

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

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1992-93 FALL AND WINTER SIGHTINGS

Greg D. Jackson

Autumn and winter are times of excitement for birders, as we lick our lips in anticipation of tasty vagrants. This fall was satisfying in that regard, with two first Alabama records; the winter yielded several choice rarities. Numbers of non-passerine migrants seemed good, though waterfowl were scarce at the coast this winter. Good numbers of transient passerines were noted at the coast in the fall.

August was cooler than normal, but temperatures were not unusual during the remainder of the autumn. Though there were cool spells in early December and late February, most of the winter was warm. The seven-month period generally had higher-than-expected rainfall, excepting October (normal) and February (dry). Tropical activity was limited to the rainfall 27 August in n. Alabama from the dissipating Hurricane Andrew. I received few reports of rarities in our area thought directly related to that storm. The most productive frontal systems were 28-29 August, 27-29 September, and 11-12 October.

This report covers the period from August 1992 through February 1993 in Alabama and the Florida Panhandle (east to the Apalachicola River). The appearance of observations in this column does not suggest verification or acceptance of records for very rare species; these must be considered by the appropriate state records committees. It is important that all submissions for birds that are rare, either in general or for a particular season or region, be accompanied by adequate details of the observation. The extent of this documentation depends on the rarity of the species and the difficulty of identification. Reports should always describe the conditions of observation and the diagnostic characters observed. Your help in this matter is appreciated.

County names are in *italics*. "GC" = Gulf Coast (Alabama), "ICP" = Inland Coastal Plain (Alabama), "MR" = Mountain Region, "TV" = Tennessee Valley, "WP" = Western Panhandle of Florida (*Escambia*, *Santa Rosa*, and *Okaloosa*). Records

not specifying Florida are in Alabama. "AFB" = Air Force Base, "m.ob." = many observers, "NWR" = National Wildlife Refuge, "p.a." = pending acceptance by the state bird records committee, "ph." = photographed, "WMA" = Wildlife Management Area.

LOONS - DUCKS: A rare **Red-throated Loon** was spotted 13 December at Gulf Shores, *Baldwin* (CK). Two **Pacific Loons** were exciting 2-9 January at Gulf Shores (GDJ,JH,CDC,SWM,mob,p.a.); this occurrence was the 11th for Alabama. It was a good season for the uncommon Eared Grebe, with six reports of nine birds. Most unusual of these were single birds 1 October at *Okaloosa*, FL (DMW), and beginning 17 November in w. *Jefferson* (ALM,MJO). Shearwaters are always stellar finds, and the **Greater Shearwater** 31 December and 3 January at Gulf Shores (ALM,ADM,p.a.) provided the first winter record for our area. The Am. White Pelican is difficult to find inland, so lone birds at Swan Creek WMA, *Limestone*, 13 September (ALM,ASC) and 1 November (SWM) were noteworthy. A flock of 200 was unusual for Destin, *Okaloosa*, FL, 13 January (JP,JaP).

Double-crested Cormorants continue to recover, and are now expected on inland lakes. An excellent movement of cormorants was detected in n. Alabama in mid-fall, with a total of over 500 at only three sites 24 September to 4 October (TAI,BM,SWM,GNP). Tricolored Herons are uncommon wanderers to the ICP; one was located in *Montgomery* 15 August (LFG). A Reddish Egret 17 January at Cape San Blas, *Gulf*, FL (JHi) was rare for the winter. A new maximum for the TV for Cattle Egret was provided by 94 in *Morgan* 29 August (SWM). Two White Ibis flew over Gulf Breeze, *Santa Rosa*, 24 December (RAD); there was only one previous WP record for December. The first December WP record for Glossy Ibis was of a bird 21 December at Eglin AFB (LRD,WWD,RAD). A Wood Stork was a rare WP find 5 October in *Okaloosa* (SM).

There are few records for Tundra Swan in the WP, so an individual 23 November at Pace, *Santa Rosa* (ph.CWM) was a surprise. The Gr. White-fronted Goose appears most winters at Wheeler NWR on the Tennessee R.; the maximum reported this year was six in *Limestone* 28 December (SWM). Less expected was a single bird beginning 3 February in *Clarke* (LB,ph.CK,mob). This was a good winter for **Ross' Goose**, previously recorded seven times in Alabama. As many as six birds were in Wheeler NWR, *Limestone*, beginning 31 January (JRW,SWM,RAD,mob,p.a.). Single Ross' Geese were in *Clarke* beginning 3 February (LB,ph.CK,mob,p.a.), and in *Perry* 7 February (ph.GDJ,DGJ,p.a.). The 56 Wood Ducks 3 December at, oddly, Ft. Pickens, *Escambia* (RAD) set a new WP maximum. Nine early Gadwall were in *Okaloosa*, FL, 10 September (DMW).

A rare summering Redhead was at L. Porter, *Jefferson* (TAI,mob) throughout the summer and fall. More frequent in summer, but still rare at that season, was a Ring-necked Duck at L. Porter 1 August (TAI,SSH). The Oldsquaw 19 December in Bear Creek, *Colbert* (TMH,JG,SWM,mob) was an unusual bird for the Waterloo

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CBC. Also noteworthy for the TV was the 29 November sighting of three Surf Scoters at the mouth of Town Creek, *Colbert/Lawrence* (JG,LA). Individual White-winged Scoters, scarcest of the three scoters on the coast, were reported 15 December at Ft. Walton Beach, *Okaloosa*, FL (JP), and 2 January at Gulf Shores (MJR).

RAPTORS - SHOREBIRDS: Migrant Ospreys were noted as more common than usual in n.w. Alabama, with a maximum of seven in w. *Lauderdale* 16-17 September (GNP). Rare inland in winter, one was spotted 2-3 January in *Montgomery* (P&CS,LFG). The second TV record for Am. Swallow-tailed Kite was provided by one of these graceful birds 8 (ALM,MJO) & 13 September (GDJ,DGJ) in s. *Morgan*. Two Mississippi Kites 22 August in s.e. *Shelby* (GDJ,DGJ) represented only the sixth MR record. A flock of about 40 birds was unusual 5 September in Tuscaloosa (DH,AK). Three adult Bald Eagles were notable 2 January in *Bay*, FL (R&DH,R&AI,mob). Migrant raptors were observed at the coast in normal numbers. Peak counts for the season included eight Cooper's Hawks 7 October at Ft. Morgan, *Baldwin* (GDJ,RAD), over 250 Broad-winged Hawks 30 September at Montrose, *Baldwin* (VBF,LB), and 100 Am. Kestrels 11 October at Ft. Morgan (AOS).

The sighting of *three Swainson's Hawks* at Ft. Morgan 18 October (ALM,ADM,p.a.) was unprecedented; this vagrant is seen in most years in late October and early November in s. *Baldwin*, but usually singly. An adult **Golden Eagle** was a rare find 15 October in *Okaloosa*, FL (DMW,CW). Difficult to find inland, I had reports of single Merlins 30 August in w. *Lauderdale* (SWM,GNP), 11 September in *Perry* (SWM), and 16 October (fem.) and 1 November (male) in s.e. *Shelby* (ALM,ADM). Peregrine Falcons are also noteworthy away from the coast. Lone falcons were spotted 9 & 27 September and 5 November in Decatur, *Morgan* (SWM,GDJ,MQ) and 3 October in w. Jefferson (TAI,SSH,F&KK). The **Prairie Falcon** at Guntersville Dam, *Marshall*, seemingly absent the prior winter, was rediscovered 7 January (JLD,mob). This individual was first observed in 1985 and has returned almost annually.

A Sandhill Crane at Perdido Bay in s. *Baldwin* 26 December (RAD,WWD,LRD) was away from the usual sites in Gulf Shores and west of Wolf Bay. Up to six Black-bellied Plovers, uncommon in fall in the TV, were at Swan Creek WMA 25 October (SWM). We did not have a repeat performance of the L. Golden-Plover invasion of last autumn; only three birds were reported from the TV and GC 4 October to 8 November (SWM,GDJ,CK). The Florida Panhandle produced encouraging numbers of Snowy Plovers this winter. Peak counts included 37 on an unspecified date at St. Andrews SP, *Bay* (EF,ACM,mob), 21 birds 3 December at Ft. Pickens (RAD), and 30 Snowies 8 December at Big Sabine, *Escambia* (RAD). Inland Piping Plovers are rare; single birds were noted 30 August in *Colbert* (SWM,GNP) and 6 September in Decatur (SWM). An incredible 71 Pippings were found this winter at Shell I., *Bay*, FL (BCAS), and another 14 were present 17 January at Cape San Blas,

Gulf, FL (JHi).

The Am. Oystercatcher is difficult to find in *Baldwin*, though reports from Ft. Morgan have increased in recent years; one was there 7 October (GDJ,RAD). An Am. Avocet 26 August in Decatur (SWM) was a rare inland occurrence. At least two Long-billed Curlews returned this year to the regular wintering site on the Mobile Causeway, *Mobile/Baldwin*. One seen 18 July (CK,mob) provided a new early record for Alabama. Marbled Godwits are uncommon migrants and rare wintering birds. The maximum reported this fall was three godwits 6 October on the Mobile Causeway, *Baldwin* (GDJ,RAD). Another was at this location 6 December (CK) and 8 January (JLD). Two Ruddy Turnstones were rare inland 4 October in *Morgan* (SWM).

Baird's Sandpipers are regular in small numbers in the autumn. Single birds appeared 9 October in *Okaloosa*, FL (DMW), 1 October at Wheeler NWR, *Limestone* (ALM), and 6 October at Ft. Morgan (GDJ,RAD). Up to two birds were at Swan Creek WMA 12 & 18 October (GDJ) for a new inland Alabama departure date. The 33 Stilt Sandpipers at Decatur 12 October (GDJ) set a new TV maximum; that day Swan Creek WMA produced an impressive 75 basic-plumaged dowitchers (GDJ). A Wilson's Phalarope at Decatur 1-18 October (ALM,MJO,SWM,mob) established a new late date for n. Alabama. The first **Red Phalarope** for the TV, and one of the few recorded for inland Alabama, excited birders in w. *Colbert* 8-13 October (GNP,SWM,mob).

GULLS - ANIS: This was a good year for inland Laughing Gulls, which are usually scarce. Lone birds were noted 6 September in n. *Shelby* (ALM,ADM), 24 September in w. *Jefferson* (TAI,BM), and 21 November in *Marshall* (GDJ,JH) and *Limestone* (GDJ,JH,JTP). Two Laughing Gulls were at Wilson Dam, *Lauderdale/Colbert*, 2 February (GB). I had one report of the rare Franklin's Gull; one was at Wheeler Dam, *Lauderdale/Lawrence*, beginning 29 December (MJO,ALM,ph.SWM,mob). Two **Little Gulls** were discovered this winter; there were only three previous records for Alabama. An adult was near Marion, *Perry*, 2 January (MJO,p.a.), and an imm. was at Wheeler Dam, *Lawrence*, 7-30 January (SRM,ph.GM,JLD,mob,p.a.).

An imm. **Iceland Gull**, accidental in our area, was reported beginning 30 December at Port St. Joe, *Gulf*, FL (WB,*fide* RAD,ph.,p.a.). The ad. **Lesser Black-backed Gull** 17 December to 14 January at Wilson Dam (ALM,HHF,JF,p.a.) provided a fifth state record. **Great Black-backed Gulls** are rare-but-regular visitors to our area. An adult was at Dauphin I., *Mobile*, beginning 2 October (LR,mob). First-winter Great Black-backed included one at Cape San Blas, FL, 17 January (JHi), another found dead at Pensacola Beach, *Escambia*, FL, 3 February (CCW), and a bird beginning 27 February at Dauphin I. (ph.CK,mob). Alabama's sixth **Black-legged Kittiwake** was a treat 5 December to 10 March at Wheeler and Wilson dams (BCG,mob,ph.ALM,ph.SWM).

The 52 Caspian Terns 29 August in *Morgan* (SWM) likely were related to

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Hurricane Andrew, and provided a new inland Alabama maximum. An unidentified "crested" tern (*not* a Caspian) appeared 29 December and 12 January at Wheeler Dam and Town Creek (ALM,MJO). Even if this was a Royal Tern, it would be accidental inland; other terns, including Elegant and even Lesser Crested, could not be excluded. A Forster's Tern 7 February in Perry (GDJ,DGJ) was rare for the winter in the ICP. A minimum of 150 Black Terns at Town Creek (ALM,MJO) set a new TV maximum. Four Common Terns were unusual as late as 14 November at Ft. Morgan (ph.GDJ,DGJ).

The spread of the **Eurasian Collared-Dove** continued unabated along the coast and even inland. At least nine were at Dauphin I. beginning 8 October (EC,JP,JaP,GDJ,mob,p.a.) and continuing through the period. Four were noted near Perdido Pass, *Baldwin*, 2 January (RRR *et al.*, p.a.). Collared-doves continued in Montgomery through the winter (LFG). There was even a lone bird in the TV in *s. Limestone* 6 February (MLB,mob,p.a.); this is the northernmost record for the state, possibly for the nation. White-winged Doves at Ft. Morgan 5 October (GDJ,MM) and 1-8 November (CK) represented the only reports of the season. Groove-billed Anis are rare in our area; they are seen in most years east to Ft. Pickens, where one was spotted 21 October (RAD,WF). More unusual were individuals in *Bay, FL*, 18 October (E&LK) and 14 November (RBH).

OWLS - SWALLOWS: The **Burrowing Owl** is a rare vagrant to our area in the fall and winter. We now have evidence of a *colony* of these delightful owls on a closed area of Eglin AFB, FL. They were discovered 11 February, and up to 16 birds have been seen subsequently (DT,DMW,mob). It was a good fall for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, with above average numbers reported (*fide* RRS). A late Ruby-throated was banded in Mobile 20 November (RRS,MBS). Black-chinned Hummingbirds, rare but regular in our area, were banded at two sites in *Jefferson* 8 December and 1 January (RRS,MBS). Alabama's first **Anna's Hummingbird**, an adult female, was banded 19 November in Huntsville, *Madison* (RRS,ph.MBS,mob,p.a.). This stray was enjoyed by multitudes of birders until late January. An impressive nine Rufous Hummingbirds were banded at various locations in Alabama during the late fall and winter (RRS,MBS). A male **Allen's Hummingbird**, Alabama's third, was present in Mobile from early November through February, and was banded 13 February (RRS,ph.MBS,mob,p.a.).

Olive-sided Flycatchers are rare throughout our area, though a few usually are seen each autumn. A regular site is at Gulf Breeze, FL, where one was noted 28-31 August (RAD,RSD,WWD). A late E. Wood-Pewee was in Montgomery 24-25 October (LFG,AM). The "casting of the nets" at Ft. Morgan can turn up some great birds, and this fall was no exception. The first **Hammond's Flycatcher** for Alabama was banded there 19 September (RRS,ph.MBS,p.a.); I am aware of no previous records east of Louisiana. Numbers of Western Kingbirds appeared normal this fall on the coast, where it is uncommon; the latest was an individual 27 November at Ft. Morgan (ph.KAM). A Western Kingbird discovered 6 September

in *Lauderdale* (GNP) established the third TV, and first n.w. Alabama, record.

A gathering of 83 Eastern Kingbirds in *Lauderdale* 23 August (GNP) was unusual. Locally significant were five Gray Kingbirds 26 August in Panama City, *Bay*, FL (ACM). As is usual for the fall, several Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were seen on the outer coast, with a maximum of three at Ft. Morgan 11 October (AOS). A lone bird 30 December at Port St. Joe, FL (WB) was rare for the winter, particularly that far east. Eight Purple Martins 18 November at Panama City, FL (R&AI) were very late. The earliest report of returning martins was of three birds at Dauphin I. 9 February (CCW). Over 50 Tree Swallows 5 November at Guntersville, *Marshall* (ALM,ASC) tied the previous late departure date for the TV. An unidentified swallow 25 December at Guntersville (SWM) likely was this species. Two late N. Rough-winged Swallows appeared 16 November in *Lawrence* (JG). A Barn Swallow 8 November in *Perry* (ALM,ADM) provided a new late date for the ICP; another was tardy 28 November at Dauphin I. (TAI,IAI).

CROWS - FINCHES: Three Fish Crows 19 November in w. *Jefferson* (TAI) established a new late MR record. Two early Golden-crowned Kinglets were at Swan Creek WMA 12 October (GDJ). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 24 December in *Morgan* (SWM) was a rare winter occurrence. An early Veery was observed 29 August in *Lauderdale* (PDK,GNP,DCP,WJR). Cedar Waxwings are sporadic breeders in n. Alabama; two adults with two juveniles were in n. *Shelby* 29 September (ALM). Uncommon inland in winter, a White-eyed Vireo was in Montgomery 1 January (LFG). A record late Golden-winged Warbler was at Pace, *Santa Rosa*, FL, 21 November (DMW). "Brewster's" Warbler, the more frequent of the two main types of Blue-winged X Golden-winged hybrids, is always a treat to find. The first ICP record was of one in Montgomery 29 August (LFG).

An early Tennessee Warbler was in c. *Baldwin* 6 August (VBF), and a late bird remained in e. *Jefferson* until 2 December (RRS,MBS). A male Black-throated Blue Warbler, rare in the fall, set a new late WP record 15 November at Gulf Breeze (LRD,WWD). The Prairie Warbler spotted 2 January at Gulf Shores (JVP,TW) was only the third winter record for Alabama. Blackpoll Warbler, an Atlantic Coast migrant, is very rare in the fall. The first WP records for autumn were of single birds 11 September and 12 October at Gulf Breeze (RAD,PCT,BT). Mourning Warblers are elusive and are seen rarely in our area. A new early WP date was set by a sighting 29 August in Gulf Breeze (RAD); the Mourning 7 October at Wheeler NWR, *Limestone* (ALM) tied the previous TV departure date. A Wilson's Warbler 17 November to 3 December in *Jefferson* (ALM,MJO,ASC) established a new late MR date. Another discovered 16 January in *Bay*, FL (BR,TR,EF,ACM) provided a rare winter record. Also rare in winter was a Yellow-breasted Chat at Gulf Shores 2 January (RAD,RSD,LRD).

A **Western Tanager** was a good find 10 October at Dauphin I. (SRM,p.a.); this species is recorded almost annually at the coast. The Blue Grosbeak at Gulf Breeze 13 January (RAD) was a surprise, and provided the first January record for the WP.

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Indigo Buntings are rare in winter, so it was notable to have two at Foley, *Baldwin*, 30 December (RAD,PCT). More regular in winter at the coast, but still difficult to find, is the Dickcissel; a single bird was at Ft. Morgan 23 January (WJB,mob). Clay-colored Sparrows are rare but expected strays to the outer coast each autumn. One at Gulf Breeze 10 September (RAD) was only the sixth WP record. Single Clay-colored were observed 6 October at Dauphin I. (RAD,ph.GDJ), and 9 October (GDJ,BS,EC) and 14 November (ph.GDJ,DGJ) at Ft. Morgan.

Lark Sparrows are uncommon on the Alabama coast in autumn; there was one report from that area at Ft. Morgan 6-7 October (GDJ,RAD). This species is less common to the east, and one at Gulf Breeze 9 October (RAD) was the first for the WP in October. Lark Sparrows are difficult to find inland. Two were rare for the MR at Birmingham 22-29 August (TAI,SSH,PH). An immature was in *Perry* 30 August (ALM,ADM); another set a new inland Alabama late date 1 November in *Perry* (ALM,ADM). The rare **Harris' Sparrow** was spotted in s. *Baldwin* 27 November (RAD,WWD,p.a.). A very late N. Oriole was also in s. *Baldwin* that day (LRD,RAD,WWD). Winter finches were present in only moderate numbers this year. The march of the House Finch continued; *Bay, FL*, recorded first occurrences 2 January at Panama City (WB,ACM,PG,JR) and 11 February at Southport (BJ). The Gulf Shores CBC 2 January set a new GC maximum with 237 House Finches.

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