FALL MIGRATION 1990
1 August to 30 November

George “Terry” Hall, Seasonal Editor

At the risk of sounding trite, words like average, lackluster or uneventful may be applicable to fall 1990, but for this editor as I try for the first time to make some sense of the data, such generalizations are not appropriate. I found the task exciting and challenging, if frustrating at times, for it was difficult to pin down any definite trends, and so I present the data without much “editorial” comment. Each season has highlights and this one was no exception with two new state records, several rare shorebird sightings and some excellent banding and hawkwatch data. This occurred with no major weather systems to affect migration.

August was warm and wet, with heavy rains and thunderstorms in the first two weeks and again late in the month. Birders along Lake Champlain found an adult LAUGHING GULL in Burlington on the 9th, and then 2 juvenile BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKES which were well photographed near Sandbar Causeway in South Hero on the 20th, as well as the first Little Gulls of the season. An optimistic report of a hen Spruce Grouse with 3 nearly grown young came from the Yellow Bogs area in August, and further highlights include numerous and widely scattered reports of Great Egret throughout the southern part of Vermont.

In general, the weather was cooler and drier in September with a couple of cold fronts affecting conditions in the first ten days and again in mid-month, with more storms in the third week. Each of these fronts produced some heavy rain and winds, and perhaps enhanced some passerine fallouts, noticed at banding stations active at Woodstock and West Brattleboro. On 9/14, both KENTUCKY and Connecticut Warbler were banded at Goodenough Road, West Brattleboro. The Kentucky was a 7th state record; a female netted within a few hundred yards of the place where singing males have been recorded twice in spring in the last few years. Also in the southern part of the state, a SANDHILL CRANE was observed flying over the Winhall Hawk Watch on the 16th, on the heels of a cold front; and an adult LITTLE BLUE HERON seen in a small pond behind a school in Manchester 9/4 was carefully described. A “pelagic” trip on Lake Champlain produced an adult LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL off Grand Isle as further testimony to how productive Dick Lavallee’s frequent excursions on the lake can be.

Waterfowl activity picked up in October, as did the weather. This month was the wettest October on record for New England, and a major storm moved through on the 18th, producing high winds and heavy rain statewide, to be followed by a hard freeze and then another storm system producing flood warnings for heavy rain. The highlight this month was the banding of one and a half flocks of Snow Geese near Retreat Meadows. Also in November, the vanguard of Northern Shrikes arrived, in what became one of the biggest invasions into the region in years, and last but not least was a CLAY-COLORED SPARROW seen near the banding station (but not netted) in West Brattleboro.

The total number of species reported to Records of Vermont Birds this fall is 242, a good number, above average. Trends as detailed by banders and hawkwatchers tended to be fairly positive with excellent days in October producing some station highs of warblers and sparrows, but noting the near absence of northern finches. An “unprecedented success” described the 1990 hawkwatch season, as stations were fully manned and records meticulously kept and published, providing a sound basis from which to measure future trends. Over 7800 raptors were tallied, the highest ever for Vermont and hopefully due to healthy populations as well as increased coverage. I look forward to subsequent falls and the ability to compare from year to year in this dynamic and exciting season.

*Consideration by the Vermont Birds Records Committee pending.
Only 5 Red-throated Loons were reported this autumn, a number that is a mere average total for Lake Champlain (hereafter LC) than the unprecedented 26 birds found there in 1989. Three juv. were found on a lake survey on 10/27 between Charlotte and Bridgeport (WGE, NLM, RBL), 1 off Addison 12/3 (DLC) and 1 picked up on a road in Winooski and later euthanized due to trauma to the head or nervous system (JSE, SBN, VRC). Of the 402 Common Loons reported, 35 were on inland lakes, including 13 on Neal Pond, Lunenberg on 11/3 (RGY). A high count of 209 found on 11/20 included 105 from St. Albans Bay, 82 from Swanton and 22 from the Georgia area of LC (RBL, BSR, GEH) representing a late peak although loons primarily feed on the lake through August and later, when reports of Pied-billed Grebes were received: a total of 15 with a high of 4 at Herrick Cove (hereafter HC) on 10/22 (DHC, NGE) and the latest reported from the Vermont area of the Connecticut River (hereafter CR) a single bird on 11/6 (JJC). Horned Grebe stayed in numbers on LC with 542 birds reported mostly in November, except the high total of 175 recorded on the lake 10/27 (WGE, NLM, RBL). Other notable counts were 79 in Shelburne on 11/1 (RBL) and 100 at Potsa Bay on 11/9 (JAP). Although these grebes will stay on LC until freezeup, the last report for the period was 1 off Charlotte on 11/26 (MBN). The 2 on L. Hortonia, a small inland lake, 11/18 (RWP), may have been pushing their luck. The earliest of the 59 Red-necked Grebes reported were singles off Chittenden 9/20 and 9/21 on LC (RBL, JGC, RBL). A high of 15+ birds off Grand Isle was found 11/7 (DLC), and notable sightings away from LC were: up to 2 on L. Bomoseen 11/18 (CJF, RWP), 2 on L. St. Catherine on 11/14 (CCR) and 2 on 11/21 on Caspian L., Greensboro (FO). The only report of Great Cormorant was of an imm. on L. Hamphreymagog with 7 Double-crests on 11/4 (DLC), the same location as last year’s bird. It would appear that Double-crested Cormorants have increased significantly, but numbers reported do not reflect the total numbers on LC. Of the nearly 2000 reported, fully 1750 were seen on boat surveys between August and November (RBL, WGE, NLM). On 8/20 counts made around the major nesting sites where large numbers of birds stage, revealed 670 around Young Isl. and another 380 near New York’s Four Brothers Isl. In the last report of Fronted Goose received (JBG) there were no other reported sightings for the latter species. About 190 Great Blue Heron were reported by 31 observers from Young Island where they have bred. One bird on 11/29 (SAC). Cattle Egret also breeds on Young Island where 11 were counted on 8/20 (WGE, RBL, NLM) and a high of 51 was counted in the Grand Isle area on 8/18 (DJH). Notable was 1 seen in Shaftsbury 8/12 (BCO), and the latest seen were 10 9/8 and 2 9/9 on Grand Isle (DJH). Green-backed Heron was well reported, although 30 of the 70 reported were estimated to be at NHWR in September. Highs of 5 at East Slang Ferrisburgh on 8/20 (JID, MCD) and between Williamstown and Berlin on 9/1 (WGE, NLM, LRB, DHC, TEJ) were significant, but the latest records were of injured birds: one found 10/24 along Tweed River, Pittsfield with a 10" stick through the abdomen, and one found in Rutland 11/15 after hitting a building, both sent to VNC but later died. Black-crowned Night-Heron was sighted only 7 times, except for an estimated 40 at NHWR for September (JBG), with a high of 10 at DCMN 9/1 (WGE, NLM, LRB, DHC, TEJ), and the latest at the LaPlatte R. Marsh Shelburne, an imm. 10/6 (WGE et al.).
on 10/27, an imm. at close range but in fading light, making photography unsuccessful (WGE,NLM). Subsequent observers reported a confusing array of ages and numbers. Detailed reports were received of an ad. on 10/29 (JAP) and an imm. on 11/25 (BMP). Reports of 2 on 11/4 and 1 ad. with 2 imm. on 10/30 were not accompanied by documentation. A total of over 32,000 Canada Geese was tallied for the period, most reports being of large flocks moving down LC and at DCMWA. A single high count of 5964 on LC 10/2 resulted from a Fea and Friends Day at DCMWA (hereafter VFWD) count (WJC). Earliest movements were in the second week of September with 12 over Dorset (EFG), 14 over West Bolton (MC), 7 in Chester (CEAD), 20 in Winhall (WJN) and 14 over Grand Isle (DJH). Peak numbers in October included 4,000 at DCMWA (JRA),(WJC) and 360+ in Grand Isle (RBL, DKL), with geese remaining in the area through the period. November counts included nearly 900 individuals, as high as 1000 at Grand Isle (RBL) and the latest a remarkable 2 on 11/21 from Caspian L. Greensboro (FO). The more modest Common Goldeneye breeds in small numbers in Vermont bays and one count was of 128 on LC on 8/1 (JBG); most other reports of the 947 tallied were in November. A high count of 102 in Swanton on 11/10 (GEHa,RBL,BLR) was normal for LC, and in addition there were 40 on L. St. Catherine 11/14 (CCR), 25 on L. Bonoseen 11/18 (CFJ) and 42 on L. Hortonia 11/24 (RWP). Barrow's Goldeneye usually appears a bit later, so 2 seen on northern lakes is noteworthy: 1 on L. Memphremagog 11/4 (DLC), and a drake on Caspian L., Greensboro 11/21 was present for a week (FO). Birders reported 124 Bufflehead and 20 more were estimated at DNNR 9/28 and 10/25 (JBG). Peak numbers were 9 in the Shelburne/Burlington area 11/1 (RBL), 21 on Danby Pond 11/18 (CFJ), and 9 in Charlotte 11/21 and 11/27 (SSW, MBN). Good numbers of Hooded Merganser came in, with a high of 60 on L. Memphre 11/4 (DLC), and 60 estimated at DNNR around 10/30 (JBG). Of the total 375 sightings, L. Bonoseen held the highest numbers, with 45 11/18 (CFJ), 40 11/20 (FAP) and 34 11/24 (RWP) - good consistent counts by 3 independent observers of presumably the same birds. One bird in Weybridge 11/30 was the late report (SSW). Common Merganser was scarce, although on 10/12 an ad. was reported, 5 at L. St. Albans Bay 11/1 (JBG), but was reported only 3 more times by birders: single birds at Springwater Nature Area on 9/13 (WJN), the mouth of the Ompompanoosuc R. Norwich on 11/17 (DHC) and Bellows Falls 11/24 (MWB,DC). Outside of DNNR, where Gadwall estimates were 100 9/28 and 30 10/4 (JBG), birders counted 24 more, 18 in the Champlain Islands (DJH), 1 in Springfield 9/15 (WJN), 1 at DCMWA 10/10 (CFJ), 4 more on LC through period, with over 1850 birds counted. Notable were 400 on L. Memphremagog 11/21 (FO) and 72 on L. Pinneo, Quechee 11/29 (JHN). Normally much rarer, Red-breasted Merganser put in an astonishing appearance where 1500+ were counted in Addison 11/3 (DLC) and other scattered reports came in through mid-November including 40 in Grand Isle 11/3 (DJH), 12 in Shelburne (RWB and Erin Charles, RHL), while another late report 11/21 (SSW). The only Buckley Duck report was of one at Retreat Meadows in Brattleboro on 11/10 (JJC).

VULTURES, HAWKS AND FALCONS

Turkey Vulture numbers increased in 1990, with 198 reported from hawk watches, and another 233 elsewhere. Highs were of 15 over New Haven 9/14 (JRA) and Sallisbury (JBG), 10 over LC at DCMWA (CFJ), 4 at Swanton 9/15 (FAP) and 11 at Orwell 9/24 (BWP) and DCMWA 10/17 (SSW), and the latest a remarkable 2 on 11/16 in Reading (FPH, GEH). Osgrey was well reported, with 175 from hawkwatchers and another 70 by birders statewide, of no more than 3 at any time. The latest report was of 1 bird at Grand Isle 10/31 (RBL) (but see the Winter FAV). The exciting regularity of Bald Eagle in Vermont was again borne out, with 27 reported for the period, 12 from hawk watches, and 15 others scattered throughout the season. Hawk watches recorded 143 of the total 240 Northern Harriers, with most of the remaining birds (at least 60) seen at or near DCMWA by 11 observers. A high of 10 at DCMWA 11/11 (DLC) is notable, and the latest report was of 1 bird in the same area 11/30 (JAP).