



Illinois' Incredible 1996 Spring Migration

By Christine Williamson

The spring of 1996 was best described by one birder's simple phrase, "sweet, but sad." Spring migration was sweet in so far as it brought in large numbers of birds and concentrated them in a few areas, producing the kind of high numbers of birds not seen before by new birders. Meanwhile, veteran birders reported it as one of the best fallouts they have witnessed. Many species arrived late and left slowly, giving unparalleled opportunities for long-term observance of migrants.

But extremely high mortality of migrants, caused partly by unseasonably cold weather and a related slowdown in insect production, overshadowed the excitement birders felt statewide. The spring 1996 season, birders tallied a remarkable 35 documentable birds including a Green-tailed Towhee and Swainson's Warbler, as well as a huge death toll of famished passerines.

The extreme wind and weather created the conditions that caused the bittersweet spring of 1996.

Chicago birder Paul Clyne kept track of the weather patterns, begin-

ning with near-record low temperatures in early March and the heaviest snowfall of the season in Chicago on 6 March, followed by a gradual warming trend which was abruptly cut off by northeasterly hurricane-force winds on the first day of spring. A strong southwesterly front on 24 March preceded a heavy reverse migration along Chicago's lakefront. March and April were both fairly dry in Illinois while drought conditions persisted in the west. April was dominated by fronts from the north, interrupted by four strong southwesterlies. Some of the birds bottling up in the south came through the state on the wave of the last of these winds, which gave way to a stationary cold front from 26 April onward. Clyne's records show that the Arctic front remained until 8 May as a very warm high pressure system moved from the south toward Chicago. On 9 May, the warm front brought in a huge fallout of stranded birds. The warm front from the south banged up against the cold front just north of Chicago, dumping birds south of the collision line.

At 10 a.m. on 10 May, the wind shifted and howled out of the north, dropping the temperature 20 degrees F. in minutes and bringing pouring rain. Clyne observed birds deserting

the Chicago lakefront that morning, moving west into suburban gardens and forest preserves, seeking food. Most trees on the Lake Michigan shoreline were still in bud on this date and insect production was almost non-existent. Overnight temperatures on 11 May plummeted to a record 34 degrees F., with wind chills at about 15 degrees F. The 12th of May dawned dismally for many birds which were forced to the ground in search of insects. Observers from central and northern Illinois reported canopy-dwelling birds foraging frantically on the ground. Birds could be found on any available patch of grass almost everywhere and even in the middle of roads, where many were killed by cars.

Mike Baum awoke at 3:30 a.m. on 12 May to hear hundreds of migrants from his deck in Knox County in western Illinois. It would be one of the best birding days he ever had. He went birding at dawn and by 9:30 a.m., had amassed an astonishing 122 species. Baum immediately went into Big Day mode. With 161 species, he smashed the previous Knox County Big Day record of 138, minus the usual preliminary scouting and midnight start time. Of the total, 102 were passerines including Knox County's second Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Baum said 40 Gray-cheeked Thrushes and 35 Swainson's Thrushes were at Green Oaks Nature Preserve, which usually has only

*Adult Little Blue Heron, Jackson Park, Cook Co. 18 May 1996.
Photo by Robert Hughes.*