

# The Changing Seasons

Spring 1990

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**F**OR MOST BIRDERS OVER the eastern three-fifths of the continent, the “quality” of the spring migration is dictated by two things: the weather and the calendar. Weather dictates the timing of the migrant fallouts. The calendar dictates whether or not those fallouts happen to occur on weekends.

Bruce Peterjohn reports that in the Midwest this spring, a series of cold fronts brought fallouts each week in May — fallouts that were not witnessed by most birders. For example, May 15 was a great day at Chicago for those who could be in the field, with 205 American Redstarts counted (how?) in two trees, and tallies of 50 Ovenbirds, 19 Golden-winged Warblers, and 95+ Veeries, among many other good counts. The following day, one tree in Chicago held 40 Cape May Warblers. If May 15 and 16 had been a Saturday and Sunday, instead of a Tuesday and Wednesday, the local birders probably would have called this a great migration.

The progression of weather systems from west to east across the continent often brings cold fronts spaced about a week apart in spring. Chicago’s weather often goes on, two or three days later, to become New York City’s weather. This season, many of the weather fronts that passed through the upper Midwest around mid-week arrived on the Atlantic Coast around the weekend. Thus, in Maryland, the weekends of May 5–6 and May 19–20 had good movements of warblers and thrushes, respectively. In the New York City region, the pattern broke down to some extent because most of the month was cool and wet — even between actual weather fronts. As a result, New York had numbers of migrants almost every day in May.

## America’s Birding Spot revisited

Yes, that headline is misleading. Central Park is not really “America’s Birding Spot,” any more than the Dallas Cowboys were really “America’s

Football Team” back when they were claimed to be. But such pearls of exaggeration usually have a grain of truth at the center. Central Park, an emerald rectangle in the middle of Manhattan, has been a famous spring migrant trap for decades, enjoyed by generations of New York birders. Ludlow Griscom, working at the American Museum of Natural History, birded Central Park. So did Roger Tory Peterson, during his years as an art student and as National Audubon’s director of education. Peterson devoted a whole chapter to the park in his 1948 book, *Birds Over America*. Claims for the birding stature of Central Park may be exaggerated, but they are not unfounded.

In May 1990, I again had a chance to bird Central Park (and other parts of the Hudson-Delaware Region) extensively, after five spring seasons in the Southwest. I must say I entered the park with some trepidation. Not that I was concerned about muggers — nothing so concrete as that. I was worried by the persistent rumors about dwindling numbers of migrant songbirds. Would the warblers in the park be a sparse and pitiful remnant? Would Central Park be silent?

To my immense relief, every time I walked through Central Park I found large numbers of migrants. On most mornings there were warblers in every tree, thrushes in every thicket. Still, it was disquieting to talk to some of the veteran local birders. “There just aren’t as many migrants as there used to be,” they told me. I was not in a position to argue. But I had to wonder: how much of this pessimistic assessment was based on precise comparative counts? How much was triggered by the sense that “everybody knows” the migrants are declining?

## Off the bandwagon: Some heretical questions about Neotropical migrants

As much as I respect the initiative and skill of field ornithologists today, there is one kind of error in judgment that

plagues this community: we seem to convert theories much too quickly into “accepted facts.” One day an idea is proposed, and the next day “everybody knows” that it’s true. But is it?

This flaw in reasoning may result, unconsciously, from the workings of our rare bird committees. Suppose we all vote to accept a record of an Alder Flycatcher. That vote converts a hypothetical sighting into a fact: It is now an Officially Accepted Record of an Alder Flycatcher. But the *fact* here involves the *acceptance* of the record, not the identity of the bird itself, which may have been a wood-pewee instead. The power of our vote won’t change the genes of that bird.

The same kind of thing may be occurring with a larger and more important topic: the connection between tropical forest destruction and the populations of our migrant songbirds. If we go out birding in spring and fail to see as many migrants as we had hoped, someone is bound to say, “It’s the destruction of tropical forests. The birds are losing their wintering habitat, so their populations are declining.” We all nod our heads in agreement — we know about that. But do we? The fact that we all agree does not prove that tropical deforestation is causing the decline, or even that the decline is really taking place.

It’s always tempting to jump on the bandwagon when an idea like this comes along. Certainly in this case the end result would be highly desirable more pressure to preserve the tropical forests. (Of course, those forests are worth preserving in their own right.) It may be comforting to place the blame squarely in someone else’s back yard, but it’s not necessarily accurate. Some or many or all of the Neotropical migrants may be facing threats other than, or more serious than, tropical deforestation.

There has been a tendency, subconscious perhaps, to lump all these migrants into one category — as if there were one big tropical forest, uniform in

its composition but steadily shrinking in size, where all these migrants mingled in winter. But this is not the case. The winter ranges of these migrants are as diverse, and almost as sharply delineated, as their breeding ranges.

Consider the winter homes of a handful of our eastern warblers. Blackburnian Warblers winter mainly in the Andes; Blackpoll Warblers mainly in the South American lowlands east of the Andes; Black-throated Blue Warblers mainly in the West Indies; Golden-winged Warblers mainly in the foothills of southern Central America; Magnolia Warblers mainly in the lowlands of northern Central America and Mexico.

Even where their winter ranges overlap, the migrants may not share the same habitats. In southeastern Mexico in winter, I have found Kentucky Warblers mainly on the ground in tall wet forest; each apparently maintains a territory, so only a finite number of Kentuckys can be packed into a section of undisturbed forest. Magnolia Warblers, on the other hand, seem to be everywhere in the second growth, roadsides, gardens, and brush. My guess is that clearing of forest in that region would hurt the Kentucky a lot more than the Magnolia. Other migrants wintering there that tend to be found in the forest interior include Wood Thrush, Hooded Warbler, and Worm-eating Warbler. On the other hand, Tennessee Warblers occur wherever there are any flowering trees, including city streets, while Wilson's Warblers are common in any kind of brush. Lumping all these birds as "the Neotropical migrants," and assuming that they all face the same threats, may blind us to what is really going on.

Our migrant songbirds — our warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, and all the rest — may well be subject to serious pressures today. But it's almost certain that they're not all subject to the *same* pressures. Birders should strive to avoid making assumptions about bird population trends. We need more careful monitoring, more precise counts. If some of our migrants are going downhill we need to know *which* ones before we can identify the real causes.

**Once again, the spring migration was schizoid: many early records were set in the first part of the season, but the bulk of the migration was late**

The uneven weather of spring 1990 produced unusual warmth over much of the northeastern quadrant in mid-March and again in late April. Early migrants took advantage of these conditions in many areas. Early dates were THE story in Ontario, where no fewer than 106 species set new early arrival records! This same general pattern — hot spells with record-early migrants — was repeated in many reporting regions from North Dakota to Quebec to the Maritimes and south to Virginia.

However, with cooler temperatures in May, there was a widespread feeling that the main migration was somewhat late. This was true as far south as the Gulf Coast, where "a general tardiness characterized the season," and as far north as Newfoundland, where "the passerine migration was at least ten days behind schedule" at the end of May.

These patterns resulted in what Dave Lambeth called a "strungout" migration. Early transients came in early or on time, but then lingered longer than usual. Wintering species extended their stay later into the spring. Late migrants came in later than expected. One question raised by these phenomena: could this influence our perceptions of the numbers of migrants at typical migrant traps? If the passage is spread over a longer time period, might we expect fewer transients to be present on a given day?

#### **Weather over the Gulf apparently caused a major westward shift in the passage of many migrants**

During April and early May, an unusual pattern over the Gulf of Mexico produced many days with strong winds out of the east and southeast. Effects of these winds were surprisingly noticeable along the coast, as a number of migrants were shunted to the west in their landfall. In Florida, the only apparent shift involved some species that are usually typical of the east side of the peninsula showing up in good numbers along the west side. Farther west, effects were more obvious. Greg Jackson called this the "Year of the Cape May Warbler" along the northern Gulf coast, with high or record numbers from Alabama to Louisiana. Alongside the Cape Mays were unusual numbers of Black-throated Blue Warblers. These species both winter mainly in the West Indies, and usually

enter North America in spring *via* Florida. In Texas, Cape May Warblers also made news, but observers were more impressed with the unusual abundance of Blackpoll Warblers there, Blackpolls also generally pass through to the east of Texas.

Did this westward shift have any obvious results in regions to the north of the Gulf Coast? I think so. Warbler-watching is not carried out in a highly standardized or systematized way, so variations in the numbers of records from year-to-year could reflect variations in coverage more than anything else. But it seemed that fair numbers of eastern warblers were found well inland in Texas. Eastern New Mexico recorded an excellent diversity of stray eastern migrants, especially warblers. The Great Plains states had perhaps a better selection of easterners than usual, and South Dakota birders saw their best warbler migration in recent years. Colorado had an outstanding variety of eastern warblers, including Prairie, Mourning, Connecticut, and even Swainson's; 23 Blackpoll Warblers in the state were far fewer than in the banner year of 1983, but still far more than in a typical year. One of the best single spots for vagrants was in southwestern Wyoming, at Fontenelle Dam, where a phenomenal list of eastern warblers was amassed during the last week of May. Still farther west, the migrant traps in southeastern Oregon had a fine push of eastern warblers, but apparently the vagrant season in California was nothing special.

An ongoing debate about vagrancy in birds asks the question: are its causes mostly external or mostly internal? In other words, do birds wind up out of range because weather carries them off-course, or because they have faulty navigational powers?

Something could be said for both sides of this argument. Dave DeSante, in his famous studies, found Blackpoll Warblers in fall in California that were orienting toward the southwest — toward the empty Pacific. These birds were clearly doomed by their own internal drives. On the other hand, seabirds carried inland by hurricanes are obviously victims of outside forces. In between these two clear examples there lies a large gray area. I have argued for years that most birds out of range get there because of their own mistakes, not because of weather, but this spring



Numerous scattered records of Garganey across North America during spring 1990 probably reflected two events out of the past: Something that the birds did in 1989, and something that the birders did in 1983. This pencil portrait of a male Garganey was done in 1990 by Keith Hansen.

made me pause to reconsider.

Many "eastern" warblers, of course, are really eastern and northern, extending quite far west in Canada. Blackpoll Warblers, for instance, breed commonly west into Alaska. If Blackpolls find themselves wind-shifted west to the base of the Rockies, they may just continue north from there rather than correcting back to the east; in this case they are not vagrants, they are merely taking a different route to their intended destination. This line of reasoning could apply fairly well to a number of warblers recorded in the west this season, such as Magnolia, Cape May, Palm, Bay-breasted, and others. But birds like a Worm-eating Warbler in Wyoming or a Swainson's Warbler in Colorado are not on their way to anyplace they belong — they're lost. Did they get lost because of the weather? I couldn't guess.

We should note that even while these westward shifts were going on, some western birds appeared east of their normal ranges. A remarkable Red-faced Warbler was in Cameron Parish, Louisiana, at the same time as the peak Cape May Warbler tally there; and Wyoming's first Hermit Warbler, at Fontenelle Dam, was virtually surrounded by vagrant warblers from farther east.

#### **A plethora of Garganeys this spring undoubtedly reflected something that had occurred the previous fall**

Garganeys, it seemed, were everywhere this season. Their numbers were small, but they were remarkably widespread: one in California, one in Idaho, two in Colorado, one in Alberta, one in Saskatchewan, one in North

Dakota, one or two in Quebec, one in New Brunswick, and one on Prince Edward Island. Another in Virginia was treated as an "exotic," but it (like the rest of these) was probably a legitimate wild bird.

Occurring in April and May, these Garganeys were all likely northbound migrants, and all had probably wintered somewhere farther south in the New World. Something must have happened in autumn 1989 to displace them in their typical long migrations.

Because Garganey (like so many other Eurasian birds) occurs in Alaska, we have tended to assume that most Garganeys on this continent arrived via the Alaskan connection: across the Bering Sea, and then south on the American side. But this is not necessarily the case. Garganey is not a common stray in Alaska like some Eurasian ducks. On the other hand, it *is* a very common wintering species in west Africa — the most numerous northern duck wintering in Senegal and the Gambia, at about the same latitude as the Lesser Antilles. If a flock of southbound Garganeys in fall got offshore and got caught in a tropical storm system moving west across the Atlantic, they might easily survive the crossing and then spend the winter somewhere in the marshes of South or Central America, mixing with the migrant Blue-winged Teal. Heading north the next spring with the Blue-wingeds, they could produce the scatter of records witnessed this season. It's a plausible theory. But noting that one Garganey was actually detected in coastal California last fall, I'd suggest that some birds could be coming from *both* directions.

#### **A surprising surge brought White-faced Ibises into a number of areas on or beyond their northern/eastern periphery**

Clearly more than coincidence was the widespread appearance of White-faced Ibises beyond their usual limits. The Canadian prairies saw four in Alberta, two in Saskatchewan, and one in Manitoba, the latter a first confirmed provincial record. Records in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Indiana were notable, while good numbers were found in Iowa, western Missouri, and eastern Kansas. Southwestern Arkansas got a first spring record, and the first record ever for Tennessee was furnished by a flock of 28 birds! At the outer limits was one in New Jersey. I'm a little uneasy about some of the Glossy Ibises reported well inland in the east this season; hopefully they were identified to species by something more than assumptions.

Reasons for this peripheral push of White-faced Ibises were not immediately apparent. But it may be worth noting that unusual numbers of American Avocets spread into some of the same areas; these two species share a lot of range and habitat in the interior of the west.

#### **Out west, montane birds gradually headed back to the mountains after last winter's lowland invasion**

The arrival of the jays in the lowlands last fall was greeted with great fanfare, but there was far less notice taken as the jays went slinking back to the mountains this spring. Scattered reports from around the southwest, however, indicate that some of the jays, Mountain Chickadees, Lewis' Woodpeckers, and other birds from the "montane invasion" lingered in the lowlands into March or April, sometimes later.

Some of the finches actually seemed to increase from winter into spring. Purple and Cassin's finches and Pine Siskins stayed late in the valleys. Evening Grosbeaks were especially notable in New Mexico and Arizona, staying well into May, in numbers that were unprecedented in some areas.

#### **Instant endangered species: just subtract water**

According to David Yee, the drought in California—now in its fourth year — is turning out to be one of the worst of this century. Several effects on birdlife

are already being noted. Predictably, the dry spring had a negative impact on waterfowl breeding, and a nesting colony of waders at Colusa Refuge was abandoned when the area dried up. Effects on landbirds were harder to trace, but a drop in Barn Owl numbers was thought to be linked to the drought.

The most alarming news involved Tricolored Blackbird. Unlike its relative, the ubiquitous Red-winged Blackbird, the Tricolored is localized, colonial, and erratic in its nesting distribution. Traditional colony sites may be temporarily abandoned, perhaps even in periods of normal rainfall. In this dry spring, apparently the birds in northern California had very little nesting success — and the local population in northern California is a good percentage of the *world's* population.

Tricolored Blackbird may be suffering the combined effects of its own sensitive nature, four years of drought... and decades of destruction of its habitat. Although the species has recently expanded its limited Oregon range (see *AB* 44: 321), this is no cause for complacency. The Tricolored deserves to be regarded as, at least, a species of special concern.

#### **The Shining: an ornithological horror movie in real life**

Hitchcock said it first: "The birds are coming!" But the horrified populace in this script should consist of

other birds, mainly, plus a few birders. Shiny Cowbirds are spreading across the Southeast in surprising numbers, with amazing speed. So far as I know, nest parasitism by the species on this continent has not been documented yet, but it must be occurring.

Numbers of Shiny Cowbirds in Florida are already far too numerous and widespread to track, a mere five years after the first individual was recorded. Up the Atlantic Coast, the species has been recorded in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Westward along the Gulf Coast, the bird made big news this season. Singles in northwest Florida and Louisiana were outclassed by the first records in Alabama: up to 43 birds, with 28 in one lingering flock! Greg Jackson suggests that the Shiny Cowbirds were probably helped along by the same strong southeast winds that brought numbers of Cape May Warblers. Most amazing this season was the first Shiny Cowbird for Texas — not on the upper coast, but far inland, close to a vulnerable colony of Black-capped Vireos. At this rate, the vanguard should reach California before 1995. Heaven knows what impact the species may be having on nesting passerines in the Southeast by then.

#### **You tell me: unanswered questions about Philadelphia Vireo and Sharp-tailed Sparrow**

What factor could possibly make Philadelphia Vireo more conspicuous or more numerous over a broad front? I don't know, but it happened this spring. They were above average in Massachusetts; high numbers were banded in southwestern Pennsylvania; good numbers were found in Missouri; numbers in southwestern Louisiana were called "amazing"; and they were more common than usual in eastern Oklahoma and Kansas. Some of the latter could be explained by a westward shift of migrants, but that does not account for the birds farther east.

Two Sharp-tailed Sparrows were found in mid-May at desert oases in southern California. At least a couple of previous records exist for the same region and season. Where were these birds coming from? It's my impression that wintering Sharp-taileds in southern areas usually pull out in March or April — and anyway, the species is practically unknown in Mexico, so there is no obvious source population to the south of southern California.

A Sharp-tailed Sparrow that arrives at the vagrant trap of Galileo Hill on May 20 has probably done something interesting on the way there. For us to know what that "something" was may never be possible. But it gives us something to think about as we go back out into the field, looking for answers — and for more questions. ■



*The first of the invasionary force to infiltrate Texas, this male Shiny Cowbird had traveled more than one-third of the way across the state before it was apprehended at Fort Hood, Bell County, on May 23, 1990. Photograph/ Christopher Zyskowski.*