

Jackson Park: worst migration ever?

by Paul R. Clyne



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During the spring 2006 migration, I heard occasional grumbings about the poor numbers and diversity of birds at Chicago's Jackson Park, including epithets like "worst migration ever." It seemed worth investigating how much truth lay in such visceral assessments, so I compared the 2006 season with the data I had compiled for the preceding 12 springs at this site. The comparisons revealed that 2006 really and truly was the worst spring migration here within this time frame.

Bay-breasted Warblers were seen at 75 percent below their normal average at Chicago's Jackson Park in spring 2006. Above photo by Jerry Kumery.

As of 31 May 2006, I had record of 182 species for the year in Jackson Park. This is 20 species short of the average year-to-date total and nine species short of the worst previous year. Indeed, the 12-year average date for attaining 182 species happens early in the peak of migration, on 9 May. Moreover, no dates showed the wondrous influxes in diversity that make spring migration so fun; the greatest one-day tally of first-of-year birds, 28 April, yielded only nine new species, marking the first spring that did not include double-digit first-of-year arrivals on at least one date.

If there were any great days or avian fall-outs during the 2006 season, I missed them (as did everyone else from whom I gathered local data). Jackson Park is one of those magical small sites (barely one square mile) where one might reasonably expect to encounter more than 100 species in a single day in spring without ever getting in a car. On four dates over the past 12 years, composite counts have exceeded

120 species in a day, with a record high of 128 species on 4 May 1996. The 100-species mark was missed in two preceding years (2001 and 2002), by three species in both years. But 2006 showed lower one-day species totals than any other spring, peaking at only 91 species on 3 May. The average one-day high count for the preceding 12 years is 110 species.

It will sometimes happen that a less common species is missed entirely in a given year, but this spring a total of eight species (American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Wilson's Snipe, Forster's Tern, Philadelphia Vireo, Sedge Wren, Hooded Warbler, and Grasshopper Sparrow) went undetected that had been recorded in each of the preceding 12 years. In addition, Black-billed Cuckoo went unrecorded until 16 June. Four additional species (Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Cerulean Warbler) that had been found in all but one or two years were also wanting the spring of 2006.