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Spring 1996 Report

Note: I was out of the state the last few days of April and the first ten days of May, as well as for most of the last two weeks of May. Hence the May report is quite incomplete and early and late dates were difficult to determine.

Weather for the period:

Three words describe this spring: Until mid-May, spring was SLOW, DRY, and COLD.

March: Early March brought temperatures below normal, with lows in the single digits and highs in the 20's. On March 7 we set a new record low of -10. Most water remained frozen. On March 10 a warm-up began. On the 13th we reached 69 degrees. The third week cold weather returned, which slowed down the melting of ice and the migration in general. On March 24 a blizzard dumped 6" of snow and created a complete standstill. (According to the news, the storm killed a number of Sandhill Cranes in Nebraska.) On March 26 we had near record low of 3 degrees above zero. In all, March temperatures and precipitation were below normal.

April: The cool March weather continued into April. In the second week the weather warmed up: on April 10 and 11 the thermometer went up to 79 degrees! But a cold front came through on the 12th, and during the next two days we received 4 inches of snow! The roller coaster continued for the remainder of the month: 79 again on April 17, and near record lows (in the low 20's) on April 23.

May: The first half of May was cool. Some rain fell, but nothing like the floods in eastern Iowa and Illinois. In mid-May "spring" suddenly turned to summer: 88 on May 16, 94 on the 17th, and 96 on the 18th. The last few weeks of May were cool and quite wet.

Unusual sighting:

- Red-throated Loon
- possible Ross's Goose
- Cinnamon Teal
- early Baird's Sandpipers
- early Lincoln's Sparrow
- possible Hoary Redpoll

See below for details.

Observations:

- ✓ - Red-throated Loon: One was in a gravel pit quarry five miles south of Sioux Center on April 19. See enclosed documentation.
- American White Pelican: Arrived at Rock Valley on April 17.
- ✓ - Double-crested Cormorant: Arrived at Hawarden on April 6.
- Great Blue Heron: Arrived on March 27.
- ✓ - Great Egret: The first was at Doon (Lyon Co.) on April 6.
- ✓ - Snow Goose: Large flocks of birds were flying over in mid-March. March 16 was a particularly spectacular day.
- Ross' Goose? On March 16 I was observing the many flocks of Snow Geese flying over western Sioux County. One small flock of about 15 birds came over quite low. Among these 15 were two decidedly smaller geese. These could have been Ross's Geese. South Dakota birder Bruce Harris regularly picks out Ross' Geese in fly-over flocks of Snow Geese (South Dakota Bird Notes, Vol. 42, 86-87). However, I cannot be sure. Consider this report for the sake of interest only.
- ✓ - White-fronted Goose: A flock of 20 individuals was in a field along Pahoja Lake (Lyon County) on March 16.
- Canada Goose: Migrants appeared in the first week of March. On March 4 a flock of 400 geese was at Winterfeld Park in Rock Valley, where part of the lake is kept open artificially. Most of these geese were strolling about on the ice.
- Wood Duck: At Winterfeld in Rock Valley the wintering male was joined by migrants on March 27.
- Green-winged Teal: Arrived on April 6.
- Blue-winged Teal: Arrived on April 6.
- ✓ - Cinnamon Teal: A drake was with Blue-winged Teal and Lesser Scaup on a pond along Highway 12, just south of Hawarden. The bird was easily observed, as it came to within 25 feet of the highway. I'm not sure whether this bird requires documentation. It's hard to mistake an all dark chestnut-cinnamon teal (with blue patch on wing) for anything else but a Cinnamon Teal. Besides, I am quite familiar with this bird. I see it often on my various annual excursions to the West.
- Northern Shoveler: The first migrants were a bit early on March 16. In mid-April hundreds of Shovelers were distributed throughout Sioux County.

- Gadwall: In Sioux County in normal numbers by mid-March.
- American Wigeon: Arrived on March 16.
- Canvasback: The usual numbers moved through in mid-March.
- Redhead: Arrived in mid-March.
- Ring-necked Duck: The first migrants were at Rock Valley on March 9.
- Lesser Scaup: The first migrants were at Rock Valley on March 9.
- Common Goldeneye: Usual migration. Last one observed on March 22.
- Bufflehead: Usual migration. Last ones observed on April 12.
- Hooded Merganser: About 6 were at Hawarden on March 22. Nearly a dozen were with a large flock of duck species at Rock Valley on March 27. Several were at Hawarden on April 6.
- Common Merganser: I did not see them until the middle of March.
- Red-breasted Merganser: Extremely scarce this spring.
- Ruddy Duck: I did not see them in Sioux County until April 6.
- Turkey Vulture: Relatively late this year. First observed over Sioux County on April 28.
- Bald Eagle: Once again, very much in evidence. It's marvelous to see this bird actually becoming a very common migrant. On March 9 a flock of 8 was huddled along the Rock River in western Sioux County. In March and early April it was virtually impossible to bird western Sioux County without seeing a number of these eagles.
- Northern Harrier: Their migration began in earnest on March 8. On that day I saw three in Sioux County.
- Sharp-shinned Hawk: The first one observed was in my yard on March 6.
- Cooper's Hawk: I did not see them in Sioux Co. this spring.
- Red-Tailed Hawk: The migration seemed normal.
- American Kestrel: Rather slow in coming, I thought. They were not really plentiful until the first week of April.
- Osprey: The first was at Hawarden on April 19.
- Northern Bobwhite: Still absent in western Sioux Co.

- Grey Partridge: They seem to be doing a little better. At least, I now see them regularly on my birding trips.

- American Coot: Large numbers had arrived by the third week of March.

- Killdeer: Very late this year. The migration did not begin in earnest until the first week of April.

✓ - American Avocet: Six were at the edge of a quarry 5 miles S. of Sioux Center on Apr. 19.

- Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs: Both species arrived on April 6.

✓ - Least Sandpiper: A flock of 30 was at Doon (Lyon Co.) on April 12.

✓ - Baird's Sandpiper: One was at Hawarden (along the same pond as the Cinnamon Teal) and another at Doon on the early date of April 6. Both birds were positively identified: Both were with Lesser Yellowlegs, which helped estimate their size (as larger than, e.g., Least Sandpiper), and in both cases the wingtips extending beyond the tail (giving the birds that "pointy" look) were clearly observed. More Baird's Sandpipers were at Doon on May 17.

- Common Snipe: These birds were exceptionally plentiful this year. Between April 5 and 19 as many as 50 could be seen at one time at the ponds near Doon (Lyon Co.) and elsewhere in Sioux County.

✓ - Franklin's Gull: The first ones observed in the northwest were several at Doon (Lyon Co.) on April 12. Flocks of several hundred were migrating through Sioux County on April 21.

- Mourning Dove: Rather slow in coming. The first one was at Hawarden on April 6.

- Common Nighthawk: Arrived a bit late on May 19.

✓ - Northern Flicker: A "Red-shafted Flicker" was at Doon (Lyon Co.) on April 12.

- Ruby-throated Hummingbird: First observed in Sioux Center on May 9. In mid-May these little birds were very common throughout Sioux Co. One could sit in the yard for only a short while and see several of them buzzing about.

- Empidonax: Arrived on May 15. As usual, they soon were literally all over the place.

✓ - Yellow-bellied Flycatcher: Two were in my yard on May 19.

- Tree Swallow: Present on April 18.

- Barn Swallow: Arrived on April 19.

- ✓ - Purple Martin: Arrived in Sioux Center on April 17.
- Red-breasted Nuthatch: Still present on April 18.
- ✓ - Sedge Wren: Several males were singing in the grassy area at the northeast corner of Oak Grove Park on May 18. This area has regularly hosted a colony for several years.
- Golden-crowned Kinglet: Very scarce this year.
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet: Very late this year. The first ones were observed on April 18.
- Gray-cheeked Thrush: Good migration. The birds were common everywhere from May 10 to nearly the end of the month.
- Swainson's Thrush: Very good migration. They were very common in Sioux County, beginning May 10. Still present on May 28.
- Hermit Thrush: The first were in Sioux Center on April 12. The migration was very good. They were common in Sioux Center, sometimes as many as three in my yard at the same time. There was a steady stream of them through April 21.

Note: I was a bit puzzled about your suggestion that Hermit Thrush is difficult to distinguish from either Swainson's or Grey-cheeked Thrush. I would think that the Hermit Thrush, when seen well, is virtually unmistakable.

- Wood Thrush: One was in my yard on May 14. Thereafter they were singing in their usual locations along the Big Sioux and Rock Rivers.
- American Robin: The first migrant arrived at Rock Valley on March 9.
- Eastern Bluebird: Only a few present in late March. More arrived in April and May.
- ✓ - Brown Thrasher: Arrived on April 19.

- Vireos and Warblers: In general, a pretty good migration. Most were late, but numbers were encouraging. The usual species were observed. Heaviest waves came through in the third week of May. The following list indicates the relative status of vireos and warblers in northwest Iowa:

Abundant to common: Warbling Vireo, Solitary Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Blackpoll, Black+White Warbler, American Redstart, Oven-

bird, Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler.

Uncommon: Bell's Vireo (breeds in Oak Grove Park prairie area), Yellow-throated Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo, Black-throated Green Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Palm Warbler (sometimes common), Mourning Warbler, Canada Warbler.

Rare: Northern Parula, Cape May Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat (a Chat was in Sioux Center on May 15.)

All other warblers are accidental.

- Northern Cardinal: They continue their presence in Sioux Center. It looks as if they have now come to dwell among us!
- Dickcissel: Arrived on May 17. Once again they were abundant in western Sioux Co.
- Vesper Sparrow: Lots of migrants were present in Sioux County on April 12.
- Fox Sparrow: The first migrant was in my yard on March 26. They were readily observed in shrubbery along the rivers in western Sioux County during the first week of April. On April 6 I saw about six in one spot along the Rock River.
- American Tree Sparrow: There were lots of them everywhere in the first half of March, many of them singing in the first week of March. Last one observed on April 17.
- Lincoln's Sparrow: A very early migrant arrived in my yard on Easter day, April 7, and stayed for several days. According to Iowa Birds (Dinsmore e.a.), this would represent the second earliest. Last one observed on May 19.
- Grasshopper Sparrow: Returned to western Sioux Co. on May 17.
- Harris' Sparrow: Late in arriving. The first ones were at Hawarden on March 22.
- Dark-eyed Junco: Remained plentiful through much of April. Last one observed in Sioux Center on May 1.
- White-throated Sparrow. First observed in Sioux Center on April 17. Last one in Sioux Center on May 19.
- Rufous-sided Towhee: First observed on April 21.

- Red-winged Blackbird: By mid-March these birds were on their territories.
- Rusty Blackbird: Usual migration in second half of March.
- Common Grackle: By mid-March Grackles were setting up their territories.
- Orchard Oriole: As last year, they visited blooming apple trees in Sioux Center beginning on May 18.
- Purple Finch: Regular visitors (only two or three at a time) in Sioux Center through April 17.
- House Finch: Simply abundant in Sioux County! Singing birds literally all over the place!
- ✓ - Common Redpoll: They daily visited my feeders in early March. They lingered until March 27. One was still present at a feeder in George (Lyon Co.) on April 5.
- Hoary Redpoll? I received a report from a birder in George (Lyon Co) of a possible Hoary Redpoll. The bird was said to have a white rump and appeared somewhat larger than the other Redpolls with which it was associating. I went up to George and noted numerous Common Redpolls. However, my not seeing a Hoary does not mean it was not there. Nevertheless, in view of the difficulty in separating the Redpoll species, I merely write this note as a point of interest. There is not sufficient information to warrant a report to the Records Committee.
- Pine Siskin: Small numbers continued at our feeders throughout March and early April. Last one observed on May 22.

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