit in the West, where "islands" may be isolated groves of trees. In the East, islands tend truly to be islands, and are less accessible.

EASTERN BIRDS WEST

THIS FALL WAS the best since 1974 for eastern "vagrants" in California. The magnitude of the flight is most easily appreciated by noting that almost as many Palm Warblers were reported from California as were all individuals of all

"western species" from all the regions east of the Mississippi River! The contrast is equally impressive from a historical context. Prior to 1962 this section would never have been written, because the number of "eastern birds West" reported was negligible. Perhaps as many as 10 Palm Warblers had been reported from California up to then. Guy McCaskie discovered the Tia Juana River Valley in September 1962, and California ornithology has not been the same since. Now a significant proportion of the records from the two California Regional Reports equally well could have come from the Atlantic Coast; the 175 Blackpoll Warbler reports so casually mentioned this fall are of a species whose first substantiated record from California came in 1962. Anyone who has experienced this transformation still has to be impressed with the change.

What now seems to be happening is that observers from the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountain states, and the Southwest are undergoing the same expansive growth in outlook which California birders underwent in the early 1960s. More observers are realizing that these so-called vagrants occur with sufficient regularity that they may be hunted systematically, especially in appropriate ecological settings such as "islands" of trees surrounded by open country. As more birders become familiar with these species and spend more time afield, the number of reports of all these species can only increase. As individual events, these reports of "eastern" species from the western Regions certainly represent exciting finds. In the broader context of the past 15 to 18 years' events, not one of the reports strikes me as really noteworthy; not one "eastern" species was added to the known avifauna of the West this fall.

While no one can doubt the personal satisfaction it gives, is the effort that birders devote to these species worthwhile scientifically? I think the answer is yes, if only because it reveals a previously unsuspected ornithological truth. Several attempts have been made to unify all these reports; doubtless more attempts will come. Let me suggest another phenomenon that can be clarified only by further fieldwork. Records of the different species from California now are sufficiently numerous that, although we may see year-to-year "sampling" variation, the overall relative abundance of the species remains quite stable. There seems to be minor differences in the relative abundance of species on the central versus southern California coast, I think partly due to differences in the habitats being visited. How does this pattern of relative abundance compare with what is being found inland? Based on the regional reports for the falls of 1977 through this season, the relative abundance of "eastern" species combined from the Rocky Mountain States and the Southwest is quite different from that in California. However, the number of records away from California is still so small that one's estimate of relative abundance, particularly of the rarer species, can change greatly from year to year. If I have correctly assessed the ornithological setting, a much clearer picture of regional differences in the relative abundances of these species should emerge during the next five years. Explaining the differences will be another matter, and surely will provide new insights to avian biology.

FIELD IDENTIFICATION

TWO REPORTS ARE ALMOST as noteworthy as problems for field identification as for bird distribution. A Western Grebe from Massachusetts was reported as being of the "dark phase." It may be important to make this distinction. Two recent studies independently have shown that the two color "morphs" of the Western Grebe, which were described well only as recently as 1965 by R. W. Storer in *The Living Bird,* in many respects behave like separate species. In fact, it may be primarily the discomfort of treating such similar forms as separate species that prevents the A.O.U. from separating them; there are some profound philosophical problems with this complex whatever the taxonomic solution may be. Regardless of the eventual taxonomic decision, what we already know suggests that careful reporting of the two color morphs is to be encouraged, as their field marks are well known.

A "tropical kingbird" reported from Florida raises the opposite problem. The Tropical Kingbird has been found actually to consist of two very similar species. True Tropical Kingbirds breed in southern Arizona and regularly wander north along the Pacific Coast. Birds that breed in south Texas belong to the Couch's or Thornscrub Kingbird, which co-occurs with Tropical Kingbirds in southeastern Mexico and on the Yucatan Peninsula. The two have very different vocalizations and adults are morphologically distinct, but some juveniles may be inseparable even in hand. No field marks have been proven to separate silent birds of this complex reliably. I know of only two eastern specimens, a Couch's from Louisiana and one reported as a Tropical from Maine (none of the published accounts of the latter has enough detail to confirm this identification). It is anyone's guess which species the Florida bird was. Until field characteristics that reliably separate these forms are established (accounts supposedly are in preparation), it will be necessary to handle these birds if they are to be firmly identified (they can be netted). I suspect that responses to play-backs of recorded songs may prove to be the most effective way to separate the two in the field when they are silent, when and if someone demonstrates that each does not respond to vocalizations of the other.

Both these problems are related to the more general and still thorny question of identifying "subspecies" in the field Historically the practice fell into disfavor because it was being abused (by both birders and taxonomists) and also because supposed subspecific differences not infrequently prove invalid on further study (e.g., look up the history of racial identification of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow). While this situation has not changed, it seems to me that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Now potentially valuable information is being lost because too many birders report only species. It will take careful review of current knowledge of geographic variation in birds, dissemination of the true criteria to distinguish subspecies, better training of observers, and cooperation of avian taxonomists to resolve problem areas. The slow progress being made in this direction by the American Birding Association attests to the difficulty of this task. Meanwhile, birders should not neglect such possibilities such as the forms described above and also several distinctive and controversial forms like those now regularly reported in the California Regional Reports.

Enough! The very length of this summary demonstrates the varied and exciting finds that the contributors to *American Birds* have added to the ornithological literature this season. Read on and enjoy!

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