

# The Changing Seasons

*Fall 1984 . . . a time to have been out west*

*Paul A. DeBenedictis*

**T**HE FALL migration is a time of excitement for birders. Unsettled weather, large-scale movements of birds, and the presence of numerous young, inexperienced birds provide a potential for finding the strangest species in the oddest settings. On the eastern half of the continent, the Fall 1984 migration was dull, dull, dull. The farther west one went, the less dull it was, but none of the Regional Reports indicates that this was an especially memorable migration.

There was no indication of a shortage of migrants, just a shortage of days when migrants were conspicuous on the ground. The most obvious explanation for this was the weather. The season was uniformly mild, with few severe weather systems to ground, concentrate, or displace migrant birds.

Three onshore hurricanes were felt only in the Southern Atlantic Coast and Florida regions. They blew relatively few marine birds inland in Florida, but an impressive list, including Black-capped Petrel, South Polar Skua and Bridled Tern, was reported from North Carolina. No unusual landbirds were associated with these storms. However, the few observers reporting from the West Indies found a more unusual set of vagrants in the wake of Caribbean hurricanes.

## *The migration in perspective*

**I**WRITE this summary late enough to know that these mild conditions were markedly reversed during the following winter. This sequence of events seems familiar. Look back one year. A mild fall followed by a harsh winter saw an amazing outbreak of Siberian vagrants, many of which persisted through the following spring migration. No similar onslaught occurred this year. Sharp-tailed and Curlew sandpipers were reported from Ohio and Virginia and from Ontario, respectively, and along the Pacific coast. Ruffs

were more numerous than usual in the interior. There were no other Siberian peeps, and only one Siberian landbird was reported away from the Pacific coast.

The fall also should have been a good season for irruptive seed- and berry-eating birds, as irruptions tend to occur every other year, and seemingly in odd-numbered years. That didn't happen either. This year there were heavy crops of cones (especially spruce), fruits, and seeds throughout the Northeast, while in the Northwest, crops were drastically reduced compared to last year. The expected happened. Pine Siskins, Purple Finches and both crossbills were numerous in all of the northeastern regions where spruces are native, and were joined by a scattering of redpolls at the season's end. In the Southeast, observers bemoaned the lack of Red-breasted Nuthatches and winter finches, with Purple Finches and Evening Grosbeaks being especially scarce.

Finches were scarce in northwestern Canada, but to the south and in the western Great Plains observers found moderate to large numbers of all species, including Pine Grosbeak, Rosy Finch and Hoary Redpoll, as well as jays, montane thrushes, and Red-breasted Nuthatch, away from nesting areas. Especially notable was an outbreak of Common Ravens and Gray Jays into the Prairie Provinces and the regions bordering on the south and west. Somewhat surprisingly, Clark's Nutcrackers were little affected by whatever produced these flights, even though they are highly dependent on cone crops.

Neither raptors nor the Northern Shrike gave any indication of a major southward movement. There was a scattering of Gyrfalcons across most of the northern part of the continent. An outstanding migration of Swainson's Hawk

was described in the South Texas Region. A continuing happy story is the generally optimistic reports of Merlin and Peregrine numbers along their major flyways. Owl watching will have to await another winter. An incursion of Snowy Owls was experienced only along the Pacific coast from Alaska to Oregon.

## *Waterbirds*

**W**ATERBIRDS appear to have had a good nesting season throughout the continent. Whooping Cranes were especially productive, and Yellow Rails were mentioned more than usual. Most Regional Editors felt that shorebirds were the redeeming feature of an otherwise dull migration, and figures on waterfowl production were generally high. There was little northward dispersion of southern herons this fall.

The Western Great Lakes Region described a notable larid flight on Lake Huron, associated with one of the few strong frontal passages. On Lake Ontario, such flights seem to occur only on the date that the frontal system, accompanied by strong onshore winds, passes. Even if the wind persists on subsequent days, only smaller numbers of common waterfowl and gull species are observed. In Syracuse, observers often do not even bother to check, if they can't be on the scene the day a front goes by. It would be interesting to learn if this is the case on the western Great Lakes as well.

## *Seabirds*

**E**XCEPT in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region, there was not as much effort made to study pelagic birds along the Atlantic coast as in previous falls. However, the most unusual record of the season—a Buller's Shearwater photographed off New Jersey—was obtained here. This report is the first known occur-

rence of a member of this species group in the Atlantic since the extinction of *Puffinus pacificoides* on St. Helena during the early Pleistocene, and complements a 1979 record of Greater Shearwater off California! What may have been the second Soft-plumaged Petrel for North America, seen off Georgia, was almost as notable. Reports of tropical storm-petrels from the Northeastern Maritime, Hudson-Delaware and Southern Atlantic Coast regions supplement David Lee's summary, which has recently appeared in these pages (*AB* 38:151, 1984). Observers in the Gulf of Mexico continue to find scattered Greater Shearwaters there, but little else.

A Northern Fulmar in Ontario, a Northern Gannet in Vermont, and an Ancient Murrelet in Montana were the most notable inland records of seabirds. A scattering of inland jaegers included Long-tailed in New Mexico, Tennessee, and Vermont. The continued growth of a New World population of Lesser Black-backed Gulls was evident from many reports throughout the East this season. California Gulls continue to be found in the East. A Heermann's Gull in Wyoming and Glaucous-winged Gulls in Alberta and Utah were notable inland records of gulls usually confined to salt-water habitats, but other experts will have to decide what Idaho's first Western Gull really was, as I am not privy to further details. A Sooty Tern found dead in Wisconsin was attributed to Hurricane Diana.

On the Pacific coast, reports were indicative of warm water conditions, with high numbers of species that nest off Baja California and low numbers of other seabirds. Numbers of Black-vented Shearwaters off central California rivaled counts obtained there before the California sardine industry collapsed. Several Cook's Petrels off southern California made this the third year since 1979 that this species has been reported there, although in one of those years only a single individual was found. Many notable seabirds were reported from Hawaii this season.

#### *Vagrant landbirds*

RARITIES reported this season generally had a familiar ring to them. Certainly the season did not bring the startling variety that appeared during the preceding spring migration.

Neither western birds east nor eastern birds west included any real surprises. Of

the former, the Central Southern Region had the best variety, of which a (Plumbeous) Solitary Vireo in Louisiana is an addition to the avifauna of the East. Yet another Allen's Hummingbird there should remind observers not to assume that female-plumaged *Selasphorus* hummingbirds seen in the East (or elsewhere) are Rufous Hummingbirds. The most unusual eastern bird west was the Northern Rocky Mountain Intermountain Region's first Yellow-throated Warbler, but this was a good fall in which to find the species at the northern periphery of its range across the continent.

Although not numerous, southern birds north were somewhat more remarkable. Common Ground-Doves in New Jersey, western North Carolina, and Kansas paralleled a similar movement of Ruddy Ground-Doves that brought individuals to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona (*q.v.*), and California. A Loggerhead Kingbird reached Florida. Fork-tailed Flycatchers were found there and in Massachusetts, and a Gray Kingbird in Michigan helped fill a void between previous Atlantic coast records and one from British Columbia. The only Groove-billed Ani far north this season was in South Dakota. Most other vagrants from Mexico reported in the Southwest were holdovers from the nesting season. I still am not convinced that the parrots being reported from South Texas are any less suspect than are reports of the same species from Florida.

#### *Palaearctic vagrants*

WHILE NUMBERS of Palaearctic vagrants were low, they did have a certain pizzazz. The first Little Curlew for North America appeared in southern California, where an adult White Wagtail was an addition to the California list. Brown Shrike (a first record away from Alaska), Eurasian Skylark, Red-throated Pipit, and Dusky Warbler were found in northern California. Observers in the Northern Pacific Coast Region found the first Far Eastern Curlew in North America outside of Alaska, as well as Bartailed Godwit, Rufous-necked Stint, and the only Brambling of the season. A Siberian Accentor reached southern Alaska and a Northern Hobby was in the Pribilof Islands. Away from the coast, a (Bewick's) Tundra Swan was seen in Alberta, while two immature whitish wagtails there were not identifiable to species. A few other Siberian vagrants were reported without documentation.

I have previously suggested that a revelation of the real size of a Palaearctic component in the avifauna of the Americas will be a significant contribution to ornithology by birders during this decade. Most of the forms involved are of Siberian origin. Likely exceptions thus fall were a Common Greenshank in Newfoundland, a Eurasian Curlew in Massachusetts, and a European Mew Gull in Quebec. Many records of "palaearctic" species in the East, like this fall's Little Gull in Kansas, may come from American populations. Furthermore, most records of Palaearctic species away from Alaska come from the Pacific coast. Examination of a globe suggests a purely geographical explanation for this.

If a bird follows a heading selected at random from the Bering Straits, the chance that it will appear at any site in North America should be inversely proportional to the distance it must travel to reach that site. The reason is that all equidistant sites form an arc, which increases in length as the distance from Siberia increases. The chance that a particular site will be visited decreases as the length of that arc increases, because there are more sites, all equally probable, along it. All of the major cities on the Pacific coast, where observers are concentrated, are closer to Siberia than is any major city in the interior except Salt Lake City, which is about as far from Siberia as San Francisco is. Denver and Minneapolis are farther from Siberia than San Diego is.

If birds do not select a bearing at random, then it appears that two types of navigational error are especially likely. If birds reverse north and south, as is apparently the case with fall Fork-tailed Flycatchers, birds trying to reach Southeast Asia from Siberia will end up on the Pacific coast *via* Alaska. (Birds heading for Africa, and European birds, end up in Alaska and the Pacific Ocean if they survive the nonstop crossing of the Arctic Ocean.) The other possibility, championed by Dave DeSante, is a reversal of east and west. Once again, this brings Siberian birds to the Pacific coast, while European birds tend only to reverse the side of Africa they eventually reach. Most significantly, neither of these navigational errors requires a significant transoceanic flight to reach North America from Siberia. Once a navigational error is made, there seems to be no real barrier to prevent a Siberian vagrant from reaching any locality in the United States or Canada.

## Concluding remarks

PROBLEMS with the quality of reports published in *American Birds* have been a frequent topic of the "Changing Seasons." I am pleased to note that fewer references to undocumented reports appear in this issue, and fewer editors mentioned in their covering letters undocumented reports that they chose not to publish than in past years. These two observations imply that those who contribute to these pages are doing a better job of reporting rarities than ever. However, the remaining cases mean that there is still room for improvement. Let's try for an issue in which no undocumented reports are seen by any Regional Editor.

Good documentation does not mean that it is necessarily easy to decide if a bird in a report was correctly identified. California's second Dusky Warbler this fall is a good example of a well-documented but very difficult to evaluate report. In such cases, Regional Editors may be forced to publish tentative identifications in order to meet publishing deadlines. Good documentation always makes the task of evaluation easier.

The long-term solution for handling

difficult records appears to be the various rarities committees that have the time and expertise to provide the full evaluation that is required. I urge everyone who submits records from an area covered by a rarities committee to prepare reports for review by that committee. A copy of such a report will always be suitable documentation for a Regional Editor, and gives that editor an easy way to assure skeptics that an observer has done his part. If there is no local rarities committee, now is a good time to get one started.

The emphasis on rarities comes from the simple truth that what is best conveyed in these pages are unusual events. Rarities and invasions are the most obvious of these. The slow, gradual expansion or contraction of ranges tends to be less well reported, because we get used to the change as it takes place. Christmas Bird Counts and breeding bird surveys really are a better way to document gradual changes, but awareness of the way things used to be, and occasional reminders that they have changed, are always welcome.

A corollary, then, is that a dull season is really one when the unusual didn't happen. That's the Fall of 1984 in a nutshell.

At the same time, I am always amazed at how long the "Changing Seasons" becomes in a season that superficially seems so unexceptional. Two things will always make this true. With so many contributors from so large an area, someone is bound to make a truly astonishing find. A lot of these someones contribute to these pages. Second, no matter how provincial one person's contributions and perspective may be, the extent of coverage in *American Birds* is bound to include the other side of the fence, where the grass is greener. Observers in the East could be heard to grumble, grumble through this fall. Their western counterparts may not have been wildly enthusiastic about the season, but the various Regional Reports clearly show where the action was. The fun of preparing this summary, and in reading the finished issue, is in seeing both what went on close to home and also what went on far away. And who knows, perhaps next year it will be the reverse!

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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, ♂: 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.

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