

Field Notes:

The 2012 Spring Migration

By Geoffrey A. Williamson

White-winged Dove drawing by Nandu Dubey.



Many observers lamented that the 2012 spring season was a poor one characterized by very low numbers of migrants. Eric Walters remarked that this “was the worst spring passerine migration in 35 years.” H. David Bohlen commented that high counts “were among the lowest for many species of any spring since 1998.” He also stated, “Almost all counts of warblers were low, and the weather and the very dense vegetation made viewing extremely difficult.” Yet this spring season provided an incredible number of early arrival dates, making it one of the more interesting one from the standpoint of the state’s avian annals. The reason? Exceptionally hot and dry conditions.

The average statewide temperature for the period from March to May was in 2012 a whopping 8°F warmer than normal, providing for the hottest spring among the 118 years for which we have temperature records. March was particularly warm, with record setting average temperatures of 55.3°F, more than 15° hotter than the 40° norm. In Chicago between the 14th and 22nd of March, temperatures exceeded 80° on eight of those nine days and set records on each, peaking at 87° during a period when 60° would be considered unusually mild. The one day in that span when temperatures reached “only” to 78°, the record high for the date was still tied. These warm temperatures followed one of Illinois’s mildest winters, which concluded with a February that was 5.5°F warmer than normal, though in June temperatures returned close to the usual level. Seasonal change in vegetation occurred some three to four weeks ahead of schedule, with the leafing out of deciduous trees being especially noticeable. Furthermore, precipitation levels were well below normal between February and June.

The impact of the season’s warmth on bird migration was very apparent and drew the attention of many observers. Associated with the high temperatures early in the season was an early exodus of gulls and other winter residents along with early arrivals by many passerine migrants. Richard Bjorklund noted that migration at Chautauqua was a full month early. Bohlen commented that “many species left very early, especially the sparrows.” At least 12 species bested or tied record early arrival dates in 2012. These were Virginia Rail, Spotted Sandpiper, Whimbrel, White-eyed Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Worm-eating Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Henslow’s Sparrow. Additionally, record early dates for American Woodcock, Marsh Wren, and Orange-crowned Warbler were also set, if the individuals involved were not in fact overwintering birds.

The dry conditions also had an impact. Water levels were very low in the Illinois River valley in Mason County, and Richard Bjorklund remarked that the Great Blue Heron and Great Egret colonies suffered widespread failure there. Water birds in other areas were sparse because of the dryness.

Below are discussed some of the more significant aspects and records of the season.

Virginia Rails arrived very early. Previously, there had been 11 March records involving 14 birds. This spring added three March records to the mix: 15 Mar in Kankakee County, 16 Mar in Massac County, and 23 Mar in Jasper County. The first two bested the prior record-early date set 19 Mar 1987 in Springfield. This year’s two record setting dates plus that of the 1987 Springfield bird are the only ones earlier than the 23 Mar date for this year’s Jasper County bird.

Black-necked Stilts made significant incursions into the central and northern tiers of the state. Counties in the central portion of the state from which stilts were reported included Adams, Brown, Champaign, Coles, Fulton, Mason, McLean, Mercer, and Sangamon, while the northern counties hosting these birds were Lake, McHenry, Putnam, and Will. Lake County’s first record of Black-necked Stilt occurred 22 Apr 1992, and was just the ninth record statewide (Johnson, 1992). The 1998 spring season, just 14 years prior to this, marked the first county records for Black-necked Stilt in Champaign and Sangamon counties (Clyne, 1998). The total number of Black-necked Stilts reported statewide that season was 15, a significantly high total at that time. This spring, eBird (Sullivan et al., 2009) included reports totalling to 659 stilts. This total from eBird certainly includes duplicate sightings of some birds. Nonetheless, eliminating all potential duplicates still leaves at least 68 stilts from central Illinois and nine or more from northern Illinois in the total. The presence of Black-necked Stilt in Illinois has clearly changed in the last 15 to 20 years.

The Spotted Sandpiper spotted in early March by Mark Seiffert at Carlyle Lake (and possibly the same bird three days later by Dan Kassebaum) smashed the previous early arrival date by two and half weeks. This year’s bird joins only three prior March records for the species.

Big shorebirds were in good supply. The Whimbrels seen 16 Apr at Mermet Lake tied the earliest arrival date, arriving a month ahead of normal. Sightings involving more than one Whimbrel are infrequent, as are those away from Lake Michigan, making the 15 at Spunky Bottoms doubly significant. Conservatively there were at least 25 Hudsonian Godwits noted this spring, which is a respectable season total. Amazingly, Nathan Goldberg photographed 24 Marbled Godwits in one group passing by Chicago’s Montrose Point; this total is one shy of the state record high count. At least 13 others were seen during the season.

The flight of White-rumped Sandpipers this spring was very nice, with reports of 20+ coming from five different locations. The Purple Sandpiper 31 Mar in Waukegan is really rather unusual. There are just five prior spring records: one 23 Feb to 2 Mar