

SIGHTINGS: SPRING AND SUMMER 1999

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Spring and Summer 1999 offered mixed blessings for birders in the AOS area, depending on when and where one happened to be in the field. Those lucky enough to be at the coast for the AOS meeting enjoyed a diversity of birds not seen in years; this was especially true for warblers, with 34 species recorded 16-18 April following a strong front. Less fortunate souls, working the coast at different dates, might have regarded the spring as dull. Inland, birding was good in early May for passerines, but less favorable for shorebirds. As usual, several rarities peppered the field to keep things lively. After the transients departed, the most significant news was the continued steady increase in breeding (or probable breeding) for Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and Lark Sparrow inland, and the first nesting of Horned Lark in the coastal plain.

March was generally cooler than normal across the state, and rainfall was increased on the coast and normal elsewhere. April was warmer and drier than usual, and May was about average in both categories. Normal temperatures and increased rainfall were experienced in June. In most of the state, July was warm and dry, though it was slightly cooler than usual on the coast.

This report covers the period from March through July 1999 in Alabama and the Florida Panhandle (east to the Apalachicola River). The appearance of observations in this column does not suggest verification or acceptance of records for very rare species; these must be considered by the appropriate state records committees. All submissions of birds that are rare, either in general or for a particular season or region, must be accompanied by adequate details of the observation. The extent of this documentation depends on the rarity of the species and the difficulty of identification. For guidance, observers are encouraged to consult the recently-revised AOS checklist. Reports should note the conditions of observation and the diagnostic characters observed. Your help in this matter is appreciated.

Abbreviations and Italics: County names are in italics. "GC" = Gulf Coast (Alabama); "ICP" = Inland Coastal Plain (Alabama); "MR" = Mountain Region; "TV" = Tennessee Valley; "WP" = Western Panhandle of Florida (Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa Counties). Locations not specifying Florida are in Alabama. "AFB" = Air Force Base; "b." = banded; "*et al.*" = and others (small number); "m.ob." = many observers; "NF" = National Forest; "NWR" = National

Wildlife Refuge; "p.a." = pending acceptance by the state bird records committee; "ph." = photographed; "SP" = State Park; "v." = videotaped. Other abbreviations in parentheses correspond to observers listed at the end of this article.

LOONS – DUCKS

Red-throated Loon is now expected annually at Guntersville, *Marshall*, where one was spotted 8 April (LBR, RAR). Two or more **Pacific Loons** were rare treats in the Pensacola, FL, area this spring; singles were at Ft. Pickens, *Escambia*, 12-22 March (RAD, PCT), and near Gulf Breeze, *Santa Rosa*, beginning 29 April and continuing very late to 1 June (RAD, LRD, AF). Unusual in summer, especially in the MR, a Common Loon was at Oak Mountain SP, *Shelby*, 8 June (PR). Breeding Pied-billed Grebes are scarce, so adults with young 9 May in *Montgomery* (LFG) and 30 July in *Limestone* (DRC, RC) were noteworthy. An alternate-plumaged Horned Grebe 16-25 June at Ft. Walton Beach, *Okaloosa* (HK, DMW) provided only the second June record for the WP. Lone Eared Grebes were at separate sites in *Marshall* 4 March and 24 March - 8 April (RAR, LBR); this species is a sparse visitor inland. More expected were coastal birds 25-31 March at Dauphin I., *Mobile* (GEH, m.ob.), and 15-17 April at Bayou La Batre, *Mobile* (SWM *et al.*).

Anhinga is uncommon and localized in the southern part of our area, but two birds 4 May in *Marshall* (LBR, RAR) were exceptional. A Snowy Egret at Guntersville 7 May (LBR, RAR) was unusual, and eight were plentiful as early as 27 June in *Lowndes* (LFG *et al.*). After an extraordinary season in 1998, Wood Stork numbers returned to more normal levels this summer, with a high of 46 in *Hale* 10 July (SWM).

Snow Geese lingered to 4 May in *Montgomery* (CTS); one bird 9 May in Gadsden, *Etowah* (P&KW) set a late MR record. A rare Ross's Goose was in Fairhope, *Baldwin*, 12 April-1 May (MFF, m.ob., v.), establishing the latest departure for the state and only the fourth occurrence for the GC. The pair of Blue-winged Teal at Guntersville 31 May (B&WB) was either tardy or represented rare summering birds; even more unusual was the pair of N. Shovelers seen with the teal. Excluding scarce breeding records, the 25 Blue-winged Teal in *Hale* 21 July (GDJ) were the earliest for s. Alabama. Furnishing a second June WP record, a N. Shoveler was spotted 23 June at Pensacola, *Escambia* (AF).

A late Greater Scaup was at Bayou La Batre 16-17 April (SWM *et al.*). Twelve White-winged Scoters were notable 2 March at Ft. Pickens, FL (RAD, LRD); more significant was the individual 2 April at Guntersville (RAR),

establishing a late record for the state. Single tarrying Red-breasted Mergansers were seen 15 May in *Montgomery* (LFG), marking a new departure date for the ICP, and 31 May in Guntersville (B&WB). Finishing the parade of lingering waterfowl, a Ruddy Duck was at Ft. Walton Beach, FL, 16-25 June (HK, DMW).

RAPTORS - TERNS

Only the fifth for the WP, a **White-tailed Kite** was a surprise 2 March in Blackwater River State Forest, *Santa Rosa* (GB). Four Mississippi Kites were extremely early 13 March at Eglin AFB, *Okaloosa*, FL (DMW); another was locally rare 12 May in Lake Guntersville SP (LBR). Always an exciting find, the elusive Black Rail was spotted 17 April at Dauphin I. (GJH). Up to four King Rails were n. Alabama rarities 1-7 May in *Lauderdale* (JTG, TMH, SWM); three were very rare during the breeding season 27 June at Blackwater River Delta, *Santa Rosa*, FL (LRD, PCT). Representing a second June WP sighting, a Sora was noted 9 June at Ft. Walton Beach (HK).

Marking a new TV departure date, an alternate-plumaged Black-bellied Plover was discovered 11 June near Florence, *Lauderdale* (PDK). Another Black-bellied 6 and 12 July on Little Dauphin I., *Mobile* (KK) likely was a scarce summering bird. Huge numbers of Am. Golden-Plovers appeared in *Lowndes* this spring, with a peak of 237 establishing an Alabama maximum 20-21 March (SER, LFG *et al.*). A count of 102 golden-plovers 16 March at Ft. Walton Beach, FL (PCT, m.ob.) was noteworthy. Three Semipalmated Plovers and one Piping Plover at Little Dauphin I. 12 July (KK) probably were early migrants, with the latter setting a new early date for the state. The Am. Oystercatcher at Gulf Breeze 5 April (RAD) was only the 11th recorded for the WP; one at Navarre, *Santa Rosa*, 15 June (RR) gave the WP a first for June.

Scarce in the WP, 25 Am. Avocets were at Ft. Pickens 22 April (RAD, CD), and a dozen appeared at Pensacola 11 May (AF, DF); two avocets 20 July at Blakeley I., *Mobile* (LFG) represented either early arrivals or rare summering birds. A gathering of 35 Lesser Yellowlegs, 150 Least Sandpipers, 25 Pectoral Sandpipers, and nine Short-billed Dowitchers was unusual as early as 17 July in *Lowndes* (CTS, PS); the Pectorals set a new arrival date for the ICP. Rare inland, but especially at Guntersville, were two Willets 26 April (RAR). Three Marbled Godwits were noteworthy 22 April at Pensacola, FL (AF, DF). Tying an early state record, a White-rumped Sandpiper was spotted 16 April at Bayou La Batre (SWM, m.ob.). Other early shorebirds included a Stilt Sandpiper 20 July at Blakeley I. (LFG), and single Wilson's Phalaropes 1 April at Ft. Walton Beach, FL (PCT, m.ob.) and 16-17 April at Bayou La Batre (SWM, m.ob.). The first-

year **Black-legged Kittiwake** at Ft. Morgan, *Baldwin* 14 April was a great find, and only the 12th for Alabama (PCT, m.ob., p.a.). Locally rare was a Least Tern 31 May at Guntersville (B&WB).

OWLS - SWALLOWS

The longstanding Burrowing Owl colony at Eglin AFB, FL, was surveyed 31 July, with 15 individuals found, including six juveniles and two breeding pairs (PB, LF). A Short-eared Owl, erratic in our area, remained to 17 March at Key Cave NWR, *Lauderdale* (PDK, DEK, DJS). Earliest for inland Alabama, a Whip-poor-will was heard 5 March in Talladega NF, *Cleburne* (BS).

Rarely seen in spring, the Olive-sided Flycatcher in *Jackson* 20 May (GDJ, DGJ) established a new departure date for the state. Early, and only the seventh in spring for the GC, a calling Least Flycatcher was documented 17 April at Dauphin I. (LFG, SER). Five E. Phoebes in n.e. *Autauga* 22 May (SER) represented a good number in the breeding season south of the Fall Line. A male Vermilion Flycatcher was a fine surprise in *Monroe* 16 April (C&JS, ph.); the occurrence established the latest of nine inland records of this western stray. For a fifth WP record of the species complex, a silent **Tropical/Couch's Kingbird** appeared 14 June at Gulf Breeze (RAD, p.a.); strangely, *three* were seen last summer at this spot. Western Kingbirds are scarce in spring, even on the outer coast; one was at Ft. Morgan 6 April (LRD, m.ob.), and a late bird was at Gulf Breeze 10 May (RAD).

A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher 9 March at Dauphin I. (PRb) was unusual at that early date. Breeding and summering Scissor-taileds are gradually increasing inland in Alabama, particularly in the TV and ICP. This May and June we had seven reports of pairs or single birds. In the TV, these included two sites in *Morgan* (SWM, HHK, CDC *et al.*) and four spots in *Madison* (KW, DRC, RC, JM). Lone Scissor-taileds were unusual 13 June in *Blount* (DB) and *Lee* (BB). Rare-but-regular in spring on the outer coast, three Black-whiskered Vireos were at Ft. Morgan 3-18 April (RRS, m.ob., two b.); singles were noted in Florida 28 April at Ft. Pickens (MR, HH) and the next day at Gulf Breeze (RAD). Unusually late was a Black-whiskered 1-2 June at Gulf Breeze (RAD, LRD).

Horned Lark is rare at any time in the southern portion of our territory, so at least eight birds in *Lowndes* this spring and summer were a surprise (TAP, LFG, CTS, m.ob., ph.). More amazing was the documented nesting by several larks, producing young, the first breeding known for the ICP. A Tree Swallow 10 June on the Tennessee R. in *Limestone* (JTG) was very unusual; the species breeds only casually in n. Alabama. A single concentration of 300 N. Rough-winged

Swallows at Demopolis, *Marengo*, was unusual as early as 4 July (SER). Also ahead of schedule was a Bank Swallow 20 July at Blakeley I. (LFG). Setting new early records for the WP, single Cliff and Barn swallows were sighted 3 March at Ft. Walton Beach (PCT, m.ob.). Cliff Swallow appears to be continuing the southward expansion of the inland population, with two new breeding sites discovered this summer. A colony of 20 birds was at Alexander City, *Tallapoosa*, 12 June (SER), and at least eight were nesting in Demopolis 4 July (SER); the latter site represents the southernmost inland extension known in the state.

WRENS - FINCHES

Rarely reported in spring in the TV, a Sedge Wren was present 1-7 May in *Lauderdale* (JTG, TMH, SWM). The Ruby-crowned Kinglet 15 May in *Montgomery* (CTS, PS) set a new late date for Alabama; also late was a Swainson's Thrush 20 May in *Marshall* (GDJ). American Robin is a rare nesting species in the WP, so 10-20 birds in n. Pensacola in May were unusual; nesting was confirmed 10 May (DT, PCT). Uncommon as a breeder in the ICP, three Gray Catbirds were found in s.e. *Autauga* and *Elmore* 16-23 May (SER). Cedar Waxwing breeds sparingly in n. Alabama; this June birds were found in three locations in *Limestone* and *Morgan*, with feeding of dependent young observed at one site (all CDC).

Rare in spring, a Nashville Warbler was at Monte Sano SP, *Madison*, 2 May (GDJ). Cape May Warbler is regular in spring in most of the state, but ICP records are scarce; single birds were in *Montgomery* 7 April (CTS, PS) and 1-2 May (LFG), the former setting a new early date. Also ahead of the pack was a Blackburnian Warbler 7 April in *Montgomery* (CTS, PS); five noted at Monte Sano SP 2 May (GDJ, DGJ) represented a good single-site count for spring.

An organized effort was made this year to detect nesting Cerulean Warblers. Formerly a locally uncommon breeder in north and central Alabama, recent nesting season records outside the Bankhead NF, particularly the Sipsey Wilderness Area, have been scarce. Despite use of taped songs, only one site was found outside the Bankhead; a territorial pair was located 24 May along Rock Creek, s.w. *Colbert* (TMH, MA, PDK, DJS), at a site where a singing male had been noted in June 1997 (TMH). Though not all possible sites were checked this year, the perception of a marked decrease in the species as a breeder here seems to have been correct. The only bright spot was the detection of moderate numbers of Ceruleans in the Sipsey Wilderness Area stronghold (ES).

Swainson's Warbler is difficult to find in the TV, so the returning bird 19 April-17 May at Wheeler NWR, *Morgan* (CDC) was notable. Two rare Mourning

Warblers were heard, one in *Jefferson* 16 May (PR) and another in *Morgan* 18 May (HHK, MD, PK).

Analogous to the increase in Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Lark Sparrow is becoming more prominent as a breeder in the TV and ICP. This season showed birds returning to two locations in *Lawrence* (SWM, HHK *et al.*); at least five new sites were discovered in *Morgan* (MSG, CDC, m.ob.), *Madison* (DRC, RC), and *Lawrence* (SWM). A juvenile Lark Sparrow 21 July near Marion, *Perry* (GDJ, DGJ) could have originated locally. The Seaside Sparrow 7 July at Gulf Breeze (RAD) must have been a bizarre sight in a coastal woods. Lincoln's Sparrow is rare in spring on the coast, and the bird 7 April at Ft. Morgan (RRS *et al.*) was either an early migrant or a wintering bird. It was a stunning spring for Painted Bunting, with 131 of these jewels banded at Ft. Morgan 3-18 April (RRS *et al.*). On 16 April alone, 59 Painteds were banded at Fort Morgan; combined with a minimum of 21 birds on Dauphin I. (GDJ, DGJ, m.ob.), at least 80 were recorded that day, setting a new Alabama maximum.

Continuing a trend in the last few years of minimal visitation along the coast, two Shiny Cowbirds were reported, both from the WP; one was at Ft. Pickens, 14 May (RAD), and another appeared at Gulf Breeze on the unusual date of 8 July (RAD). Baltimore Oriole winters only rarely in our region, so one from mid-February to 2 April in Guntersville (RAR, LBR) was a surprise. Extremely unusual was the **Bullock's Oriole** 24 April at Clay, *Jefferson* (RRS, MBS, p.a.), furnishing the latest inland record and tying the state departure record. Bill Summerour devoted considerable time and effort over the last year documenting the first known nesting of Red Crossbill in Alabama. Eight nests were discovered from winter into early summer in *Cleburne*; details will be published separately.

Cited Observers (area compilers in boldface): Moez Ali, Barbara Ballantine, Gray Bass, Pam Bowen, Bobby & Wally Brown, Duane Brown, C. Dwight Cooley, Dean R. Cutten, Raelene Cutten, Martha Dagg, Chris Depkin, Lucy R. Duncan, **Robert A. Duncan (Florida)**, Lenny Fenimore, Mary F. Floyd, Ann Forster, Dan Forster, Larry F. Gardella, Jeff T. Garner, M. Scott Gravette, Tom M. Haggerty, Greg J. Harber, Geoff E. Hill, Hud Huddleston, Debra G. Jackson, **Greg D. Jackson (Alabama)**, Keith Kimmerle, Helene King, Peggy King, Helen H. Kittinger, Donna E. Kittle, Paul D. Kittle, John McBride, Steve W. McConnell, Tommy A. Pratt, Shawn E. Reed, Linda B. Reynolds, Richard A. Reynolds, Paul Rodelaub (PRb), Marilu Rose, Rufus Rose, Pelham Rowan,

Martha B. Sargent, Robert R. Sargent, Damien J. Simbeck, Carolyn T. Snow, Phil Snow, Eric Soehren, Claire & Jim Stallworth, Bill Summerour, Phil C. Tetlow, Dana Timmons, Ken Ward, Donald M. Ware, Phillip & Karen White.

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ERRATUM

The following error should be corrected in the papers "Observations of nesting Eurasian Collard-Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*) in Gulf Breeze, Florida" and "Summer Sightings (June-July, 1998)" published in *Alabama Birdlife* 45, No. 2. Gulf Breeze is in Santa Rosa County, not Escambia County.