

1989 SPRING AND SUMMER SIGHTINGS

Greg D. Jackson

The spring of 1989 was productive for birders in the AOS area, not necessarily in terms of extreme rarities, but more in the way of good numbers of regular migrants. The coastal passerine migration in particular was better than in several recent springs. This was undoubtedly due to the occurrence of several wet fronts which delayed migrants, especially on the outer coast. Best birding days were 22-25 March, and 10, 20, and 29 April. The 10 April "fallout" was particularly impressive, with R. Duncan and Fang describing a massive movement of birds at Ft. Morgan, principally Scarlet Tanagers, Orchard Orioles, Red-eyed Vireos, Indigo Buntings, and Blue Grosbeaks. Duncan writes: "The movement continued all day, wave after wave, until about 3 PM. For those of us distressed about tropical deforestation and its effect on North American migrants, it was heartening to see so many Scarlet Tanagers and Orchard Orioles making it back again."

Temperatures were fairly normal throughout the period, with the exception of cold snaps in the early parts of March, April, and May. It was the rainfall that was unusual, or at least it **seemed** unusual to those of us accustomed to the drought conditions of recent years. Actually, the rainfall in the spring months was back in the normal range. It was extremely wet in June and early July. In June, Birmingham had five inches of rain above expected amounts, and we were three inches above normal for the first half of July.

The reports that follow are from the period March through July of 1989, and cover Alabama and the Florida Panhandle (east to the Apalachicola River). The appearance of an observation in this column does not indicate verification or acceptance of a record for a very rare species. That task is in the hands of the appropriate state Bird Records Committees. In submitting records of unusual species, please remember to include descriptions of the bird as well as the conditions of observation.

County names are in italics. "WP" refers to the western Panhandle of Florida (Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa Counties). Records not specifying "FL" or "WP" are in Alabama. "mob" = many observers, "NWR" = National Wildlife Refuge, "WMA" = Wildlife Management Area.

LOONS - GREBES: *Red-throated Loons* are quite rare inland, so the two birds seen 8-9 March at Town Creek, *Colbert* (ALM, GNP), were surprising. Common Loons are rare throughout our region in the

summer. Three to four birds were seen in the Pensacola, FL, area in June; more unusual were three birds at Guntersville on 6 June (TAI,JCR) and a single individual at Porter Lake in west *Jefferson* on 6 July (TAI). From one to three Eared Grebes were unusual at Porter Lake from 21 February to 25 March (TAI,GMI,mob). This species is regular now at Blakely Island (*Mobile*); four birds were still present on 17 April (GDJ,DGJ).

TUBENOSES: Two **Greater Shearwaters** were discovered 50-80 miles south of Pensacola, FL, on 27 May, and two more were noted 80-100 miles south of Pensacola on 30 June (all KW). This is the most frequently seen tubenose in our area, but it is still unusual. One bird was located only 1/2 mile from shore near the mouth of Perdido Bay in *Baldwin* on 22 July (AOS). Much rarer was the single **Sooty Shearwater** observed from Mobile Point at Ft. Morgan on 4 March (RAD,OEF). This bird was picked out of a large feeding assembly of gulls and cormorants; any time this type of activity is seen, we should work over the flocks very carefully for rarities. Several unidentified shearwaters were noted at Ft. Pickens, FL, on 5 March (RAD,LD). Rounding out the tubenose reports, Wright observed 30 **Wilson's Storm-Petrels** 27-28 May while on a fishing boat 50-80 miles south of Pensacola, FL. At night, he reported these birds flying around in the lights of the boat, with one landing on a fishing rod! Wright also saw 10 individuals while fishing 80-100 miles south of Pensacola 30 June to 1 July.

SULIDS - FRIGATEBIRDS: Northern Gannet is a common species in the Gulf in the colder months, but in recent years it has also been found to be present in small numbers in the summer. This year, 30-50 of these spectacular plunge-divers were seen at Gulf Shores 18-24 June (PT,FT). Six were noted just south of Orange Beach, *Baldwin*, on 22 July (AOS), with another on the same date at Ft. Morgan (GDJ,BCG,JH). American White Pelican occurs regularly in large numbers in Mobile Bay, but 16 at Pensacola, FL, on 8 March (JP) were less expected. Much more unusual were the sightings of 20 birds at Eufaula NWR on 10 March (mob), and of a single pelican in *Colbert* on 5 April (GNP). Double-crested Cormorant numbers still seem to be going up in inland areas, a welcome change from their scarcity several years ago. On 14 March there were 140 birds present in *Greene* (GDJ,RRS,MGS). Anhingas are uncommon in the coastal plain, with only a few scattered breeding locations known. Fledged young were discovered in a *Walton*, FL, heronry on 28 June (RSD), providing a rare nesting record for the Panhandle. A few Anhingas were noted in *Clarke*, *Greene*, *Perry*, and *Washington* in June and July. Magnificent Frigatebirds are regular in the warmer months on the coast, but seemed

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more numerous than usual this June in the Gulf Breeze, FL, area (LD,RSD).

HERONS - STORKS: Up to 10,000 birds were estimated at the regular site of the rookery near Prairieville in *Hale* on 20 July (TAI). Most of these nesters were Cattle Egrets, with a smattering of Great Egrets, Little Blue Herons, and White Ibis. Least Bitterns are uncommon in the coastal plain, and in June were observed in *Washington* (AOS) and *Greene* (MO,SO). A Tricolored Heron was an odd find on 28 May in Swan Creek WMA (JTP). Unidentified dark ibis are uncommon birds, seen mostly on the coast in fall and winter. A single individual was located on Dauphin Island on 10 April (mob). A **Roseate Spoonbill** was a great discovery on the Tennessee River in *Jackson* 29 July to 3 August (DRJ,mob). This was the first substantiated inland report of this vagrant in Alabama in over 30 years; several adjacent states also had a few spoonbills located this summer. There has been a flurry of reports from our coast and in other areas in the Southeast in the last two years. Continuing a recent trend, Wood Storks were again noted in good numbers in the western half of the coastal plain this summer. The first report was of a single stork on 24 June in *Hale* (DM). Seven other reports were received through the end of July from *Hale*, *Perry*, and *Washington*, with a high of 27 storks in *Hale* on 28 June (DM). A lone bird was noted on 19 July at Auburn (JH).

WATERFOWL: Fulvous Whistling-Duck is rare but regular on the coast, but is only occasional inland. One bird was seen near Marion in *Perry* 4-18 March (BS,LM,mob) [see Summerour (1988)]. Two Fulvous Whistling-Ducks were noted at Gulf Shores on 30 April and 7 May (PB), and one was seen on Blakely Island on 4 June (BCG). Greater White-fronted Geese are uncommon visitors to our area. One bird was in *Perry* 4-18 March (BS,LM,mob). A Snow Goose on 18 April at Bon Secour NWR in *Baldwin* (TAI) set a late record for the Gulf Coast. The obliging **Ross' Goose** first discovered 17 February at Eufaula (HHK,GA) [see Drennen (1988)] was last noted on 2 April (GDJ,DGJ). Another interesting goose sighting was of a Canada Goose of the *minima* (Cackling) race seen with the Greater White-fronted Goose at Marion on 4 March (BS,LM,mob) [see Summerour (1988)].

Thirty Mottled Ducks were counted at the regular breeding spot on Blakely Island on 23 July. On the same date at that location there was a summering Lesser Scaup (both GDJ,DGJ). A lingering scaup sp. was at Gulf Shores on 3 June (PB). The White-winged Scoter first seen at Porter Lake in *Jefferson* in February remained until 10 March (LNT,TAI). Any scoter is rare in the Mountain Region of Alabama. Black Scoters are rare in the WP; five were located at Ft. Pickens on 19 March

(RAD). Hooded Merganser is an uncommon breeder in Alabama, so it was nice to hear about the female with six young in *Greene* on 3 June (MO,SO). Five Common Mergansers remained near Waterloo in *Lauderdale* until 12 March (GDJ). To round out the waterfowl, there were two Red-breasted Mergansers on 4 June at Destin, FL (DW,CW); this species is occasional in the WP in summer.

RAPTORS: A pair of Ospreys was noted engaged in nest construction on a platform at Eufaula NWR on 2 April (GDJ,DGJ). Another bird was seen 3-4 June in *Greene* (MO,SO), which would raise the question of local nesting. Swallow-tailed Kites were noted in normal numbers on the outer coast in April. Three of these magnificent raptors were located in *Clarke* on 11 June (AOS), and an impressive 13 were seen on 24 July at Century, *Escambia* (GF), for a WP maximum. For the first time since 1962, a pair of Bald Eagles attempted to nest in Alabama. They were discovered in *Lauderdale* on 12 February (GNP,JoP,JP) and were monitored until departing the nest in late April or early May. A bird was first seen sitting on the nest on 8 March, and incubation continued until 27 April. A flyover by state personnel on 10 May showed at least one egg. An immature Bald Eagle was seen on 10 March at Ft. Walton Beach (RAD); the species is occasional in the WP. Two inland Merlins were noted this spring, one on 18 March in *Perry* (BAS), and another on 7 April in *Lauderdale* (PK,DK). Several Merlins were spotted at Ft. Morgan in mid-April. Three Peregrine Falcons were reported at Ft. Morgan, Dauphin Island, and Blakely Island 20-22 April. One seen on 1 May at Ft. Morgan (ALM,ADM,MLM,OF) was late. The only other Peregrine Falcon reported was a first WP July record on the 24th at Gulf Breeze (LD).

RAILS - SHOREBIRDS: The 25 American Coots found at Swan Creek WMA on 28 May (JTP) were unusual for that season. The first WP nesting of this species was documented at Holiday Isle, *Okaloosa*, with three nesting pairs (one with young) seen 28 June to 8 July (DW,CW). The highest count of Lesser Golden-Plovers that I received was of 27 at Ft. Morgan on 25 March (PB,GF). A new early record for Alabama for Wilson's Plover was set on 21 February, with one bird sighted at Dauphin Island (ALM,ADM). Twelve Wilson's Plovers were found at Big Sabine in *Santa Rosa*, FL, on 18 March (RAD,PT). The highest number of Piping Plovers turned in this spring was four seen at Gulf Shores on 19 April (GDJ,DGJ). The second April WP record of American Oystercatcher was of a single bird at Pensacola noted from the 24th to the 27th (PJ,RAD). This species is very localized in its distribution along our coast. Black-necked Stilt is only occasional in the WP in the spring, so three birds seen at Pensacola Beach on 4 April (RAD) were unusual.

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American Avocets have spent several recent summers in small numbers at Blakely Island; five birds located there on 23 July (GDJ,DGJ) probably were summering though they could have been early migrants.

On 23 July there were approximately 1100 Lesser Yellowlegs at Blakely Island (GDJ,DGJ). The Willet found on 1 July near Mooresville in *Limestone* (PF,mob) was unusual inland. Upland Sandpiper records inland included three on 29 March near Harpersville (*Shelby*) (ALM), six on 8 April in *Dekalb* (HHK), and one in *Perry* on 22 July (PF). The two Long-billed Curlews on the Mobile Causeway were last seen on the battleship lawn on 28 March (MFF,RT,MT,MW). One bird returned early on 23 July (GDJ,DGJ). A single Marbled Godwit was discovered on 16 April at Ft. Pickens, FL (CT); the six found at Gulf Shores on 19 April (GDJ,DGJ) were an unusual number for our area. This season's maximum for Western Sandpiper was 1700 at Blakely Island on 22 April (AOS). An early Pectoral Sandpiper was observed in *Lauderdale* on 4 March (GNP). Blakely Island had 1250 Dunlin on 22 April (AOS).

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are more difficult to find in the spring than in fall. This year one was on the Mobile Causeway on 15 March (MFF,MW), establishing a new state arrival record. Four birds were sighted at a sod farm in south *Baldwin* on 8 April (PB,GF). Long-billed Dowitchers were present in good numbers, with 100 calling birds seen on Blakely Island on 17 April (GDJ,DGJ). The Common Snipe at Muscle Shoals, *Colbert*, on 13 May (GDJ) was rather late. Wilson's Phalaropes are regular at Blakely Island in the spring, though in much smaller numbers than in the autumn. Three birds were found on 17 April (GDJ,DGJ), one on 22 April (AOS), and one 5-6 May (BS). This species is much harder to find in other spots, so one at Muscle Shoals, *Colbert*, on 7 May (GDJ,DGJ) was interesting. Four Wilson's Phalaropes were noted on the return trip south at Blakely Island on 23 July (GDJ,DGJ). Much harder to find anywhere in our region is the **Red-necked Phalarope**. One was noted at Blakely Island 5-6 May (BS).

GULLS - TERNS: Two alternate-plumaged Laughing Gulls were discovered at Town Creek in *Colbert* on 7 May (GDJ,DGJ); this species is rare inland, but is more likely to be found in the summer or early fall than in spring. The subadult **Franklin's Gull** seen on 27 April at Ft. Walton Beach (PL) was a first record for the WP for that month. A first-year **Great Black-backed Gull** was seen with a Herring Gull at Dauphin Island on the record late date of 2 May (JH). Speaking of black-backed gulls, "ole one foot" reappeared at Pensacola, FL, on 16 May (RAD). Is this bird immortal? Very rare in our region, the first-year **Black-legged Kittiwake** seen at Dauphin Island on 30 March (RAD) was also the latest ever for Alabama. Common Terns are *uncommon* in

spring; one bird was at Gulf Shores on 19 April (GDJ). Late summer and fall are the seasons for this species on our coast, and on 22 July 75 birds were seen at Ft. Morgan (GDJ,BCG,JH). Three **Sooty Terns** were found on 1 July 80-100 miles south of Pensacola, FL (KW).

ANIS - TYRANT FLYCATCHERS: Quite unusual for the spring was a **Groove-billed Ani** on 4 April at Ft. Pickens, FL (CT,RR). The first confirmed Panhandle nesting of Barn Owl was of fledged young in Walton on 22 June (RSD). An adult bird on 17 June at Lillian in Baldwin (BCG) is suspicious for nesting at that locale. A female-plumaged Rufous/Allen's-type hummingbird was seen at the Sargents' "hummingbird farm" at Clay in east *Jefferson* 16-20 July (RRS,MGS); this was an early record for Alabama for this probable Rufous Hummingbird. The Least Flycatcher at Gulf Breeze on 27 April (PL) was the first WP record for that month. An **Ash-throated Flycatcher** made a rare spring appearance at Dauphin Island on 22 April (RRS,MGS,TAI). The only Western Kingbird report that I received was of a single bird on 2 May at Dauphin Island (JH). There were two separate June Scissor-tailed Flycatcher reports. One bird was noted 12-13 June in *Lauderdale* (DP,PN,SW); another individual was seen in *Okaloosa* on 24 June (DW,BG,BM) for a second WP record for that month. There were several reports of this species from surrounding states this June, suggesting a broad dispersal.

SWALLOWS: Several early swallows were noted this spring. One of these was a Tree Swallow at Lake Aliceville (*Pickens*) on 5 March (GDJ). Another Tree Swallow at Swan Creek WMA on 1 July (PF,mob) could be related to nesting, as this has been a proven breeding site in recent years. Two N. Rough-winged Swallows were observed at Waterloo in *Lauderdale* on 12 March (GDJ,DGJ), for a new Tennessee Valley record. On the same date at Gulf Shores, one individual of this species was noted (PB). The Cliff Swallows nesting under bridges at the head of Mobile Bay returned again this year, with many birds and nests located on 3 June (PB,GF). Two **Cave Swallows** were observed at close range near Ft. Morgan on 22 April (PB,GF). We have had several April records on the outer coast since 1984, including a bird found dead in 1988 that was determined to be most likely of the Caribbean race. This species breeds now in southern Florida, and we will probably see a few more of these birds on occasion. The final notable swallow was the Barn Swallow sighted at Wilson Dam in *Colbert* on 12 March (GDJ) for a new early Tennessee Valley date.

CROWS - VIREOS: The Fish Crow reaches the edge of its range just south and west of Birmingham. This July, it was noted regularly in small numbers at Bayview and Porter Lakes, both in *Jefferson* (TAI).

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White-breasted Nuthatch is very rare in the WP, so one seen on 25 July at Century in *Escambia* (GF) was noteworthy. Ten Golden-crowned Kinglets were noted as late as 19 March at Ft. Pickens, FL (RAD,OEF). A late Ruby-crowned Kinglet was at Birmingham on 3 May (GDJ). Another late departure was the American Robin at Ft. Morgan on 27 April (PB,GF). Cedar Waxwings are rare breeders in northern Alabama, so the pair building a nest in Guntersville on 6 June (TAI) was interesting. On Dauphin Island on 20 April there was a late Solitary Vireo (GDJ). At the other end of the spectrum, a Philadelphia Vireo, uncommon in spring, was seen at Dauphin Island on the early date of 6 April (MFF). I only received one **Black-whiskered Vireo** report, of a bird of the Jamaican race banded at Ft. Morgan on 18 April (RRS,MGS,TAI). This species is a rare but regular vagrant to the outer coast in April and early May.

WOOD WARBLERS: As I noted in the introduction, this was a good season for passerine migrants on the coast, and this included numerous warblers. Several early records were set, and Blevins and Fleming saw 30 species of warblers in south *Baldwin* this spring. A Blue-winged Warbler at Ft. Pickens on 23 March (RAD) was an early WP record. Also early were a Tennessee Warbler on 23 March at Dauphin Island (JH), and a Nashville Warbler at Montrose (*Baldwin*) on 9 April (VBF). Another Nashville Warbler, hard to find in the spring, was seen at Ft. Morgan on 15 April (PB). A Chestnut-sided Warbler was spotted on 3 June at Hackleburg in *Marion* (PK,BR); there are at least seven June or July Mountain Region records for this possible breeder. A Magnolia Warbler reported from Clay, *Jefferson*, on 22 July (RRS,MGS) was earlier than any previous Alabama fall records.

Two Cape May Warblers on 29 March at Ft. Pickens (OEF,JP), and a Worm-eating Warbler on 24 March at the same site (OEF), were both early WP records. A Swainson's Warbler, which is an uncommon and local breeder in Alabama, was found singing from 3 April to 24 July at Bayview Lake in *Jefferson* (TAI). A cooperative singing male **Mourning Warbler** was present near Dancy Bottoms in Wheeler NWR (*Morgan*) 13-17 May (PF,HHK,mob). This species and the Connecticut Warbler are rather elusive, but we would probably find more of these birds if concerted birding activity continued into the middle of May. Dancy Bottoms may be the best locality to search at that time. Single Wilson's Warblers, uncommon in the spring, were seen on 11 April at Ft. Pickens, FL (ST), and at Ft. Morgan on 15 April (PB,GF).

TANAGERS - FINCHES: An early Scarlet Tanager was noted on 30 March at Ft. Morgan (RAD). A male **Western Tanager** was described from *Cullman* on 30 April (BB,AB). This was one of the few

spring; one bird was at Gulf Shores on 19 April (GDJ). Late summer and fall are the seasons for this species on our coast, and on 22 July 75 birds were seen at Ft. Morgan (GDJ,BCG,JH). Three **Sooty Terns** were found on 1 July 80-100 miles south of Pensacola, FL (KW).

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inland records for this vagrant. Fifteen to twenty Bachman's Sparrows were discovered in Stimpson Wildlife Sanctuary (*Clarke*) on 11 June (AOS). "The singing Lincoln's Sparrow at Wheeler NWR (*Morgan*) on 13 May (BS) was interesting, as this species is difficult to locate in the spring." Four Brewer's Blackbirds set a late Gulf Coast record on 15 April at Hurricane in *Baldwin* (RAD,LD,PT,JP). House Finches have spread to both Pensacola, FL, and Mobile in the last few years. In Pensacola, there were reports from 27 April (PT), 22 May (RAD), and 4 July (JP) of 1-2 birds. As many as 12 birds continued to frequent a Mobile residential area and probably were breeding (AD). Imhof banded 78 House Finches, mostly hatching-year birds, this season in Birmingham. No Purple Finches or Pine Siskins were reported this spring.

OBSERVERS: Alabama Ornithological Society, Gussie Arnett, Birmingham Audubon Society, Paul Blevins, Anna Bowden, Bill Bowden, Anne Delchamps, Lucy Duncan, Robert A. Duncan, R. Scot Duncan, Owen E. Fang, Gene Fleming, Mary F. Floyd, Paul Franklin, Venetia B. Friend, Ben C. Garmon, Bill Gericke, Jim Holmes, Gina M. Imhof, Thomas A. Imhof, Debra G. Jackson, Greg D. Jackson, Daniel R. Jacobson, Paul Johnson, Helen H. Kittinger, Donna Kittle, Paul Kittle, Paul Lehman, Mary Lou Mattis, Bob McKinney, Lane Merchant, Al D. Miller, Ann L. Miller, Dottie Miller, Phyllis Nofzinger, Michael Owens, Suzanne Owens, Johnny T. Parks, Dee Patterson, James Pfeiffer, G. Ned Piper, Jim Piper (JiP), John Piper (JoP), Bill Rogers, John C. Rolan, Rufus Rose, Martha G. Sargent, Robert R. Sargent, Bill Summerour, Sam Tagatz, Charlie Teagle, Fred Tetlow, Phil Tetlow, Lynnes N. Thompson, Mary Tiller, Ralph Tiller, Carol Ware, Donald Ware, Shirley Wayland, Marge Williams, Kenny Wright.

CORRIGENDUM: In the 1988 spring and summer column I indicated that the *Colbert* Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was the "sixth record in the spring south of Alaska." This should read the "fourth spring migration record south of Alaska."

Literature Cited

Drennen, Daniel. 1988. Ross' Goose (*Chen rossii*) observed on Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge. *Alabama Birdlife* 36: 1-2.

Summerour, Bill. 1988. Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) and Cackling Goose (*Branta canadensis minima*) seen at Lake Land Farms. *Alabama Birdlife* 36: 4-5.

Greg D. Jackson, 2220 Baneberry Dr., Birmingham, AL 35244