

Field Notes



Field Notes Heading Drawing of Ovenbird by David J. Athans.

The 1999 Spring Migration

by Paul R. Clyne

The 1999 spring migration was among the best ever for southern overshoots, and a few long-distance strays added splashes of color (in more ways than one) to the season. Alas, most of the more routine migrants fared little better than average, but even this made for a big improvement over the previous year's truly terrible spring passage! Overall, the season was very good for the numbers and diversity of scarcer species, but mediocre to fair for the more common birds.

There are several contenders for "best bird" of the spring. **Gray Kingbird** should, in principle, take top honors as a first state, indeed, regional record, but Illinois' second **Garganey** logged vastly more miles (and entertained many more observers) in making its appearance, and neither of these can vie with a male **Painted Bunting** on visual impact. A **Couch's/Tropical Kingbird** was also recorded as the state's first record this spring. **Purple Gallinules** competed for the best bird title by sheer abundance (coupled with breath-taking beauty). See an article in this issue for details on these interesting species. Finally, Illinois' second **White-winged Dove**—just nine months after the state's first—deserves an honorable mention at the very least! See separate articles in this issue on the kingbirds, bunting, Garganey, and gallinule.

The most conspicuous trend among regular migrants was the superabundance of the scarcer southern overmigrants in the northern two-thirds of Illinois. Summer Tanagers and White-eyed Vireos had banner seasons in the northeastern part of the state, and most of the southern warblers were two to three times more evident than usual—see, for example, the accounts below for Prairie, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers. High counts outside southern Illinois remained in the single digits for these species, and the hard data below do not adequately reflect just how widespread and unusually frequent sightings of these species were in small numbers. The only southern warbler that did not enjoy a healthy passage was Northern Parula.

The onset of spring migration was strikingly early in the wake of a very mild winter. Several species of waterfowl, Sandhill Cranes, Red-winged Blackbirds, and even Killdeer

reached northern Illinois by the last week of January. Record high temperatures 10-11 Feb ushered in hordes of early migrants—many setting local record arrival dates—although unusual species were few. The biggest February surprise was an all-time early Lesser Yellowlegs on 11 Feb.

From March through the first half of April, migration continued with few hitches and few spectacles. Highlights included record spring high numbers of American White Pelicans and Sandhill Cranes, an all-time high count for Brewer's Blackbirds, a **Tricolored Heron** at Chicago on 7 April, all three of the seasons's **Cinnamon Teals**, and notably early dates for Warbling Vireo, Purple Martin, Swainson's Thrush, and Palm and Hooded Warblers.

The second half of April was chilly and wet, especially in the northeast, and forestalled the arrival of warblers and other neotropical migrants over the northern half of the state. Among the best finds were the aforementioned White-winged Dove, **White-faced Ibis**, the first of the season's **five Scissor-tailed Flycatchers**, and record numbers of Willets and Northern Flickers.

As expected in spring, most of the season's highlights were in May, including most of the ultra-rarities listed above, a **Neotropic Cormorant** near Chicago, the season's second **Tricolored Heron**, plus all those southern songbirds. Exceptional high counts were obtained for several species in May; see especially Least Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Common Yellowthroat, and White-crowned Sparrow. Many of this year's high counts coincided with the Illinois Spring Bird Count, held on 8 May. This is due partly to the fact that 8 May saw a fairly strong passage through at least the northern parts of the state, but mostly it reflects the results of more birders keeping more concrete data. Full Spring Bird Count tallies are in a separate article in this issue; they are included below only if contributed as single-party high counts by individual observers.

The main thrust of May's passerine movement gave out early this year. By the end of the third week in May, migrants were in low numbers, and the variety of late stragglers reported was under par.