



Field Notes

Grace's Warbler drawing by Eric Secker.

Fall 2003 Migration

by Douglas F. Stotz

After 2002, when West Nile dominated the headlines in Illinois, 2003 represented a return to relatively normal conditions. Certainly, Illinois birders commented very little on further changes in avian populations. Because the surveillance of bird deaths by public health officials is focused on West Nile issues with respect to human health, much about the situation in bird populations is not known. We do know that birds (American Crows and Blue Jays among others), mosquitoes and horses tested positive for West Nile over much of Illinois. Seventy counties had at least one positive test in at least one of these groups. This compares with 100 counties with positive tests in 2002. While these data indicate possibly a decline in the affected area in Illinois, more critically they indicate that the disease remains widespread in the state. At the same time, the more than 90% decrease in human and horse cases of West Nile in 2003 compared with 2002, despite increased awareness of the disease, indicates that the incidence of the disease in bird populations must have been much reduced in 2003. These data are adapted from the Illinois Department of Public Health web site on West Nile (<http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/wnv.htm>), where readers can go for further and up-to-date information on the disease.

In terms of bird populations that showed declines in 2002, American Crow numbers remained low in many areas in the Chicago region, but seemed to have mostly recovered in other areas of the state where declines had been noted. Black-capped Chickadees showed a similar pattern with some recovery, but continued scarcity in the northern suburbs of Chicago. On the other hand, any declines in Blue Jays in 2002 appeared to have been completely reversed. Other species, such as House Finches, hawks and owls, known to be susceptible to West Nile, and about which birders commented in 2002, seemed to show no noticeable effects in 2003. Birders can contribute much to our understanding by continuing to carefully monitor population levels in these species, and in making sure that dead crows and Blue Jays are tested for West Nile.

Overall, fall of 2003 was fairly colorless. Shorebirds began moving on time near the first of July, but landbird migration was notably poor in August. Migration toward the end of the

season was fairly unremarkable as well. There were few rarities, and both landbird and waterbird migrations were below average. Significant high counts and early and late records were few and far between. Nonetheless, there were some outstanding rarities. Most stunning were three new species for Illinois. The summer's **ROSEATE SPOONBILL** continued to be seen in Fayette County into August (see an article about this state record in the last issue of *Meadowlark*, Volume 12, No. 1.) Montrose hosted the other two additions to Illinois' list, a **BLACK-TAILED GULL** on 7 August, and an extraordinary **GRACE'S WARBLER** on 8 September. (See the next issue of *Meadowlark* for a detailed article on this remarkable state record.) Photos and documentation are presented in the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee report in this issue. Although neither bird stayed for even the entire morning, both were well-photographed and seen by a number of observers. The gull was probably the same individual that had been seen in previous months in Wisconsin and Indiana, establishing first state records for those states for this species with a rapidly expanding pattern of vagrancy. The Grace's Warbler, on the other hand, is the first record east of Colorado and western Texas of a species that is seldom found away from its breeding areas in the American Southwest during migration.

Other impressive rarities included the state's second **BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK** that lingered at Chautauqua for six weeks, an immature **WHITE IBIS** at Carlyle Lake, a **SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER** along the Fox River in Kane Co., a **RUFF** at Quiver Lake, multiple **WHITE-WINGED DOVES** in southern Illinois, and a **SAY'S PHOEBE** at Carlyle Lake.

Ducks through Hawks

Waterfowl migration was delayed this fall by mild weather, and significant numbers of ducks remained throughout the state through November. Scoters followed up last year's record showing downstate with another strong showing. Loon migration was strong, with impressive counts of Common Loons scattered across the state; Red-throated Loons were well-reported, but there was only a single Pacific Loon, on Lake