

Field Notes: The 2011 Breeding Season

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Field Notes drawing of European Goldfinch by Matt McKim-Louder.



The 2011 breeding bird season could best be described as warm and very wet, with both temperature and precipitation over much of the state above average. Above average temperatures began in May and above-average precipitation began in April, continuing into August. The large amount of precipitation recharged aquifers and wetlands in many areas of the state, including wetlands like Sand Lake in Mason County, often planted to corn because of no water. Recharged wetlands at the Green River State Fish & Wildlife Area in Lee County saw increased numbers of breeding marsh birds like Common Gallinules and Pied-billed Grebes, as well as small numbers of Least Bittern and Virginia Rail. Sand Lake also enticed only the second successful nesting of Eared Grebe for the state as well as several nesting pairs of Pied-billed Grebes. This lake also lured nesting Ruddy Ducks, flocks of Cattle Egrets and a rare Tri-colored Heron to stop by. New or recharged wetlands along Union County's Mississippi River levee road also attracted Common Gallinules to breed there, a rare nesting species for that part of Illinois. These wetlands along the Mississippi River levee road also attracted breeding Pied-billed Grebes, a number of pairs of nesting Black-necked Stilts and two species that are becoming regular late-summer visiting ducks, but which arrived ahead of schedule, including Black-bellied Whistling and Mottled Ducks (might breeding be in the near future for these two species in Illinois?).

The statewide average of 6.73 inches of rain in June represented a 2.65-inch surplus, to go along with the 1.33-inch surplus that fell in May, and 3.79-inch surplus in April. All of this rainfall caused many rivers throughout the state to inundate large areas with their floodwaters including the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, all above flood stage during June. Many of these major rivers' tributaries were also in flood including the LaMoine River at Ripley, Bear Creek near Marceline and the Little Wabash below Clay City. The water levels there were all the highest on record for them for June. The Rock, Green, Pecatonica, Iroquois, Kankakee, Mackinaw, Kaskaskia, Embarras, Cache and several other rivers were either above or much above normal stream flow for much of June over part or all

of their lengths. Rend, Shelbyville and Carlyle Lakes were also all several feet above their summer target levels. This continued well into July at most of these locations, making it the 12th wettest May-July on record. Much of this rainfall occurred as severe weather systems, which swept through the state. Severe weather was widely reported in both June and July, with June producing 8 tornadoes, 53 reports of significant hail, and 213 wind damage reports occurring mostly on June 4, 8, 10, 15, 17-19, 22, 25-26, and 30 with baseball-sized hail in Augusta, on 10 June. The severe weather continued into July with reports of three tornadoes, five significant hail events and 109 damaging winds. It is feared that as many as 50% of nests and some to many adults of Illinois's small remaining Greater Prairie-Chicken nesting population were destroyed/killed during during that species' nesting attempts in April and May, during a particularly bad hail storm in that area. Downed trees were another common consequence of many of these strong storms, so large numbers of forest nesting songbirds and/or their nests were likely destroyed by the severe weather. Early season cool and wet conditions for nesting Eastern Bluebirds reduced the numbers of young produced by them, and possibly for Eastern Phoebe, Purple Martins, Tree Swallows, and possibly early cavity-nesting species including chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and some woodpeckers.

On the positive side, this summer's large periodic cicada emergence over much of the southern third to half of Illinois was likely a boon to many nesting species that often feed on such insects such as Mississippi Kites, cuckoos, Red-headed Woodpeckers, flycatchers, Cedar Waxwings and others.

Ducks through Hawks

An impressive array of 23 waterfowl species was located throughout Illinois, which included 19 species of duck. However, other than the usual nesting species and both teal, observers were able to *confirm breeding for few of the* many species found. Some of them surely attempted to nest, especially at places like Hennepin and Thompson Lakes, the two large and relatively recently restored wetlands