The Changing Seasons

Fall 1983 . . . a mediocre migration, with the oddest birds in the strangest places

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THE FALL 1983 migration was most notable for its mediocrity. The early fall saw few strong weather systems, and numbers of grounded migrants were low. Temperatures were generally at or above the seasonal average. The West experienced above-average precipitation during this period. The mid-fall from late September to late October had more varied though mild, wet weather, and better numbers and a greater variety of migrant birds were seen. November was generally mild, and all Regions noted many late departure dates. A pronounced "reverse" migration was seen in the Canadian Maritimes at the season's end, but was little evident elsewhere. The few tropical storms this season produced little significant avian fallout. These negatives do not mean that the season lacked flavor, but rather that its taste was dilute.

SEABIRDS

THERE WERE NO exceptional counts of seabirds from the Atlantic. Warm-water species were conspicuous in every Region in which pelagic birding was attempted. As in most recent years, healthy numbers of Black-capped Petrels, Audubon's Shearwaters and Bridled Terns, the latter two as far north as Massachusetts, were found. This season yielded multiple White-faced Storm-Petrels off Massachusetts and the Carolinas, Band-rumped Storm-Petrels off the Carolinas, widespread South Polar Skuas, and a scattering of tropicbirds and boobies from Florida and the Carolinas. A Brown Noddy off South Carolina was unusually far north in the absence of a tropical disturbance. In contrast, the cool-water Northern Fulmar made early appearances off southern New England and Manx Shearwater was authenticated off Georgia.

A conspicuous influx of Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes was detected in each of the Regions bordering the eastern Great Lakes. It is hard to tell if any of the few kittiwakes found elsewhere in the central United States were related to this flight, since a few appear there in most years. Numbers of jaegers and of Sabine's Gull inland were unexceptional, and only one alcid, an Ancient Murrelet from Alberta, was reported inland.

The Pacific was characterized by warm-water *El Niño* conditions. These conditions are typically associated with low oceanic productivity. The common ornithological impacts are nesting failures, such as occurred this past summer and are noted again in the Northern Pacific Coast Region, and in kills of seabirds. The SA in the Alaska Regional report suggests the impact that even a small change in water temperatures may have. The influx of Slender-billed Shearwaters and of Northern Fulmars into the Pacific coast waters of the United States, of Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels off northern California, and a California record of Parakeet Auklet, may all reflect a forced emigration of starving birds from the more northerly waters these species usually inhabit. The unusual abundances of the seabird species normally observed off the Pacific coast follow a pattern of northward displacement, as if these birds were seeking the surface-water temperatures they normally inhabit. The presence of large numbers of Brown Pelicans, Elegant Terns (including the first Canadian records), and Xantus' Murrelets in the Middle and Northern Pacific Coast Regions similarly reflects the tendency for warm-water species to have been displaced northwards. Further south, high numbers of Black-vented Shearwaters, Least Storm-Petrels and Craveri's Murrelets off California are typical of warm-water years. As happens in most such years, tropical seabirds like tropicbirds, boobies, and frigatebirds were little in evidence. One wonders why.

WATERBIRDS

WATERBIRD RECORDS are always much influenced by the distribution of precipitation. The usually arid Great Basin was wet this year, and the report from the Mountain West Region nicely chronicles the problems this abundance created It is hard to image that these same areas are more often quarreling to obtain sufficient water.

Red-throated Loons were numerous in the Northeast but not noted elsewhere Reports of other divers were inconsistent. Waterfowl numbers were normal Even where early migrants were observed, the bulk of the arrivals were late In the interior of the continent, most Regions noted an unusual preponderance of dark-winged scoters, or rather a scarcity of White-winged Scoters. The most noteworthy waterfowl report is the population explosion of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in South Texas, with correlated records of stragglers in the Regions to the north and east.

Long-legged waders received mention in most northern Regions. Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, Cattle Egrets, White Ibises, and Wood Storks were found in several of the northeastern Regions, and white egrets were widespread though not exceptionally numerous. Nantucket Island's Western Reef-Heron departed to points unknown in mid-September. The Mountain West Region summarizes the status of the Whooping Crane population being intro-

duced into the western United States.

Continued observation of mixed American/Caribbean Coot populations from the West Indies this season does not bode well for the taxonomic future of the Caribbean Coot.

Shorebird numbers were quite normal, but localized concentrations associated with drying reservoirs in the Southeast got much attention from observers. Mild November temperatures produced a wealth of late departure dates. Purple Sandpipers were unusually numerous on Lake Ontario this season. Gulls and terns can be described in much the same terms, although for gulls the mild late fall generally produced late arrivals. The continued growth of the Lesser Black-backed Gull population in the New World is reflected in the numerous reports this season, with a notable increase in Ontario.

IRRUPTIVE SPECIES

IT WAS DIFFICULT to discern any trends among irruptive diurnal raptors from the Regional reports. Northern Goshawks and Gyrfalcons were found in somewhat higher than normal numbers. The Rough-legged Hawk and Northern Shrike received little mention. The picture for owls is clearer. There was only a minor incursion of Snowy Owls, but a significant flight, involving Great Gray Owl, Northern Hawk-Owl, Boreal Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl, was clearly evident in all Regions bordering the Great Lakes and, to a lesser extent, in New England and the Canadian Maritimes. As is typical of owls, most arrivals were in November.

A minor Red-breasted Nuthatch incursion in August fizzled out by mid-September, except in the Middle Pacific Coast Region. Black-capped Chickadees were conspicuous in the Northeast, and were accompanied by a few Boreal Chickadees. Trends for American Robin and Varied Thrush could not be discerned in the Regional reports, but there was a strong movement of Townsend's Solitaires, Bohemian Waxwings, and Rosy Finches into the western intermountain lowlands at the end of the season. A brief but intense incursion of Bohemian Waxwings was also noted in eastern Canada and along the eastern Great Lakes during November.

Winter finches were uniformly regarded as disappointing. Pine Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls appeared thinly over much of the northeastern United States by late November. Purple Finches got little mention and crossbills were almost unknown away from nesting areas. The best flights involved Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks. Both exhibited minor incursions in August and larger flights in October, finally penetrating to the northern parts of the South Atlantic Coast, Central-Southern, South Texas and Middle Pacific Coast Regions by the end of the season. Finches got little mention in the western Regions.

SOUTHERN BIRDS NORTH

SOUTHERN SPECIES stand out the most in the northern Regions. A Fulvous Whistling-Duck from Ontario was the only one noted far north. A belated Black Vulture report from Yukon Territory was far out of range, and a Black-shouldered Kite from Nebraska is almost as outlandish as last spring's New York record. A perhaps suspect Inca Dove in South Dakota is the northernmost record yet. White-winged Doves seen in Maine and New Jersey, and a Burrowing Owl in Virginia, may have been either of southern or of western origin. Groove-billed Anis were noted in Ontario, Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana and Colorado at times consistent with the disappearance of South Texas breeding populations.

Mexican vagrants were concentrated in Arizona, where Berylline Hummingbird, Plain-capped Starthroat, Green Kingfisher, Aztec Thrush, Crescent-chested and Rufous-capped warblers, and Yellow Grosbeak were the most eye-catching set of rarities in any Region. Sulpher-bellied Flycatcher, Rufous-backed Robin, and Yellow-green Vireo from southern California seem paltry in comparison. Both Dusky-capped and Brown-crested flycatchers were found in central California. The northward movement of Tropical Kingbirds along the Pacific coast was about average, the northernmost in Oregon. Several parrot species, all of dubious origin, were noted in South Texas. Farther afield, a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher was netted in Alabama, but a *Myiodynastes* flycatcher photographed in Massachusetts awaits definite identification. A Painted Redstart from Michigan adds to the growing number of this species' northeastern records.

The few West Indian visitors noted included Bahama Swallows and Stripe-headed Tanager in Florida. Michigan's first Fork-tailed Flycatcher was the only South American vagrant reported.

Aztec Thrush, Madera Canyon, Ariz., Sept. 10, 1983. Photo/J. Saba.

Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Dauphin I., Ala., Sept. 6, 1983. Photo/R. Havard.

WESTERN BIRDS EAST

WESTERN SPECIES found in the east mirrored the general migration—unspectacular numbers punctuated by exceptional records. A Cinnamon Teal appeared in Nova Scotia. Forster's Terns

Townsend's Warbler, Ft. DeSoto P., Pinellas, Fla., Sept. 14-15, 1983. Photo/B. Atherton.

were quite numerous throughout the northeast this fall, but Eared and Western grebes and Franklin's Gulls were scarce there. A Band-tailed Pigeon appeared in Missouri for the first time this fall. Rufous Hummingbirds from the District of Columbia, South Carolina and perhaps Missouri and Tennessee were distant from their more regular haunts along the Gulf Coast. More unusual was Louisiana's second Calliope Hummingbird ever. Western Kingbirds were present in average numbers, but few Scissor-tailed Flycatchers appeared on the East Coast. Townsend's Solitaires from Newfoundland, Ontario, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are indicative of the heavy flight noted above under irruptive species. Mountain Bluebirds were in Ontario and Michigan as well, but Varied Thrush was little mentioned in the eastern Regions. A Lucy's Warbler from Florida may be the most unusual western bird east this fall. Townsend's Warblers were reported from Newfoundland and Florida, and putative MacGillivray's Warblers were netted in Massachusetts and New York. A half-dozen Western Tanagers from the Atlantic coast seems typical of recent years. Unusual sparrows reported include a Lark Bunting in Ontario, a Green-tailed Towhee in Mississippi, and a Black-throated Sparrow in Wisconsin.

EASTERN BIRDS WEST

THE CONCENSUS WAS that this was a below-average season for eastern vagrants out west. Most of the records continue to follow patterns set in previous years. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was finally collected in California; unfortunately an Eastern Wood-Pewee there could not be similarly substantiated. The most noteworthy report this season was New Mexico's first Swainson's Warbler. Hooded Warbler was added to the Utah state list this fall.

PALEARCTIC SPECIES

ONE TURNS FIRST to the Alaska Regional report to see what palearctic visitors were encountered this season. There was unusually good coverage of the western Aleutian Islands this fall and the list of species is quite long, though none were new to the North American list. Somewhat more unusual was a Brown Shrike at the Anchorage airport, far east of the two previous North American records.

In many respects the most striking feature of the fall was the scattering of palearctic species away from Alaska. In the east there has been a dispute as to the origin of many these species: do they cross the Atlantic or cross North America from Siberia? For some species like Lesser Black-backed Gull and Northern Wheatear, the answer clearly is that Atlantic crossings are most important. For others, including Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper, either route is a possibility. In the absence of banding recoveries, their origin would be demonstrated best by the presence or absence of records from the North American interior. These records are now beginning to appear and a "Siberian connection" seems more likely than ever. A Ruff from Colorado, a Long-toed Stint from Connecticut, a Smew from Manitoba and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers from Massachusetts and Virginia provide the best examples this season. Even more indicative is the increasing number of palearctic shorebirds reported from both western and eastern Regions. This fall Little Stint were reported from Nova Scotia, New Jersey, and California, and Temminck's Stint from Massachusetts and California. Unfortunately, not all of these reports were as well documented as one might like.

Even more striking were the palearctic landbirds found this fall. Now almost commonplace outside Alaska, Bramblings were found in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Colorado, with more to come in the winter season. Point Reyes' Skylark returned for the sixth consecutive winter. A Yellow Wagtail appeared in central California and a White/Black-backed Wagtail was found in southern California, but no Red-throated Pipits were reported south of Alaska. A Siberian Accentor from Washington and a Rustic Bunting in British Columbia were the first substantiated reports in North America away from Alaska. Far more unusual was a Stonechat, showing characters of a Siberian population, photographed in New Brunswick for a first North American record.

Finally, another outpost for palearctic vagrants, Kure Atoll, is described in the Hawaii Region. The several Asian vagrants noted this fall included Rufous-necked Stint and multiple Olive Tree-Pipits, both additions to the Hawaiian state list.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

SEVERAL REGIONAL EDITORS mention either in covering letters sent with their reports or in the Regional reports that potentially significant observations of rarities were submitted without details. This is one of the most frustrating aspects of editing a Regional report, and one which *never* should occur. Every observer who contributes to these pages must take responsibility to carefully and exhaustively document all reports of rarities that are submitted to *American Birds*. No Regional Editor ever should be forced to solicit the documentation which all responsible observers automatically submit. I would go even farther. Most Regions now get so many reports that every editor can ignore all undocumented reports without compromising an informative report. I hope this will become a uniform policy of *American Birds*.

It is equally true that some well-documented observations reported in this journal are on the frontiers of avian field identification. A Solander's Petrel reported off Washington by an experienced observer is the best example this season. It may well have been that species. However, the earlier reports from California now are thought to pertain to Murphy's Petrel, which is a possibility given the *El Niño* conditions of this season. Whenever possible, collecting these poorly

known species is still necessary, because definitive field marks have yet to be established for most of them.

In prior "Changing Seasons" I have urged increased reporting of distinctive subspecies, subspecies groups, and morphs, like Bullock's and Baltimore orioles. The many changes in nomenclature and taxonomic status of birds that have recently occurred should remind all of us that the taxonomic disposition of populations is always in a state of flux. For North American birds, almost all of these distinctive populations, regardless of their current taxonomic status, have names. It is encouraging to see growing attention being paid to many of them in recent issues of this journal. Many observers are unaware that the A.O.U. Committee on Nomenclature and Taxonomy explicitly left the names of the former "species" now taxonomically lumped "available" for use when a more precise designation is possible and/or desired. The Sixth Edition of the A.O.U. Check-list mentions most of these forms and provides specific English names by which they may be called. Recently published field guides also include most of these field-identifiable forms, as well as others that may not be distinguished so reliably. Given the emphasis on field identification and on the distribution of birds which characterizes these pages, this more precise nomenclature is almost always warranted in *American Birds*. In this context, I see no need for quotes or special and usually awkward constructions for English names of distinctive populations, although it might be desirable to reach an *a priori* agreement as to which forms (and names) are appropriate for these pages.

Identifying subspecies and distinctive forms requires an appreciation of variation within avian populations that is a cut above what is needed to distinguish most species. There tend to be fewer absolute differences. Populations are characterized by samples and not by isolated individuals. It is possible by quirks of genetics for odd individuals to resemble a foreign population more closely than the population from which they have originated. Hybrids and intergrade individuals can obscure seemingly clear-cut distinctions. For these reasons many ornithologists prefer to say that isolated individuals exhibit the traits of a given subspecies rather than that they belong to that subspecies. Observers get an appreciation of this variation by paying as careful attention to ordinary, common birds as they do to rarities. The effort has other rewards. You the observer will increase both your own skills and the enjoyment of your birding. Several Regions now have observers adept at locating hybrid waterfowl and gulls, whose numbers and fate are of much interest to ornithologists. Scientific ornithology is enriched by the added detail that such precise observations provide.

A dull season it was. But as was the case the last time I reviewed a "dull fall migration," by the time I had covered the highlights this summary was as long as many I have produced for an "exciting" fall. There are surely points I have missed and which will appeal to you. With this admission I invite you to read on and enjoy.

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Abbreviations frequently used in Regional Reports

ad.: adult, Am.: American, c.: central, C: Celsius, CBC: Christmas Bird Count, Cr.: Creek, Com.: Common, Co.: County, Cos.: Counties, *et al.*: and others, E.: Eastern (bird name), Eur.: European, Eurasian, F: Fahrenheit, *fide:* reported by, F.&W.S.: Fish & Wildlife Service, Ft.: Fort, imm.: immature, I.: Island, Is.: Islands, Isles, Jct.: Junction, juv.: juvenile, L : Lake, m.ob.: many observers, Mt.: Mountain, Mts.: Mountains, N.F.: National Forest, N.M.: National Monument, N.P.: National Park, N.W.R.: Nat'l Wildlife Refuge, N.: Northern (bird name), Par.: Parish, Pen.: Peninsula, P.P.: Provincial Park, Pt.: Point, not Port, Ref.: Refuge, Res.: Reservoir, not Reservation, R.: River, S.P.: State Park, sp species, spp.: species plural, ssp.: subspecies, Twp.: Township, W.: Western (bird name), W.M.A.: Wildlife Management Area, v.o.: various observers, N,S,W,E,: direction of motion, n., s., w., e.,: direction of location, >: more than, < fewer than, ±: approximately, or estimated number, ♂: male, ♀: female, ø: imm. or female, *: specimen, ph.: photographed, †: documented, ft: feet, mi: miles, m: meters, km: kilometers, date with a + (*e.g.*, Mar. 4+): recorded beyond that date Editors may also abbreviate often-cited locations or organizations.