THE CHANGING SEASONS

Autumn 1990

By Kenn Kaufman

IN SOME SEASONS, the avian news of the continent is dominated by one or two major events. Autumn 1990 was not one of those seasons. Plenty of things were happening, but most involved relatively few regions or relatively few birds. So to get a comprehensive view of the news of this season, we have to scan a number of different topics: lots of front-page stories, no major headlines.

South by Northwest: weather fronts or the lack of them, and resulting shifts in major migration patterns

Along the Atlantic Coast from Maine to Virginia, the fall migration of songbirds was considered disappointing. Regional Editors there drew a connection to weather patterns.

In a normal autumn, the best birding days at the coast are immediately after passage of a weather front, with strong winds from the northwest. Southbound migrants apparently are shunted off-course by the northwest winds, and they pile up when they hit the coast. But in fall 1990, major fronts were scarce, and winds that followed them were light. Birders who congregated at the coast, as usual, found the birding often dull in the first half of the season.

From New England, Charles Duncan found many strands of evidence to suggest that migrants avoided the coast. For example, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were unusually scarce at Monhegan Island, Maine, but unusually common in western Massachusetts. Solitary Vireos were in high numbers far inland in Massachusetts, but failed to show up on Appledore Island, Maine. Banding totals for Traill's (Willow/Alder) Flycatchers showed a contrast: David Holmes's banding operation on Appledore Island had very low numbers, while Chris Rimmer banded a record high at Woodstock, Vermont, far from the coast. Warbler totals were drastically down at Appledore, but only moderately low at Woodstock.

Numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks mirrored the same pattern. They set records on the ridges in western Massachusetts. Lighthouse Point, well westward on the Connecticut shoreline, saw a good passage. To the south of there, counts were the lowest in six years on Long Island, unimpressive in New Jersey, and "anemic" at Cape Charles, Virginia. Bob Paxton *et al.* point out that in the Hudson-Delaware Region, counts of Sharp-shinneds at the coast have dropped far more than counts on the inland ridges. Farther west, tallies at two Ontario hawkwatches were at or above long-term averages, while good numbers generally were noticed in the Central Southern Region. Overall, while there may well have been a drop in Sharp-shinned populations, there also seemed to be a shift away from the coast this fall—simply because these lightweight raptors were not forced to the coast by northwest winds.

As a final note on this theme, three mentions of one songbird migrant caught my eye. Canada Warblers were singled out as being particularly scarce in western Massachusetts, but much farther south and west, Regional Editors were impressed enough to report one-day, one-spot high counts of 150 Canadas in southwest Louisiana and 68 in coastal Texas. Maybe there's no connection. But maybe, in the absence of strong weather fronts and northwest winds, this species—and many others—followed a southbound route well inland, away from the Atlantic seaboard.

An infiltration of wheatears

The Northern Wheatears that nest in Greenland and Arctic eastern Canada all cross the Atlantic each fall to winter in the Old World...or, *almost* all do. Virtually every fall, a few come straight south and are found in settled latitudes of Canada or the eastern United States. But the numbers found vary from year to year, sometimes with peaks that seem to be more than coincidence.

Autumn 1990 was a peak season· at least *16* wheatears were reported. This was not a record, since the fall of 1976 produced *21* wheatears, but the differences between that year and this are illuminating. In 1976, 12 of the wheatears were in New England, seven in Massachusetts alone, with a high percentage along the coast. In autumn 1990, New England reported four ("only" four, better than in an average year), and one of these was far inland at Bristol, New Hampshire The Atlantic Prov-

inces only had two this year, but there were four in Quebec (where one would make a good season) and two in Ontario (where there had been only one autumn bird in the last decade). The one in New York was far upstate, not on Long Island. Most impressively, *three* states—Illinois, Maryland, and Arkansas—had their first wheatear records ever.

As a broad generalization, a rare small bird is much more likely to be found if it happens to be on the coast: birds and birders both tend to concentrate there. But this fall, as we've noted, there was a lack of cold fronts and northwest winds to push migrants to the coast. My guess is that the flight of wheatears in 1990 was at least as large as that of 1976, but that the birds scattered inland, where they were less likely to be detected (even the Maryland bird was well away from the coast).

Wheatears are small birds, unobtrusive except when they fly, flashing their tail patterns. Away from the coast they may turn up in almost any vacant land, not necessarily in birding hotspots. With 16 detected by birders, I'd guess that there must have been scores, even hundreds, scattered across the continent.

Very-low-density invasions, or mere coincidences? Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Anna's Hummingbird, and Lark Bunting

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, a long-distance migrant from Siberia, is regular in small numbers in fall on the Pacific Coast, from Alaska to California. But when several turn up farther inland in the same year, it suggests something more than coincidence.

This fall, the Yukon Territory recorded its second Sharp-tailed ever. Farther south on the same flight path, there were at least *four or five*, apparently, east of the Rockies in Alberta. Illinois and Iowa each had one, each furnishing a third state record. New Mexico had its first one ever. This scatter of unusual records may have reflected a low-density invasion.

If that concept doesn't bother you, consider this season's "invasion" of Anna's Hummingbirds...involving only three to five birds. Males that stayed for long periods provided a first record for Kansas, a first record for Wisconsin, and a second confirmed record for Alberta. These places are a *long* distance from the normal Pacific Coast/Arizona range of Anna's. Less outlandish but still notable, a male in Albuquerque was rare, and one at Midland, central Texas, furnished only the fourth record there.

I believe the vast majority of Anna's Hummingbirds out of range will go unreported. Hummingbirds are often hard to see well, except at feeders; most feeders are maintained by non-birders; a high percentage of Anna's in fall will be females or obscure young males, likely to be overlooked even by birders of moderate skill. The odds are heavily against any vagrant Anna's, especially deep in the interior, being reported in these pages. Confirmation of three this season leads me to speculate that many more must have gone astray.

Since we're already on thin ice, let's look at far-eastern records of Lark Buntings last fall. In Ontario, where the species averages fewer than one per year, four this fall set an all-time high. One in Quebec furnished only a second fall record. Single birds in Massachusetts and Florida were very rare there. Can seven birds represent an invasion?

If very-low-density invasions do occur, it suggests that we could view the bird hotlines—the rare bird alerts—in a different light. Typically, birders use hotline information only to go and look at the rarities that have already been reported. If that's all that happens, then the purpose served by the hotlines is purely recreational (and there's nothing wrong with that). But there is another possibility.

Consider: Autumn 1990 saw excellent numbers of Buff-breasted Sandpipers on the Pacific seaboard, from British Columbia south, with northern California getting its most ever. Ella Sorensen had heard about this flight; in fact, she was talking about it just an hour before she found the first Buff-breasted Sandpiper for Utah. She was actively looking for the species, analyzing the Utah habitats she knows so well and making a conscious search.

This may represent a new kind of rare-bird-chasing for the 1990s, when people everywhere (except in the White House) are realizing the importance of energy conservation. When the hotline reports suggest that some rarity is staging a low-density invasion, you don't have to drive long distances to chase the individuals that already have been found—you can try, instead, to discover the same species on your own home turf. If you happen to succeed, you'll get your name in the record books, add to our total knowledge, and save gasoline.

Last year's invasion of montane birds to western lowlands went largely unrepeated, but for variable reasons

Autumn 1989 saw a massive movement of mountain birds to plains and valleys of the West. Autumn 1990 saw very little echo of that phenomenon. The lack of a downslope movement signalled good news in some areas, but not all.

It's generally thought that mass movements of jays, chickadees, nuthatches, and other western mountain birds to the lowlands are triggered by a serious lack of food on their normal territories. Such an event may be exciting for the valley birders, but it's not so great for the montane birds. When conditions are good for them, they stay at home.

In summer 1990, the drought in parts of the Southwest was decisively

broken, and birds in the mountains evidently did well without going anywhere. Farther north in the Mountain West, drought persisted in some areas, but Hugh Kingery reported that wild food crops in the mountains were generally quite good; no downslope movement ensued.

California was a different story. Wild food supplies in the mountains there are probably low, but after four years of serious drought, this season produced no concerted downslope movement. There were some Scrub Jays in the deserts of southeastern California and some White-breasted Nuthatches on the southern coast, but most of the downhill movers were isolated and far-flung. Single Williamson's Sapsuckers provided first records for two counties and a second record for another, and reached six unexpected localities in the south. A single Pinyon Jay at a feeder was the first in Humboldt County since 1912. A lone Clark's Nutcracker was the second ever for Sonoma County. A very few chickadees wandered out of range to the central valleys and the coast. The impression I get is that these isolated strays were all making desperation movements out of parched home ranges, from populations too low to produce any mass flights.

The winter-invader scoreboard, Part I: numerous Northern Shrikes,—local Hawk Owls, central Rough-legged Hawks, early Gyrfalcons

Especially in eastern regions, Northern Shrikes staged one of their best flights of recent decades, arriving early and in big numbers. They were especially noticeable in southern Ontario, where *100* were found, but there was agreement on the magnitude of the flight as far east as upstate New York, New England, and the Atlantic Provinces, and as far west as Saskatchewan. A good sprinkling got south to New Jersey and Ohio, but "only two" in Kansas were considered not to represent an invasion. Two reached southern California by early November.

Northern Hawk Owls seem to be independent souls, not given to the kind of mass flight that occasionally occurs for birds like Great Gray Owls and Boreal Owls. But this season hawk owls put on what was, for them, a big flight. By the end of November there were a dozen in southern Quebec, thirteen in southern Ontario, and fair numbers in the Prairie Provinces, especially in Saskatchewan. Minnesota had four, Michigan had one, and one in Wisconsin was the first there in almost thirty years.

Rough-legged Hawks put in a good appearance in the interior. They were sparse in the Atlantic Provinces and down the coast (except for eight at one site in Maryland), but numbers picked up in western New England, upstate New York, and western Pennsylvania. They were noted in good numbers across Ontario, the upper midwest, the plains states south to Kansas, and west into western Montana and Idaho. On the Pacific Coast, however, very few got as far south as northern California.

The movement was not only widespread, but early. Charles Duncan of Maine, a "September-skeptic" about early reports of Rough-leggeds, might have been "August-apoplectic" at the *August 11* sighting in Wisconsin. But even ignoring such exceptional records, the general sense was that the birds arrived ahead of usual dates.

Also early were Gyrfalcons, with one banded in Minnesota September 24 and singles seen in New Jersey October 6, North Dakota October 7, and in many places by mid-October; all of these were eclipsed by one in southern Quebec August 10! Numbers were good all across the Prairie Provinces, thirteen were detected in Idaho and Montana, with five more in the Dakotas and six in Minnesota.

Gyrfalcon at Grand Forks, North Dakota, October 21, 1990. A decent flight of Gyrs developed in the fall of 1990, with some birds showing up unusually early. Photograph/David O. Lambeth.

The winter-invader scoreboard, Part II: Chickadees and Blue Jays

The northeastern quadrant of the continent saw a good southward flight of Black-capped Chickadees, the first in several years for most areas. In Ontario the flight involved literally thousands of birds, and continued for over a month. There was also a fair movement across New York and Pennsylvania. A few got into eastern Maryland, a small flight reached central Ohio, and George

Hall banded a fair number of migrants in West Virginia. Unlike some flights of Black-capped, this one did not seem to be accompanied by any Boreal Chickadees.

Big flights of Blue Jays drew comment this fall in some areas. Thousands every day for weeks in the Cape Charles area, with 8000+ on October 14, furnished a "highlight of the fall" for the Middle Atlantic Coast. Holiday Beach, Ontario, counted *51,000* September 30. Far from any shoreline, 3000+ October 5 at the Allegheny Front observatory in West Virginia made an impressive total. Hundreds were noted in northeastern Texas, but the flight did not go much farther south—the birds did not flirt with the Mexican border, as they do some years. However, many Blue Jays went west: they were scattered all over western Montana and Idaho, and unprecedented numbers reached southeastern British Columbia.

The winter-invader scoreboard, Part III: "Grandpa, what does 'winter finch' mean?"

As a kid, reading about birds that lived far beyond the limits of my midwestern neighborhood, I used to pore over accounts of the "winter finches." These birds—cardueline finches like siskins, crossbills, redpolls, Purple Finches, Pine and Evening grosbeaks—were famous for their unpredictable invasions, sometimes sweeping down out of the north to bring winter excitement over wide areas. Later, I got to see some such invasions myself. But it's my impression that flights of winter finches have become far less frequent, far less widespread, over the last couple of decades.

That impression could be false. But there's no question about autumn 1990, which definitely did not see any such flight. Regional Editors over the eastern two-thirds of the continent were unanimous on this point. From Manitoba, Rudolf Koes and Peter Taylor stated matter-of-factly that "There was a general scarcity of winter finches across the Region." From Newfoundland, Bruce Mactavish made the dry observation, "most finches were in neutral." Farther south, comments were more pointed. In the Western Great Lakes Region, Daryl Tessen wrote, "The winter finch flight this autumn proved deceiving and poor ...By season's end, even northern observers were lamenting the atypically quiet woods." And on the Middle Atlantic Coast, Harry Armistead expressed the frustrations of many when he wrote, "When this Region finally does get a strong influx of northern finches, it will be most well-received."

Controversy corner: Dr. Stejneger, I presume

In the hope of stimulating a good argument, I'd like to hit what should be a sore point: Stejneger's Petrel in California.

This November, one individual of this fast-flying deep-water species was photographed 50+ miles off Point Reyes. Writing about the event, Steve Bailey and company were correct to say that this bird was "almost expected." But paradoxically, it also furnished the first confirmable record for North American waters.

Prior to November, Stejneger's Petrel was on the California list—but *not* on any official North American list—on the basis of one bird glimpsed in 1979. I say "glimpsed" with reason. That individual was seen well for 15 seconds by a boatload of birders who assumed it was a slightly different Cook's Petrel, and who had just seen the first Cook's Petrels of their lives an hour or two earlier. Many of the observers took notes on the sighting (because Cook's Petrel was then new to the state, and because California birders, admirably, document everything). But the idea of Stejneger's was not even raised until later. The record went around the California Bird Records Committee several times before it was grudgingly voted in.

The California Bird Records Committee file on Stejneger's Petrel is an inch thick. It contains lots of intelligent discussion, generated while committee members struggled with this borderline case. But the file is almost *all* discussion: the original descriptions are quite short. Even the most skillful observers in the world—some of whom were on that boat—can only see so much in 15 seconds. This is probably why the checklist committees of the American Ornithologists' Union and the American Birding Association ultimately rejected the record.

Remarkably, the glimpsed bird in 1979 and the photographed one in 1990 both occurred on the 17th of November. In 1990 there were two others seen, on the 14th and 17th. So here are my questions for discussion: Does the photographed bird "prove" all the others, including the one eleven years earlier, or does it just provide circumstantial evidence? Was the California Bird Records Committee right to accept the 1979 record because it was probably good, or were the continent-wide committees right to reject it because it was only probable? Would the California Bird Records Committee members have accepted the 1979 bird if none of them had *seen* it, and if precisely the same slim details had come from birders in, say, Oregon?

And after you solve that one—were there really "invasions" behind the three Anna's Hummingbirds in the heartland and the seven Lark Buntings in the east, or were these just coincidences? Were the Sharp-shinned Hawks and other little birds really following inland routes, or were their numbers down? There are still plenty of questions, plenty of reasons to get back out in the field and turn up more data. ■