

and at migratory staging areas, several of which are injured birds from hunting. Neotropic Cormorants have been detected in June or July in Illinois for the last six years in a row (three in a row at Lake Calumet including an adult and immature last summer) leading me to believe that this species may have already bred in or very close to Illinois. Actually, a pair nested this year on a Mississippi River island in Iowa, less than 200 yards from the Illinois border, and substantially north of their former, northernmost breeding range in Texas. A proactive search for this species in known Illinois Double-crested Cormorant breeding colonies would likely turn up a breeding pair in Illinois in the very near future. At least one or more pairs of a once unlikely nesting species, Anhinga continue to breed in their one known Illinois nesting area.

### **Expanding ranges of new, common and rare breeding birds**

Some species summer ranges in Illinois are or appear to be spreading southward, or into Illinois from the north, like Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Vesper Sparrow, though this southward advance seems to be occurring much more slowly than the many northward advancing species. However one species that appears to have Illinois in its crosshairs for expanding its breeding range southward is the boreal-nesting Merlin. Bohlen (1989) listed only one August (30<sup>th</sup>) arrival date for an early fall migrant, with the usual average fall arrival date given as September 29<sup>th</sup> in central Illinois. However, since then, there have been at least 25 August fall migrant Merlins, including in eight of the previous 10 years, as well as many early September migrants. This year, two Merlins were well-documented with photos, both in July, and one as far south as central Illinois. As I write this, a female and two juvenile Merlins have been discovered at Pokogan State Park in Indiana near its border with Michigan, likely representing that state's first nesting record. Merlins showed the largest increase in population in a recent study group of boreal-nesting bird species (Niven et al. 2004), and the species has made a fairly rapid movement into urban and suburban city breeding locales over a large part of their range relatively recently (Warkentin et al. 2005), including agricultural and urban areas of nearby Wisconsin (Cutright et al. 2006). In Ontario, Canada, only one urban nesting Merlin was found during their first breeding bird atlas project in 1986, but by the time their next atlas project was completed in 2006, the Merlin had become the most common breeding raptor in some Ontario cities, including Ottawa (Cadman et al. 2007). Illinois birders should be on the lookout for nesting Merlins in the years to come. They don't build their own nests but often choose old American Crow (and so also likely old Cooper's Hawk nests), often near water, especially wetlands.

A variety of species are or seem to be reclaiming areas of the state where they were likely or historically found, such as Bald Eagles and Ospreys. New eagle nests continue to be found yearly and since the first modern Osprey nest was found in Illinois back in 1996 in the Palos area of Chicago, not only are there now several Chicagoland area Osprey nests, but they are also nesting in other widespread areas of the state. I have heard of other plans for erecting many more Osprey nesting structures in the next few years. Sandhill Cranes are spreading south out of the Chicagoland area to the Illinois River Valley and another nesting pair in east-central Illinois was found this summer. Given the numbers of breeding and summering Hooded Merganser observations that I was able

to track down, they seem to be becoming more than just the uncommon to occasional nesting species that they once were just 20 years or so ago. I know that I see them much more frequently during the breeding season now, than what I used to. There also seem to be more breeding Spotted Sandpipers in more areas than previously, though I'm not sure if this is due to more birders finding and reporting such sightings in more types of public media or whether they are truly increasing as a breeding species.

Clay-colored Sparrows were formerly only found breeding in one or two Winnebago County locations before that population temporarily disappeared for a few years in 1998. However, a summering/breeding population began in Cook and DuPage Counties in 2003 with an even larger and more widespread number of birds moving into the Chicagoland area in 2004 (as well as new nesting records in eastern Iowa). Since then, the species has remained and increased in the Chicagoland area each summer since. Likewise, the only known nesting Illinois Brewer's Blackbird population in Illinois for many years was in the sand prairie areas at Illinois Beach State Park, but in the last five to ten years, it has become clear that they have been nesting at a number of Greater Chicagoland area sod farms scattered around Kane, DeKalb, McHenry and Lake Counties. Interestingly, small numbers of breeding Western Meadowlarks, rare in the Chicagoland area, also find the habitat attractive at the same sod farms.

Several species whose breeding numbers have historically always been much greater in southern Illinois, only continue to become more widespread and numerous farther north in both central and northern Illinois including Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Blue Grosbeaks, Summer Tanagers and Orchard Orioles. For some of these species, many of the state's highest reported maximum counts actually came from northern Illinois this summer, an area where just 15-20 years ago you would have been hard-pressed to find a single/few individual(s) of these species. More and new nesting locations also continue to be discovered for Cliff Swallows as well, as they continue to fill in most gaps of their historic Illinois breeding range. They are still only scarce nesters in East Central Illinois. Another bird which is surprisingly turning up in more and more areas, while it continues to see marked declines in its western U.S. strongholds, is the Bell's Vireo, though how long such a breeding population can continue under heavy and persistent Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism is dubious.

### **Vagrants and rare summering/breeding species**

As usual, there were relatively few summertime vagrants, but the rarities did include a photographed, male Painted Bunting and a well documented Lark Bunting that stayed for many days and was seen by dozens of observers. The male Lark Bunting hung out in one relatively small area of a large prairie giving frequent courtship, flight-songs and displays throughout its long stay, in an apparent effort to attract a non-existent mate.

There were several fairly unusual early/late/lost migrant species including an early June Purple Finch, a singing Swainson's Thrush and a White-crowned Sparrow in mid-June, and an even more bizarre, tundra-nesting American Pipit in July. A larger than normal detection of summering loons were also found this summer.

On a more negative note, the only known nesting pair of