

# Field Notes



*Sooty Tern drawing by Eric Secker*

## Fall 2002 Field Notes

*by Douglas F. Stotz*

Bob Chapel ably compiled the fall field notes since the inception of *Meadowlark* in 1992. Tragically, that service to the birding community and years of expert birding ended abruptly with his death on 2 November in an automobile accident. I volunteered to cover this season in his stead. Having done so enables me to better appreciate the skills Bob brought to the task. His knowledge of the distribution and phenology of Illinois birds and his thoroughness in compiling the records for this account are far beyond my abilities. We will all miss Bob.

The fall of 2002 will probably be most remembered for the significant outbreak of West Nile Virus in the midwestern US, especially Illinois. Dead American Crows infected with West Nile Virus began to be found in early summer, but the epidemic really gathered steam in August and September. By the end of the season West Nile had been found in 100 of Illinois' 102 counties, and Illinois had the greatest number of horse cases, human cases, and human deaths from the disease in the country. Although West Nile Virus is basically a disease of birds, vectored by mosquitoes, the human health threat received most of the attention. Panicked communities initiated aerial pesticide spraying for mosquitoes long after the mosquito numbers had peaked, and the spraying arguably may have had more severe negative impacts on birds than West Nile Virus. Ongoing scientific studies are attempting to understand the dynamics of this disease in natural populations, but it is clear that there are vast differences in the susceptibility of different species of birds to the disease. Birders attempted to make sense of the disease by looking for population changes of local birds. There were widespread reports of decreased numbers of American Crows and Blue Jays, especially in the Chicago area, but also downstate. Other species known to be susceptible to West Nile that received mention of low numbers or observed mortality by at least some observers include Red-tailed Hawk, Great Horned Owl, House Finch, and House Sparrow. Reports of large declines in Black-capped Chickadee numbers came from the Chicago region, but the tie to West Nile remains unclear.

Studies to this point do not show chickadees to be particularly susceptible to West Nile Virus. Hawks and owls in captivity seemed to be very susceptible to West Nile, and many wildlife rehabilitators reported receiving numbers of sick raptors infected with West Nile. However, even in the hard-hit Chicago region, declines in raptors did not appear to be widespread.

The fall was generally dry, warmer than average through October, then cooler than average into December. For the first time in several years, most lakes in the northern and central parts of the state had frozen by the end of November, so numbers and diversity of waterbirds lingering into December were lower than in recent past years. The dry conditions created good shorebird habitat in many areas and good counts and diversity were the rule.

Landbird migration was late getting started with little significant movement in August. September was better, but there were few high counts and few rarities. The warm weather allowed warbler migration to continue well into October, and sparrows were generally well represented. But the cold of November brought migration largely to a close fairly early.

Significant rarities were few this fall, and most remained only a day or two. Most exciting was Illinois' first **SOOTY TERN** on the Ohio River following Hurricane Lili; this was the only obvious hurricane-borne species in Illinois, although Sooties were also found in Kentucky and Tennessee. See an article about the Sooty Tern in the next issue and the IORC report in this issue for more information. Other notable rarities included a **EURASIAN WIGEON** in Richland County, another juvenile **LONG-TAILED JAEGER** at Carlyle Lake (but just for a day), a **RUFF** (Reeve or female) there as well, three (!) **RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRDS** at feeders across the state (two of these remained for months), and **ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER** and **TOWNSEND'S WARBLER** at Montrose, each for a single day. Reports of species on the IORC review list are enclosed in square brackets in this summary, pending IORC evaluation of the evidence.