

Alaska Region

T. G. TOBISH, JR.

Spring 1995 generated nearly every possible weather condition and seasonal extreme for each of the State's regions. A widespread cold and cloudy March, an above-average, heavy late-winter snowpack, and a near-record southward pack ice extension certainly combined to produce a disappointing and sluggish early migration. Few migrants were noted before the end of the first week in April. The vanguard groups—waterfowl and raptors—arrived mostly late across the standard entry points, and very few notable concentrations were reported. By mid-April, at least south of the Brooks Range, a series of broad, sustained continental-type high pressure systems dominated the Mainland as the Aleutian Low rapidly deepened across the Chain and into the southern Bering Sea. This combination of stationary continental high pressure and an intense Aleutian Low created a static pressure break that generated heavy winds and rain in the Aleutian Bering Sea region and record-warm temperatures from Ketchikan into the northern Interior. The North Slope missed both conditions and instead mired in endless winter to at least the third week of May—the season's first above-freezing temperature was recorded April 24, and most of mid-May saw no readings above 32° F. Regardless of these unusual conditions, migration was mostly uneventful in Southeast and across

the Mainland, and most of this year's excitement came from the Bering Sea outposts.

This report should resemble a mid-1970s spring Alaska column because, for the first time since 1975, an Attu Island report was not submitted. The annual Attou trip to the westernmost Aleutian Island was canceled when the above-mentioned stalled low pressure system (and a few airline schedule conflicts) prohibited the usual mid-May access to Attu. Although reports were submitted from Buldir and Nizki Islands, this was the first time since 1973 that a spring season did not receive early May to mid-June coverage in the Western Aleutians. Highlights from the other standard outposts made up for this missing data, and gave indication that it may have been an exceptional year in the Western Aleutians. As has become normal, I received excellent, timely reports and substantiation of rarities from the various bird tours. Their data continues to make a significant contribution to our knowledge of Alaska's birds.

Abbreviations: North Gulf (*North Gulf of Alaska*); SE (*Southeast AK*); SC (*Southcoastal AK*).

Loons to Waterfowl

The season's high count of Arctic Loons peaked at a below-average 14 June 4 (WINGS), all fly-bys at Gambell's Northwest Point. More unusual were two birds together on a pond at Mile 27 of the Council Rd., June 13–15 (GHR, VENT), well inland on the Seward Pen. Western Grebes were well reported in typical spring March concentrations at the standard SE sites, with peaks of 297 in Sumner Strait Mar. 22 (PJW) and 125 around Ketchikan Mar. 4 (SCH). Single migrant Pied-billed Grebes showed up on Prince of Wales I., Apr. 9 (PJW) and at Ketchikan's Ward L., May 3 (SCH). There

have been few recent spring reports of this more regular winter visitor. For the first time since the *Exxon Valdez* spill, several observers contributed subjective reports that Horned Grebe numbers were up and beyond what had been obviously dwindled local populations in SC. Up to four Great Blue Herons wintered around Kachemak Bay and remained well into April (*fide* GCW). Another Heron carrying sticks onto an islet in Little Tutka Bay Apr. 14 (NO) provided potential breeding evidence well w. of the nearest known regular nesting areas locally in Prince William Sound. Kodiak's latest winter bird was a single that lingered to May 2 (JH). Alaska's sixth **Black-crowned Night-Heron**, an immature-type at Buldir I., May 20–29 (ILJ, FH), was the latest of the 4 Aleutian I./St. Paul I. spring records, which had all been adults in April. An adult from the Commander Is. provided the only previous s. Bering Sea May report. The Region's other report included a flock of presumably Nearctic *N. n. hoactli* that hung around Juneau the first half of summer 1987.

The Aleutians' latest **Whooper Swan** by nearly a week, presumably a tardy winter bird, passed by Buldir I., May 16 (ILJ, FH). Most wintering Whoopers depart the central and W. Aleutians by the 3rd week of April. A single Trumpeter Swan on early melt pools of Big L., near Wasilla Feb. 28–Mar. 1 (*fide* RLS, DF) was SC's earliest in spring and must have survived the winter on spring-fed ponds locally. Notable was a pair of Trumpeter Swans at an active nest May 3, and with 3 eggs by May 22 (REL), near Berners Bay n. of Juneau. This or another pair apparently nested in the same general area in 1994 (*fide* PJW). I know of only about 3 prior SE nest records, two from the Chilkat Valley and another way to the south on Prince of Wales I. For whatever reason, Greater White-fronted Geese were more common and early across SC this season, as reported from Seward, Homer, Kodiak, and Anchorage (m.ob.). Notable counts included a local record high >215 from Kodiak I., May 10 (RAM). This spring's peak Brant count reached >50,000 Apr. 21 (CPD) around the heart of the species' Alaska range near Izembek Lagoon. That area's winter tally was an impressive 12,703 birds, the 3rd consecutive year that >10,000 overwintered. A ♂ Cinnamon Teal at Juneau May 12–15 (RJG) provided this spring's only report. Although the timing of arrival and peak numbers was typical, this spring's numbers of N. Shoveler were exceptional on the North Gulf Coast (m.ob.), where it is the least common of the "regular" dabblers. The daily *maxima* from Kodiak of 1440 birds May 10





Common Greenshank at Gambell, Alaska, June 4, 1995. Third record for St. Lawrence Island. Photograph/Andy Kraynik.

(RAM) more than doubled the previous spring record high. Numerous small groups of apparent unpaired birds of both sexes lingered around Anchorage into June (TGT). Extralimital Gadwall reports included five males at Prudhoe Bay May 31, where very rare especially before early June (EEB), and a pair at Safety Lagoon near Nome June 9 (VENT).

Despite the poor May coverage in the Aleutians, Com. Pochards were well reported. Up to five arrived about on time at St. Paul May 5–6 (SS), where a single lingered to May 23 (ATTOUR), and a pair was noted at Adak May 8 (LS). Other noteworthy *Aythya* highlights included: an above-average overshoot peak of >50 Canvasbacks (mostly males) at Safety Sound near Nome June 7 (WINGS), and a pair well n. to Prudhoe Bay, where they are rare and not annual, May 30 (EEB); ≤nine Tufted Ducks at Adak May 9 (LS), a single drake at Kodiak (where

casual) May 10–27 (JBR, RAM), and ≤four at St. Paul May 19, with a late single to May 26 (ATTOUR, SS). An extraordinary and late aggregation of Surf Scoters lingered on several in-shore bays near Ketchikan, where herring had been spawning, to May 2+ (SCH). Heintz roughly estimated 60,000 birds densely concentrated in 3 lower Behm Canal sites. These are by far the largest and latest spring counts from SE. The season's only extralimital Hooded Merganser report was a male at Kodiak May 7 (KH). South-coastal's first Ruddy Duck, a young male, was discovered at Anchorage's L. Hood May 13 (DWS, SCH, RL, WM). None had been located in the e. Interior through May where this n. Prairie form occasionally nests.

Raptors to Alcids

An adequately described **Turkey Vulture** from Mile 1252 of the Alaska Hwy., e. of Northway Jct., May 9 (†RAS) came 16 years to the day after the Region's first documented record from farther north up the Highway at Delta Junction. There are several scattered but uncorroborated reports from the Region between May and September, which may have been correct. A well-seen *Accipiter* was reported from Nizki I., June 8–9 (†Jw, ph.) and identified by the observer as an ad. **Chinese Sparrowhawk** (*Accipiter soloensis*). This small individual was observed hunting (and feeding on a Song Sparrow) mostly around the perimeter rocky cliffs. The distant and only fair photo portrays a bird with no eyebrow and seems to eliminate Sparrowhawk (*A. nisus*), a form that by range is the most expected Palearctic *Accipiter* to the W. Aleutians. There does not seem to be sufficient detail, as of this writing, and the photo alone is not adequate, to

officially document this bird as North America's first Chinese Sparrowhawk. However the photo is under evaluation to determine if the identification could serve to have this species added to Alaska's Unsubstantiated List. The submitted field notes do not appear to adequately distinguish the characterized differences in underwing and tail patterns between Japanese Sparrowhawk (*A. gularis*) and *soloensis*, two very similar forms. Chinese Sparrowhawk reaches n. only into extreme s. Japan and the Korean Pen., while Japanese Sparrowhawk nests into the s. Kurile Is. The only other noteworthy raptor report was an overshoot ♀ Am. Kestrel at Bethel May 4 (JM, CH, BJM), both early and well w. of known migrant and nesting areas.

Six calling Soras from the always exciting Ketili Cr. beaver ponds up the Stikine R., May 27 (PJW) was a local record high and the only report for the season. Based on the report from Buldir I., the Aleutian shorebird passage must have been spectacular. Highlights from Buldir, which has little suitable shorebird habitat, included up to six Com. Sandpipers May 28–31, ten Wood Sandpipers May 16–30, eight Rufous-necked Stints May 26–31, and a Terek Sandpiper May 28–30 (all ILJ, FH). Noteworthy shorebird reports from Gambell included at least two Com. Ringed Plovers June 2–5 (WINGS, AK) followed by an apparent ♂ Eur. Dotterel in the middens June 5–6 (WINGS, VENT, AK ph.), a fancy Com. Greenshank June 4 (†WINGS, AK ph.) (= 3rd St. Lawrence I. record), a Terek Sandpiper June 4–7 (†WINGS, AK), and a most astonishing Marbled Godwit that flew by the Point and later rested in the middens June 5 (†AK, †KB, †VENT). This record is



Eurasian Dotterel at Gambell, Alaska, June 5, 1995. Photograph/Andy Kraynik.

enigmatic in that this isolated Alaska population has an early May and restricted coastal migration path into a very local breeding zone in the coastal lowlands of s. Bristol Bay. Until this spring, when another Marbled Godwit, by timing a probable overshoot, flew over Bethel May 3 (†BJM), there had been no records n. of Nushagak Bay. Early coverage at St. Paul I. produced the following Pribilof highlights: two Mongolian Plovers May 31 (SS); single Wood Sandpiper May 26–27 (SS); one Gray-tailed Tattler June 5–6 (FIELD GUIDES); and Semipalmated Sandpiper May 26 (ATTOUR, SS), one of few spring reports, in company with a striking Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (also May 26, ATTOUR), a distinctly casual spring migrant in the Region. A calling Short-billed Dowitcher was located at the margins of Safety Sound June 7 (†WINGS) for a first confirmed Seward Pen. report.

This year's local herring and especially eulachon runs produced several massive gull concentrations. Impressive peak estimates included mixed species aggregates (Herring, Glaucous-winged, and fewer Mews) of at least 80,000 birds at the mouth of the Stikine R., Apr. 22–24 (PJW), >50,000 in the Juneau area's Berners Bay May 4–7 (GVV, RJG), which included the Region's highest-ever count of around 8000 Iceland (*thayeri*) Gulls, and a less impressive, but locally unusual, Turnagain Arm count of >1000 (mostly Glaucous-winged × Herring) June 3 (TGT). Extralimital Bonaparte's Gulls showed up at *Adak I.*, Apr. 5 (†LS), providing a 2nd local record, and ≤two adults were around Nome June 7 (WINGS), where there have been several recent spring reports.

Apparent pure ad. Western Gulls, both photographed, turned up in mixed gull flocks near canneries at Kodiak I., Mar. 31 (†RAM ph.), and at Annette I., s. of Ketchikan, May 6 (†SCH ph.). As with the few previous Pribilof I. records, which had been tied to extreme southerly winter ice pack extensions, a basic-plumaged Black Guillemot lingered in the protected St. Paul I. Harbor May 20–26 (†ATTOUR).

Doves to Pipits

Another early Band-tailed Pigeon arrived in Ketchikan Apr. 3, and four were in the same location Apr. 8 (AH). Given the past few year's spring arrival dates from the Ketchikan area, as early as Mar. 20 and most clustered in mid-April, it is likely that this unobtrusive and local form arrives typically much earlier than had originally been considered. Up to ten different N. Pygmy Owls were calling on Mitkof I., Mar. 3–May 21 (PJW), for a new local high count. A single on Prince of Wales I., Apr. 5 (PJW) was more

unusual for the outer islands. Four Vaux's Swifts at Hyder May 23 (HP, MP) and two at Ketchikan May 30 (SCH) were early and synchronous arrival records for areas where we have few. The Ketchikan ♂ Anna's Hummingbird left its winter feeder Mar. 29 (*fide* SCH). Eurasian Skylarks reached into the Region across a broad front, with a single at Buldir I., May 15–22 (ILJ, FH), at least four in a display group (>3 singing males) at St. Paul May 22+ (ATTOUR), and a single at Gambell May 31 (WINGS). The St. Paul group of birds displayed continuously and a female was noted gathering nest material through May 26, at which time a nest with 4 eggs was located on a slight ridge in the tundra. The nest was later found destroyed, likely depredated by an Arctic Fox (SS). Details and photos (not submitted to the editor) of this first Alaska breeding record are to be published elsewhere. Eurasian Skylark is a regular migrant in the w. Aleutians in variable numbers and a rare sporadic spring bird e. of there to the Bering Sea islands. Nesting had been suspected at least once before at St. Paul when ≤12 birds were noted at St. Paul in July (1970).

Extralimital Tree Swallows included a single at Buldir I., May 17 (ILJ, FH) providing a 2nd island record and one of few from the w. Aleutians, and ≤four around St. Paul I., May 20–26 (ATTOUR, SS), with two lingering into June (SS *et al.*). Early and a first local spring record was a single N. Rough-winged Swallow at Ketchikan May 7 (†SCH). At least two Red-breasted Nuthatches that survived the very long and cold interior winter (see winter 1994–1995) were heard in the forest near Tok May 8 & 24 (TJD). Other scattered reports came

from the Fairbanks area in April and May (*fide* DDG). The season's only Siberian Rubythroat sighting was a male at Buldir I., May 29–31 (ILJ, FH). The season's maximum count of migrant Bluethroats was an average nine birds at Gambell May 31 (WINGS), while the passage of N. Wheat-ears peaked at 15 June 1 (WINGS), also at Gambell. Although the excellent photographs and field descriptions had not been circulated to European experts at this writing, I think the observers were correct in their identification of a **Brown Tree-Pipit** seen at Gambell June 6 (†VENT, †AK ph.). This individual showed a different structure (larger bill, longer tail) and plumage pattern and color than Red-throated or Pechora, and the heavily streaked dorsum was not greenish, as Olive Tree-Pipit. The well-described short hind claw is visible in photos and eliminates the similar Meadow Pipit. Alaska's only previous record, a worn adult of the nominate race, was collected at Wales in late June 1973. Although there are recent Japan records of this w. Palearctic form, this individual could have certainly reached St. Lawrence I. *via* the Arctic Coast or as an over-the-Pole overshoot.

Sparrows to Finches

Following last spring's Juneau report, a **Clay-colored Sparrow** was netted near Tok May 31 (*TJD), representing the Region's 5th record, 2nd in spring, and first for the Interior. Four Rustic Buntings at Buldir May 24–31 (ILJ, FH) was an excellent count given the Region's weak spring numbers over the past 5 years. A single Red-winged Blackbird on the Stikine R. Delta Mar. 29 and two near Petersburg Mar. 31



This pipit at Gambell, Alaska, June 6, 1995, was evidently a Brown Tree-Pipit, which would provide only a second record for North America. Visible in this photo are the heavily streaked back and rather large bill. Photograph/Andy Kraynik.

(PJW) provided the Region's first migrant March records. Surprisingly, the only Brambling report came in from Gambell, where a young male appeared June 3–4 (WINGS, AK). The Ketchikan winter feeder Purple Finches (a male and two females) remained together to Mar. 31 and a female lingered to Apr. 12 (JP, SCH). White-winged Crossbills remained locally common (in the e. Interior) to nearly absent from most the North Gulf Coast (m.ob.).

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British Columbia/ Yukon Region

JACK BOWLING

The waning of El Niño allowed for some interesting weather in March—stormy on the coast during the first half, then ending with a heat wave for southern areas and a cold snap into the -30s° F for Yukon. April began unsettled but became sunny and warm during the third week as a ridge of high pressure built over Yukon and northern British Columbia. This pattern lasted into the middle of May, resulting in a prolonged episode of brisk northeast winds across the southern half of the region. The effect on northbound migrants was clear: Many of the March and early April arrivals were early, while subsequent waves became progressively later, causing much anxiety in the birding world. Also noticeable was the reluctance of many of the late-arriving songbirds to sing, almost as if they had all their strength sapped fighting the winds. There were few extralimital visitors, a Costa's Hummingbird in Vancouver being the most obvious.

Abbreviations: B.C. (*British Columbia*); D.C. (*Dawson Creek*); Ok. L. (*Okanagan L.*); Ok. Vly (*Okanagan Valley*); P.G. (*Prince George*); p.v. (*pending verification by governing Bird Records Committee*); Q.C.I. (*Queen Charlotte Islands*); Reifel (*George C. Reifel Waterfowl Sanctuary near Ladner, BC*); R.P.M.-M.S. (*Rocky Point Migration Monitoring Station, s. tip of Van. I.*); S.T.P. (*Sewage Treatment Plant*); Van. (*Vancouver*); Van. I. (*Vancouver I.*); Vic. (*Victoria*); Whse. (*Whitehorse*).

Loons to Herons

A pair of Red-throated Loons on Lacey L. near Port Alberni May 13 (MB) was thought to be nesting. Staging Pacific Loons off Reifel increased from 2500 Apr. 14 to 6000 by Apr. 25th (JJ), likely catching the last of the eulachon run at the mouth of the Fraser R. Two unaged Yellow-billed Loons were at Tofino Mar. 11 (JJ), while an immature was on Kalamalka L. near Vernon Apr. 21–May 14 (PG, MCo, C S, RJC). A single Pied-billed Grebe was at Rat L., Carcross in s.w. Yukon May 2–12 (LS, MaW, HG), the scene of the territory's first nesting last year; it was not seen thereafter. A single Eared Grebe on Arrow L. at Nakusp May 7 (GSD) was a good find. There was a noticeable staging of W. Grebes in Georgia Strait, with a peak of 3000 Mar. 26 (RSw). Another high count was of 1200 off English Bay, Van., Mar. 30 (CAi). As usual, the interior buildup of W. Grebes occurred later, as on Arrow L. at Nakusp where 455 Apr. 28, 285 Apr. 30, 1250 May 6, and >1000 May 7 (GSD) were recorded.

A flock of three Am. White Pelicans flew N over Pitt L., n.e. of Van., May 13 (†K. McEachern, LC, AM, M&E Merry), the 5th or 6th spring checklist record for which a clear pattern of mid-May visitations has unfolded. This is a bit later than the s. interior valleys, where seven were seen winging N over Ok. L. from Westbank May 9 (EF). The increased spring sightings of this species suggest the population may be increasing in the Region. A wandering single first-year Double-crested Cormorant made it to a pond on the Commonage near Vernon May 21 (CS, m.ob.), while an adult travelled far north to L. Laberge, s.w. Yukon May 25 (BD, HG), a location where one had been the previous year (BD). The bird was also seen there May 26–27 (m.ob.). A sizeable flock of 2000 Brandt's Cormorants between Gabriola I. and Duke Pt. s.e. of Nanaimo Mar. 2 (DS) was presumably feeding on spawning herring. An estimated 5000 Brandt's were in Active Pass between Salt-spring and Mayne Is. Mar 26 (CAi *et al.*), the non-breeding season Regional stronghold for the species. A new local record-high count for Burrard Inlet of 45 Brandt's Cormorants was tallied Apr. 8 (B.I.E.A.P.). At least 3 pairs of Pelagic Cormorants were seen on the cliffs on the n. end of Ballenas I. off Parksville Mar. 2 (DFF), where no nesting has been reported since 1987. Nesting Pelagics on the cliffs of Prospect Pt., Stanley Park, Van., were interrupted by blasting and scaling of the cliff face by the Parks Board during the time the birds were setting up territories. Only 10 adults were noted there during the height of the blasting Mar. 1, while 61 birds—including 10 nesting

