

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

1993-94 FALL AND WINTER SIGHTINGS

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The fall and winter are eagerly anticipated for the vagrants they often bring. Adding the identification challenge of many basic-plumaged and molting adults, and the young-of-the-year, yields a formula for excitement. This autumn we had a good migration of passerines, with many lingering birds. Normal numbers of waterfowl and raptors were noted. Shorebirding was a little dull in most areas; unfortunately, Blakely Island in Mobile County was still poor. Rarities were most prominent among the gulls this winter, though several other groups presented interesting strays.

The amount of rainfall during the period was not unusual. Temperatures were generally lower than normal from September through November and again from late December through January; August and February were warm. Fronts resulting in good birding on the coast came 5-6 and 12 September, 28 September through 6 October, 11-13 and 22-26 October, and 7 November.

This report covers the period from August 1993 through February 1994 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*). Locations not specifying Florida are in Alabama. "CBC" = Christmas Bird Count; "*et al.*" = and others (small number); "*fide*" = by the faith of

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

(according to); "m.ob." = many observers; "NWR" = National Wildlife Refuge; "p.a." = pending acceptance by the state bird records committee; "ph." = photographed; "SP" = State Park; "v." = videotaped; "WMA" = Wildlife Management Area. Other abbreviations in parentheses correspond to observers listed at the end of this article.

LOONS - CRANES: A rare **Pacific Loon** graced the Gulf Shores CBC, *Baldwin*, 1 January (RRR, p.a.). The Com. Loon in *Bay*, FL, 12 October was locally early. Eared Grebes are uncommon on the coast, especially in Florida. Single birds were in *Okaloosa*, FL, 25 October-12 November (DMW,RAD,OEF), at Dauphin Island, *Mobile*, 21 November (CK), and 30 November in *Santa Rosa*, FL (RAD,AF,DF *et al.*). The 50 Am. White Pelicans on the Mobile Causeway, *Baldwin*, 21 August (GDJ,DGJ) probably summered. Inland records in our area are rare, and four were spotted 28 September at Swan Creek WMA, *Limestone* (SWM). A flock of over 225 Am. White Pelicans was noteworthy at Gulf Shores 27 November (KAM). Good numbers of Double-crested Cormorants continued to be seen inland, with 168 counted 3 October in *Limestone* (SWM).

The Least Bittern is rare in winter in our area; one was discovered 1 January on the Gulf Shores CBC (MM). Good numbers of Great Egrets were at Swan Creek WMA this year. An excellent count of 92 birds occurred 21 November (SWM), and up to 67 set a new TV winter maximum by remaining into January (JG,LA,TMH). Tricolored Herons are always good finds away from the coast; one was in *Montgomery* 7 August (LFG). Reddish Egrets were unusually plentiful in *Bay*, FL, with seven as late as 22-24 November (RLW). Cattle Egrets are rare in the WP in winter, so three were interesting at Gulf Breeze, *Santa Rosa*, 7 January (RAD). There were several reports of *Plegadis* ibis from the coast, with a high of 13 on the Mobile Causeway, *Baldwin*, beginning 25 December (CK). A flock of 100 Wood Storks was noteworthy 8 August in *Perry* (RRR).

Tundra Swans are rare visitors, and one was present at Wheeler NWR, *Morgan/Limestone*, 30 December-23 January (JG,LA,m.ob.). The maximum

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

number of Gr. White-fronted Geese reported this year was nine at Wheeler NWR, *Limestone*, 26 November (SWM). Alabama's 11th **Ross' Goose** was at the same location 20 November-4 February (RRR,HHK,m.ob.,p.a.). Even more exciting was an adult male **Eurasian Wigeon**, the fourth for the state, at Wheeler NWR, *Morgan*, 31 October-4 February (SWM,VM *et al.*,p.a.). This was not the hybrid Eurasian × American Wigeon found at the same site in recent years. Good numbers of the uncommon Greater Scaup were at Town Creek, *Colbert/Lawrence*, this winter, with 10 counted 9 January (GDJ,DGJ). Five Oldsquaws were unusual 13 December at Fort Pickens, *Escambia*, FL (RAD); another was at Town Creek, *Colbert*, 26 November-23 January (SWM,JRW,m.ob.,ph.).

Several scoters were noted inland this year. A Black Scoter, rare away from the coast, set a new early Alabama date 25 October in the Tennessee R. near Town Creek, *Colbert/Lawrence* (ALM,ADM). More expected were five Blacks 15 December at Fort Pickens, FL (RAD). Inland Surf Scoters included two at Lake Purdy, *Jefferson*, 23 October (GDJ), one to two birds at Oak Mountain SP, *Shelby*, 31 October through the winter (HHF,m.ob.), and another beginning 31 December at Town Creek, *Colbert* (SWM). A White-winged Scoter joined the Surfs for the season at Oak Mountain SP beginning 20 November (ALM,ASC). Two Hooded Mergansers 1 November in *Bay*, FL (EF) were locally early.

An Osprey was seasonally rare 18 December on the Waterloo CBC, *Lauderdale*. The Am. Swallow-tailed Kite 28 February at Dauphin Island (JP) established a new early arrival date for Alabama. There were seven reports of 10 coastal Bald Eagles; these included a pair nesting again this winter in *Okaloosa*, FL, and three adults 1 January on the Gulf Shores CBC (BCG *et al.*). An immature Cooper's Hawk was unusual as early as 5 August in *Santa Rosa*, FL (JWB,RWB). "Harlan's" Red-tailed Hawk is always a good find, and an adult was in *Perry* 21 November (GDJ,DGJ). At the same site, a rare **Golden Eagle** was observed at close range 6 November (JVP,VN). Merlins and Peregrine Falcons were seen in routine numbers this autumn.

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

A calling **Yellow Rail** was an exciting discovery at Dauphin Island 24 November (JP,JaP,p.a.); there were only two previous GC records. The second winter TV record of Virginia Rail was provided by an individual at Town Creek, *Colbert*, beginning 1 January (GNP,m.ob.). The Purple Gallinule in *Bay*, FL, 25 November (B&MK,ACM) was late. Sandhill Cranes are rare inland, and this fall I received two reports. Three cranes made an exceptional MR appearance 24 November at Clay, *Jefferson* (RRS), and another trio was at Wheeler NWR, *Limestone*, 5 December (SWM).

SHOREBIRDS - FLYCATCHERS: Black-bellied Plovers are uncommon migrants inland; this autumn the high count was four at Swan Creek 12 October (SWM). American Golden-Plover is more difficult to find in fall than spring. A new MR early record was set by a bird at L. Purdy, *Shelby*, beginning 27 August (HHK,m.ob.). The peak number of golden-plovers recorded this autumn was 11 in *Limestone* 21 October (GDJ). A late bird was in *Limestone* 14-20 November (SWM,HHK,m.ob.). A count of 97 Snowy Plovers was outstanding in *Bay*, FL, 4-6 October (RLW); the tally of 56 Piping Plovers in the same areas of *Bay* 8-10 November (RLW) was equally impressive. In the same county one to two Am. Oystercatchers were locally unusual beginning 27 August (RLW). Black-necked Stilt can be difficult to locate in the WP, so 26 at Pensacola, *Escambia*, 14 August (DF,RSD *et al.*) were noteworthy.

The traditional "Battleship" Long-billed Curlew returned to *Mobile* 7 August (CK); more unusual were singles at Dauphin Island 9-10 October (AOS) and 26-27 November (BCG,CK). Maximum count this season for the uncommon Marbled Godwit was at Dauphin Island, where up to seven were seen 7 October-27 November (TA,CK,KAM,m.ob.). Ruddy Turnstones are always a surprise away from the coast. Two were in *Morgan* 27 August (ALM,ADM); the turnstone 9-23 September in *Shelby* (ALM,ADM) provided the sixth MR record. As many as four Sanderlings, uncommon inland, were at Decatur, *Limestone*, 25-26 September (SWM,GDJ,DGJ). A flock of 24 Stilt Sandpipers at Swan Creek WMA 21 October (GDJ) was notable, as were 10 birds as late as 5 November in *Okaaloosa*, FL (RLB,JWB). The first August WP record of Am.

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

Woodcock was set by one, present since June, at Tiger Point, *Santa Rosa* (WJB). Wilson's Phalarope is rare in the WP, so the individual 14 August at Pensacola (RSD,WWD,VS) was a good find. Uncommon inland, one to two Wilson's were in *Morgan* 15-25 August (GDJ,DGJ,SWM); the fourth MR record was provided by a lone bird 1 September at L. Purdy, *Shelby* (ALM,ASC).

Franklin's Gull is always a treat in our area; this season solitary birds were at Gulf Shores 19 November (BCG), and at Dauphin Island 9 January (JP,JaP). A **Little Gull**, the sixth for the state, was at Town Creek, *Colbert*, 19 December (GDJ,BCG,v.,p.a.); the plumage suggested a third-winter bird. Alabama finally recorded **Thayer's Gull** this year; a first-winter bird was scrutinized 9 January at Wilson Dam, *Colbert/Lauderdale* (GDJ,p.a.). **Lesser Black-backed Gull** is rare in our area, and I received reports of three to four birds, all adults. One was at Fort Pickens 7 October (GF), and possibly the same individual appeared 20 October in Pensacola (WF,JK,m.ob.); there were only three previous WP records. Another Lesser Black-backed was spotted 22 November on Shell Island, *Bay*, FL (RLW), and Alabama's sixth record was provided by one at Wilson Dam 25 January-4 March (MJO,ALM,m.ob.,p.a.). A rare **Glaucous Gull**, in an immature plumage, was at Wheeler Dam, *Lauderdale/Lawrence*, beginning 25 January (ALM,MJO *et al.*). Less rare in our area, but still significant, is the **Great Black-backed Gull**. This year there were sightings of an adult 6-28 November at Dauphin Island (JP,JaP,BCG,ph.), and of first-winter birds 29 December on the Port St. Joe CBC, FL (SJS) and 14-15 February at Dauphin Island (JP,JaP,RAD). The Forster's Tern 2 January on the Montgomery CBC (JGi) was unusual at that season.

Eurasian Collared-Doves continued to gain a foothold in our region. Populations increased at Pensacola Beach (FL), Dauphin Island, and Montgomery, and a few were at Fort Morgan, *Baldwin*, again this autumn. The Gulf Shores CBC 1 January recorded 33 collared-doves. White-winged Doves are uncommon fall migrants along the coast; I received six reports of seven birds 2 October-6 December from Fort Morgan (DC,SWM,RAD,KAM *et al.*), Dauphin Island (JP,JaP), and Fort Pickens, FL (JWB). There was only one

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

sighting of the erratic Groove-billed Ani at Fort Morgan, where an early individual appeared 8 October (SWM *et al.*). Another species of unpredictable occurrence is the Short-eared Owl; one was at Eufaula, *Barbour*, 29 January (RRS,DB). Tardy Com. Nighthawks included single birds 17 December at Fort Walton Beach, FL (RAD) and 31 December in Greenville, *Butler* (GDJ,DGJ), the latter establishing a first ICP winter record.

A **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** was banded 6-9 November in Destin, *Okaloosa* (RRS,MBS,BH,p.a.); an apparently different bird arrived at this site 29 November (BH,ph.,*fide* RRS,p.a.). There were four previous Florida records. An early male Ruby-throated Hummingbird appeared 26 February at Dauphin Island (JP,JaP). Surprisingly, no Black-chinned Hummingbirds were reported for the period. Rufous Hummingbirds are uncommon in fall and winter; ten birds were banded throughout Alabama 11 September-6 January (RRS,MBS). Florida's first **Allen's Hummingbird** was banded 25-26 August in Pensacola (RRS,MBS,M&JK,m.ob.,ph.,p.a.).

There was a single report of the uncommon Olive-sided Flycatcher, with a bird at Fort Pickens, FL, 6 September (RLB). A calling E. Wood-Pewee set a new late date at the same location 8 November (RLB,JWB). Yellow-bellied Flycatchers pass through in small numbers each fall. Two calling birds were in Birmingham, *Jefferson*, 10 September (BCG,p.a.). In s. *Baldwin*, five were banded 10 September-9 October, with three appearing the last day (DC *et al.*). These banding stations, at Fort Morgan and Week's Bay, handled 24 Least Flycatchers 6 September-17 October. Three adult male **Vermilion Flycatchers**, rare in our area, were present this season. One was spotted 7 October at Fort Pickens, FL (LG,AZ). Another was a very rare inland surprise on the Birmingham CBC 27 December (MR,TAI *et al.*); this bird delighted many observers through at least 8 January. Another Vermilion was on restricted property near Gulf Shores in December, and was documented on the CBC 1 January (JL,BCG). Two rare **Ash-throated Flycatchers** were seen this winter. One was at Fort Walton Beach 9 December (RAD) for a seventh WP record, and another was on the Gulf Shores CBC 1 January (GDJ,BCG,v.,p.a.).

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

SWALLOWS - FINCHES: The N. Rough-winged Swallow 20 November in *Morgan* (SWM) provided a new late TV date; one at Gulf Breeze 8 December (LRD) was the first recorded in the WP in that month. We enjoyed the amazing experience of two **Northern Wheatears** this fall! The first was at a shopping center (!) in Montgomery 20-22 September (JGi,m.ob.,ph.,p.a.). The next wheatear appeared at Fort Morgan 2 October (HH,CK,WL,GDJ,DGJ,m.ob.,-v.,p.a.); coincidentally, the only other state record was from that site on the same date in 1988. Banding in s. *Baldwin* produced two new GC arrival records, of a Veery 1 September and a Gray-cheeked Thrush 5 September (both DC *et al.*). Late thrushes included a Swainson's 23 October in Montgomery (LFG), and a Wood Thrush 20 November at Fort Pickens, FL (JWB,JB,RLB).

A Solitary Vireo, rare in winter in n.w. Alabama, was observed on the Waterloo CBC 18 December. The Yellow-throated Vireo in Montgomery 23 October (LFG) was the latest for the ICP except two winter records. Nine Philadelphia Vireos at Wheeler NWR 5 October (TA) were noteworthy. Hybrid Blue-winged × Golden-winged Warblers are rare finds. Two "Brewster's" were recorded this fall; the second for the ICP was in Montgomery 27 September (LFG), and another was banded at Fort Morgan 23 October (RRS,MBS). Much more unusual is the "**Lawrence's**" Warbler, and one at Waterloo 11 September (G&FM) provided a second TV record. An early GC date was set by the banding of an Orange-crowned Warbler 13 September at Fort Morgan (DC *et al.*).

An odd, apparently hybrid, warbler was at Fort Pickens, FL, 17 September (EC); the description is similar to "Sutton's" Warbler (N. Parula × Yellow-throated Warbler), but the bird lacked the dark cheek patch of that extremely rare hybrid. Yellow Warblers were abundant in early fall on the coast, with a peak of 60 at Gulf Breeze, FL, 23 August (RAD). The lone bird 21 November in *Perry* (GDJ,DGJ) set a new departure date for the ICP. A banded Chestnut-sided Warbler at Fort Morgan 5 September (DC *et al.*) provided a new GC arrival date, while one at Fort Pickens 2 November (RLB,JWB) was late. A tardy Cape May Warbler, rare in the fall, was observed in *Shelby* 19 October (HHK,m.ob.,ph.); another banded at Fort Morgan 23 October (DC *et al.*)

established a new GC late date. Black-throated Blue Warblers can be difficult to find in the autumn, so it was noteworthy that eight were banded in s. *Baldwin* 14 September-18 October (DC *et al.*).

The Prairie Warbler 2 November at Fort Pickens, FL (MM,RLB,JWB) was late, though not as delinquent as one 29 December on the Port St. Joe CBC, FL (SJS). Palm Warblers are rare in winter in n.w. Alabama, and one was in w. *Lauderdale* 27 December (RCD,WJR). The third autumn WP record for Blackpoll Warbler was provided by an individual at Gulf Breeze 15 September (RAD). An adult male Am. Redstart 6 November in *Perry* (JVP,VN) set a new late ICP date. At Fort Pickens, FL, tardy migrants included a Worm-eating Warbler 30 October (RLB) and a single Ovenbird and N. Waterthrush 31 October (RLB,JWB).

Connecticut Warbler is a rare treat; one delighted a few observers (and frustrated many more) at Dauphin Island 9 October (JRW *et al.*,p.a.). Mourning Warblers are uncommon migrants in the fall, though they are not easy to find. An adult male in Birmingham 28 August (BCG,PHF) set a new early date for inland Alabama. Six Mourning Warblers were banded in s. *Baldwin* 2-19 September (DC *et al.*), and another was in Birmingham 26 September (BCG). The Hooded Warbler in Montgomery 23 October (LFG) set a new late ICP date, and the individual 6 November at Fort Pickens (RLB,JWB) was also behind schedule. An adult male Wilson's Warbler was in Gulf Breeze 10 December (RAD), providing only the second WP record for that month.

A Summer Tanager 14 November at Gulf Breeze, FL (JWB,RLB) was late. The individual at Dothan, *Houston*, 18 February (RRS) was the first in winter for the ICP. **Western Tanagers** are rare in our area, though the species is recorded in most years. A male was at Gulf Breeze, FL, 19 September (JWB); another male 9 January at Northport, *Tuscaloosa* (JH,p.a.) was only the third for the MR. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak 24 October in Montgomery (LFG) set a new late ICP date. An immature male Indigo Bunting 1 January-5 February in *Morgan* (SWM,ph.) established the fourth inland winter record. Late Painted Buntings included female-like birds 31 October-2 November at Fort Pickens

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

(RLB,JWB,MM) and 18 November at Fort Morgan (RAD). A "Spotted"-type Rufous-sided Towhee was in *Limestone* 21 November (SWM); this likely was a western bird, though exceptionally an eastern Rufous-sided shows similar markings.

Bachman's Sparrows seldom are seen in migration, so the occurrence of one at Fort Morgan 2 October (GDJ) was a surprise. Clay-colored Sparrow is an uncommon fall transient on the outer Alabama coast, and is rare to the east. Three were at Fort Morgan 2 October (GDJ,DGJ); another was seen that day at Gulf Breeze (RAD,LRD,PCT,BT) for the fifth WP record. Lark Sparrows can be difficult to find in the winter, so up to four at Fort Walton Beach, FL, 17 December-31 January (DMW) were noteworthy. Two immature **Black-throated Sparrows** at Fort Pickens 25 October (RLB,JWB,p.a.) must have been a thrill; there are no previous records for Florida. Over 500 Lapland Longspurs were notable at Swan Creek WMA 26 December (SWM,JRW); 400 remained 16 January (GDJ). Yellow-headed Blackbird is a scarce visitor along the coast. An adult male was at a feeder in Destin, FL, 29 August (M&GS), and five Yellow-headed were at St. Andrews SP, *Bay*, FL, 20 October (R&AI,TR *et al.*). House Finch continued to increase throughout our area; the 292 counted 1 January on the Gulf Shores CBC set a new GC maximum.

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