

MANY DIFFERENT authors have written this column since the era, decades ago, when Ludlow Griscom used to write it every time. Sometimes these columnists have complained that there was little to discuss, that little had happened in the reporting regions. I have never been in that position—every time I have undertaken the “Changing Seasons,” it has turned out that the season

under scrutiny was an eventful one. But this season was more so than most. Looking at the continent-wide picture, it was clear that a lot was going on in the bird world during summer 1993. Without taking up an excessive amount of space, I can touch on only a few of the avian events of the season.

#### **WEATHER: BETWEEN A SWAMP AND A DRY PLACE**

This summer there seemed not to be much middle ground between the extremes of flooding and drought. Cool and very wet weather throughout the northern prairies turned into extremely wet weather and massive flooding farther south; east of the Appalachians, however, everything was hot and dry. National headlines in the United States were simultaneously reporting on massive, destructive floods in the Mississippi Valley and intense, destructive drought in the Carolinas. Texans, never to be outdone, experienced both: floods in June, drought in July. Only in the southwest was the weather really near “normal.”

Effects of the weather on birdlife were, as usual, difficult to discern in many areas. On the northern plains, however, there was good evidence of

# THE CHANGING SEASONS

## Summer 1993

*By Kenn Kaufman*

the effects of the cool and rainy season. In the Idaho-western Montana area, according to Tom Rogers and Dan Svingen, nest box checks revealed failure of many nests of swallows and bluebirds. Trumpeter Swans in some areas in the region failed to breed, and duck nesting was delayed in some places, but the new shallow wetlands contributed to good nesting by Northern Pintails.

Stuart Houston surveyed active Tree Swallow nests in southern Saskatchewan and found that only 28% were successful; ordinarily, the success rate is well over 70%. It was apparently a poor year for nesting Swainson's Hawks in various parts of the Prairie Provinces and the Great Plains. In North Dakota, the record precipitation may have had a negative effect on many nesting birds, but ducks apparently had good success.

In the areas hit by drought, birds did not seem to be seriously affected. In the southern Atlantic states, according to Ricky Davis, conditions were generally good for nesting birds, but horrible for bird watchers. And in Florida, the unseasonable drought (following exceptional rains earlier) may have actually helped to provide good foraging for some of the wading birds.

#### **COSMIC MIND-BENDERS**

While many people in the Mississippi Valley watched the waters rising and prayed for miracles, birders in other regions went down to the water's edge and saw miracles, or so it seemed.

A large body of water in a desert region often attracts remarkable birds. That was the central fact of Arizona birding this summer, as many observers made the long hot trek to Painted Rock Dam, which (thanks to last winter's floods) backed up a substantial reservoir. As described by David Stejskal and Gary Rosenberg, Painted Rock turned up a great number and variety of species to reward those birders for their efforts.

As good as Painted Rock Dam can sometimes be, Arizona birders suffer from a kind of “Salton Sea Envy” when they look across into southern California. Compared to Painted Rock, the Salton Sea is larger, older, more stable from year to year, closer to big source populations of birders, and much closer to the ocean, especially the Gulf of California.

This summer's reports were enough to ensure that Salton Sea Envy would remain firmly in place, because no Arizona waterbirds could compare with the combination of seabirds found on the Salton Sea on July 10. On that date, a Least Storm-Petrel was the first to be found there since the storm-driven invasion of September 1976. A large dark shearwater was seen at too great a distance to be identified to species. A Cook's Petrel—a deep-sea *Pterodroma* that rarely even comes within fifty miles of the California coast—was seen not only on July 10, but off and on until August.

And to top it all off, a bird studied by Guy McCaskie and friends on the 10th was believed to be a Bulwer's Petrel, a species that never has been fully confirmed in North American waters! It is especially noteworthy that this quartet of seabirds in the desert was found in a period of calm weather; McCaskie points out that a

storm off the southern tip of Baja in early July may have played a part, deflecting lost pelagics into the northward funnel of the Gulf of California.

For mass appeal, however, the four rare birds on the Salton Sea could not compete with a single tern on the Atlantic Coast. The first Whiskered Tern for North America spent several days in southern New Jersey, disappeared, and then was rediscovered (apparently the same bird) across the bay in Delaware, where it stayed for weeks. News of this outlander made the front page of *The New York Times*, and birders by the hundreds flocked to Delaware. I was particularly happy to hear about the bird, because I had predicted it. In a talk to the American Birding Association (April 1992 in Mobile, Alabama), I had named Whiskered Tern as a bird that was already occurring in North America and was being simply overlooked. Now that there has been one record, I'm sure there will be more; but I certainly hope that future reports will be documented thoroughly, as this one was.

### **SUMMER DUCKS**

Every year, across much of the continent, scattered individual ducks are found summering south of their known breeding ranges. Comments from a number of regions suggested that 1993 saw more of these oversummering birds than usual. As long as these ducks are just isolated singletons, their presence does not mean anything (many are just injured or sick birds, anyway). But sometimes these lingerers turn out to be breeders, adding up to significant range extensions. For example, this season a pair of Ring-necked Ducks stayed on a secluded pond in Maryland and raised a brood, a first nesting for the state and well south of the usual range.

It seems only a matter of time until Eurasian Wigeon is found nesting on this continent. Northern areas from

New Brunswick to British Columbia and Alaska reported scattered summer records this year (mostly of the easily-identified males), and a pair was found in Quebec in late July. The large numbers of these birds observed every winter (and the occasional Eurasian × American hybrid) would be more easily explained if the species were nesting in North America. In a similar vein, a Garganey summered on Prince Edward Island, another stayed through June in Montana, and one or two were seen in Quebec. In a class by itself was the male Baikal Teal that summered at Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

As a reminder that tropical ducks do interesting things also, Masked Ducks from last winter's surge remained in Texas through July, and nesting was at least attempted at one spot. Farther afield, a flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks appeared in Quebec in June, and likely the same flock appeared later in Ontario. It is at least possible that these were wild birds. However, this species seems less prone to wandering than its relative, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck. Despite the numbers of Black-bellieds that nest in southern and central Arizona, one at the Salton Sea this summer established only the twelfth record ever for California.

### **CONCERTED SUMMER MOVEMENTS**

Summer is not generally the season for big invasions of birds. One exception to this generalization, of course, involves northward dispersal of southern wading birds. This season was marked by a major movement of White Ibises. Along with other wading birds, White Ibises had a poor nesting season in the Everglades, but farther north in Florida they did very well. Rich Paul and Ann Schnapf called it the best year in a decade for colonial nesters in the Tampa Bay area; eight thousand pairs of White Ibises made up a big part of the success story there, and the ibises also did quite well at Merritt Island and else-

where. This year's hatch obviously contributed to a big northward push of the species, which was composed largely of immatures.

The southern Atlantic states saw high numbers inland, with an invasion to the Atlanta area. In the middle Atlantic states, an amazing concentration of 150 was found in the Back Bay area of coastal Virginia, 40 were inland in Surrey County, and one reached Maryland in late July. Two got to Delaware, singles to Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and one to Ohio for a third state record. In the Central Southern region there were many notable records and high counts inland away from the Gulf. Texas saw many White Ibises wandering inland earlier and in larger numbers than usual, and two reached Oklahoma. The invasion was still going on at the end of the reporting period, so this accounting does not describe the full extent of the movement.

A smaller but much more unusual summer movement involved Evening Grosbeaks in northeastern regions. This was noted primarily in Massachusetts, where over 150 birds were reported between late June and late July. Some of these birds evidently nested, a rare event in that state. During the same period there were also a number of records from Rhode Island and Connecticut. Outside New England, there were multiple June sightings of Evening Grosbeaks on Quebec's Magdalen Islands and in Leeds County, Ontario, both areas where the species is unexpected in summer. We may be seeing a resurgence of this big finch after several years of scarcity in the northeast.

### **A HANDFUL OF HUMMINGBIRDS**

It required, at most, only a couple of ounces' worth of White-eared Hummingbirds to make news in three states. In Arizona, White-eareds have been regular recently at Ramsey Canyon, and were there again all season, but individuals also occurred at

three other sites. The species is very rare in New Mexico, but two summered at the same feeder north of Silver City, and there was a possible record even farther north. Texas had had only three solid previous records, but two birds (and possibly a third) came to a feeder in the Davis Mountains, well above the border.

The Texas feeder that hosted the White-eareds had other blessings as well. A Blue-throated Hummingbird there was a first for the Davis Mountains. Up to fifteen Magnificent Hummingbirds were there, too, a surprising number for that area. But the most notable hummer of the season was the Magnificent Hummingbird that came to a feeder in Arkansas in July. It almost seems that the southwestern specialties among the hummingbirds are redefining just how far the "southwest" really extends.

#### **CHECKING IN WITH SOME ONGOING EXPANSIONS**

In 1984 and again in 1989 in this column, I discussed the ongoing expansion of the Double-crested Cormorant population. This expansion is still going on, and going strong. The nesting population in Rhode Island has multiplied a hundredfold in the last dozen years, numbers on Vermont's Lake Champlain continue to rise, and new colonies are being established in upstate New York. Colonies in Illinois and Iowa posted increases, and the species nested for the first time at Midland, Texas, and at Cody, Wyoming. Nesting colonies in two areas of San Francisco Bay continued to expand.

Great-tailed Grackle is another avian success story, continuing its steady march to the north. One Missouri colony had over 200 birds in June, and new nesting sites were established in northwestern Iowa and western Nebraska. (Note that Minnesota had its first confirmed record in April 1993, just a bit north of the Iowa outposts.) The nesting population in southern California was

increasing dramatically, with more records than ever in northern California this year. Four were found during the season in southeastern Oregon, where nesting will probably occur soon.

There were continued signs of advancement by many other species that have been doing well recently. Black Vultures continued to push at their northern limits, with notable records this season including one in Nova Scotia and three in New England, plus high counts in Illinois; the presumably breeding birds in southeastern New York got through another summer with no nest being discovered. Black-necked Stilt favors bare ground near unclean water, and has been able to take advantage of many man-made aquatic habitats, apparently nesting for the first time in Illinois, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and North Dakota this season. From the center of the continent came a few comments to the effect that House Finches were consolidating their holdings in areas like Missouri and Wisconsin.

#### **THE FORTUNES OF WARBLERS**

Among all the Neotropical migrant species that may be in trouble, the warblers are often picked out for special attention. This season there were some encouraging comments about the Hooded Warbler, one of the species that has been considered vulnerable because it seems to require forest-interior habitat for wintering. Toward its northern limits, Hooded Warbler was reported to be in solid numbers in New England and Wisconsin, as well as in northern Illinois and Indiana, and it made progress in southern Ontario. It also drew honorable mention at western limits in Oklahoma. These peripheral reports do not tell us how the species is doing at the center of its range, of course.

We could note in passing that the Blue-winged Warbler is doing well and expanding its range toward the north. But its expansion is taking

place at the expense of the Golden-winged Warbler, which is being swamped out genetically by interbreeding with the advancing Blue-wingeds. The Golden-winged is "rapidly disappearing" from New England, whence there were only eight reports this season, and it continues its "march toward oblivion" in the northern Appalachians. Farther north, the Blue-winged *vs* Golden-winged story is still being played out in southern and central parts of Ontario. As an odd sidelight, however, a misplaced pair of Golden-wingeds apparently nested in Colorado this year.

While most range expansions in North America today are northward ones, George Hall points out again that several northern breeders seem to be spreading southward and downhill in the Appalachians. Advances were reported this season for Magnolia and Canada warblers, and especially for Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler, which nested for the first time in North Carolina. Farther west, the Ozark region in Arkansas produced two major warbler surprises. Four singing male Chestnut-sided Warblers there provided the first summer records for the state. At least a dozen singing male Black-throated Green Warblers were found as well, with fledged juveniles apparently establishing the first nesting records for Arkansas. Whether these represent a recent range extension or a previously undiscovered population, the news is remarkable.

Finally, the best warbler news came from Michigan, where this year's census of Kirtland's Warbler tallied 485 singing males. This is the largest total in three decades, and it attests to the success of the habitat management and cowbird control programs in that area.

#### **SPECIES OF CONCERN, AND SPECIES ON THE DECLINE**

Lack of cowbird control is likely one of the big factors affecting the Black-

whiskered Vireo in Florida. With Shiny Cowbirds spreading north in the peninsula, Brown-headed Cowbirds spreading south, and Bronzed Cowbirds lurking around the edges, any open-cup nesters in Florida are likely to be at risk. Again this season, observers reported that numbers of Black-whiskered Vireos were down. It is true that healthy populations of this vireo still exist in parts of the Caribbean, but if the species disappears from Florida, it will be hard to bring it back.

This season, a number of regions focused attention on the Willow Flycatcher. In many areas, particularly in the arid southwest, this inconspicuous bird is reliant on high quality riparian habitat, so it may be a good indicator of the health of natural streamside communities. Surveys this summer found the endangered southwestern subspecies at a number of sites in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, but the total number of individuals located was quite small.

There are many other species that have elicited concern, at least locally, under the watchful eyes of *American Birds* reporters, and these are discussed regularly in the columns from the appropriate regions. For an entire habitat full of species of concern, however, see under the next heading.

#### **GRASSLAND EXPLORATIONS: MORE SPECIES OF CONCERN**

Within the last few years, the plight of the tropical rain forest has become a topic for the general public, with rock stars and even politicians cautiously stepping onto the bandwagon. This has helped to establish some sympathy for our North American migrants that winter in the rain forest. But our birds that breed in grassland (even those that travel long distances to the south) do not spend the winter in the rain forest, so none of them benefits from the general concern.

Nonetheless, grassland birds are getting some attention in various

parts of North America. Particularly notable this season was the survey carried out by Andrea Jones in Massachusetts. I was impressed that the survey turned up 300 pairs of Grasshopper Sparrows, and surprised that only half as many Eastern Meadowlark pairs were found. This type of precise information is invaluable for managing grassland birds in a region of the continent that is largely either forested or urbanized.

A very different set of circumstances applies in regions that were originally prairies and plains. There the habitat may look unchanged to the untrained eye, but it may be largely degraded by grazing or agriculture to the point where it will no longer support populations of native birds. In such regions, basic mapping of the current distributions of grassland birds is a big step in the right direction.

Observers working on the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas this summer turned up important information on several grassland species. Out in the wide-open country east of Colorado Springs, they found significant range extensions for Mountain Plovers, Long-billed Curlews, McCown's Longspurs, and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. This kind of discovery illustrates how atlas projects can be especially valuable in grasslands and other open habitats that are too often ignored by birders.

This season, Henslow's Sparrow numbers were above average in Oklahoma (where the species was only recently discovered) and in eastern Kansas, and there were positive comments from various parts of the Middlewestern Prairie region. But elsewhere the picture was not so bright. Around the western Great Lakes the species is "definitely declining," while in the Appalachian region it has "almost vanished." It was missing this year from some traditional sites in central New York. In Ontario, intensive surveys of former nesting areas turned up only one pair. Clearly,

Henslow's Sparrow merits concern. It has a breeding range centered on heavily populated parts of the upper Midwest. The weedy fields that it favors may look like waste places or vacant lots to most people. Saving a healthy population of Henslow's may be a tough job—especially now, with single-species efforts coming under more and more criticism. Our best bet here would be to join forces with groups like the various native-plant societies, or the Xerces Society (which focuses on invertebrate conservation). Those "vacant lots" that meet the exacting requirements of Henslow's Sparrow probably also support communities of notable wildflowers, butterflies, etc., and our focus should be on saving the community, not just on saving the sparrow.

#### **LOOKING AT THE REST OF THE ICEBERG**

This brief summary of the season has only been enough for a quick look at some of the avian events of summer 1993—a look at the tip of the iceberg. There is a lot more to be found in the pages that follow. It was, as I stated earlier, a season in which a lot was going on.

If you are not in the habit of reading all of the Regional Reports, this would be a good time to try it. Take a few hours on those cold February evenings to read what North American observers detected about the continent's bird occurrences last summer. You'll see that there was indeed a lot going on in the world of birds during the season (far more than I could discuss in this column), and you'll benefit from the accumulated knowledge and insight of the fine *American Birds* corps of Regional Editors.

