

Changing Seasons

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Northern Wheatears made news in many regions. A scattering of individuals were found far south, with birds in Florida and Texas vying for the southernmost location. This immature wheatear was at Key Biscayne, Florida, October 23, 1994. Photograph/Jeff Weber

AUTUMN 1994 was, in many ways, that rarest of things, an average season. No singular events occurred in the bird world to grab the headlines in this seasonal summary. In reading through all the regional reports, I sought in vain for one single unifying theme or overriding phenomenon. And yet the season was far from dull. As Greg Jackson wrote, Santa came early this fall, bringing lots of exciting gifts. Rarities, mini-invasions, and flights of migrants were spread all over the continent, and to the islands beyond.

It was a mild season over much of the continent, with relatively few major weather events.

In the Regional Editors' assessments of autumn weather, there was remarkable unanimity about the mildness of the season. This was true even across the north. Alaska was unseasonably warm at least through October, with two Townsend's Warblers lingering in Anchorage through the end of the period. In the Yukon Territory, Helmut Grünberg saw a Wilson's Warbler north of Whitehorse at the end of October. At Churchill, Manitoba, on the shores of Hudson Bay, there was no snow until November.

Tropical storm *Beryl* came into the Gulf of Mexico and then swept ashore over the Florida panhandle August 15–16, going north. Avian fallout in the area where the storm made landfall was not spectacular, featuring a few frigatebirds, Audubon's Shearwaters, and Sooty and Bridled terns on or near shore. Farther inland, however, there was a hint that other birds might have been carried by the winds. The storm center

tracked north over the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina as it fizzled out; a couple of days later, a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel was picked up there, near Tryon, North Carolina. This bird may well have been picked up in the Gulf of Mexico itself, not farther out in the Caribbean. Note that Band-rumpeds were being reported on boat trips off the Texas coast this summer, including late summer, as the species is turning out to be regular in the Gulf.

Two weather phenomena on opposite sides of the continent may have had wider impacts. In Newfoundland, persistent northeast winds were noted during the season, probably contributing to the number of European birds recorded there (including what may have been the first absolutely unquestionably wild Eurasian Blackbird for North America). Off Alaska, the Aleutian Low pumped wind and moisture across the southern part of the state for much of the season. Relatively few Asiatic birds were found in Alaska in spite of this, but British Columbia hosted Wood Sandpiper and Dusky Thrush.

Fall migration was lackluster in many areas, partly because of mild weather, but migrants moved both early and late.

Mild weather and lack of strong cold fronts may have contributed to a lack of big migrant fallouts. Aside from some very good hawk flights on the Atlantic Coast (which are caused by slightly different conditions anyway), there were very few big migration events. Writing from Ontario, Ron Ridout put it this way: "Warm temperatures and clear skies persisted through the period, con-





ditions conducive to an uneventful passage for most migrants. Not surprisingly, almost to a person, observers remarked on the invisible migration as a result of the great weather, and few attributed the shortage of birds to any catastrophic decline.”

One result of the mildness of the season was that many birds lingered later than usual, a phenomenon noted in many regions. Paradoxically, some areas also reported on early migrants. In the Appalachians, George Hall said that the migration was “drawn out at both ends,” with early and late dates. This kind of point is not often considered, but if the duration of the passage changes—if it is compressed into a shorter span, or stretched out over a longer period—this could profoundly affect our ideas of the total numbers of migrants.

A welcome addition this season was the inclusion of records from Bermuda in the West Indies Region report. Bermuda is actually far from the West Indies, and far from every place else, but year after year the active Bermudan birders turn up astonishing records. These records can give us a unique insight into the movements of birds over the western North Atlantic. Kudos to Andrew Dobson for sending in notes from Bermuda, and to Rob Norton for including them in his column.

Bermuda had a good fall, with a wide variety of migrants, but the most noticeable trend was that the migration was early. Fourteen species set new early records, and the first wave of migrants was six days earlier than average. These migrants, of course, are coming from North America, heading for the West Indies or South America, so their timing is quite relevant to our concerns here on the continent. It ties in well with the

observation, on parts of our Atlantic Coast, that the migration was most impressive early on, and faded somewhat later.

A very good breeding season on the northern Great Plains may have had autumn impacts from coast to coast, or even beyond.

In the previous issue, I commented on the superb nesting season enjoyed by many birds on the northern Great Plains, a result of two consecutive summers of very good rains. This fall, there were hints that many of those northern prairie birds did indeed have good reproduction, as suggested by the good numbers of certain species that were reported elsewhere.

Consider the autumn track record of the following species, all birds that have major breeding strongholds on the northern plains. Ruddy Ducks and American Coots showed up in record or near-record numbers in New England. Prairie-nesting ducks in general (including dabblers and Canvasbacks) were in good numbers around the western Great Lakes, in the upper Midwest, and in the Mountain West. Blue-winged Teal registered good numbers in several areas, from New England to Florida (although they were in *low* numbers in northern California).

American Avocets seemed to radiate out from the plains, with noteworthy reports or numbers from New England, the Appalachians, the middle Atlantic Coast, Florida, and the Central Southern region. Marbled Godwits also drew comments, with a couple in the Atlantic Provinces, more than usual in the Hudson-Delaware region, and record counts in New England. Black Terns, which surely benefited in the brimming marshes

To the north, Northern Wheatears were found in good numbers in the Atlantic Provinces and Ontario, and in record numbers in Quebec and New England. This wheatear was at St. John's, Newfoundland, October 11, 1994. Photograph/Bruce Mactavish.

this year, appeared in encouraging numbers in several eastern regions during the fall (although the totals are still well below those of a couple of decades ago).

Franklin's Gull, which is known to be strongly affected in its nesting by water levels, probably has done quite well the last two years. The species did not make much of a showing east of the prairies this fall, but there were very good counts in Iowa and on the southern Great Plains. Notable numbers moved west into British Columbia. An outlier was a single bird in Hawaii in September.

Perhaps the most surprising species in this group is Clay-colored Sparrow. Many birders probably do not think of it in those terms, but the species' center of abundance seems to be in the Dakotas and the Prairie Provinces, areas where the habitat was green and wild food was undoubtedly plentiful last summer. The Clay-colored must have had a banner year for raising young, and the resulting high population apparently spread out in all directions this fall. Many different regions mentioned high numbers of the species this fall. Notably good totals were reported from along most of the Atlantic Coast, with a record tally of 32 in New England. In the southwest, the species was more common and widespread than usual in both southern California and Arizona. In the northwest, one reached the coast at Vancouver, while far to the southeast, one was found in the Bahamas!

After last winter's big flights, winter invaders were starkly absent as this fall season ended.

Winter 1993–1994 was memorable for the wide variety of invasiory species that moved down from the north. As autumn 1994 drew to a close, it appeared that the ensuing winter would be forgettable in this regard.

Pine Siskins and crossbills were noted as numerous in some parts of the boreal forest, but with no indications that they were poised to go anywhere. American Goldfinch, which hardly qualifies as a northern finch anyway, had a good flight in the Appalachians but was mostly unmentioned elsewhere. Pine Siskins in the lowlands in parts of the west, such as New Mexico and southern California, could have come from nearby mountains. Northern raptors were generally scarce. For the first time in 16 years, not one Snowy Owl had been reported in New England by the end of November.

Red-breasted Nuthatch is sometimes a winter invader over much of the continent, but its numbers vary dramatically from year to year; Joe Grzybowski says that its fluctuations in numbers are “worse than the stock market.” Only a few regions south of Canada mentioned the species at all this fall, and they mentioned it to comment on how scarce it was. The one exception was New Mexico, where fair numbers appeared in the lowlands, probably part of a downslope movement from the local mountains. Farther north, however, numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches did make news in Alaska. This species is usually scarce and local in southern Alaska, but invasions move in during some fall seasons. This was one of those seasons, with nuthatches scattered all over the center of the state, practically wherever there were observers to notice them. They got as far west as Bethel, and even to Cold Bay, out on the Alaska Peninsula. It was almost as if these nuthatches, having gone south last year, decided to go north this season instead.

The west saw movements by a few jays, montane and otherwise.

In New Mexico and western Texas, jays were on the move. Scrub Jays came out of the mountains in early September and were soon widespread in the lowlands of New Mexico. They spread over much of western Texas, from the panhandle down to the Rio Grande Plain southeast of Del Rio; Frances Williams reported that four at Midland were the first there in 20 years. Steller's Jays moved a little later and were slightly less widespread, but they reached a number of lowland points in New Mexico, as well as foothills locations in western Texas.

Undoubtedly unrelated was a movement of Steller's Jays in western Canada, with notable flocks on the southern coast of British Columbia. Several also appeared at feeders in the Yukon Territory, and a couple were noted out of range in Alberta. Jack Bowling suggests that the B.C. birds may have come from farther up the coast, not from inland. Also noted in British Columbia and elsewhere was a small movement of Clark's Nutcrackers.

The biggest jay invasion in the northwest, however, came from the east. Blue Jays moved on a broad front, from the northern Great Plains to the coast. They invaded eastern Montana in late September, showed up in unusual numbers across northwestern Wyoming and southern Alberta, and were widely reported in British Columbia during the season. In Idaho, where recent autumns have produced an average of about three Blue Jays, more than sixty were found this season.

As I write this, I lack a couple of regional columns from the northwest, so I can't say how widespread the flight was; but the species also showed up west of normal in New Mexico, and staged a minor invasion of south-central Texas. It may be only coincidence, but it was interesting to note that the usual big flight of Blue Jays past the Allegheny Front in West Virginia failed to materialize this year. Was a big part of the population simply shifted to the west?

Wheatears made news once again, both north and south.

Something that adds spice to fall birding in the northeast is the outside chance of running into that perky little open-country thrush, the Northern Wheatear. As we have known for many decades, the Greenland race nests in northeastern Canada as well as Greenland, but almost all of these birds migrate back across the North Atlantic every fall to winter in the Old World. Those that come south in the New World are presumed to be lost vagrants. But for some reason, numbers of these stragglers seem to be increasing, more than could be accounted for simply by increases in birding coverage. This was another banner fall for wheatears. The Atlantic Provinces had excellent numbers, while Quebec (with at least 18 birds) and New England (with 12) set new all-time records, and Ontario reported three. Farther afield, Michigan had its sixth record, North Carolina had its third, Florida had its sixth, and Texas had its first, all the way at the southern tip of the state! In this connection, one wonders about the bird in Los Angeles, a first for southern California; conceivably it could have come from eastern Canada, not from the Alaska-Yukon population.

The several good wheatear flights in recent autumns prompt us to wonder, also, whether the species might be increasing as a breeder in northeastern Canada. In late summer 1994, Mactavish, Tingley, and Ryan found evidence that wheatears are nesting commonly along the southernmost part of the Labrador coast. This is new information, but the area had never been thoroughly surveyed before, so we don't know if the birds had been there all along.

It is possible that Northern Wheatear could establish a new wintering area in the New World. One was known to have wintered successfully in Louisiana a couple of years ago, and there are undoubtedly various places around the Gulf or the Caribbean that could furnish good winter habitat. Besides, wintering in the Americas would save these birds from the hazards of the flight across the North Atlantic. We might see a new migration pathway evolve before our eyes. But if wheatears are wintering in this hemisphere, we should see northbound migrants as well as southbound. It will be interesting to see, in coming years, whether *spring* records south of Canada begin to accumulate.

Records of the season indicated advances by some species, and hinted at some retreats.

People familiar with the history of the species will not be surprised to learn that the Eurasian Collared-Dove is still spreading from its major foothold in Florida. (For that matter, people familiar with the species will not be surprised if it eventually reaches Anchorage.) The colony in Brunswick, Georgia, is still increasing. This fall South Carolina's first colony was discovered, far up the coast at Myrtle Beach, with up to 30 birds present. Also this season, North Carolina had its second and third records. Observers everywhere should be on the lookout for this species, and carefully distinguish it from Ringed Turtle-Dove, which can still show up as an escapee anywhere.

Common Black-headed Gulls, which have invaded North America within the last century, have been found nesting to date only on the coasts of eastern Canada and New England. This season, however, there was evidence that the species may have nested far inland, in northwestern Iowa! See Ken Brock's column for details. The species does nest far inland in parts of Eurasia, so there is no intrinsic reason why it should not do so here.

Meanwhile, numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks continue to slide. Weather conditions this fall were such that excellent hawk flights reached the Atlantic Coast in some areas; Fire Island, New York, had a record count, and Cape May, New Jersey, had the best numbers

in several years. Cape May even posted new record highs for some species, such as Red-shouldered Hawk and Cooper's Hawk. But not for the Sharp-shinned. The count there was up somewhat from recent years, but still far below the high counts of the past. Farther down the coast at Kiptopeke, Virginia, new records were set for several hawks; but again, Sharp-shinned Hawks were far below past levels. When even the best flight conditions produce low totals, it is obvious that the species has gone through a major decline.

Questions of origin I: The value of looking at records in a larger context.

As we sit here with the whole panorama of the fall season spread out before us, we have the advantage of being able to put the season's bird records into context. And this context can be especially valuable for some kinds of records: those of birds far outside their usual patterns of range and season, those which might or might not have had human help in reaching the points where they were then discovered.

Harris' Hawk is essentially a tropical bird, non-migratory, entering our area mainly in Arizona and Texas. So one found in Wisconsin most likely would be a falconer's escaped bird, right? Wrong. Not this fall. The individual captured and examined by the hawk banders at Cedar Grove showed no signs of prior captivity; more persuasive to me, however, was the news of what the species was doing elsewhere this season.

In southern California, a single Harris' that showed up in mid-November was the advance scout for an invasion of at least 25 before the end of the year. In New Mexico, up to 14 were seen outside their usual range, in six scattered locations. In Texas, Harris' Hawks invaded the upper coast, where they are usually quite rare. Eleven were found on the plains west of Lubbock, remarkably far north. Three birds recorded at separate points in Oklahoma were therefore not too surprising, and they in turn lent credence to one found in northeastern Kansas; the latter was thought by some to be an escape, but I doubt it. From northeastern Kansas it is not far, as the hawk flies, to Wisconsin. Taken in context, it seems highly likely to me that the Cedar Grove bird was a genuine wild vagrant.

Another question of origin mentioned in these pages involved a Wood Stork near Cody, Wyoming, in September. Obviously, this bird of the southern swamps is not a regular item on the Wyoming rangeland; so could the bird have come from a zoo somewhere? Again, a look at other records this fall suggests not. Wood Storks were unusually numerous in eastern Texas this season, both on the coast and well inland. Two good-sized flocks reached Oklahoma. Farther east, sin-

gle storks appeared at three odd inland sites in South Carolina, one made it to New Jersey, possibly another to New York, and one settled in for a lengthy stay in Massachusetts. The records suggest that this was an unusual year for Wood Storks, that a few wandered well to the north, and that the Wyoming bird was among those few.

Questions of origin II: Those problematic waterfowl.

Earlier I discussed many birds from the northern prairies that spread out to the east this fall. In light of those, I was not surprised that a handful of Cinnamon Teal were reported on the Atlantic seaboard.

The northernmost of these, in Connecticut, was tainted as a possible escape from captivity. But it need not have been one, any more than the individuals reported in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, or Florida. The status of Cinnamon Teal in the east may well be underestimated. The majority of those that do wander there are probably overlooked, since the females and young birds are so similar to Blue-winged Teal (although hard-working Jeff Wilson did pick out one female-plumaged Cinnamon in Tennessee this fall). In early fall, when such strays are most likely to occur, even the adult males may still be in eclipse plumage and thus easily missed. The Connecticut bird appeared in November, back in rusty plumage, readily recognized and readily dismissed. But, as pointed out by Walter Ellison and Nancy Martin, this Cinnamon Teal could have been a part of the general influx of birds from the northern plains.

Questions of origin were also raised relative to three Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in South Carolina. Since whistling-ducks in general are great wanderers, and since this colorful species has been turning up all over the map recently, the odds favor wild status for these as well.

The strangest case this fall, however, involved Whooper Swans in the northeast. Whooper Swan breeds commonly in Iceland, and has occurred often in Greenland, so it is a prime candidate for vagrancy to eastern Canada. When three top birders went exploring along the coast of Labrador in late summer, they were in a perfect position to find such strays. So why were doubts raised about the trio of very wary Whooper Swans that they found in late August in the wilderness setting of Cape North, Labrador?

It's a long story—and the story is told well by Bruce Mactavish in the Atlantic Provinces, and by Yves Aubry and Pierre Bannon in Quebec. Briefly, it involves a group of up to six Whoopers that had been wandering around Long Island and Massachusetts for a couple of years. The timing of sightings was such that this group could have produced the

three Whoopers that appeared on Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula in late July and early August, and then the same three could have gone on to Labrador in late August.

This scenario is plausible, perhaps even probable, but not overwhelmingly so. There were discrepancies in behavior: the Massachusetts birds had become very approachable (possibly from associating with Mute Swans and tame ducks), while those seen in Canada were quite wild. And there are some problems with numbers. The Massachusetts birds were said to have diminished from four to two, and then disappeared just before the three appeared in Canada. However, this fall's New England report says that four Whoopers continued during the season in the Plum Island area. Maybe there had been more than the reported six in Massachusetts earlier; maybe some of these birds went a thousand miles north and then rapidly backtracked to the Bay State. But it is possible that the Canadian birds were unrelated genuine strays from Iceland. It is also possible that the more southerly birds, despite their unwary behavior, could have been wild strays as well. This is a classic example of a case in which the odds can be argued any number of ways, and we will almost certainly never know the true story. ▶

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