The Changing Seasons

Spring 1989

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IT'S A TRUTH THAT WE COULD HOLD to be self-evident, although some would be surprised to hear it: birders don't just look at birds. By that I don't merely mean that we also look at rocks, reptiles, rhododendrons, and so on, although most of us do. What I mean is that even when we are focussing completely on birds, what we see often tells us things about the world at large.

In perusing all the Regional Reports for Spring 1989, I found that I was not just reading about birds. I was reading about bigger patterns of events on the continent, as revealed through the reactions of the birds and the ideas of the birders.

Spring is a season of migration, and many observers (especially in eastern regions) judge the season by the "quality" of the migration. Of course, we are all coming to the realization that a "good" migration for observers is not necessarily good for the birds. The old idea of *waves* of migrants has been modified in recent years. Some birds migrate by day, and we can actually see their passage, but not so the nocturnal migrants. Great numbers of birds fly at night, and we do not witness their movements—we only see them when they *stop*. Weather is the factor that stops them, that puts them down in concentrations big enough to be notable. There are a few places where numbers of migrant landbirds congregate even in good weather, but these localities are the exceptions. Generally what we perceive as a spring "warbler wave" is really a breaking wave, a flow of warblers breaking up on a reef of bad weather. A report on the spring's birding is really, in large part, a weather report.

*Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) at Sambo, Nova Scotia, April 20, 1980. What route did the bird take to reach the Canadian Maritimes? Photograph/Ian McLaren.*

A topic that does not come up every season, but that was on my mind as I read the accounts this time, was the distribution of water. The moisture level of the continent may have been about average—just as a man can be comfortable, *on average*, with one foot in ice and the other in fire. Many areas of North America were either exceptionally wet or disturbingly dry this season. The effects on birdlife were not always apparent, but they were always worth looking for.

A third major topic for the season was more purely ornithological, a case of the birds fighting it out among themselves: the continuing saga of the cowbird scourge. Even as we received more bad news about these invasive parasites, there were a few hopeful signs.

So in looking at the spring migration season of 1989, three big questions that came to mind were: Where was the weather? Where was the water? And, apprehensively . . . where were the cowbirds? Beyond these three big questions there were, as always, a myriad of smaller patterns in the big picture of North American birdlife.

Storms and the man: how the groundings produced by local weather patterns give us "snapshots" of what is passing overhead on a given date

This spring in eastern Pennsylvania, Rick Wiltraut watched the weather; whenever it was bad, he headed out to Beltzville Lake. As a result of this careful timing, he found a remarkable number of rarities, including the

state's first proven Arctic Terns in nearly a century. Wiltraut's success reflected an important point: interesting waterbirds may be passing over an inland region any time, but a storm will bring them down.

This principle applies equally well to songbirds, and it applies to the masses of regular migrants as well as to the hotline highlights. Our perceptions of a migration can be strongly affected by what happened to be migrating over on the days that storms brought them down. In mid-April this year, a major frontal system grounded migrants along the entire Texas coast. Simultaneous coverage at several areas showed that the composition of species involved in this fallout varied substantially from one area to another.

In New England, where the timing of each species' passage is known with great precision, Simon Perkins was able to trace the exact weather patterns that caused big fallouts of Fox Sparrows in late March and Hermit Thrushes in mid-April. Another major Hermit Thrush fallout was noted in Ontario in early May. In each case, if the storms had not occurred when they did, observers' perceptions about the numbers of these birds would have been quite different.

An exceptional case of a species-specific fallout involved Scarlet Tanagers in the Appalachians. During the cold, wet weather of early May in West Virginia and western Pennsylvania, the tanagers were grounded—often literally. Many were found dead, or found sitting on the ground or in low bushes, in a weakened condition. And as George Hall noted, "Some observers remarked that they saw more tanagers than usual, but seemed to be unaware of the severe stress the birds were under."

I am not trying to suggest that birders should feel guilty about enjoying weather-induced fallouts of migrants. After all, our migratory species have been putting up with these events for millenia; the strong individuals tend to survive, and the breeding population is strengthened as a result. But it would be worth noting situations where the birds are exceptionally stressed by the weather that causes the fallout.

Affected by weather, Spring Migration 1989 was both early and late, and concentrated in some unusual places, especially in the West

Local storms rarely do more than give us so-called "snapshots" of the migrant birdlife passing over a region on a given day. Larger weather systems, lasting for several days and covering wide areas, can actually change the timing and direction of the migration. Of course, no weather system is likely to have the same effect over the entire continent. But this spring, as usual, there were some points of consensus about the timing of migration over broad areas.

Over much of the northeastern quadrant of the continent, the early part of the spring was mild, and March brought notably early arrivals—even record-early in some cases. By April, however, there were few comments on early arrivals. The month was either generally unremarkable or generally cold, and migrants seemed somewhat delayed, although the Middlewestern Prairie Region had a normal push of migrants in the latter part of April. Early May, across most of the Northeast, was cold or very wet or both, and evidently the songbird migrants were substantially delayed. About the middle of May these cold and wet conditions abated somewhat and, as Ron Weir stated, "the dam broke"—and the migration moved through quickly. This big push of migrants in the second half of May was noted across Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. In the latter region, the birds moved in so rapidly that Blake Maybank in Nova Scotia considered the last of the insectivores to be a little ahead of schedule by late May.

Farther west (where, of course, there tend to be fewer passerine migrants anyway) the patterns were less clear-cut. The northern prairies evidently had some timing like regions to the east, with some early arrivals but the bulk of the passage somewhat late. In Texas, the Mountain West, the northern Rockies, and northern California, notably early arrivals drew comments.

In the Southeast, peninsular Florida had few storms, so few migrants were seen. On the Gulf Coast, frequent rains produced numbers of migrant fallouts. In neither region was the *timing* of the passage (or lack of passage) noted as unusual. Variation in the timing of arrivals there probably would be caused largely by weather patterns to the south of there, *i.e*, in the Caribbean and eastern Mexico. So far there have been few attempts to draw such connections.

Parts of the Southwest, mainly Arizona and southern California, experienced a more visible passerine migration than usual. Numbers of migrants were grounded by cool weather in mid-to-late May. In the interior of southern California, the timing of passage in this period seemed late.

Every spring, intense interest focusses on vagrants and low-density migrants from Asia at a few spots in western Alaska. Although the coverage is not really systematic, it has been sufficiently intensive for the last dozen years that some clear patterns have emerged. This season the patterns were askew. Asian birds were much scarcer than in other years on Attu, at the western end of the Aleutians; farther east, such birds were *more* numerous than usual on the Pribilofs, St. Lawrence Island, and Seward Peninsula. Tobish and Isleib imply that the storm track in May, farther east than normal, may have played a part.

Where the water was, and where it was not

It seems reasonable to assume that conditions of drought or excess rainfall should have effects on bird populations. When we try to trace these effects, the connections we draw are often just guesses, but it's still worth making the attempt. Repetition of some patterns over a number of years will at least give us circumstantial evidence. And if broad patterns of precipitation are going to change in the near future—as has been suggested—it would be a good thing if we could predict what that would do to patterns of bird distribution and abundance.

Conditions slightly wetter or drier than average are not too noteworthy unless they persist for long periods. But this spring, some regions had exceptional conditions of moisture. It was extremely wet in parts of the eastern United States. George Hall, in West Virginia, might have been exaggerating when he compared condi-

tions to the Biblical deluge, but it is true that areas both to the east of there (Hudson-Delaware and Middle Atlantic Coast regions) and to the west (in eastern Ohio) experienced record rainfall in May. Going from there westward across the upper Midwest, conditions dried out radically, with Iowa and northern Missouri remaining gripped by drought. The Great Plains from Kansas to central North Dakota remained dry. Both Joseph Grzybowski to the south and Gordon Berkey to the north discussed the fact that even a season or two of normal rainfall might not cancel out the effects of long-term drought. Climate there must be considered in a longer perspective than one season.

While areas farther north were soaking in May, Florida was getting dryer. Lake Okeechobee was almost two feet below normal levels. Low water probably put more stress on the already beleagured Snail Kites. The state of Texas, which is practically a continent in itself, experienced extremes of *both* rain and drought. Very dry conditions in the Coastal Bend area of Texas may have hurt the breeding of Purple Martins, and may have affected the ratio of different *Myiarchus* flycatcher species there. Farther west, patterns were less extreme; it was wetter than usual on the Northern Pacific Coast, drier than usual on the Southern Pacific Coast, but not remarkably so. Hawaii had good rainfall, welcome news after the very dry conditions of some recent seasons there.

Birds of the water's edge could be birds on the edge in more ways than one

Birds that live where water meets land—such as shorebirds—are affected when water levels change in either direction. It would be comforting to believe that migrant shorebirds are opportunistic enough to adapt, to find suitable stopovers. In fact, I do believe that they do to some extent. Where I live in Arizona, temporary artificial habitats such as new sewage plants will attract scores or even hundreds of shorebird migrants, pulling them down out of the dry blue sky. Still, the hundreds of thousands of shorebirds that blanket the Arctic tundra in summer need to stop and feed *somewhere* on the way north If too many of their potential stopovers are either flooded out or dried out, the birds may reach the Arctic underfed and ill-prepared for a successful nesting cycle.

One of the continent's greatest shorebird stopovers crashed this spring. Cheyenne Bottoms, in central Kansas, normally hosts of tens of thousands of shorebirds. This season, Cheyenne Bottoms dried out. Some shorebirds still gathered on the dry flats, but it is difficult to judge how useful the area might have been for staging and feeding by these migrant flocks.

If Cheyenne Bottoms were one isolated case, I believe that perhaps some of the thousands of sandpipers that had staged there before might be able to find other feeding sites. But if the entire Plains region were gripped by drought, such alternate sites would be harder if not impossible to find. As Joe Grzybowski points out, birds that are predominantly Plains migrants in spring—such as Baird's Sandpipers, White-rumped Sandpipers, and Hudsonian Godwits—will bear closer watching over the next couple of years.

Another great shorebird site in the interior is the Lahontan Valley in Nevada, where peak migrant counts run into six figures. That locality had large numbers again this spring, but as Hugh Kingery warns, this is another area facing danger from lack of water.

Long-distance migrants among the shorebirds may have more popular appeal among birders and the public, but they are probably not hurt by drought as much as more sedentary marsh birds. In areas like the Great Plains or the interior of the West, a few dry years could wipe out populations of rails and other marsh dwellers over wide areas where they depend on a few isolated oases.

The National Audubon Society has recently launched a campaign to identify and protect local wetlands across the continent. Birders hardly need be told that such areas are important; I'm optimistic that the birding community will play a big role in this round of wetlands protection.

*Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisea*) at Beltzville Lake, Pennsylvania, Photograph/Rick Wiltraut.*

The continuing cowbird saga intensified, as the Shiny Cowbird invasionary force made landfall

There was evidence that Bronzed Cowbirds were increasing in southern California, New Mexico, and Mississippi, but that was not the big story in this group. Shiny Cowbird, first recorded in Florida less than four years ago, is now streaming into the peninsula at a shocking rate. *Flocks* were roaming the Keys and the Dry Tor-

tugas, and the pattern of occurrences at the latter suggested to me that different small groups were arriving and departing through much of the spring. The total number recorded in southern Florida during the season was well over one hundred. But the dispersal abilities of these sinister invaders was best demonstrated by records farther north: during May and June, single male Shiny Cowbirds were found in *northwestern* Florida, then southeastern Louisiana, then southwestern Louisiana, practically to the Texas border! It is difficult to predict how far the birds might go before they reach their ecological limits. But the outlook is not good for the relatively few songbirds (= potential victims/hosts) in southern Florida.

Is there life after a cowbird invasion? Two possible rays of hope

In the midst of the bad news, there was an encouraging word about Orchard Orioles. The species has decreased in some southerly areas, and cowbird parasitism has been claimed as a cause; this season, Joe Grzybowski reported more evidence of a decline in Oklahoma and southern Kansas. But in the northern plains states, Gordon Berkey reports that Orchard Orioles are thriving (despite the fact that cowbirds are too) and are even expanding toward the northwest. Perhaps, as Berkey suggests, the center of the population is merely shifting toward the north.

A number of years ago, Hooded Oriole numbers declined drastically in the lower Rio Grande Valley of extreme southern Texas. Some observers felt that the decline coincided with a big increase in Bronzed Cowbirds there. This spring, although the cowbirds are still present in force, the Hooded Oriole appeared to be making a comeback in the Valley.

A recent source of debate has been the possibility that populations of the cowbird's hosts, given enough time, may evolve defenses against these nest parasites (such as the ability to recognize the cowbird eggs and then toss them out or abandon the nest). If that is so, perhaps the Hooded Orioles in northeastern Mexico are already starting to develop such defenses.

Neither of these examples is meant to encourage complacency. The Black-capped Vireo, a prime cowbird victim, is not shifting its range northward; and if we were to halt cowbird control programs in Michigan, the Kirtland's Warbler would probably become extinct before it had time to evolve defenses. Such threatened birds still need our attention. But for more common birds, the situation may not be quite so hopeless.

House Finch chronicles: The red tide rolls on, and in its wake the finches continue to consolidate their gains

Out at the periphery, our non-native eastern House Finches continued to spread westward toward their ancestral range. They were noted out to the Florida panhandle, central Alabama, central Arkansas, the eastern edge of the southern Plains, Missouri, Iowa, eastern South Dakota, southern Manitoba, the North Shore in Quebec, and Prince Edward Island.

Meanwhile, back on the Middle Atlantic Coast, Henry Armistead has been carefully monitoring the fortunes of the finches in different localities there. He notes that southerly peninsular sections of his region are the last places to see big increases in House Finch numbers, long after they seem to have blanketed the mainland areas. This is a reminder of the fact that invasions are worth tracing on a local level, as well as on the more obvious outer periphery.

The legacy of mild winters: Carolina Wren, Winter Wren, and kinglets are all thriving

The Carolina Wren is our best avian gauge of recent winters. The northern edge of its range will freeze back with every really hard winter, and then creep forward again after mild seasons. Its current advance, after several mild winters in a row, is exceptional. This spring the species drew raves in northern New England, Nova Scotia, upstate New York, the northern Appalachians, Ontario, and the western Great Lakes. Perhaps more surprising is its uphill (= westward) spread to Colorado, where a first state nesting was documented this spring.

The northern breeding limits of Winter Wrens are too far north to be visited by many birders, but this is another indicator species: despite its name, it apparently suffers much mortality in harsh winters. Recent eastern winters have not been harsh at all, and Winter Wren numbers were up on its breeding range in the Maritimes and on migration in the Midwest.

The Golden-crowned Kinglet seems to be at a very high population level, and many observers think this is another species that prospers when winters are gentle in the middle latitudes of North America. Big numbers were noted in migration in the Midwest and probably in western Massachusetts, and Blake Maybank's estimates of breeding densities in the Maritimes were remarkable. Ruby-crowned Kinglets seem to be sharing in the general prosperity, with good numbers noted in several areas, including as far west as the Colorado Rockies.

Other species spreading to the north: ibises, southern passerines, and possibly Black-necked Stilts

Glossy Ibis numbers have been dropping recently in the Carolinas; pressure from White Ibises, expanding northward in that area, has been suggested as a cause. The center of the Glossy's range in North America appears to be shifting northward, as evidenced by a count of 126 this March in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where even one would have created a stir just a few decades ago. (However, White Ibises also reached Massachusetts this spring, with three stray individuals.) The northward spread of Glossies may result in more inland records, and this spring produced a Glossy Ibis in Manitoba and two more (verifiably photographed) in Colorado—a signal that western birders will have to check their White-faced Ibises more closely.

Some migratory passerines of southern affinities seem to be quietly extending their breeding ranges northward. Yellow-throated Warblers are spreading northward in western Pennsylvania, and appearing more often in upstate New York and near the western Great Lakes. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers may be increasing at northern limits in several areas, including the western Great Lakes area and the Mountain West. The Great-tailed

Grackle, a southern bird that is mostly nonmigratory and hardly seems like a passerine, continued its northward spread. Numbers were up in southern Colorado and western Nebraska, and Wyoming had its first. However, Iowa and Missouri may have posted declines; Bruce Peterjohn suggests that drought may have caused a setback there.

The Black-necked Stilt has been seeming to push at its northern boundaries in some recent years. This season there were notable reports from beyond its northern and eastern limits, including record-establishing individuals in upstate New York, Ohio, Indiana, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and the comment that records were becoming more frequent in North Dakota. The birds in Alberta nested, for perhaps the second successful breeding in the province. This might appear to be a clear-cut case of northerly expansion; in this season, however, drought in the central plains could have contributed to wandering by the stilts.

What we've been missing: Murphy's Petrel, Little Egret, and possibly others

For a relative newcomer to the scene (it was just described to science in 1949), the Murphy's Petrel has been drawing a lot of attention. It may have been out there, off our Pacific Coast, all along, but its detection has been recent. The latest details are in the Middle Pacific Coast Region column and in a special feature article in this issue.

What else, we might ask, is lurking out there, near the 200-mile limit . . . or beyond? Hawaii once again had a notable diversity of seabirds during the season, including more reports of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, a mystery bird there. It is tantalizing to think what American and Canadian birders might find if we could somehow cover the great block of ocean between Alaska and California and Hawaii. If only we could . . .

Murphy's Petrel may have been missed in the past because of the scarcity of birders far offshore. But what was the story with Little Egret this spring? Observers in the Canadian Maritimes found three Little Egrets during the season. According to Blake Maybank, they did not feel that this was another example of "the Newfoundland connection," of birds coming across the northern Atlantic. Instead, they invoked "the Caribbean connection" that Rob Norton has written of recently, of birds coming across from Europe or West Africa to the Lesser Antilles. If the Little Egrets really did arrive that way, they probably would have moved all the way up the Atlantic seaboard before hitting Canada. Were they (and others of their species) missed farther south? Were they simply too needle-in-a-haystack obscure to be detected in regions where Snowy Egrets are abundant?

Next spring, no doubt, a small army of observers will look for Little Egrets all over the Atlantic Coast (and elsewhere). I hope they will all carry cameras, to prove their finds. And I hope they will keep in mind this question: what else are we missing? North American birdlife is in an era of change, and the *American Birds* network of observers make up the front line of detection and documentation of the changes.

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