

Van Dyk

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### Spring 1997 Report

Note: For most of the period I was in Sioux Center, so had a better than average shot at keeping tabs on the bird situation here in the far northwest of Iowa. However, from late April to mid-May I was overseas (in Western Europe and Russia -- unfortunately very little time for birding!), so I missed a key period of the spring migration (as well as the convention in Sioux City).

#### Weather for the Period:

March began with mild weather (42 on March 3) but soon returned to below-normal temperatures (-1 on March 5). Still water remained frozen until the third week of March, when open water appeared in ponds and quarries. The only open water available in early March was restricted to patches in the big rivers and at Winterfeld in Rock Valley, where the water is kept open (in part) artificially. Meanwhile, a heavy snow and ice cover stayed in place until the second week of March, when a significant melt-down began (e.g., the high for March 10 was 53 degrees). However, patches of snow and snow banks remained until the very end of the month. A cold snap on March 14 brought wind chills down to -30 and the temperature dropped to 5 degrees on the 15th. This arctic blast froze up the water once again and significantly slowed the waterfowl migration (and the predicted spring flooding). On the 18th we received 2 inches of wet snow. But then a quick warm-up began: On the 20th we reached 63 degrees in Sioux Center. Shortly thereafter the big rivers began to flood, although the dire predictions for record flooding did not materialize. Warmest days of the month: 74 degrees on March 26, 77 on March 27, and 74 on March 31. In general, precipitation in March was much below normal. By the end of the month, flood waters began to recede.

April began with a sweet smile: 73 degrees on April 1. Nevertheless, in shaded places deep snow banks and some frozen water remained into the first week of this month. Sustained rains during the first week of the month contributed to the moderate to serious flooding of the Big Sioux and Rock Rivers. On April 5 and 6 both springtime and the migration came to a virtual standstill: After a day of heavy rain (1 and 1/4 inches) an arctic front came through, changing the rain to snow, dropping wind chills to just

below zero, and ushering in roaring northwest winds of between 50 and 60 miles an hour, thus creating blizzard conditions. An arctic high settled in during the next week, bringing in unseasonable cold, even record low temperatures (11 degrees, windchill -27 on April 8). On April 9-10 we received about 6 inches of snow. This did not melt until April 14. Bird feeders were jammed! Undoubtedly many early migrants perished. Especially the birdline from South Dakota (where conditions were similar) reported many dead and dying birds. Snow banks remained in our area until April 23. At the very end of the month the temps warmed up into the 70's.

May turned out to be both cold and wet. Although I was gone for the first half of the month, the reports were not good, and upon my return I was surprised to find that the leafing out of the trees had not progressed all that much. At the end of May we experienced heavy rains and unseasonably cold and windy weather (Memorial Day weekend was a wash-out). Consequently, the passerine migrants were generally very late. At the very end of the month it warmed up considerably, creating an impressive rush of birds. May 28, 29, and 30 saw excellent warbler migrations. Temperatures were in the 80's on May 30 and 31.

Summary of Unusual Sightings - for details see below (bold-faced species):

- Western Sandpiper -- rare spring migrant
- Pectoral Sandpiper -- very early for this area
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet -- a bit early
- Gray-cheeked Thrush -- very late
- Swainson's Thrush -- very late
- Solitary Vireo -- very late
- Philadelphia Vireo -- very late
- Blue-winged Warbler -- rare spring migrant
- Orange-crowned Warbler -- very late
- Field Sparrow -- quite early
- Harris's Sparrow -- very late
- Eastern Meadowlark -- out of range



Observations (following your list in Summer 1996 Iowa Bird Life):

- ✓ - Pied-billed Grebe: First one was at Hawarden on March 28. They probably nest in the ponds south of Doon (Lyon County, just north of the Sioux County border), as I saw them there regularly right through May 30.
- American White Pelican: First ones over Sioux Center were reported on April 14. On May 30 a late flock of 12 were at the south pits in Hawarden.
- ✓ - Double-crested Cormorant: First ones were at Hawarden and Rock Valley on March 28. One was still at Hawarden on May 30, and two came flying over my house on May 31 (these three were all light-breasted individuals).
- Great Blue Heron: Rather late arrivals. It was not seen in Sioux County until April 2.
- ✓ - Great Egret: First one was at Hawarden on March 28.
- ✓ - Cattle Egret: One was at Doon (Lyon County) on May 17.
- Green Heron: First observed on May 30.
- Greater White-fronted Goose: On March 13 several dozen were mixed in with a flock of 100+ Canada Geese in flooded fields along County road B-30 between the Rock and Big Sioux Rivers in western Sioux County, an area to be developed as a wetland. (An arctic blast froze over these fields the next day, and drove away the waterfowl.) On the 15th half a dozen or so White-fronted Geese were with 100+ Canadians in a bend of the Big Sioux River just south of Hawarden. A flock of a dozen or so was over Rock Valley on March 26.
- ✓ - Snow Goose: The first flocks were reported from western Sioux County on March 9. They were not conspicuous until the second half of March. Excellent migration from then on, into the first week of April.

- Canada Goose: Migrating birds were in the air on March 3. A very good migration during virtually all of March.
- Wood Duck: They returned to Sioux Center on March 23. They were in Rock Valley on March 26.
- Green-winged Teal: They were present in flooded areas by March 21, and conspicuous during the next several weeks.
- Northern Pintail: Several dozen were in flooded fields in western Sioux County on March 13. By March 17 there were at least 200+ of them in the same area. The one that wintered in Rock Valley continued there until mid-March.
- Blue-winged Teal: They were at Rock Valley on the somewhat early date of March 26.
- Northern Shoveler: A flock of a dozen or so flew over my house on March 21. They were present in most of the watery places in Sioux County during the final week of March.
- Gadwall: Many had arrived in Sioux County (mostly in flooded fields) by March 13.
- American Wigeon: Last one observed on April 25.
- Canvasback: By March 21 they were plentiful in western Sioux County.
- Redhead: Arrived by March 21.
- Ring-necked Duck: Had arrived by mid-March.
- Lesser Scaup: Arrived at Rock Valley on March 6. A few were still in Sioux County on May 17. One was at Rock Valley on May 30.
- Common Goldeneye: Still present on April 4.
- Bufflehead: Arrived by March 21. Still present on April 17.

- Hooded Merganser: There were four in two different places by Hawarden on March 28. In early April some could be seen in almost every small pond in Sioux County. In other words: a very good migration. It seems to me this species has become increasingly common over the last 10 years or so.
- Common Merganser: At least 15 were observed in the Big Sioux River near Oak Grove Park on March 9. Several dozen were at Hawarden on March 21. Last ones observed on April 4.
- ✓ - Ruddy Duck: They were at Rock Valley on the somewhat early date of March 26. There were some 75 of them at Rock Valley on March 29. Two (females) were at Hawarden on May 30.
- ✓ - Turkey Vulture: First ones observed in western Sioux County on April 15.
- Bald Eagle: By March 7 the migration was under way. On this date two adults and one immature were in Sioux County well away from the big rivers. On March 9 there were at least six in Oak Grove Park. From then on -- until early April -- they were "all over the place"!
- Northern Harrier: The migration was under way by March 28, when several were moving through Sioux County.
- ✓ - Sharp-shinned Hawk: An individual hung out in Sioux Center for most of the winter. It was in my yard on March 14.
- ✓ - Cooper's Hawk: First one observed in Sioux County on April 15.
- Red-tailed Hawk: By mid-March this species became very plentiful. In some areas of Sioux County two or three could be observed from a single vantage point. Near the big rivers one could observe at least one per mile of road.
- Rough-legged Hawk: One was in extreme western Sioux County on March 13. Another one was five miles west of Sioux Center on March 15. Still another one was at the south edge of Sioux Center on March 22.
- American Kestrel: As usual, their numbers began to increase sharply during the second half of March.



- Gray Partridge: As I indicated in my winter report, this species seems to be doing a little better in our area. They are easier to find this year than during the past several years.
- Killdeer: The first migrant reported in Sioux County was calling overhead on March 9. By March 21 they were just about everywhere.
- ✓ - American Avocet: Five were along the bank of a quarry five miles south of Sioux Center on May 23.
- ✓ - Greater Yellowlegs: First ones observed were three near Rock Valley on April 4.
- ✓ - **Western Sandpiper:** On May 23 I observed two of these sandpipers together with some Semipalmated and White-rumped Sandpipers (and a Baird's Sandpiper nearby) on a mudflat at the South Pits in Hawarden. They were about 30 yards away. The light was good, and I could observe them at leisure though my balscope. I noted the following points of identification: Size about like the Semipalmated (definitely smaller than the White-rumps and Baird's); dark legs; streaked breast; and the bill: longer than those of the Semipalmated, and clearly slightly drooping at the tip. The difference in bill shape between the Western and Semipalmated was quite conspicuous, even unmistakable. Given the size, leg color, and shape of bill, I rule out Semipalmated, Least, Baird's, White-rumped -- as well as Curlew Sandpiper, and Dunlin. (Though, admittedly, at times no easy task, I have considerable experience separating Semipalmated from Western Sandpipers in California, .)
- White-rumped Sandpiper: Last flock (of about 20) observed on May 28.
- ✓ - **Pectoral Sandpiper:** Two individuals were at the South Pits in Hawarden on the very early date of March 21. I was preparing to write a documentation when, on my return home, I checked your book and found that it is not unusual for this species to be early. This is certainly the earliest I have seen them here in northwest Iowa.
- ✓ - Franklin's Gull: An early individual in full breeding color was near Rock Valley on March 28. On April 9 several were at Rock Valley. Still present in Sioux County on May 19.

- Bonaparte's Gull: One still in winter dress was at Doon on the early date of March 28.
- Ring-billed Gull: The first migrants arrived in our area on March 21. On March 28 there were hundreds of Ring-bills throughout the county.
- Herring Gull: An immature was at Rock Valley on April 9.
- Mourning Dove: First reported in Sioux Center on March 3. These could have been wintering birds or early migrants. They arrived in full force on March 22.
- Black-billed Cuckoo: The first one was at the west edge of Sioux Center on May 29.
- Yellow-billed Cuckoo: Not heard or observed during the period.
- Common Nighthawk: Very late -- I saw the first one on May 29.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: Last one observed in western Sioux County on May 17.
- Olive-sided Flycatcher: One was observed in Sioux Center on May 17.
- Yellow-bellied Flycatcher: Exceptionally common -- maybe the cold rainy weather kept them low and thus more visible. I saw at least half a dozen during the last two weeks of May.
- Empidonax: Excellent migration. During the cold rainy weather in the last week of May they could be seen flycatching in lawns and low places. On May 31 they were still clearly migrating in large numbers (in the fields to the east of my home they were still lined up on the fence wires). All calling flycatchers were Least Flycatchers.
- Western Kingbird: One was in western Sioux County on May 21.
- Purple Martin: They arrived in Sioux Center on the very late day of April 22.



- Tree Swallow: Arrived rather late. First observed on April 16. The other species of swallow, too, arrived late.
- ✓ - Red-breasted Nuthatch: The wintering female was still at my feeders by March 21. (The male died during a January blizzard -- see my winter report.)
- Sedge Wren: One was singing on its usual territory near Oak Grove Park on May 23. On May 30 I was at the area again but did not hear any.
- ✓ - **Ruby-crowned Kinglet:** Three individuals in my yard on the rather early date of April 5. High point for this species: On April 25 and 26 they were all over the place (at one point about half a dozen in a single tree in my yard).
- Eastern Bluebird: A rather late migration. Not observed in Sioux County until April 2.
- ✓ - **Gray-cheeked Thrush:** Much less plentiful than Swainson's this spring. One was still in my yard on May 31.
- **Swainson's Thrush:** Excellent migration. They were plentiful during the last half of May. Many still around on May 29. On May 31 I saw at least three in my yard.
- ✓ - Hermit Thrush: Arrived in Sioux Center on April 18.
- Wood Thrush: Many individuals singing along the big rivers in western Sioux County in the third week of May.
- American Robin: Arrived in Sioux County on March 8.
- ✓ - Northern Shrike: This has been a banner year for this species (see my winter report). They continued to be relatively easy to find in March. One was six miles southwest of Rock Valley on March 7. On March 13 I saw one in extreme western Sioux County (about 15 miles west-north-west of Sioux Center). On March 15 another one was at the outskirts of Rock Valley. I studied each one of these birds closely and carefully, to make sure they were indeed lingering Northerns and not early Loggerheads.



- Loggerhead Shrike: One was just south of Hawarden on May 21. Another one north of Hawarden on May 30.
- Vireos and Warblers: The migration was late, but good towards the very end of May. Some notes on some vireos and warblers:
  - **Solitary Vireo:** Last one observed in my neighbor's yard on the very late date of May 30. The bird was singing. This matches some of the record late dates for this species as recorded in your book.
  - **Yellow-throated Vireo:** One was in Oak Grove Park on May 23, and still singing in the same area on May 30. .
  - **Philadelphia Vireo:** Common this spring. I observed them in my yard, in town, and in Oak Grove Park. Last one observed (in my yard) on May 31. This, too, equals one of the record late dates for this species.
  - **Blue-winged Warbler:** I found one of these rare migrants in Oak Grove Park on May 29. The bird was very conspicuous in a hedge row. It was hard to confuse the bird with anything else: Yellow underparts, bluish wings with two wing bars, and a black line through the eye in a yellow head. This is the first time I see this warbler in Iowa. I have seen it on numerous occasions in New York State and in Michigan.
  - **Tennessee Warbler:** Still in Sioux Center on May 31.
  - **Orange-crowned Warbler:** A late migrant was in Oak Grove Park on May 29. Close to a new late date record?
  - **Chestnut-sided Warbler:** Particularly abundant this spring. High points in the migration: May 28 and 29.
  - **Magnolia Warbler:** This species was absent during most of May, until on May 29, 30, and 31 they were literally everywhere.
  - **American Redstart:** Exceptionally abundant. Females easily outnumbered males -- still, I got quite a few calls inquiring what those "little orioles" were!

- Ovenbird: Unusually plentiful: several individuals still marching about in my yard on May 31. Normally they have sought out woodsier areas by then.
- Mourning Warbler: Arrived unusually early: the first individual was in my yard on May 18, ahead of the earlier and more common warblers. They were particularly conspicuous at the very end of May. On May 30 I saw at least six (at Hawarden, at the Big Sioux-Rock River public access, and in my yard). On May 31 there were at least three, possibly four in my yard.
- Wilson's Warbler: Unusually abundant this spring, especially in the third week of May.
- Blue Grosbeak: First one observed near Sioux Center on May 23.
- Dickcissel: Very late -- I did not see it until May 29.
- American Tree Sparrow: Excellent migration during the first half of March. Flocks of 25+ birds were still migrating at Rock Valley on April 9. Last ones observed on April 12.
- Chipping Sparrow: Arrived on April 20.
- Clay-colored Sparrow: Normally this species is a common migrant here in the northwest. But this spring their numbers seemed reduced. Perhaps the big waves moved through during the time I was gone (first half of May).
- **Field Sparrow**: One was singing in the vicinity of the Rock Wildlife Area northwest of Rock Valley on the very early date of April 2. Several were in the vicinity of Oak Grove Park on April 4.
- Vesper Sparrow: First ones observed in Sioux County on April 4.
- Savannah Sparrow: Arrived rather late on April 25. One was in western Sioux County on May 30.
- Grasshopper Sparrow: Back on territory on May 23.



- ✓ - **Fox Sparrow:** The first one in my yard appeared on March 29. On April 2 at least half a dozen were in a small patch of shrubbery near Rock Valley, some of them singing loudly. Last one observed on April 11.
- **Lincoln's Sparrow:** Arrived April 29.
- **White-throated Sparrow:** Arrived on the late date of April 27. Lingered until May 20.
- ✓ - **Harris's Sparrow:** One returned to my feeders on March 8. This may have been a wintering resident, rather than a migrant. By March 20 their numbers began to increase. Flocks of 12+ were in bushy areas around Rock Valley on April 2. A very late individual was at Oak Grove on May 30.
- ✓ - **Dark-eyed Junco:** One brightly colored individual of the Oregon race was at my feeders March 17 to 29. Last ones ("slate-colored") observed on April 27.
- ✓ - **Lapland Longspur:** Flocks of 100-200 birds were roaming through Sioux County on March 28, and even larger flocks were noted on April 8.
- **Red-winged Blackbird:** The wintering residents were at my feeders during the first week of March (March 8). Migrating flocks were first observed in Sioux Center on March 10.
- ✓ - **Eastern Meadowlark:** On March 17 I found one singing along County Road B-30 two miles east of the Rock River in western Sioux County. To add an interesting touch, the bird flew from its post and landed along the road right next to a Western Meadowlark, allowing a fine comparison between the lighter upper parts of the Western and the darker upper parts of the Eastern. This is the first time I have found an Eastern Meadowlark in Sioux County. To my knowledge, the closest colony of Easterns is near Sioux City in Woodbury County.
- ✓ - **Western Meadowlark:** They began singing on March 17.

- Rusty Blackbird: Very good migration. They were plentiful in most of the bushy, shrubby watery (flooded) places in Sioux County during the second half of March and into April. Still plentiful by April 9.
- Common Grackle: The wintering resident was at my feeders during the first week of March (March 8). Migrating flocks were first observed on March 9.
- Brown-headed Cowbird: First ones were in Sioux County on March 28.
- Pine Siskin: An occasional individual or pair visited our feeders during March. A lingering individual was reported on May 2.

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June 1, 1997