

Field Notes

The 2011 spring migration

by Geoffrey A. Williamson

Northern Flicker drawing by Nandu Dubey.



This spring featured the highest levels of April rainfall in recorded Illinois history, contributing to its being in the top 10% of wettest springs. Average temperatures were overall close to normal throughout the period, but large swings in temperature were frequent. In early February, snow and cold were felt over much of the state with a major snowstorm hitting the northeast portion. Harbors along Lake Michigan froze solid. The cold temperature persisted until to mid-February, when the weather warmed up significantly, for instance with temperatures reaching the upper 50's in Chicago on 18 Feb. The snow cover vanished, and ice retreated. At this time swans and geese were noted to be moving, with many reports during the week of 14 Feb. There were also some reports of Sandhill Cranes heading north at this time.

In the first week of March, many rivers and streams in Illinois were swollen by rain and snow melt and there was a lot of flooding; the Kankakee and Iroquois Rivers were at flood stage. Several subsequent pulses of warm weather peaked with temperatures way above normal on 21 Mar, reaching 80°F in Carbondale that day. A period of colder-than-normal weather settled in to close out March and welcome April, but temperatures soared again and were 25°F above normal statewide on 10 Apr, reaching 82°F in Carbondale, 85°F in Springfield, and 84°F in Rockford. Though the southern tier saw one more push of warm air during April, heavy rains also arrived. Near Carbondale, some 10" fell between 22 and 27 April, and the month closed out with 13.5" there. Water levels were high statewide, but especially in the southern regions, and many fields were inundated. On 2 May, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers breached a levee near the meeting of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the floodplains filled with water too deep for shorebirds to forage. Observers noted that shorebird numbers in many areas were well below the usual, and they attributed this to the high water levels. Richard Bjorklund referred to shorebird numbers at Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge as "far below their historic norms." Black-necked Stilts were among the species reported in low numbers in southern Illinois, but they were also seen well north of their usual locations, reaching even to the top of state, perhaps in search of appropriate habitat given the flooded conditions in the south.

In the middle and northern tiers, the last part of April was colder than average, and the southern portion joined in during the first of May with temperature 10 to 14°F cooler than normal during the 3rd and 4th of the month. Though a warm front brought raised temperatures quite high during the 10th to 12th (they reached 91°F in Rockford), another cold period followed. Perhaps because of the chilly May temperatures, the migration appeared to several observers to be running late,

especially across the northern section. Paul Clyne commented that in Chicago's Jackson Park, the migration was weak and ended early, with few of the species that normally linger into June being observed in that month. Dan Williams noted from Rockford that the weather "held migration back in significant ways as compared to the prior 10 to 15 years." Arrival dates were much later in Rockford in comparison with Lake Michigan shoreline dates.

As is the case with every season, there were aspects that are significant in regard to numbers or timing of migration for individual species or groups of species. Some of this season's highlights are summarized below.

Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were reported for the fourth consecutive spring; perhaps the flooded conditions were conducive to this species making another appearance. Good numbers of Ross's Geese continue to be reported in spring, with the peak count of 70-80 being one of the highest on record (though well-eclipsed by last year's 1000-2000). High counts for American Wigeon this spring, as with the preceding four, remained significantly below the average for the last couple of decades. Reported numbers of American Black Duck and Mallard were also below normal. As is now expected, no Gray Partridges were noted.

The loon migration was strong this spring. The count of 492 Common Loons by Dave Johnson in Lake County was quite impressive; if you add his McHenry County sightings his total for the day reached 528. Also outstanding were the season totals - 42 - for Eared Grebes. Exceptional numbers of ibis, including reports of all three species, were present this spring. As with the whistling-ducks the wet conditions may have been a factor in their occurrence. Numbers of extralimital Mississippi Kites were simply incredible. Sightings came from all over the central and northern sections of the state. This year's peak count of American Golden-Plovers, some 13,300 seen 18 Apr in Jasper County, topped all counts since 1994. Piping Plovers, like last year, made a strong showing, with the passage of seven of them noted. Overall the large shorebirds had strong flights this spring, especially Willets and the two godwit species. Among the 14 species of gulls reported, the standout was the Ross's Gull photographed at Montrose. It overshadowed even the Black-legged Kittiwake and Little Gull reports. An early record arrival date of 19 Mar was set by the Caspian Tern noted in White County. Though White-winged Doves seem less unusual these days, the one found this spring was the earliest on record. The count of eight Black-billed Cuckoos (21 May in Cook County's Plum Creek Forest Preserve) was exceptional.