



Field Notes: The 2008 Spring Migration Season

by Travis A. Mahan

Field notes drawing of Indigo Bunting by Jenny Vogt.

The spring 2008 migration season from February through June included reports of 322 species in Illinois, including one exotic. Among these reports was a nice assortment of rarities. Among the best finds were 11 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in Clay County, a male Eurasian Wigeon in McLean County, a lingering adult Glaucous-winged Gull at Carlyle Lake, a Kirtland's Warbler at Chicago, a male Western Tanager in Champaign County, and Painted Buntings at feeders in both Winnebago and Saline Counties. Other remarkable reports pending acceptance by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC) include: a female Garganey in Kane County, a Neotropic Cormorant at Carlyle Lake, single Prairie Falcons at two central Illinois sites, an adult Little Gull in far southern Illinois, Black-tailed Gulls in both Monroe and Lake Counties, a White-winged Dove at an Urbana feeder, a potential regional first Brown-crested Flycatcher at Carlyle Lake, five Bewick's Wren reports from four different counties, three Sprague's Pipits at Pyramid State Park and two additional in Clinton County, another male Western Tanager, a Bachman's Sparrow at Carlyle Lake, female Lark Buntings at two sites in central Illinois on the same date, and two Hoary Redpolls in Cook County in the latter half of March. Of the 31 reports requiring IORC review, only about 60% were accompanied by documentation.

Weather patterns during February produced below-average temperatures overall through most of the state. Some areas reported temperatures that were 10 to 20 degrees below normal much of the month. A significant winter storm passed through Illinois 31 January-1 February, affecting most counties. Substantial accumulations of snow were reported statewide, but a band from Jersey County to Kankakee County received the heaviest snowfall. Within this band, the highest reported snowfall came from Sangamon County, with localized totals exceeding 12 inches. Heavy precipitation became the theme of the 2008 spring season. A few periods during February saw above average temperatures. From about 4-5 February, southern Illinois experienced temperatures that nearly reached 70°F. A significant low pressure system passed through the state 16-19 February, bringing thunderstorms and Chicago's highest temperatures for the month (47°F). The first migrant Aythya ducks were reported at Chicago during this period. The beginning of a massive wave of White-winged Scoter reports began 22-23 February, with records from Lake Michigan and numerous downstate lakes. The season's final elevation in temperature bumped the mercury to meet, or just exceed, the average high for the period on 28-29 February.

A total of sixteen species of waterfowl arrived through the latter half of February. Twelve additional species of migrants were noted as February arrivals, the most notable being three Red-throated Loons along Lake Michigan.

March weather systems continued to provide heavy precipitation; however, overall temperatures were more stable and generally in line with expected averages. The period from 1-3 March yielded strong southerly winds with gusts reaching nearly 40 mph. This system ushered in the arrival of at least 30 additional species and marked the first push of insectivorous migrants for the spring. Harlequin Duck and Varied Thrush in Cook County were the highlights of this wave. Though March temperatures were generally in line with averages, the passage of numerous low pressure systems throughout the month provided ample opportunities for eager migrants to travel north. The month of March showed a significant number of early arrivals, some of which were record early for the state, including a White-eyed Vireo on 20 March, single male Hooded Warblers at four (!) sites 21-25 March, single Yellow-throated Vireos at two sites 22-25 March, a Caspian Tern on 25 March, and an adult male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on 27 March.

Heavy spring rains continued through April, leaving many areas flooded throughout the state, particularly in southern Illinois. A minor excursion in above-average temperatures was noted in central and northern Illinois 5-8 April, accompanied by southerly winds and a few new arrivals. A strong low pressure system passed through the state 9-15 April, which yielded heavy rains and significant migratory activity. Two record early arrivals were associated with this system: Gray-checked Thrush on 11 April in Sangamon County and Mississippi Kite on 15 April in Adams County. About 30 additional species were noted as arriving during this period, with a male Cinnamon Teal in Henry County being the most unusual. The first two individuals amid the biggest invasion of Black-necked Stilts ever recorded in Illinois arrived in Alexander County on 13 April. Black-necked Stilts were detected in at least seven counties by the end of April, the northernmost report coming from Coles County. Stilt numbers would continue to climb to record highs through the month of May and into June. From about 16-25 April, statewide weather was rather static, but winds maintained a strong southerly component, and temperatures climbed above average for the central and northern sections of the state. This period showed heavy migratory activity with more than 45 species noted as new arrivals, 15 of which were war-