

Field Notes

The 2011 Fall Migration

by Douglas F. Stotz

Field Notes drawing of Sage Thrasher by Matt McKim-Louder



Autumn of 2011 had fairly typical weather, but was a bit warmer than average. Cold weather took its time arriving, and Chicago did not have its first freeze until well into November. Rainfall was slightly below average for the season, with October very dry. Shorebirds were impressive in the lower Illinois River valley again, but in the Chicago area only the lakefront produced many birds. Fronts were few, and fallouts were in short supply, but 17 September produced some impressive landbird counts at Carlyle Lake.

Rarities were well-represented this season. A MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD was photographed in White County in mid-September, picking up stunned fish from electroshock search on the Wabash River! Three WOOD STORKS spent several days in Monroe County in late August. Ibises were fairly well represented with a WHITE IBIS in Monroe County, two WHITE-FACED IBISES in Macon County, and several other dark ibises seen. Rare waterfowl included a BRANT photographed at Clinton Lake in early November, an EURASIAN WIGEON in mid-October at Rollins Savanna, and two MOTTLED DUCKS in southern Illinois in August, with one in Union County and one in Monroe County. Stunning were two PURPLE SANDPIPERS at downstate reservoirs, with one at Lake Decatur in late October and one in late November at Clinton Lake. There were two different MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS at Illinois Beach State Park (IBSP) this fall with a young male following on the heels of a female. This follows another Mountain Bluebird on the Lake County lakefront in the spring and was part of an unprecedented five records in 2011. An immature CAVE SWALLOW was photographed at Carlyle Lake in mid-September. The Chicago lakefront was productive for high-quality landbird vagrants starting with a LARK BUNTING at Montrose Harbor at the end of August, a TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE there in October, and a SAGE THRASHER that lingered there for three weeks in November. Elsewhere on the lakefront, there was a BREWER'S SPARROW at Northerly Island in mid November and a GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE at Jackson Park in early October.

Ducks through Hawks

Waterfowl migration was slow getting started and there were few notable concentrations. Standing out was a count of nearly 15,000 Green-winged Teal at Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in mid-November. Other than that, dabbling duck counts were not notable. Scoter migration was mostly unimpressive, with fewer downstate records than we've had in recent years. The best counts were concentrated at Gillson Park in Wilmette at the end of October and early November. Good counts of Common Loons came from Lake Michigan and Rend Lake. Red-throated Loon reports were fewer this fall, with only 6 birds reported statewide. Pacific Loons were found at Carlyle

and Clinton Lakes. A record-tying seasonal total of ten Red-necked Grebes were reported, including birds at Independence Grove Forest Preserve in Lake County and Monroe Harbor in Chicago that lingered for multiple weeks. The three Western Grebe reports included a bird that stayed nearly three weeks at Carlyle Lake. Horned Grebes were found in good numbers, especially on downstate reservoirs in November; again, though, few Eared Grebe reports were received, although a breeding family group was in Mason County through August and much of September. Large concentrations of American White Pelicans were reported from Chautauqua NWR and Carlyle Lake, but numbers elsewhere were not particularly impressive. Cormorants were in good numbers at Carlyle Lake and along Lake Michigan. The only Neotropical Cormorants were a lingering bird from the summer in the Lake Calumet region and a one-day wonder at Hennepin-Hopper. There were a number of good heron counts from southern Illinois, especially Monroe County and Carlyle Lake. The most notable was a count of 1187 Cattle Egrets in August at Kidd Lake State Natural Area. Few night-herons of either species were reported. The data from the hawk watches at IBSP and Greene Valley Forest Preserve both were better than the previous two or three years, but were not particularly strong. Broad-winged Hawks were a bit better represented than the last few years, although IBSP had a very poor year. Greene Valley recorded both Mississippi Kite and Swainson's Hawk, while IBSP had 3 Swainson's Hawks.

Rails through Woodpeckers

Yellow Rails were more widely reported than usual in northern Illinois with four records in three counties, in addition to the usual multiple records at Prairie Ridge in Jasper and Marion Counties. A few King Rails were reported on migration, but most significant were breeding birds at the end of August in Monroe County. Up to ten birds were reported from there. Only a few Virginia Rails were reported, but Soras were widespread, with good counts from several sites. The high counts of Common Gallinules were all from breeding sites in August and early September, but an unusually late migrant was at Montrose for a week at the end of October into November. Impressive counts of American Coots came from the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. The Sandhill Crane migration was fairly ordinary by recent standards, but there were at least eleven Whooping Cranes accompanying the Sandhills over the last half of November in northeastern Illinois. Whooping Cranes continued to be seen into December.

Shorebirds were well-represented along the Illinois River and at Carlyle Lake. Northern Illinois was generally poor because of high water, but Montrose had good diversity across the season. Migration was slow getting started, but by mid-August was in full swing. Plovers were well-reported at the