

# Changing Seasons, Summer 2000:

## *Random Trends And Random Thoughts*

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**T**he breeding season is time to reflect on that most important of all quests birds undertake, the propagation of their genes into the future. The millennium's first (as many see it) summer brought the usual litany of interesting vagrants and wild records. More interesting, however, are the myriad changing patterns we can detect by pursuing regional reports from across the continent. The breeding season, especially, is a time to discover and wonder about these patterns. After all, our field guides and state and local avifaunas give the sense of being outdated, of being period pieces, more by changes in breeding status than by anything else.

At least six singing Willow Flycatchers in New Brunswick perhaps signify further range expansion by this species. By some accounts (P. Unitt pers. comm.), the Willow Flycatcher was unknown east of the Appalachians until sometime during the twentieth century. Its northward push mirrors that of the Blue-winged Warbler. Consider, for example, that only one Golden-winged Warbler was reported in New England during the entire summer, equaling the number of Lawrence's Warblers reported! Key differences between the flycatchers and warblers, owing largely to identification difficulty of the former, are that we have little idea if Willows are expanding at the expense of Alders, let alone if the species are hybridizing along the expanding front the Willow's

range. Their distinct songs may prohibit interbreeding, but are they distinct enough? Even more southerly species are getting into the act. The gaudy Scissor-tailed Flycatcher nested successfully in both Georgia and North Carolina, straining the eastern limits of its breeding range. With all of the talk of global warming, I suppose one expects southerly species to push north, but for nearly every example there is a counter-example. While some species are pushing north and east, others are working their way south and west. Common Ravens are well on their way to becoming a fixture in Connecticut. Moreover, the species appears to be colonizing western Pennsylvania where, as in Connecticut, it is being noted with increasing frequency in low-elevation areas well away from mountains.

Not surprisingly, and adding to the rich tapestry of gauging and interpreting avian status and distribution, patterns can be different in different parts of the continent. The Tree Swallow, for example, has declined precipitously as a breeder in much of California, yet this species is increasing dramatically in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. The Bank Swallow might well be enjoying similar increases in the East while suffering similar declines in the West. In cases where subspecies are the same in both regions (e.g., Tree Swallows are monotypic and all North American Bank

Swallows are the nominate subspecies), we might be mystified by differences in range expansion or retraction, or population increase or decrease. That climatic, vegetative, geographic, and anthropogenic factors vary considerably over the continent ought at least to give us solace, though reminding us of the tangled complexity of ecosystem function.

Perhaps more interesting are cases where different subspecies are undergoing the same sort of expansion or increase. Brown Pelicans, for example, whether on the West Coast or East, are pushing northward. In part we have allowed populations to recover from tragedies of our own doing, such as DDT poisoning. But on another level their parallel expansions are bringing the species to new frontiers. In the West, Brown Pelicans began breeding at the Salton Sea in the mid-1990s. At the same time, the Atlantic subspecies pushed into the Chesapeake Bay, where the breeding population has burgeoned to hundreds of pairs. And need I remind anyone of the amazing northward expansion of three different subspecies of the Great-tailed Grackle? *Q. m. prosopodicola* of eastern Mexico has pushed into parts of the Southeast and beyond, *Q. m. monsoni* of central Mexico has pushed into New Mexico, Arizona, and southeastern California, and *Q. m. nelsoni* of western Mexico has pushed into western Arizona, California, and beyond. Apart from its penchant for ranches and suburbia, what factors inherent to the Great-tailed Grackle triggered an essentially simultaneous expansion of three different populations?

This question is of course complicated by the terrific variance in ecosystem structure that I pondered early. Even a single factor can have a heterogeneous, complex effect. For example, factors we often associate with enhanced productivity, such as increased rain, do indeed benefit many species. But as usual the broad brush cannot be applied, for increased rain apparently hindered productivity of various raptors in the Hudson-Delaware region and various grebes in the Prairie Provinces. The oft-complex, oft-miraculous interplay of seemingly unrelated species also plays a role. Witness the absence of breeding Worm-eating, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers in a Philadelphia park, largely because White-tailed Deer devoured the understory. Other changes may be more directly related to changes in human land use. Emphasis on waterfowl and their habitat, from Ducks Unlimited and the like, has resulted in greater population sizes of Snow Geese, Canada Geese, Mallards (up a remarkable 55% in Minnesota), and a many other species. Might the Canvasbacks providing the first breeding record for Ontario (see the cover), despite their recent well-documented declines, be reaping the same benefits?

With these various thoughts, I leave to find discover your own changing patterns in breeding bird distribution and status across North America. There are many. I close with two digressions, neither particularly related to the breeding season, but both deeply tied to *North American Birds*.

#### **DIGRESSION I : HYBRIDS**

Although not really a topic for the summer season, the topic of gulls has again reared its head. I was fortunate enough to receive a memo from Joe Jehl, along with a reprint (Jehl 1987), discussing a photograph recently published in *North American Birds* (54:227). I had blithely concurred with this first-winter bird's identification as a Nelson's Gull, nearly universally deemed a Glaucous × Herring Gull. As Jehl rightly noted, the name "Nelson's Gull" actually applies to myriad phenotypes, such that there is no good reason to assume that the bird in the photograph is a Glaucous × Herring hybrid. It might just as well have been a Glaucous-winged ×

Herring hybrid or a Thayer's × Herring hybrid. This problem is not confined to gulls (or to birds). Hybrids always present an identification challenge, and their identification is nearly always tentative. I remain unconvinced, for example, that the hybrid towhee featured in Sibley's marvelous summary paper (1994) is a Spotted × Green-tailed, especially when considering that the bird's phenotype matches some examples of the well-known hybrid combination of Spotted × Collared (*Pipilo ocai*) Towhee (Sibley 1950). The point is that we rarely can be certain of the identity of a hybrid, particularly without a specimen. This situation is probably exacerbated in gulls, a group in which plumage variation is extreme and hybridization (and intergradation) is extensive. We must therefore temper our desire to identify as hybrids many of the unusual gulls we encounter (*cf.* Howell and Corben 2000). And I must go on record as accepting Jehl's challenge that I do not really know the parentage of the gull that I concluded had a Nelson's Gull phenotype.

#### **DIGRESSION II : RECORDS COMMITTEES**

*North American Birds* is intimately related to the functioning of bird records committees. As an example, some such committees (e.g., California, Texas) make an effort to review all published records of state rarities, many of which appear in print for the first time in these pages. It is thus incumbent upon all Regional Editors to work closely with the chairperson/secretary of records committees in the states they cover. After all, the real issue—the reason this journal exists—is for the greater good of field ornithology. By publishing carefully vetted records, we can later build accounts of status and distribution, of range surges and retreats, of population peaks and valleys, for myriad species across this vast continent. Yet three potential problems arise with this erstwhile symbiotic relationship. Contributors to *North American Birds* can play a crucial role in avoiding or resolving these problems.

On the one hand, Regional Editors operate under a strict timetable. They are therefore faced with the daunting task of vetting a host of records in short order, often with only the vaguest sense of how a particular record of a state rarity might eventually fare once reviewed by the state committee. Editors, then, often publish records that are ultimately rejected by a committee. For example, recent reports of a California Gull at Charlevoix in fall 1998 and a King Eider at Rogers City in fall 1999 were not accepted by the Michigan Bird Records Committee (A. Chartier *in litt.*). What then? The best recourse, in my view, is for the committee to communicate these results to the editor, **and** for the editor to add a short corrigendum/addendum to next regional report.

More vexing are situations where an observer reports a particular bird to a Regional Editor, but provides details only to the state committee. Closely related scenarios are when the observer reports only to the committee, completely bypassing the editor. The greater good is clearly served best by the observer providing his/her data to both the editor and committee, but if that does not happen it is incumbent upon the committee chair to communicate with the editor each season to ensure that various records will be included in the report. Still, some records are likely to be received solely by a committee. Provided a particular committee regularly publishes reports, in cases where a record is left out of a regional report but is subsequently accepted by a committee, there may be no need to update *North American Birds*. I should mention that another option exists: that the observer trumpets the validity of his/her record, but provided nary a scrap of documentation to anyone. In these cases, the greater good may be best served by including the record in regional report, placing it at the end under a heading of

"Undocumented rarities" or something similar (see many a Texas report over the years).

Of course this last general problem requires that the committee be in contact with the Regional Editor. A more insidious problem involves the converse. I sincerely hope that no Regional Editor for *North American Birds* deliberately withholds data from a records committee. No one benefits from such behavior. Instead, at the end of each season the editor should forward all documentation for review-list rarities to the appropriate state committee. Failing to do so is certainly an egregious error. It further should be implicit that any and all such rarity records submitted to this journal will be forwarded to a committee. I am again thinking of the greater good, wherein each of us who contributes to *North American Birds* does his or her best to uphold the integrity of the data. Whether our records get accepted or not, we should always strive to do better next time, to ensure that researchers using our data can be certain of drawing accurate conclusions from them. To this end, Regional Editors, committees, and the army of contributors work together

toward continuing the most thorough data set in the world on avian natural history.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Allen Chartier, Joseph R. Jehl Jr., and Philip Unitt for feedback and information.

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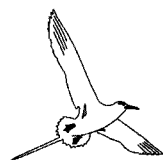
**North American Birds** thanks the following individuals who acted as peer reviewers for manuscripts submitted to the journal during 2000 (volume 54). Without their hard work the journal could not maintain its high standards.

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