

Changing Seasons

The Fall Migration 1996

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If the Autumn report can be considered in part a litmus test of our observations about nesting successes and failures of summer, then the news this year appears on balance to be good. If the remainder of the report is to consider records of migratory and especially extralimital species, then the news must be considered extraordinary.

The year 1983 is remembered fondly as the start of the "Siberian Express," in which Rustic Bunting, Siberian Rubythroat, Slaty-backed and later Black-tailed gulls, focussed attention across North America on the phenomenon of transcontinental vagrants from northeastern Asia. Those who bird the interior now know to look for Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in September and the Asian *perdix* form of Marbled Murrelet in November and later at their local patches, and indeed both put in appearances this season. Perhaps 1996 will be remembered as the "Rise of the South" for the palpable shift in our thinking about the regularity of vagrants from the southern hemisphere. It was, in any case, a season in which not only our own southern species strayed north, but a group of truly Deep Southerners as well: Great-winged and White-chinned petrels, Shy and Black-browed albatrosses, Kelp Gull, Piratic Flycatcher. The trend itself may not be new, but the way North American birders prepare themselves for both terrestrial and pelagic birding is clearly changing rather rapidly toward a more global perspective. Nowhere is this more apparent than in birders' exchanges on the Internet.

In cases of vagrancy, the "conventional" wisdom, we are finding, can be as much a booby trap as a boon for field identification. The identification of Florida's Piratic Flycatcher at the Tortugas in 1991 as a Variegated, along with previous North American records of that species from Ontario and Maine, and possibly Tennessee, no doubt influenced New Mexican birders, who first labeled their bird a Variegated rather than a Piratic. Some austral migrants we know well, such as Fork-tailed Flycatcher (five this fall), but others may still slip by: Are all late Great Crested and Ashthroated flycatchers checked for the smaller-billed nominate Brown-crested (or other southern *Myiarchus* flycatchers)? Could Dark-billed Cuckoos from South America be passed off as Black-billed, as happened in February 1986 at a Texas bird rehabilitation facility?

Several factors conspired to make this one of the most remarkable fall migrations in many years—"the most memo-

orable autumn since at least 1987, and perhaps back to 1977," write Don Roberson and company in California.

First, the nesting season appears to have been productive for High Arctic species such as jaegers, Sabine's Gull, Baird's and Buff-breasted sandpipers, Ross' Goose, Pacific and Red-throated loons—species always welcome at local birding patches in the interior of the continent and all very well-represented in the Regional Reports for 1996. Second, a *relatively* wet summer season from Texas (still in the throes of a long drought) north to the prairie provinces also appears to have sparked good reproduction in grebes, waterfowl, American White Pelican, Franklin's Gull, and Sandhill Crane.

The migration of these and other species was strong and for many mid-continent migrants showed a greater Atlantic coastal component than is typically observed, which may have to do with the nature and timing of the cold fronts sweeping in from the Arctic, especially pronounced October 29–30, following the mild fall in the Great Plains and the West generally. The dates of some easterly Franklin's Gull reports suggest that this first of many brutal Great Plains cold fronts was behind this eastward shift, also noted with Greater White-fronted Geese on the eastern seaboard to some extent, but the gulls' numbers were clearly also augmented by another "good" year on the nesting sloughs. In Alaska, following a mild late summer, Tobish noted a sharp demarcation in the seasonal shift toward winter, with a "swift and synchronous freeze-up," which clearly affected cranes, among other species. These weather patterns are not unusual for the season, but it is worth noting likely correlations of bird movement with weather systems.

A prelude to cranes and white pelicans, other BWBs (Big Wandering Birds) took to the skies in the late summer Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, Brown Pelican, and a few Anhingas made headlines from Arizona east to Florida and north to Colorado and Maine. Though not quite the identification challenge of the loons and jaegers, this "southern spice" was more than the continent's interior had seen in recent years. Much of such post-nesting dispersal indicates nesting success, especially with the waders; it is not clear, however, to what extent the dispersal might also have been driven by dry conditions in Mexico.

Clearly on the negative side, dry conditions in parts of the central and west-



At Bald Eagle State Park in the center of Pennsylvania, hurricane *Fran* deposited this Black Skimmer and numbers of Laughing Gulls, including the two seen here, September 7, 1996. Photograph/Paul W. Schwalbe.

ern United States, severe in montane regions, stimulated a mass exodus of corvids, parids, finches, thrushes, and other passerines into the deserts, the coast, into cities, and even into the East. Leading the list were Clark's Nutcrackers, Pinyon Jays, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Lawrence's Goldfinches, Red Crossbills, Cassin's Finches, Evening Grosbeaks, Mountain Chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Townsend's Solitaires, and Pine Siskins, with smaller numbers of Blue and Steller's jays, Western Scrub-Jays, Common Ravens, Pygmy and White-breasted nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, and White-headed Woodpeckers. The incredible flight of Aztec Thrushes into Arizona might also relate to dry conditions in mountain areas to the south. The forest fires that raged in the West will benefit woodpeckers, but the dry conditions did not bode well for later-season mountain nesters. All these species, naturally, have evolved in the context of cyclic droughts and fires.

Atlantic seabirds, another group hit with foul luck in 1996, had to contend

with *thirteen* named tropical cyclones, and some did not fare well. Black-capped Petrels, counted during the summer off North Carolina in record high numbers (up to 363), found themselves in the path of several major hurricanes. *Fran*, a Category 3 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale as it struck coastal North Carolina on September 6, drove *at least* 52 into the interior, from North Carolina to Ontario, and along with them nine other species of tubenose, Sabine's and Laughing gulls, phalaropes and other shorebirds, Black Skimmer, and 12 species of tern, including 139 Sooty Terns. For species that show both strong overland *and* coastal components in their migration, such as Caspian and Black terns, the jaegers, and Sabine's Gull, it will never be precisely known how many were grounded while migrating over the interior and how many swept back from the pelagic and littoral zones, but an increasing body of data on storm-displacement suggests that terns, gulls, and shorebirds caught over open water are entrained in the eye and the body of the storm. Chimney Swifts,

swallows, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, and shorebirds were observed in rapid northbound flight within *Fran* by birders in North Carolina and Virginia, all species noted in *Bertha* and other hurricanes. It is believed that a *Cypseloides* swift on Bermuda in October, as well as the possible nominate (West Indian) Black Swift at Martha's Vineyard, were storm-displaced, the former by *Lili*, the latter by *Bertha*.

The year 1996 ranks as one of the ten most active ever recorded for tropical storm activity in the North Atlantic. This year's five other storms categorized as "major," such as *Edouard*, *Hortense*, and *Lili*, passed well offshore and undoubtedly affected seabirds, especially mid-ocean foragers such as White-tailed Tropicbird and Sooty Tern, but there are few data on avian displacement from cyclones that do not make landfall. Most of the relevant data on seabird displacement from the Atlantic is found in past issues of *American Birds* and *Field Notes*, and the excellent accounts in the Regional Reports herein add considerably to these data.

As traumatic as hurricanes must be for seabirds—and 28 dead Black-capped Petrels in the interior make the point—they offer easterners a genuinely rare opportunity to study the plumages of Gulf Stream seabirds from *terra firma*, with a spotting scope and some leisure. Unlike in the West, most pelagic seabirds in the East do not traverse the littoral zone and so cannot typically be studied from shore. Indeed, there are no records of gadfly petrels from shore in the East outside the context of such storms (other than a nineteenth-century New York record of Mottled Petrel!). To those who scanned Lake Erie profitably for Black-capped Petrel, Sooty Tern, and Wilson's Storm-Petrel, or the large reservoirs of North Carolina and Virginia for White-faced and Leach's storm-petrels, Herald, Fea's, and Black-capped petrels, Audubon's, Sooty, and Cory's shearwaters, and many more species, the experience was electrifying by all accounts. The coverage of interior areas by birders during the weekend of *Fran* and afterward surely outdid that for any other storm, and the diversity and number of seabirds recorded in the interior of the continent outdoes the aftermath of *David*, *Hugo*, or any other "bird storm" on record. Brown Noddy, South Polar Skua, and the tropicbirds and boobies were the only species not recorded somewhere during the storm. Aided in communication by cellular phones and computers, sightings could be shared among thousands of people within seconds, sometimes from the field. Wallace Coffey's "Hurricane-Net" chat group on the Internet linked hundreds of birders and forged common strategies amongst complete strangers for searching remote areas. As exciting as this kind of activity might be, no "lifer" is worth risking one's life, or that of one's fellows, in the havoc of a strong hurricane. Atlantic hurricanes killed 135 humans in 1996, and birders should heed the advice of local authorities in these storms.

The rest of this report will focus on species that showed interesting inter-Regional dynamics of one sort or another; several species were selected because of their status on the Partners in Flight WatchList (see *AFN* 50: 238–240), whereas other species are relatively numerous. To make more room for the common species—and in order to juxtapose international and regional vagrants in a democratic spirit—Table 1 is provided as an index to the Regional Reports. It is a feast.

Loons and grebes

Loons are all the rage these days. To add to Richard Rowlett's censuses from California in the spring at Piedras Blancas, the watch on Cayuga Lake, New York, noted over 10,500 in its fourth and best season; at the Avalon seawatch on Cape May, New Jersey, a fantastic 55,174 Red-throateds and 5078 Commons were tallied in the 1996 season; and at Michigan's Whitefish Point, 4474 Commons and 490 Red-throateds. The value of these point counts is tremendous for monitoring loon populations in the long term; counters at Cape May call for the institution of counts to the south, as far as Hatteras, to learn more about wintering areas. Colorado, which boasted its 15th Yellow-billed Loon in 15 years, notes that they "are almost expected in fall or winter" now. *Ai caramba!* Nebraska recorded its first Yellow-billed, Kansas its second.

But it is the Pacific Loon that has been stealing headlines, largely in the interior, for about a decade now. A concentration of 100,000 off southern Santa Cruz County, California, boggles the brain, even with Rowlett's counts in mind, but how about the inland trekkers? Two in Texas and New York, 23 in the Mountain West, eight in New Mexico, four in Tennessee, three in Minnesota, one in Maine, and one in the "regular" site, Figure Eight Island, North Carolina (a dozen eastern seaboard reports follow in the winter). Ken Brock writes of the Middlewestern Prairies, "a phenomenal fall," "awash with the rarer loons," with no fewer than 70 Red-throated and 10 Pacific, and observers in the southern Great Plains found Red-throateds more numerous as well. Arizona netted its twelfth Red-throated, the Appalachians noted "more than usual" of the same, and Hawaii had its third loon of any kind, an Arctic/Pacific like the previous two. Are we merely being rewarded for keeping our eyes open? Dan Svingen notes specifically that Pacifics are "more regular and numerous in Idaho in recent falls," and this is echoed in Montana. Like most such phenomena, it is likely a bit of both—greater observer vigilance stimulated by an increase in records.

Grebes fared well. Ron Martin notes "successful breeding by most waterbirds" in the Northern Great Plains, with a high count of 1200 Western Grebes on Lake Etta, North Dakota, while to the south, Gryzbowski writes that Westerns far surpassed "expectations of even exponential growth." At Medicine Hat,

Alberta, Rudolf Koes cites an observation of a juvenile Western still riding on pop—on October 6! Likewise, the Texas editors report Eareds with chicks on August 24, "responding to the fall rains," while early-stage juvenile Pied-billeds were observed in September on Ketili Creek, Alaska, and at three sites on Virginia's Eastern Shore—evidence of late local breeding where considered rare. Vagrant Westerns were carefully documented at Sandy River Reservoir, Virginia, and Britton Pond, Tennessee, arriving on November 20 and 23 (strong western cold front with frozen precipitation); both states have previous *Aechmophorus* records (11 and six), but only one, a Clark's from Tennessee in March 1994, has been accepted to species level. In Quebec, where records of "swan-grebes" are in the same taxonomic pickle, Bannon and David list single probable Western and Clark's but maintain both records at the level of genus. The hybrid situation warrants their restraint. Roberson, Bailey, and Singer meanwhile document the presence of 13,800 Western, 4,150 Clark's, and 29 Red-necked Grebes in the same Santa Cruz County concentration as the 100-grand Pacific Loons; hard to worry about hybrids in that bunch. Eared Grebes migrating in small numbers along the Appalachians appear to move much earlier than Horneds: from the first at Batavia, New York, down to the six at Lake Lanier, Georgia, Eared continues to increase in the Carolinas, in the Central Southern Region, and in western Virginia, which held an unheard of >21 on South Holston Reservoir alone.

Tubenoses and Tropicbirds

These two families provided a great deal of stir on all three pelagic fronts. From the *RV McArthur*, coursing through the Central Pacific Gyre, came word from Rowlett, Michael Force, and Todd Pusser of a **Streaked Shearwater** off Oregon's Heceta Bank, about 30 nautical miles (nm) offshore, on September 13; of *twelve recorded*, single **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** on September 28 and October 10, 180–195 nm off central California, plus two or three 240–260 nm off Oregon September 10–11, and three together September 29; and at least six **Red-billed Tropicbirds**. Cook's Petrels were seen daily August 8–14; among the >150 were 65 August 14 36–60 nm off California on the Corteo Bank. Force and crew located a second **Dark-rumped Petrel**, after the July bird, 210 nm west of Point Arena, September 29, while

Chris Hoefler on the *David Starr Jordan*, far off southern Oregon, saw another one on the same date. Too late to make the summer report, Bob Pitman and Susan Smith identified yet another Dark-rumped on July 31, 25 nm southwest of San Miguel Island, along with a **Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel**.

Landlubbers who ventured out to sea on day trips saw an equally astonishing variety of seabirds. Running a chase trip for the Streaked Shearwater on October 5, Oregonians saw instead a nominate **Shy (White-capped) Albatross**, a sublime Patagonia-effect if ever there was one. (Recall that Rowlett's California record of the spring season was identified as Salvin's Albatross, *D. c. salvinii*). California birders, hot on the heels of their first Parkinson's Petrel, discovered a **Great-winged Petrel**, a northern hemisphere first to go with their **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** of 1995, as well as a **Dark-rumped Petrel** off Monterey on August 24. (Unlike the sooty albatross, the petrels were not aired on national newscasts.)

In the Atlantic, Russell Fraker, working on the *Reliance*, photographed the hemisphere's second **White-chinned Petrel** just off Oregon Inlet, North Carolina. Fraker first located the bird on October 12 and only realized later what it was; as the boat returned to the vicinity five days later, a chum slick was set, and the bird materialized. The photographs show a very heavily built *Procellaria*; field notes mention the entirely pale bill and white chin, both of which refer to *P. aequinoctialis*. Off South Beach, Chatham, Massachusetts, an immature **Black-browed Albatross** was observed feeding with other seabirds on September 21. This is perhaps the fourth reliable sight record for that state, the ninth in the western North Atlantic, but to date, no one has ever photographed one. Oregon's second firm **Short-tailed Albatross**, and the seventh modern record for the West Coast, was found on November 9. In no other year have six albatross *taxa* been recorded in this hemisphere.

Back east, one Fea's and eight Herald petrels off North Carolina continued to confirm those species' presence in the Gulf Stream. A Fea's Petrel on August 10 was stooped by a White-tailed Tropicbird, an interesting at-sea observation of tropicbirds' aggressive behavior toward small *Pterodroma* (see the West Indies report for more dirt on *Phaethon*). It has become clearer from observations this year, and those back to 1992, that birds observed *at close range* in North

Carolina and Virginia, 11 in total, are indeed identifiable as the heavy-billed *Pterodroma feae*, properly called Fea's Petrel (pronounced *FAY-ahz*). A two-part article on distribution and identification of this group will appear this year in *Birding*. After the banner summer of 1995, tropicbirds returned to normal numbers in the cold-water summer of 1996 off North Carolina, but off the Gulf Coast, an unprecedented number of **Red-billed Tropicbirds** were noted within 100 nm of South Pass, on October 21, 27 and 28, with one White-tailed on October 12.

In the nearshore Atlantic and Pacific, no *major* deviations in tubenose populations were reported, not surprising in a year with no El Niño, though Heceta Bank, off Oregon, held 10,000–12,000 Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels on August 29—a large but very localized concentration—and 500 at the Queen Charlotte Islands made an even more localized high count for British Columbia. Pink-footed Shearwaters were more numerous off Oregon as well this year. Northern Fulmars were in higher numbers off both coasts, a few early ones in September by Capes May and Hatteras foretelling high winter counts. An anomalous mass of very cold water settled into the western North Atlantic by mid-November, pushing great numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes and later Great Skuas south to Virginia and North Carolina waters. It should be noted here that tubenose taxonomy continues to evolve rapidly: Species such as Shy Albatross and Dark-rumped Petrel may see their allopatric populations divided into multiple species in the future. Careful field notes are a must with out-of-range seabirds, as photographs often do not tell the whole story.

Big Wandering Birds

Psychologically, one might say that these birds keep us looking up. Roseate Spoonbill. Where is such a bird unwelcome? They appear to be doing well on the southern Atlantic coast, where Davis reports them in “excellent numbers” in Brunswick, Georgia, and to the west, in Arkansas and western Tennessee, reports are “becoming regular” according to Jackson. Texas had a record from the Trans-Pecos, where rare, and Arizona had another for 1996 at Lake Roosevelt; the species has appeared in that state in only in six previous years. Maryland's spoonbill continued at Smith Island.

Wood Stork—in “staggering and unprecedented numbers” in Texas and in

“excellent numbers” in Arkansas, with “often large proportions of immatures”—strayed north to Hammer Creek, Pennsylvania, for the first county record in this century, and two immatures traded roosts across the Mississippi River from Madison County, Illinois, to Missouri. The species' reputation for long-distance flights was upheld by Maine's first in 74 years, at Cape Elizabeth. This continues a trend from fall 1995.

Sandhill Cranes and American White Pelicans were out in force this fall on the East Coast. Bannon and David found the fall staging of cranes to be very well documented in Quebec this year, and surmise that the “breeding population of the James Bay Lowlands is certainly increasing.” Likewise Brock reports Sandhills “doing well,” peaking in Indiana at Jasper-Pulaski Wildlife Management Area at 26,366. A pioneering pair continues to nest in western Pennsylvania. While four in the Maritimes were average, Paxton, Boyle, and Cutler detail “more Sandhill Cranes than have ever crossed” the Hudson-Delaware Region, at least 26 birds—including a flock of 17 at Hook Mountain hawk watch, the day of the Big Front October 29.

Coastal observers with persistence frequently saw white pelicans on the same fronts as the cranes, and between 24 and 43 graced the Hudson-Delaware Region, with up to 14 moving around the Northeast. On several occasions, Virginia observers noted cranes or pelicans passing just a few hours after their passage at Cape May—one group even continuing on to Bodie Island, North Carolina! “Good numbers” in the Southern Atlantic Region translates to a count of 60 pelicans at St. Mary's, Georgia, while 14 in West Virginia at Leachtown was a fine tally. Healthy numbers of white pelicans come from the Middlewestern Prairie, 4700 from Iowa and several east to Ohio, and from the legendary Ensley Bottoms, Tennessee, a high of 580. Brown Pelicans, by contrast, are only strays in the interior, and records are patchy from most landlocked states. Lone Browns were in Colorado, Ohio, Iowa/Illinois, and Tennessee.

Anhingas, following an uncanny “overshoot” spring in the East as far north as Ithaca, New York, moved again in mid-September, with records from Town Hill, Maryland (10th), Greenwich, Connecticut (14th), and Washington County, Iowa (17th), the latter a state second, the first coming from 1953. Double-crested Cormorants continued their increase across the East, while Neotropics in the

southern tier states were reported in larger numbers and from more localities than ever before. This fall's most mobile Neotropics made it to Ensley Bottoms, Tennessee, Douglas, Kansas, and Jackson County, Illinois, in late July and early August. Scour those inland reservoirs and large rivers in mid- and late summer!

Shorebirds and Rails

"Grasspipers" are often singled out in Regional Reports in the autumn. Enigmatic species such as Upland, Baird's, Pectoral, Sharp-tailed, and Buff-breasted sandpipers, are studied with more leisure on the protracted fall migration than in the spring—their tame habits, offbeat habitats, and golden and buff hues make them species of perennial interest for birders throughout the continent.

A high count of 2000 Baird's near Lake Pakowki, Alberta, plus counts of 90–100 Buff-breasted there, suggested a good breeding season—although the lack of mention of age proportions in the Regional Reports limits speculation in this regard. The Texas editors note "unprecedented numbers of Baird's" as well, with a count of 372 at Fort Bliss. Baird's were "reported from a wider area" of Nevada, and in Utah, the high count was a respectable 51. Arizonans recorded "unusually high" numbers. New Brunswick was alone among the Maritimes in finding a "well above-average" total of 13 Baird's. From the upper Midwest, Baird's made it to all six states, with high counts of 13 from Illinois, 10 from Ohio, and eight from Kentucky. The species occasioned little comment from either side of the Appalachians; counts from western New York, western Pennsylvania, and western Virginia do appear to indicate a strong migration in August and September. A group of 12 on the Conejohela flats, Pennsylvania, following *Fran* provided a local high count. In the interior of the Carolinas and Georgia, peeps were in average numbers *except* for Baird's, which posted four singles and a one-day high count of five in Georgia.

A Texas count of 120 Buff-breasted Sandpipers at Lake Tawakoni was good but not remarkable for that state, while >200 was the highest Southern Great Plains count, in Wagoner County, Oklahoma. Quebec reported an "average fall." In the Gulf and Southern Atlantic states, however, the editors remark on "unprecedented numbers" of Buff-breasted: Greg Jackson tallies no fewer than 346, with an Alabama-slammer 153 at Gulf Shores. In the Western

Great Lakes, an "outstanding" flight produced about 250. An eastward shift in the species' usual mid-continent migration seems plausible, given the consensus from New England to Georgia and west to Minnesota that the species was "up." Ricky Davis mentions, among 15 reports, a likely regional high count of 20 from Macon, Georgia, while Ken Brock finds them "unusually widespread" this year in the Midwest, the largest group being of 20 in Boone County, Illinois. In the Maritimes, "low numbers" of Buff-breasted were observed, and they were "absent again" in the Pacific Northwest.

Upland Sandpiper occasioned slim comment. Bob Paxton and co-editors mark the "best migrant groups in memory," with over 77 in three locations in New Jersey, and Georgians confirmed the good East Coast flight. New Mexico reports poor counts of the species in the southeastern part of the state. Pectoral Sandpiper received similarly mixed reviews. Van Truan and Brandon Percival felt them in higher numbers in the Mountain West, and Sartor Williams in New Mexico concurs that they were "more prevalent than usual." In Ensley Bottoms, Tennessee, where Jeff Wilson has amassed a significant body of data on shorebird migrants, numbers were down, as they were through most of the Central Southern Region. In New York and Delaware, "exceptional numbers" were noted in September, but "anemic numbers" were the rule in New England. The species' preference for ephemeral habitats such as lightly flooded fields means that such discrepancies in observers' impressions are often the rule.

Species with predominantly palearctic distribution were detected in numbers we now call "normal." The Siberian counterpart to the Pectoral, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, came through with 17 West Coast reports, plus single September juveniles from San Antonio, Texas, Lake Pakowki, Alberta, and a wildly early bird from Carson Lake, Nevada, August 18. Ruff migration was a bit above par, with 16 in California, four in the East, six in the Pacific Northwest, and singles in Louisiana, Quebec, Alberta, and Nova Scotia. Curlew Sandpipers often slip under birders' radar as Dunlin-like juveniles in the fall, but not at Calgary, with four adults on September 15! Singles were in Virginia, Wisconsin, Michigan, and at Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Genuinely rare shorebirds were few. Canada's second **Wood Sandpiper** on Herschel Island, Yukon, August 9

takes top honors, but a Wandering Tattler at Calgary September 3–5 was also first-string.

American Avocet, a local rarity in much of the eastern interior, was on the move all over the place. In northern Arizona, 310 were on Mormon Lake with 125 Black-necked Stilts, while "unusual numbers" were in Oregon. In the East, the Bombay Hook, Delaware, flock swelled to 560, while the larger Savannah Spoil Site flock in Georgia crested to a record 925, the largest group on this coast, though probably augmented by immigrants from Delaware by this time. In the interior, flocks of five to 13 were found in all middlewestern states except Missouri, and still more records hailed from North (one) and South (two) Carolina, the mountains of Virginia (two–three), and Pennsylvania (eight). In Louisiana's interior, the species is normally scarce, but they were numerous this season. New England had six, but the long-dancer was one at Saint Rest Marsh in New Brunswick. This continues a trend from fall 1995.

Two species, Hudsonian Godwit and Wilson's Phalarope, appeared to be in low numbers again in the East this year. Hudsonians, another High Arctic nester, were down from the Midwest to Hudson-Delaware, and south to the Carolinas, though this may be the effect of high water levels at coastal sites. For the second year, Wilson's Phalaropes were low, the solo Maritimes report prompting Mactavish to ask: "Are Wilson's Phalaropes becoming rarer?" With strong counts coming from the southern prairies, such as 1600 at Crescent Lake, Nebraska, one wonders whether the disjunct population of Wilson's around the Great Lakes might not be the source of the problem. For the first time in 21 years, incredibly, no Bar-tailed Godwit was reported in the Pacific Northwest, while one of the nominate race in Massachusetts was the only Eurasian shorebird in the New England Region at all.

In matters rallid, American Coots appear to be up, at least in the mid-Atlantic, Appalachians, and eastern Lake Ontario, where numbers have never recovered from the cholera epidemic of the 1970s. Yellow Rails were detected in Kentucky, California, Maryland, and New Jersey, but not elsewhere. Two Purple Gallinules completed suicide peregrinations to Canada—one to Étang du Nord, Quebec, October 20, the other to Fundy National Park, New Brunswick, October 19 (better tailwind), the former the 11th provincial record, the latter about the

19th! Another one or two frequented the North Shore of Massachusetts.

Gulls and Jaegers

Preliminary analysis by observers familiar with the species appears to confirm the identification of a dark-backed gull in Indiana as a **Kelp Gull**, a species of the southern hemisphere recently confirmed nesting on the Yucatan and on islands off Louisiana. Texas has been the only other state to record the species, but if the Indiana bird is confirmed, then we are, nearly anywhere, confronted with the potential for vagrancy of yet another four-year-gull. Kelps are not an identification challenge in range, but the panoply of nearctic hybrids (Great Black-backed x Herring and Herring x Lesser Black-backed among others) and

even a few years ago: Skeptics argued against transcontinental vagrancy, even though ship-assisted travel and escape from captivity were implausible for interior and East Coast records.

Slaty-backed Gull, documented nesting in Alaska for the first time in 1996, was not identified outside several typical sites for the species in that state, but records from Canada have continued to increase, and the Lower 48 has widely scattered records from ten states. From Hawai'i comes report of a probable Asian-race **Herring Gull** off Ni'ihau. This complex, which includes the "Vega Gull" recorded in Alaska, is under study by Asian larophiles (*Hong Kong Bird Report* 1994: 127-156) and should be considered potential vagrants across North America.

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backcrosses will complicate the situation for documenters of potential vagrant gulls. Likewise for **Yellow-legged Gull**, a species making its third appearance in Newfoundland in 1996. Good English-language material on its subspecific identification is now available (*British Birds* 90: 25-62), but observers should note that Yellow-leggeds still appear to be outnumbered in the mid-Atlantic areas by Lesser Black-backed x Herring Gulls, which may bear resemblance to Yellow-leggeds.

A **Silver Gull** in Pennsylvania appears to be of the taxon *Larus [n.] novaehollandiae*, also known as "Red-billed Gull." It typically winters in southern Australia and New Zealand. Though not uncommon in zoo captivity and probably correctly listed as an "exotic," the record should be considered carefully, in light of a 1947 New York specimen from the Genesee River mouth, a female with an immature ovary that was apparently unlikely to have escaped from captivity (specimen #629, Rochester Museum). We should recall the intense debates over the origin of **Black-tailed Gulls** out of range (Rhode Island's summering bird continued), which raged

Other much-watched species showed signs of increase out of range. California Gulls, now regular in the East in very small numbers at Niagara Falls and Cape Hatteras, were documented well in Maryland.

Sabine's Gull, a sure bet only in the Pacific and Arctic and ever a prize in the interior and East, was perceived to be in low numbers in Quebec but *way up* everywhere else—throughout the East, Midwest, Great Plains, interior and offshore Pacific Northwest, Western Great Lakes, and New Mexico. Twenty inland records in British Columbia were "more than the previous cumulative interior fall total!"—"a virtual invasion!" Up to 11 were associated with the landfall of hurricane *Fran*, and another 11 were observed from First Encounter Beach, Massachusetts, during a storm on September 19, following the passage of *Edouard*. Some of this perceived increase, again, surely comes from the patient investigation of reservoirs during severe weather of various sorts, but it is probable that the nesting season was productive for Sabine's.

Mew Gull, and its nominate form

"Common Gull," continue to be rare transients in the interior, but high numbers of both were reported this fall. Mew Gull vagrants came from 10 westerly states (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Idaho, Texas, Arizona, eastern California, Iowa, Minnesota, and western New York) between October 6 and November 30, all but two from November 10-30. All of these birds fit well with Tobish's statement that most Mews "have fled the [Alaskan] interior by the first week" of October, "always well in advance of freeze-up." The reports of Common Gull were of a third-winter at Vaudreuil, Quebec, (the *nineteenth* Quebec record), three adults in Newfoundland, including a returning bird banded in Iceland in 1990, one at Martha's Vineyard, and an adult from Niagara Falls. One would think Common Gull a coastal visitor, and indeed records stretch south to North Carolina, but Common also moves down the St. Lawrence River to Quebec and, it seems, to the eastern Great Lakes. It was logical that the two would cross paths at Niagara, the most scrutinized gull patch on the continent. It is interesting that of the eleven interior Mew reports, no one reported a first-winter bird, inasmuch as juvenile Mews were noted moving *much* earlier than usual in California, with one at the Santa Ynez River mouth September 5, and a single offshore of Monterey August 5, among others.

Franklin's Gulls, with better nesting seasons in 1993 and 1994 than in 1995, appeared to have done very well again; they moved east more than west in fall. "Only three" were noted in southern California, but in Texas and the Central Southern Region, new records were set with an "amazing count" of 15,000 on Granger Lake, Texas, and with an "invasion of northern Mississippi River reservoirs" in late October. The Southern Great Plains region registered a count reminiscent of "old times," 85,000 or more at Lincoln, Nebraska. In the East, where the species is annual but rare, North Carolina's eighth arrived at Lake Auman November 1, Virginia's eighth and ninth at Portsmouth and Hunting Creek, while in areas with many more records, Franklin's put in appearances in Quebec, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

Documentation of jaeger migration in the interior was thorough this year, prudent in its conservatism, and full of superlatives: "the largest jaeger flight since the mid-1950s" in the Midwest, "the best jaeger flight of the 1990s" at

Derby Hill Bird Observatory on Lake Ontario. Though much of the action was in the upper Midwest and around the Great Lakes, hurricane *Fran* and tropical storm *Josephine* stirred up the jaegers as well. Reported onshore: 418 Parasitic, 163 Pomarine, 50 Long-tailed, and 136 unidentified, plus mention of 34 Long-tailed in the offshore. Observer activity may indeed be at an all-time high, but these numbers may also indicate nesting success. Information in the Regional Reports concerning age composition of the larger flights would be necessary to begin answering the question of nesting success.

Montane movers

The reader will simply have to consult the brilliant reportage in the Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon/Washington, Mountain West, Idaho/western Montana, and Great Plains columns for the full flavor of this very widespread but locally idiosyncratic "movement." The mix of species varied considerably among and within Regions, but a few species stand out. Lawrence's Goldfinch, in the Highest Priority category of the WatchList, staged "one of [its] best invasions in years" in Arizona; in New Mexico, where unreported since 1991, over 150 were documented. In Monterey and Santa Clara counties, California, the species was "unusually common" on the coast, with three reaching the Farallons. And in Texas, the volume of the flight was unmatched "since the early 1950s."

Red Crossbills were recorded out of "typical" range early in the summer after nesting, and already by June 24, Chris Corben had keyed out some of the birds in the Point Reyes, California, vicinity, as "Type 2." Observers elsewhere in California and in Texas and Arizona also recorded this widespread form. Observers capable of tape-recording their local Reds often did so, and it will probably only be through audio recordings and specimens that we will define the shifting distributions of the various *taxa* of this complex, though photographs and field sketches may be useful as well. After the scattering of summer reports (as far east as Martha's Vineyard), the next wave of wanderers toward the East were singles noted in Ames, Iowa, at Herndon, Virginia, and a flock of 25–30 in Erie County, Pennsylvania—all August 5. Reds were reported as widespread from all but the Deep South, though one reached the Lower Rio Grande Valley! Flights of

Clark's Nutcrackers were felt to be the most extensive since 1972, from Texas to the San Francisco Bay area, and the invasion's advance-guard even reached Louisiana by winter.

Other probable outliers in this exodus were Band-tailed Pigeons out of range, following the summer's Massachusetts record, in Nebraska, Idaho, and Alberta; a Pinyon Jay in Iowa; Pygmy Nuthatch in North Dakota and Minnesota; and Alabama's first Townsend's Solitaire October 7 at Fort Morgan, which presaged a substantial invasion in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and much of the Midwest later in the fall and winter.

Other Irruptors, Irregulars, Invaders

From the north country, after the banner year of 1995, Northern Saw-whet Owls were not noted moving in numbers, other than a token 70 at Tadoussac, Quebec, and >100 at Kiptopeke, Virginia, but 125 Boreals, a high number, were also banded at Tadoussac, and there were six records in New England. Snowy Owls staged a medium-sized flight to the East Coast, two reaching as far as Virginia, and a *huge* flight in the Midwest, with over 66 birds, and the Pacific Northwest, boasting the "best invasion since 1973/74" in both the United States and Canada. Northern Shrikes, following the largest flight on record in the East in 1995–1996, were most notable for their absence south of winter strongholds, and likewise for Bohemian Waxwing, Common Redpoll, and Evening Grosbeak in the East. Hoary Redpoll went unreported in the Lower 48, not unusual in November, as they often begin to appear only in mid-winter. The largest Snow Bunting flight in recent memory put flocks of several hundred as far south as Portsmouth, Virginia, and a single as far as Canaveral National Seashore, Florida, where the species is rare. The thousands of White-winged Crossbills present in Newfoundland over the summer had disappeared by September: Where did they go? And the >1200 Purple Finches that passed Cape Charles? The species had virtually no Atlantic coastal presence on Christmas Bird Counts in 1996/1997, certainly none from Virginia southward.

Numbers of southern herons were "about average" (Maritimes), "in short supply" (Prairie Provinces), and—especially in the cases of Great and Cattle Egrets—locally numerous (Arizona, Minnesota, Northeast, Pacific Northwest). Reddish Egret is worth mention in southern California, Nevada, and

southern Arizona, as well as in North Carolina, where records of this formerly rare visitor have become more regular in the 1990s. At Eastham, Massachusetts, a Great White Heron continued from the summer, a form whose tendency to stray northward may begin to parallel that of Reddish Egret. Not exactly a southerner, a **Chinese Pond-Heron** in alternate plumage reached Alaskan shores from eastern Asia to provide a first continental record.

Two species that continue to be monitored carefully for increases in the southeastern portion of the continent, Eurasian Collared-Dove and Shiny Cowbird, had distinctly different reviews this season: Editors in the Gulf Coast, Florida, Texas, and the Southern Atlantic all note the continued proliferation of the dove—"the invasion proceeds unabated" notes Jackson (with prospectors north to Colorado, Tennessee, South Dakota, Texas panhandle, Oklahoma)—but the cowbird was reported only from Key West, from Huntington Beach, South Carolina, and from Bacon's Castle, Virginia, the latter a state-first. Noel Wamer in Florida urges observers to continue submitting reports of this species. Finally, Groove-billed Ani had not irrupted northward in about a decade and a half—one wonders how many anis went undetected between the North Carolina and Nova Scotia birds!

Et cetera

Continuing trends—such as the decline of Golden-winged Warbler and Northern Bobwhite in the Northeast, the occurrences of hummingbirds wildly out of range, and the steady upward trend in raptors once nearly lost to organochlorine poisoning in the East—can be found with even a glance through the reports that follow. As ever, the reader is encouraged to seek out other patterns in these pages.

State/Province Records for the Fall 1996 Season*

Firsts

Yellow-billed Loon NE
 Shy (White-capped) Albatross OR
 Streaked Shearwater OR
 Cory's Shearwater PA
 Great-winged Petrel CA
 White-chinned Petrel NC
 Chinese Pond Heron AK
 Tufted Duck KS
 Common Ringed Plover CA
 Wood Sandpiper YU
 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper NV
 Great Skua NB†
 Pomarine Jaeger NV; ND
 Ross' Gull DE
 Black-tailed Gull [returning] RI
 Mew Gull SD
 Arctic Tern TX
 Bridled Tern DC
 Marbled Murrelet OH
 Ancient Murrelet NV
 Band-tailed Pigeon QU; NE
 Eurasian Collared-Dove SD; CO
 Groove-billed Ani NC; NS†
 White-throated Swift AB
 Calliope Hummingbird NJ
 Black-chinned Hummingbird NJ; SD
 Broad-tailed Hummingbird AR
 Broad-billed Hummingbird IL
 Green Violet-ear MI; OK
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker MT
 Red-breasted Sapsucker TX
 Piratic Flycatcher NM
 Dusky Flycatcher NS, WI, RI
 Greater Pewee NV
 Western Wood-Pewee QU, WI
 Thick-billed Kingbird NV
 Cave Swallow DE
 Pygmy Nuthatch MN
 Eyebrowed Thrush BC
 Townsend's Solitaire AL
 Northern Wheatear AZ
 Mountain Bluebird NB
 White Wagtail LA
 Wagtail sp. OH
 Blue-winged Warbler AB
 Swainson's Warbler ME
 Black-throated Gray Warbler QU
 Connecticut Warbler NF
 Great-tailed Grackle MS
 Yellow-headed Blackbird YU
 Shiny Cowbird VA
 House Sparrow YU

Seconds

Yellow-billed Loon KS
 Short-tailed Albatross OR
 Fea's (= "Cape Verde Islands") Petrel VA
 Anhinga IA
 Reddish Egret NV
 Roseate Spoonbill MD
 Black Scoter ID
 Prairie Falcon ON
 Pomarine Jaeger ND; SD
 Long-tailed Jaeger MD (& 3rd)
 Laughing Gull OR
 Mew Gull MN
 Little Gull NE
 Sandwich Tern NB
 Sooty Tern ON
 Marbled Murrelet CO
 Rufous Hummingbird QU
 Ash-throated Flycatcher CT
 Say's Phoebe NF
 Yellow-bellied Flycatcher MT
 Pinyon Jay IA
 Pygmy Nuthatch ND
 Carolina Wren ND
 Arctic Warbler CA
 Yellow Wagtail BC
 Black-backed Wagtail OR
 Black-throated Green Warbler NV
 Northern Parula Warbler BC
 Townsend's Warbler GA
 Pyrrhuloxia CO
 Dark-eyed (White-winged) Junco CA
 Lesser Goldfinch MT

Thirds

Arctic/Pacific Loon HI
 Wilson's Storm-Petrel ON (to 5th)
 Dark-rumped Petrel CA
 Red-billed Tropicbird TX
 Tricolored Heron n. CA
 Pink-footed Goose QU
 American Oystercatcher ON
 Long-tailed Jaeger NM
 Black-headed Gull HI
 Mew Gull MT
 Lesser Black-backed Gull ND
 Yellow-legged Gull NF
 White-winged Dove MI
 Violet-crowned Hummingbird TX
 Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher LA; n. CA
 Hooded Warbler NF
 Mourning Warbler NM
 Le Conte's Sparrow NS
 Brewer's Sparrow IL
 House Sparrow AK

Fourths

Red-throated Loon SD
 Black-browed Albatross MA
 Dark-rumped Petrel CA
 Black-capped Petrel ON (to 25th!)
 Herald Petrel VA
 Brown Pelican TN
 Black-bellied Whistling-Duck KS
 Common Eider BC
 Black Vulture WI
 Buff-breasted Sandpiper HI (or 5th)
 Great Black-backed Gull CO
 Black-legged Kittiwake ID
 Violet-crowned Hummingbird CA
 Gray Kingbird ON
 Eastern Wood-Pewee CA
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher MB
 Townsend's Warbler MA
 MacGillivray's Warbler MA
 Painted Redstart n. CA
 Smith's Longspur CA (1st. S. CA)
 Little Bunting AK

Fifths

Wilson's Plover ME
 Long-tailed Jaeger ND
 Mew Gull IA
 Forster's Tern VT
 Northern Saw-whet Owl FL
 Green-breasted Mango TX (& U. S.)
 Anna's Hummingbird CO (or 6th)
 Acorn Woodpecker CO
 Gray Kingbird ON
 Fork-tailed Flycatcher QU; ON (to 7th!)
 Varied Thrush FL (or 6th); LA
 Black-backed Wagtail n. CA
 Philadelphia Vireo MT (and 6th)

Sixths

White-faced Storm-Petrel VA
 Red-tailed Tropicbird n. CA
 Brant AL
 Yellow Rail KY
 Spotted Redshank NS
 Mew Gull ND
 Heermann's Gull NV
 Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler AK (or 7th)
 Yellow-eyed Junco TX

Sevenths

Black-capped Petrel PA (& 8th)
 Manx Shearwater TX
 Reddish Egret AZ
 Black Vulture NS
 Mongolian Plover CA
 Sabine's Gull VA
 Yellow-bellied Flycatcher CA (& 8th)
 Cave Swallow NJ
 Brown Thrasher ID
 Connecticut Warbler TX
 Lesser Goldfinch SD (8th & 9th also!)

Eighths

Pacific Loon MT
 Brant MT
 Long-tailed Jaeger AZ (& 9th)
 Mew Gull AZ; ID
 Franklin's Gull NC
 Short-tailed Hawk TX

Ninths

Red Phalarope MS
 Black-headed Gull TX
 Little Gull MS
 Great Black-backed Gull CO

Tenths

Brown Booby AZ
 Lesser Black-backed Gull AL
 White-tailed Kite AL
 Ash-throated Flycatcher MT
 Northern Wheatear CA

* Some of the above records have not yet been vetted by state records committees, but most have been documented by the observers, at least to the satisfaction of the regional editors, who include them as reports, not records, in their seasonal summaries.

† Several previous records of *Catharacta* and *Crotophaga* spp. here.