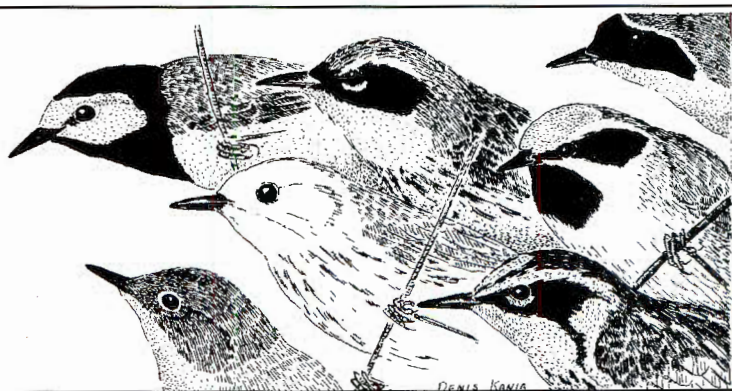


# Field Notes



*Field notes drawing of spring warblers by Denis Kania.*

## The 1997 Spring Migration

By Paul Clyne

Spring 1997 was unusually cold and wet in Illinois. It was accordingly an excellent season for hardy water birds, but uninspiring for the more fragile insectivores. Healthy passages of waterfowl, blackbirds, and other early migrants in March gave way to a gradual, mostly uneventful movement of passerines in April and early May. By mid-May, many observers had virtually written off the season entirely, but some remarkable tallies of songbirds were nonetheless obtained, mostly in the second half of May.

Unusually high water levels were initiated the third week of February, and by early March areas statewide suffered some of their most devastating floods. The most severe rainfall came early, but water levels remained extremely high throughout the season. Some traditional birding sites were effectively washed out, e.g., Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge in Mason County and Heyworth Lagoons in McLean County. At other sites, the wet weather increased the available habitat for water birds, so that statewide, water birds were well represented.

March temperatures showed the expected roller-coaster pattern of highs and lows, although the northern tier of Illinois was buffeted by cold fronts not experienced downstate. April suffered persistent northerly fronts and lingering high pressure systems which had a strikingly negative impact on the progress of the passerine migration. The few warm fronts in April were too short-lived to initiate large-scale migration. At Chicago's Jackson Park, e.g., the number of species seen to date by the end of April was 22 species behind the average for the preceding three years, despite the fact that the month began with the highest number of species to date.

May continued the pattern of chilly weather. Unfortunately for Illinois birders, most of the state was blanketed by some of the coldest temperatures in the country at mid-May, while areas just east and west of Illinois were basking in southerly fronts. The nation's weather map seemed well-suited to migration, except through Illinois. All-time record

lows were set on 16 May for Chicago, Springfield, and Rockford - the last being the coldest at 29°F. As late as 22 May, lows at Chicago were still in the 30's.

Avian fallouts this spring were modest. At Chicago, the timing of front collisions was not conducive to dramatic numbers of nocturnal migrants, since most of the high and low pressure systems interfaced very late in the day and resulted in overnight rains. The most widespread heavy influx was reported as 8 May at both Chicago and Urbana. Additional good passages were reported 17-21 May, but movements over these dates were highly localized. The last major push was registered on 30 May at Grant Park, Chicago. The late onset to migration led to unusually high species diversity continuing into June.

Some trends among groups of birds may be noted. Waterfowl numbers were generally high, especially among geese and dabbling ducks, although deep-water diving ducks were poorly reported. Highlights include another record-breaking year for Greater White-fronted Geese, a **Brant** at Chicago, and two **Cinnamon Teals**.

As a group, shorebirds were perhaps the most successful migrants of the season, with exceptional diversity for spring and strong numbers from various sites, although some traditional haunts were too flooded to offer habitat. Perhaps the large amounts of water created new habitat in the form of flooded farm fields which the birds used. Gulls were most remarkable for the large number of "winter" species lingering in surprising numbers well into May. Note also the occurrence of two **kittiwakes** this spring, both at inland locations (see seasonal highlights).

Terns stole the show in the last two days of May, when Illinois' first confirmed **Gull-billed Tern** was followed by an **Arctic Tern** the next day at the same site. A different **Arctic Tern** was found on the same beach in June. (See separate stories and highlights for details on these terns.)