



# Field Notes

## The 2008 breeding season

by Steven D. Bailey

*Drawing of Black Vultures by Barbara Williams*

### The weather

Temperatures leading into the peak of the breeding season were well below average; e.g., a reading of 28°F was logged on 9 May at Morris in Grundy County, and eastern Illinois experienced its 11<sup>th</sup> coldest May since 1895. Precipitation, however, was well above average. It was the wettest December-May period in Illinois since 1895, with more than 25" of precipitation during that period! Rivers during this time were at normal to much above-normal levels, with the Mississippi River, the lower Illinois River, and the Ohio River at Cairo all exceeding flood stage during May. Severe weather was also common, with 12 reports of tornadoes, 108 hail reports, and 54 strong wind reports, with hail and high winds reported frequently toward the end of the month.

In contrast to May, temperatures in June were above average, but precipitation remained exceptionally heavy (close to 2" above the statewide average). Western Illinois areas recorded almost 8" of rain. Again, the Mississippi River, lower Illinois River and Ohio River exceeded flood stage during June. Southeastern Illinois was particularly hard hit, with one town in Crawford County reporting more than 7" of rain in one day and over 15" for the month. These rains produced significant flooding along the Wabash and Embarrass Rivers. Severe weather was again significantly widespread, with 56 tornado reports throughout the month (including 30 reports on 7 June in northeastern Illinois), 133 hail reports and 245 strong wind reports.

Temperatures in July returned to below average while precipitation continued well above average (statewide average of 6.3", almost 2.5" above normal), resulting in the 8<sup>th</sup> wettest July on record. Northeast Illinois received the least rainfall at 5.29" while the west-southwest recorded the greatest at just over 8". The town of Sherman in Sangamon County reported 6.5" of rain in one day and over 12" for the month, while the Rock River was out of its banks over much of its length most of the summer. Severe weather continued to be widespread, with 3 tornadoes, 51 reports of hail and 199 severe wind reports.

The numerous cold fronts that continued well into May might have hampered the migration of some species. The high water and stream levels in many areas evidently eliminated traditional breeding areas for a variety of species including swallows, Belted Kingfisher, most waterfowl and even Sandhill Cranes, while the recharging of water levels at other sites may have enticed higher numbers and a greater diversity of some wetland species to simply stay in good habitat in Illinois to breed. See, for example, the accounts of rails and bitterns.

### Big stories

Small flocks of **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks** turned up in four counties, mainly at the southern tip of the state in July. With this species becoming more common in the northern reaches

of its US range, could these flocks be a precursor to a regular movement of these birds into our area, much as the **Black-necked Stilt** moved into Illinois in 1993 as a regular breeding species after extensive flooding further south in the Mississippi valley? Another big story of the 2008 breeding season was the **unprecedented influx of breeding Black-necked Stilts** throughout much of southern and even central Illinois, with a few male and female birds (pairs?) making it as far north as Chicago! Most encounters, even in central Illinois, involved multiple birds or small flocks, while several locations in southern Illinois hosted dozens of stilts, maxing out at well over 100 birds in Alexander County. Most of the stilts found were in flooded agricultural fields, which were quite prevalent during the summer, so who knows how many birds/pairs of this species were not found throughout the state in June and July! Almost as exciting was the presence of breeding pairs of endangered **Wilson's Phalaropes** in several areas.

The biggest surprise of the season was the discovery of a pair/trio of **breeding Mississippi Kites in residential Rockford!** Birders going to observe these birds in late summer initially thought them to be vagrants, but soon discovered a nest with young (see story in this issue).

### Vagrants

A **Brown Pelican** was seen well by a very experienced birder as it flew past his residence along Lake Michigan, and a **Neotropic Cormorant** was found at Horseshoe Lake in mid-June. The regularity with which this cormorant has shown up in Illinois the last several years, including during the summer, makes one wonder if breeding may be soon to follow. The most surprising vagrant was a **MacGillivray's Warbler** seen over a three-day period in July in northeast Illinois.

### Other notables

As usual, several non-breeding **Snow Geese** (many injured) lingered well into summer at their usual gathering sites. Among nesting waterfowl, extended cool and wet periods with much flooding during late spring and throughout the summer likely contributed to reduced breeding success, and comments were received from areas statewide regarding delayed nesting or low success for many waterfowl species, including all the common breeders, even cavity-nesting **Wood Ducks**. **Trumpeter Swans**, added to the state's breeding avifauna in 2006, were back at their previous breeding spot in northwestern Illinois in May, but were apparently flooded out. However, look for breeding to begin sometime soon in northeastern Illinois where at least one pair has summered the last few years. Breeding **Redheads** were a pleasant surprise at two sites. Small numbers of summering **Red-breasted** and **Common Mergansers** are now almost an annual event. Also typical was the presence of a few **Common Loons** (in both breeding and non-breeding plumage), but a **Horned**