

Field Notes

The 2006 Spring Migration

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American Golden-Plover drawing by Michael L. P. Retter.



Extremely cold temperatures early in December caused much of Illinois' waterways to freeze, but the latter part of the month was much warmer than normal. Unseasonably warm temperatures continued into January, yielding average highs ranging from the low 40s to the mid 50s statewide. While it seems odd to discuss winter weather in a spring report, the abnormal January conditions offered some early migratory movement. Five species of waterfowl were noted as spring migrants beginning mid-January; see Trumpeter Swan, Tundra Swan, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, and Red-breasted Merganser.

Weather throughout February was fairly static, with a few deviations above and below the norm. Strong south winds and above-average temperatures at the beginning of the month initiated migration for several species of waterfowl, Killdeer, American Woodcock, and Horned Lark. Of the 50 species noted as spring arrivals in February, most were encountered during the middle or end of the month, when sustained south winds from a series of low pressure systems provided efficient travel for northbound migrants. These favorable migratory conditions were separated by a severe cold front that passed through from 16-18 February, causing statewide temperatures to plummet into the single digits. Precipitation levels were below normal throughout February, but precipitation in March would compensate for the meager winter hydration.

March temperature fluctuations essentially mirrored those in February. A significant warm front welcomed in the month, producing high temperatures nearing 80°F in southern Illinois. Temperatures then leveled off to about average until another waft of unseasonably warm air pushed through from 8-13 March. Precipitation during this period was high statewide; some locales in southern Illinois received more than 6 inches of rain while spots in northern Illinois recorded nearly 3 inches. These rains were responsible for pushing monthly precipitation totals to about twice the average. A fairly minor warm front passed through the state 15-17 March but yielded little precipitation. The next significant surge of balmy air came through on 30-31 March, again pushing temperatures to well above average. Given the extent of above-average temperatures, it's not surprising that more than 80 species were reported as migrant arrivals in March, including record early arrivals for seven species: Snowy Egret (12 March), Yellow Rail (22 March), Baird's Sandpiper (8 March), Dunlin (18 March), Caspian Tern (27 March), Great Crested Flycatcher (31 March), and Northern Parula (17 March). A significant number of *additional* early migrant dates in March merited bold-

facing in this summary. The most unusual species noted during the month were Eurasian Wigeon and Burrowing Owl.

April provided more periods of unseasonably warm temperatures. Substantial influxes of warm southerly air occurred on 2 April and 6-7 April. Moderate levels of precipitation accompanied these fronts, with more than an inch being reported in central Illinois during the latter front. Sustained strong winds from the south during mid-April provided the highest temperatures noted for the month. From 13-14 April, temperatures peaked at over 80°F in northern Illinois and near 90°F in the south. For the most part, above-average temperatures continued through to the end of April, and precipitation levels remained rather meager. These prolonged conditions supplied the greatest flow of migrants during April and provided record early arrivals for the following species: Whimbrel (16 April), Common Nighthawk (13 April), Bell's Vireo (21 April), and Painted Bunting (17 April). Many migrants arrived significantly early throughout the month, as indicated by the large number of boldfaced notations in the April data. Other significant reports included several species requiring review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC), including Fulvous Whistling-Duck, White Ibis, Crested Caracara, Black Rail, Whooping Crane, and Painted Bunting (as above).

Given the sparseness of south winds during the first half of May, statewide temperatures remained about average through this period; however, a small bout of south winds at the beginning of the month did provide some movement just prior to the statewide Spring Bird Count on 6 May. The first decent smattering of rain came through on 10-11 May during the passage of a minor low pressure system. Days following this event were marked with northwest winds, scattered rain, and cooler temperatures that stalled movement during a historically heavy migratory period. Migration recommenced with the entry of sustained south winds 23-31 May, resultant from a broad warm front that sent temperatures soaring to more than 90°F statewide. Rarities found in May included seven reports requiring IORC review: White-winged Dove (23 May), Cassin's Vireo (6 May), Bewick's Wren (19 May), Kirtland's Warbler (23 May), MacGillivray's Warbler (21-22 May), Lazuli Bunting (14 May), and Great-tailed Grackle (13 May).

At least 72 species were noted as migrants into June, mostly at various sites along Lake Michigan. The most noteworthy June departures included a White-faced Ibis (3-4 June), 11 southbound Sandhill Cranes (3 June), a record late Solitary Sandpiper (11 June), two Baird's Sandpipers (1 June), a male Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (15 June), a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher