



# Field Notes: The 2009 Breeding Season

by Steven D. Bailey

*Male Dickcissel photo taken 13 June 2009 at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, Champaign County by Ivan Petrov.*

## The weather

Weather coming into the peak of the nesting season was about normal with near-average May temperatures, although the precipitation for that month was above-average. The previous 12 months were the wettest on record (since 1895), and spring (March-May) was the fifth wettest on record. While the slightly above-average June temperatures (although early June was cooler than normal) likely benefitted fruits and insects eaten by passerines that depend on them for sustenance, the continued above-average rainfall in June was not likely as kind to nests with eggs and young, which survive better in warm, dry conditions. Portions of the lower Illinois and Mississippi Rivers crested above flood stages during June.

Severe weather was common during June, with 15 reports of tornados and widespread hail and wind damage throughout the month. The average air temperature for St. Charles in far northern Illinois was 68 degrees and 77 degrees at Carbondale in far southern Illinois.

July temperatures were well-below average. In fact, it was the coldest July on record for Illinois. The temperature in Wheaton (DuPage County) was 44 degrees on 5 July, the coldest temperature for the month. There were 33 reports of record low daily minimum temperatures as well as 218 reports of record low daily maximum temperatures statewide throughout July. To make matters worse (at least for the birds), precipitation was above average. The lower Illinois River was above local flood stage for the beginning of the month. However, severe weather was otherwise minimal in July with six reports of tornados. It was the third wettest May-July period since 1895. This trend continued into August with well-below average temperatures and well-above average precipitation.

These weather patterns were likely not conducive to good nest success rates, at least where weather played a factor in their outcome. Joan Bruchman's loss of almost an entire colony of nestling Purple Martins at Lake Arlington likely played out over a large area in northeastern, and maybe much of northern Illinois during the severe cold snap in early July. Continual wet conditions likely did not help young in nests when parents left them unattended to gather food.

Continual high floodwaters along rivers like the Mississippi, Illinois and Ohio may be helpful to some species such as ducks and herons by providing more easily accessible food and more habitat, but can also hamper bird species that nest and forage along these rivers. The endangered Least

Tern more often than not is finding its nesting substrate along these rivers under water for much of the breeding season in Illinois. In addition, high water levels can inundate nesting areas for species such as bank-nesting swallows and kingfishers, literally washing them out of their nesting homes.

Still, the increased amounts of rain and higher water levels serve to recharge shrinking wetlands needed by Illinois's many rare marsh birds.

## New Illinois breeding discoveries

Thanks to the work of professional biologists, as well as happenstance discoveries by individuals, three new species have now been added to the state's list of successful breeders. Biologists checking small islands in the Mississippi River, which already had been home to breeding herons and cormorants, discovered that American White Pelicans had recently colonized a second island near the Iowa border, this year on the Illinois side. And as multiple "vagrant" Anhingas lingered at the same locations into June, some including Matt McKim-Louder wondered: Could they possibly be nesting? McKim-Louder, a graduate student studying Prothonotary and Swainson's Warblers, canoed into a large cypress-tupelo swamp in Johnson County to check on the numbers of nesting herons in a longtime rookery. When he noticed a few leafy nests among the heron-topped stick nests, he discovered the "vagrant" Anhingas were all sitting on nests! The current closest breeding Anhingas are at Reelfoot Lake in Tennessee, although they had formerly nested at the north end of that lake in Kentucky until about 1950, also in a large heron rookery.

Lastly, while working at his job at a Chicago lakefront location, birdwatcher Steve Huggins noticed that a large number of white birds, likely gulls, were atop a lakefront building. Upon closer inspection, Huggins saw that they were Caspian Terns, not gulls. Better yet, many of the birds were juvenile nestlings, most not yet having fledged, and not yet capable of flight. Like several large Ring-billed Gull colonies found the last few years in the Chicagoland area, these terns had decided to nest on a rooftop instead of the rocky islands or beach front locations they normally choose. Ring-billed and Herring Gulls were also nesting and loafing on the same rooftop, and the terns likely followed the gulls' lead. Because large numbers of juvenile and adult Caspian Terns have been seen along the Chicago lakefront the past several summers, birders suspected the species was nesting nearby. In addition, a few nesting colonies were just north and south of Chicago in Indiana and Wisconsin.