

changing seasons

The Nesting Season, June 1–July 31, 1997

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My non-birding friends (yeah, I do have a couple) sometimes ask me why there should be so much controversy and uncertainty regarding population trends of birds. Aren't birders always doing bird counts, after all, and shouldn't it be an easy matter to compare counts from year to year?

But of course, the situation is not so easy. There are hardly any bird species in North America, aside from Whooping Crane and California Condor, that can be subject to precise censusing. For all the rest, the best we can do is to make sample counts. If our counts vary wildly from year to year, it might reflect changes in population—or it might just reflect the fact that birds move around.

The mobility of birds is what puts the zip in rarity-hunting; but for censusing of populations, it would be better if the birds would just hold still for a while. That is one of the attractions of the early summer, the nesting season, the supposed space between spring and fall migrations: that should be a time when the birds are staying put, making it possible to get more accurate counts.

However, that's an illusion. There really is no gap between spring and fall migrations. Even in a normal year, some male hummingbirds are already moving away from their breeding grounds before some Arctic shorebirds have arrived at theirs. But in the early summer of 1997, more than in most years, there were numerous reminders of how difficult it is to pin birds down.

LEFTOVERS FROM LAST WINTER'S INVASIONS

The fall of 1996 and winter of 1996–1997 produced a phenomenal invasion of montane birds into the lowlands of the western two-thirds of the continent, the biggest such flight since the early 1970s. Perhaps not surprisingly, a few lingerers or wanderers left over from that flight were noted into this summer.

Clark's Nutcrackers were among the most notable of last winter's invaders, partly because they do not stage such flights very often. A flock of 42 was still in northwestern Nebraska on the first of June. Also out of range were one in San Diego County, California, in early June, and one on Washington's San Juan Islands in late July. Among other birds that may have been late fallout from last winter's flight, Pinyon Jays were reported in June in the Cypress Hills of Alberta, a province that has no confirmed records. A Steller's Jay and a Western Scrub-Jay at Malheur, in the desert of southeastern Oregon, were out of place. A Lewis's Woodpecker that remained in Los Angeles County was the first to spend the summer so far south in California, but it was outdone by one in upstate New York in June, establishing a second state record and one of very few ever east of the Mississippi River.

Some of the other species that took part in last winter's flight are better known for lingering after such invasions. Red-breasted Nuthatches are notable little nonconformists; odd summer birds were found well away from usual breeding areas in California, Illinois, Indiana, and elsewhere, although July birds in southern Ontario were thought to be extremely early fall migrants. Red Crossbills, of course, break all the rules, and it was no surprise that some lin-

gered in lowland areas after last winter's mass appearance. They were suspected of breeding at a couple of points on the California coast East of the mountains, there were summer reports from all the Great Plains states, and east as far as Iowa and Arkansas. Red Crossbills were scattered over Texas through the summer; apparently they nested at Abilene, and a juvenile was seen in late July at San Antonio! Finally, Cassin's Finches also lingered in some areas. One in the Chisos Mountains of west Texas in July was way out of season, a pair was out of place in the Organ Mountains of far southern New Mexico, and there was evidence that the species might have nested in Monterey County, California, where summer reports in the past have been unconfirmed.

DELAYED MIGRATION

The relatively cold, wet spring of 1997 was thought to have delayed the migration of many birds in the east, and this impression was confirmed by the remarkable numbers of migrants that were still short of their breeding ranges in early June. The phenomenon drew comments in many regions, from the Rockies to the Atlantic. At Point Pelee, Ontario, scores of northbound vireos and warblers were still present on June 3. At Chincoteague, Virginia, a fallout on June 8 included ten each of Blackpoll and Magnolia warblers, among a number of other late migrants. At Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at least 16 species of warblers were seen consistently through the first week of June. Olive-sided Flycatcher and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, which tend to be rather late migrants anyway, were reported in a number of areas well into June, and late Swainson's Thrushes were mentioned often.

WEATHER/CLIMATE EFFECTS ON NESTING

In addition to the weather's effects on migrants, the cool, wet spring (lasting well into June) in many regions east of the Rockies affected nesting birds in a variety of ways, benefiting some and hurting others. In some regions, many early nesting attempts failed. Species that go through a long, slow nesting cycle were at a disadvantage; nesting failures by Bald Eagles and other large species in the Northeast were linked to the bad weather. Smaller birds with shorter nesting cycles, able to start over or start late, evidently were more successful in some areas, although the delay may have increased competition for resources by forcing most of the nesting activity into a shorter period in summer. By contrast, the increased wetlands resulting from the rains were thought to have helped some waterbirds, especially in the Midwest.

A particularly interesting observation came from the Appalachians, where quite a few "northern" species were found breeding this year at lower elevations or farther south than normal. George Hall suggests that this was linked to the weather-induced delays in migration: "It appeared that some late migrants did not finish their flight north, and stopped to breed when physiology gave the word."

A series of reports from the high plains provides a perfect example of how weather can affect the same species differently in different regions. It was an unusually wet year in many areas just east of the mountains, from Canada's Prairie Provinces south to the Texas pan-

handle and eastern New Mexico. But “unusually wet” has a different meaning at either end of this range. The northern prairies are usually more verdant and green, so a rainy year there apparently made things too lush for Lark Buntings, which were specifically noted as scarce in Alberta and Manitoba. However, in the normally much drier country a thousand miles to the south, unusually good rains made the conditions perfect for these birds: it was “the summer of the Lark Buntings” in the Texas panhandle, and perhaps the best year ever for this species in northeastern New Mexico. Other grassland birds also did well in these latter areas, especially Grasshopper Sparrows and Dickcissels. The seeming mobility of such populations on the Great Plains make it much harder to track overall population trends from year to year—another indication that birds are not really “staying put” during the breeding season.

EL NIÑO

By June 1997 it was obvious that a major El Niño event was building in the Pacific. Its effects on weather patterns across North America would not be apparent to the casual observer until several months later, but it was already having a major impact on seabirds along our Pacific Coast.

The most dramatic results involved nesting birds along the coast of Oregon and Washington. Common Murres in that area have had poor breeding success for several years now, and this year saw not only a massive failure of the breeding colonies but also significant losses of adults. Abnormal numbers of dead murres began washing up on beaches there by early June, and by late in the month, some of the big Oregon colonies were mostly or entirely abandoned by the adults. Only some of the smaller murre colonies off Washington and off southern Oregon appeared to be successfully raising some young. Beached-bird surveys on the Oregon coast found their highest numbers of dead murres ever. Brandt's Cormorants apparently had reduced nesting success also. The full story is given by Bill Tweit and Jim Johnson in the Oregon/Washington report.

Local die-offs of murres and Short-tailed Shearwaters were being reported from Alaska waters by late July, but the main effects in Alaska during this season involved very warm and dry conditions across much of the mainland.

Aside from the nesting failures and the mortality of murres, the other obvious effect of El Niño's warm waters was the major northward push by some southern seabirds. A few Black-vented Shearwaters reached northern California very early, and big numbers of Brown Pelicans appeared in coastal Oregon and Washington. Heermann's Gulls moved north in very large numbers, as exemplified by nearly 3000 on Whidbey Island, Washington, in late July. Elegant Terns are perhaps the best-known indicators of warm water conditions on our west coast. The first Washington state records for the species occurred with the El Niño event of 1983. This year they were back in force, with about 150 in Washington by late July, and more than 300 in Oregon. In northern California they appeared early and in big numbers, with 450 north to Humboldt Bay and a count of 3000 at one site in Monterey County at the end of July.

In southern California there were few indications of El Niño effects on seabirds by the end of this period—unless one could draw a connection between these conditions and the appearance of a Belcher's (Band-tailed) Gull, native to the west coast of South America, in the San Diego area. Curiously, the summer flight of Yellow-footed Gulls to the Salton Sea included only one juvenile, perhaps indicating that the species had poor breeding success on the Gulf of California this year.

TRENDS OF VARIOUS KINDS: POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND MIXED

If anyone questions the value of the Endangered Species Act, and asks you whether it has been effective in bringing any species back from serious trouble, you can point out the Bald Eagle as Exhibit A. Protection has paid off in gradual but continuous improvement in the eagle's status over the last couple of decades. Even though cold spring weather caused a few nest failures in the northeast this season, overall the news continues to be excellent for this species. Some tallies of occupied nests this year that I found impressive included 34 in Missouri, 35 in New York, 58 in Iowa, and a record 219 in Maryland. Florida, a long-time eagle stronghold, had 874 active nests this year, with 1216 young produced, for the highest totals in a quarter-century of surveys. As pointed out by Rich Paul and Ann Schnapf, with the increasing population in Florida, some nests are being established in urban areas—leading to some political pressure for relaxing of current nest-protection guidelines. Obviously, even though Bald Eagles have made progress from their precarious state of a few years ago, it's not yet time to stop protecting them.

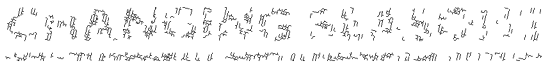
Another species formerly in serious trouble, Peregrine Falcon, is also making great strides. The species is doing well in the northeast, and this year New York state had a record 34 territorial pairs. Many modern Peregrines are in urban settings, but this year in the southern Appalachians a pair nested at a historic site in wild Great Smoky Mountains National Park for the first time since 1942.

Smaller falcons are showing mixed signals. Merlins have been doing very well on the northern plains in recent years without any direct human help, establishing themselves as year-round residents of cities in the Prairie Provinces. They are making advances in the northeast as well. In the Adirondacks of upstate New York, where first found nesting in 1992, there were six active sites this year. The species nested for the first time in Ottawa and in Vermont, and rare nests were also found in southern Quebec and in New Hampshire. Meanwhile, American Kestrels are struggling in the same general region, even with human help. Nest box programs are having a positive effect in some areas, such as Warren and Northampton counties in Pennsylvania. However, 56 nest boxes monitored in eastern Massachusetts held only one pair this year; a dozen years ago, these same boxes held at least 20 pairs. All of these falcon trends have been reflected in changing counts at autumn hawkwatch sites in recent years, raising our confidence in the value of such regular migration counts.

Even most birders don't spend much time thinking about the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, one of our most under-appreciated species. But we should. Alarming was the word for the report from New Mexico, where the population of this pallid prairie grouse was estimated to have declined by 85% over the last decade. Herbicide programs, coupled with grazing and drought, were believed responsible.

Common Nighthawk is gradually losing its claim to that modifier. In the Hudson-Delaware region, Bob Paxton et al. commented that “the news was all bad” for this species, and comments elsewhere would back that up. On the other hand, there is some evidence that nighthawks may be expanding their range slightly to the north. They had their first probable indication of nesting in Alaska this year, and there was also speculation about possible nesting as far north as Goose Bay, Labrador.

The disappearing act of the Loggerhead Shrike continues. Of course the bird is essentially gone from the northeast. The shrike-free zone seems to be expanding outward from there to include regions around the Great Lakes. Michigan had no sightings this season, Wisconsin recorded only one nesting pair, and the species was found in



only seven counties in Minnesota. Surveys in Ontario have shown a drastic decline: just 18 pairs this summer, down from 31 pairs in 1996 and 55 pairs in 1992! The effort to bring the species back in Ontario now includes a captive breeding program, reminiscent of the approaches taken with much larger birds of prey. However, the reasons behind the shrikes' decline are still far from certain.

Breeding Bird Surveys show declines in Clay-colored Sparrow populations at the center of their range. However, there are also signs of range expansion. This season at least two dozen individuals, including nesting pairs, were found in Quebec. In New England, where the first nesting was recorded in Maine last year, at least nine birds were found this summer. Other birds, apparently unmated although some were territorial, were in New Brunswick, New York, and Pennsylvania. Farther west, two Clay-colored were found this year in the Yukon Territory. There was evidence of continued spread in parts of British Columbia, and a report that the species has become regular in very small numbers in eastern Washington.

A NEW TWIST ON AN ONGOING TREND

As I've said before, the ongoing expansion of range by the Eurasian Collared-Dove in North America could be the current O.J. Simpson Trial of the birding world: It's always in the news (and, mark your calendars, it will be for at least the next ten years), but some people already are tired of reading about it. I thought I could let it slide this time, and not mention it in the "Changing Seasons," but a couple of developments demand attention.

Most of the reports of collared-doves so far have seemed consistent with natural expansion of the exploding population in the southeastern states—including such outliers as the birds in eastern New Mexico and Colorado, or the new birds on Long Island and in Kansas, or even the far-flung nesting pair in Montana this season. But not all the birds can be automatically assigned to this source. As Ken Brock reports, a mixed flock of Eurasian Collared-Doves and Ringed Turtle-Doves has been present in Joliet, Illinois, for more than twenty years, and the birds are apparently doing very well numerically despite some interbreeding between the two forms. The presence of this flock may account for some sightings elsewhere in the upper Midwest. In California, nesting birds found around Santa Barbara this season were believed to have spread from an established introduced flock in nearby Ventura, not from the advancing horde in the Southeast. The Texas editors acknowledge the possibility that local escapes may account for some sightings there; but as they point out, most of the Texas records would fit in well with a normal pattern of expansion of the southeastern population.

CONFLICTS IN SPECIES MANAGEMENT

As expanding urbanization squeezes wildlife into smaller pockets, more and more problems are likely to be caused by wild species bumping up against each other in their limited remaining space. In the Hudson-Delaware region, for example, declines of Ovenbirds and Dark-eyed Juncos were linked to the trashing of forest undergrowth by overabundant deer. Solutions in this case seem pretty obvious: bring back the mountain lion, or do everything we can to encourage deer hunters. (How about sponsoring a "World Series of Deer Shooting"?) But then there are trickier situations, the kind where one scarce or declining species is hurting another.

In Hawaii, there was some good news for the critically endangered 'Alala (Hawaiian Crow). The captive breeding program produced nine young this year, increasing the total population to forty-one. There are plans to release at least some of these young to the wild, but there's a hitch: lone young 'Alala apparently are targeted by

the 'Io (Hawaiian Hawk, a threatened species). Certainly no one is suggesting controlling the hawks to protect the crows. The best approach seems to be to release the young 'Alala in groups, for safety in numbers.

An intriguing report came from Maryland, where for a number of years Hal Wierenga has been studying the marsh birds of Elliot Island, especially the population of Black Rails. This year Wierenga found only two Black Rails there, in areas that held many as recently as a decade ago. He suggests a possible reason: nest boxes for Barn Owls have been erected here, as well as in various other marshes along the east coast, creating a constant presence of these predators in areas where they would have been occasional visitors before. It seems logical to suppose that Barn Owls might zero in on these little rails as they run about, mouse-like, in the marshes at night. Maybe it's time to relocate some of these owl boxes.

BAD IDEAS IN SPECIES MANAGEMENT: BIG DUCKS IN SMALL PONDS

In the category of what we might call Big Bad Ducks, Canada Geese continued to obliterate any memory of the concept that they used to be considered symbols of wilderness. As a case in point, consider Phelps Pond, monitored by William Reid in northeastern Pennsylvania. The pond "now has seven pairs of Canadas and no more Moorhens, Soras, or Least Bitterns." Similar horror stories have cropped up countless times in recent years, as the wild goose has become a golf course goose and city park goose and suburban goose, overrunning many wetlands that once held a wider variety of species. Many of the most problematic populations in the lower 48 states were actually introduced by state game agencies, who may or may not be alert enough to be having second thoughts about them now.

Then there's the Mute Swan. It's like a Canada Goose in some ways, only a lot bigger, and not even native on this continent. Run-away populations of Mute Swans are trashing our beleaguered coastal marshes from Cape Cod to Chesapeake Bay, and are increasing in parts of the upper Midwest as well. Responsible attempts to control their numbers are often stymied by well-meaning "animal lovers" who seem to value feral swans over native wildlife. (For a good account of the conflict, see the article by Ted Williams in the November–December 1997 issue of Audubon magazine.) This season there was little comment on the ongoing problem on the coast, but Mute Swans were showing up in new places in the interior. A flock wandered through southern Quebec and a few showed up in western Pennsylvania; one that got all the way up to the Ontario coast of Hudson Bay was, as Ron Ridout said, "astounding and just a little worrisome." One wonders how far these big birds could ultimately spread.

Okay, class, let's see a show of hands. Considering our experiences with Canada Goose and Mute Swan, how many of you are in favor of taking the Trumpeter Swan—another huge waterfowl species—and introducing it into areas of the upper Midwest and the Atlantic Coast where we think it might have been native once? Areas where wetlands are now severely reduced, where other wetland species are now struggling to maintain a foothold? Yeah, that's what I thought. Unfortunately, you and I are not in charge of that decision. "Reintroduction" programs for Trumpeter Swans have been going on for some time now in a number of northern states and provinces, and even as far east as Virginia.

Some of these Trumpeter introductions are doing disquietingly well. In the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, at least twenty pairs nested, probably representing at least a thousand pounds of swans. Others nested in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Ontario. A pair nested for the

third year at Perch River Wildlife Management Area in upstate New York. Not introduced locally, this pair probably reflects spillover from Ontario, and their presence (and their potential impact on the marsh) does not bode well for the declining Black Terns at Perch River. A couple of Trumpeters also lingered in Pennsylvania into June. Not mentioned in these pages, but publicized elsewhere by a cheerleading section of uncritical media reporters, was the deliberate attempt to teach more feral Trumpeters in Virginia to migrate a few dozen miles to Chesapeake Bay.

There seems to be a widespread sense that it's fine to introduce a species to a region as long as that species was native there at one time (even if the environment in that region has changed dramatically since). The pro-swan faction would have us believe that Trumpeters were once all over this continent, wintering south to central Florida and north along the Atlantic Coast as far as ice-free waters existed. However, the most authoritative sources on the birds of Florida, Virginia, and Massachusetts, for example, do not mention this species, even as a hypothetical. I regard the former omnipresence of Trumpeters as less than proven. Even if they did once range along the Atlantic Coast, it was in an era when that coast was vastly different than it is today. Trumpeter Swans are doing well in the west, in country where they have enough room; their populations have been increasing there. The inclusion of this species on the Partners In Flight "Watch List" of birds in potential danger is bizarre, and must have been politically motivated; it would make a better fit on the "Watch Out List," if we had one! I don't know why there isn't more scrutiny and regulation of schemes to introduce huge, potentially damaging birds like swans into new areas.

Incidentally, these are my own personal opinions, not those of *Field Notes*, ABA, or NAS, so you can direct your flames to me, not to them.

FINAL FRONTIER: LOUISIANA?

Finally, time for my vote for the state or province that had the two most intriguing reports of the season. This summer the prize would have gone to Louisiana, for two totally unrelated but unsettling reports.

Most birders are now at least vaguely aware of the Kelp Gulls that have been present on the Chandeleur Islands off the coast of Louisiana for several years, and some are aware that Herring Gulls were not found nesting in the state until about the time the first Kelps showed up. This June, expert Donna Dittmann and others visited the Chandeleurs and took a careful look. They did find one Kelp Gull there, and at least seven adult Herring Gulls, but they also found at least six Kelp X Herring hybrids! Gull identification along the Gulf Coast is not going to get any easier, it seems, any time soon.

Meanwhile, back on land, Mac Myers kept tabs on Cliff Swallow colonies north of New Orleans, and he found the proportion of birds with dark foreheads to be as high as 70% in one colony. Umm... What? There are Cliff Swallow races that are known to have dark foreheads, but the last I heard, they weren't supposed to occur anywhere near Louisiana. Obviously there are things that I don't know. And that's one of the great things about the Regional Reports in *Field Notes*—there are always surprises, always new information and new questions to think about. I invite you to read on, and discover your own questions.



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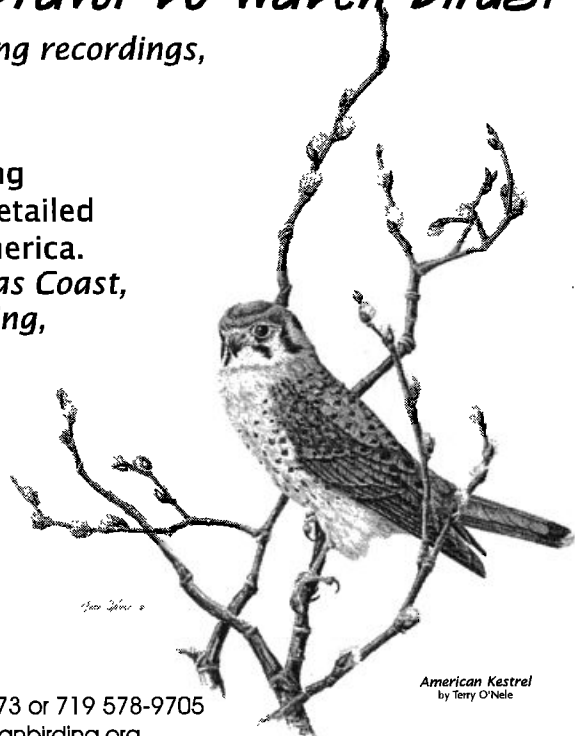
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