

## INDIANA DUNES BIRD REPORT: SPRING 2015

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Birding highlights of spring 2015 included a Black-necked Stilt invasion, multiple Glossy Ibis reports, and a surprising Siskin flight. The rarity list also included Neotropic Cormorant, Black Vulture, Swainson's Hawk, California Gull, Snowy Owl, and Harris's Sparrow. In addition, the Indiana Audubon Society hosted the first annual(?) Dunes Birding Festival in early May. According to Brad Bumgardner more than 250 birders registered for the activity. For several days during the festival the lakefront was awash with birders.

Throughout the last third of April the jet stream warped into an omega shaped blocking pattern, which stopped the movement of fronts across the Dunes area. Unfortunately, the Indiana lakefront rested on the north side of the jet stream bringing north winds and 10°F below normal temperatures for the final half of the month. This meteorological phenomenon seriously inhibited spring migration.

Temperature & Precipitation at Chicago: Departure from Normal		
	Temp (°F)	Rainfall (in.)
Mar	-2.5	-1.4
Apr	+0.5	-0.51
May	+1.3	+0.98

**Longshore Flights** Once again Brendan J. Grube conducted the longshore flight watch. Various other birders assisted Brendan, but Brad Bumgardner and Bernie Konrady were perhaps the most frequent participants. Based on Grube Magnitude (GM), the season's best flight occurred 3 May. On that day 45 standard species (of the 94 species logged) yielded a GM of 71.63 (the lakefront's fifth all-time largest). Flight highlights that day included 168 Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, 3922 Pine Siskins (a state record), 2913 Blue Jays, and 211 Palm Warblers. On two other occasions Brendan logged triple-digit species counts: the peak tally consisted of 106 on 6 May.

The adjacent table summarizes the 2015 spring migration by bird groups using the Migration Index (MI-definition appended). These data reveal that the loons/grebes, and terns had below average flights and all others were above normal. Additionally, raptors occurred in unusually high numbers. The unweighted mean of this group's MI values is +0.057, suggesting that the overall flight was above average. Keep in mind, however, that Brendan's multiple longshore flight watches generated unusually high seasonal counts for many species.

Group	MI/species	Group	MI/species
Ducks	+0.114	Flycatchers	+0.181
Loons/Grebes	-0.295	Vireos	+0.123
Hérons	+0.013	Swallows	+0.073
Raptors	+0.231	Wrens	+0.098
Shorebirds	+0.043	Thrushes	+0.169
Gulls	+0.063	Warblers	+0.113
Terns	-0.212	Sparrows	+0.079

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### SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Ross' Goose:- On 13 April M. Penny Starin found (1) on a roadside pond at the intersection

of U.S. 20 and Oak Hill Road. Likely this individual was seen among the Hitchcock Road Pond Canada Geese the following day (KJB, Lynea S. Hinchman, & Kathie Fritz).

Trumpeter Swan:- Two adults lingered at the Grant Street wetland until at least 2 May (Michael A. Topp, et al.). One was still present on 21 May (Amy Kearns).

## **DUCKS**

The overall duck migration was quite mixed: the composite mean MI/species was +0.114. Despite a record Gadwall flight, the overall dabbling migration was only average, as it also contained subnormal Northern Shoveler and Blue-winged Teal numbers. In contrast, bay ducks staged an unusually strong flight with every species well above average. Sea ducks fared poorly; every species except White-winged Scoter (see below) was reported in below average numbers. It was also a good spring for Mergansers.

Gadwall:- The lakefront's Gadwall population continues to soar, yielding a spring record count of 420 Gadwalls (TYM=117). The peak daily count was (75) at Hitchcock Road Pond on 21 March (John K. Cassidy et al.).

Canvasback:- For the third consecutive spring excellent numbers were recorded on the lakefront. This year's total was 150 (TYM=30.5). The season's peak count was (44) at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 20 March (Brendan J. Grube).

White-winged Scoter:- Although an impressive 384 white-winged were reported for the season, this value is far below totals of the past two springs when unusually large numbers accumulated on the lakefront.

Black Scoter:- Always a rare find in Indiana, an adult male was seen at the Whiting Refinery Beach on 9 April (Carolyn A. Marsh). This sighting also provided the season's only report.

Hooded Merganser:- Carolyn A. Marsh found a female and (7) downy chicks at Cline Avenue Marsh on 24 May.

Common Merganser:- For the second consecutive spring unusually large numbers lingered on the lakefront. For the season some 645 were reported (TYM=181). The peak spring count was (52) at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 8 March (Brendan J. Grube), but Matt Kalwasinski also logged (50) at Carlson Oxbow on 12 March.

## **LOONS-GREBES**

It was an abysmal spring for this group with only the Pied-billed and Horned grebe flights above average. Both the Red-necked and Eared Grebes went unreported. The average MI/species was a basement-level -0.295.

Red-throated Loon:- Lakefront birders experienced the poorest spring flight in five years with only 66 birds reported (TYM=88.8).

Common Loon:- This loon was surprisingly scarce with only 123 reported for the season (TYM=308).

American White Pelican:- It was a fine spring for this pelican on the lakefront with 25 reported (TYM=6.7). The peak counts included a flock of (5) at Hitchcock Road Pond on the afternoon of 25 April (Lynea S. Hinchman, et al.), (5) flew past the Dunes S.P. Tower on 2 May (Brendan J. Grube), and (7) flew over Forsythe Park on 7 May (Matt Kalwasinski).

Neotropic Cormorant:- One flew past the Dunes S.P. Tower with a flock of Double-crested on 6 May (Brendan J. Grube & Brad Bumgardner). This is the lakefront's second record of this cormorant.

## **HERONS**

Overall, the heron migration was slightly above average; the mean MI/species was +0.013. Cattle Egrets were not reported and four other members of this group appeared in below average numbers.

Great Egret:- A new early arrival date for the lakefront was set on 13 March when Brendan J. Grube, Brad Bumgardner, Bernie Konrady, and Michael Topp saw (1) fly past the Dunes S.P. Tower during a longshore flight watch. The previous earliest was 14 March 1996 at Wolf Lake.

Little Blue Heron:- Indiana's only spring report occurred on 9 May when Lynea S. Hinchman et al. found an adult in Dunes S.P. during the Big May Count.

Glossy Ibis:- Matt Kalwasinski discovered the lakefront's second record on 23 May at the

Grant Street wetland in Gary (the same location the first Glossy was found). The bird lingered through the end of the season. Amazingly, on 30 May Phil Drescher found (2) more Glossys at Striebel Pond (*fide* Brad Bumgardner).



The lakefront's second Glossy Ibis was discovered by Matt Kalwasinski at the Grant Street wetland on 23 May 2015. This handsome bird lingered throughout the period. Photo by John C. Lindsey.

*Plegadis ibis*:- Rick Hawksworth photographed an unidentified *Plegadis ibis* at Cowles Bog on 11 May (*fide* Brad Bumgardner).

### DIURNAL RAPTORS

Buoyed by strong Osprey and Bald Eagle flights, plus a Swainson's Hawk, the lakefront's mean MI/species for raptors was an impressive +0.231.

Brendan J. Grube almost single-handedly performed the spring hawk watches. Some 65 observation hours (while conducting the lakewatch) resulted in 1401 raptors (see table). Although this total is the lowest in four years, it is well above the TYM. This year's total was depleted by low numbers of the two dominant species: Red-tailed and Sharp-shinned, both of which were down markedly. On the positive side it was a record season for Bald Eagles and there were two rarities, Black Vulture and Swainson's Hawk.

### SUMMARY 2015 DUNES HAWK-WATCHES 09 March – 14 May 20-year Mean inside "( )"

Total	Species	Total	Species
2	Black Vulture (.25)	295	Red-tailed (356)
461	Turkey Vulture (129)	16	Rough-legged (7)
25	Osprey (16)	0	Buteo sp. (21)
50	Bald Eagle (8)	2	Golden Eagle (1)
40	N. Harrier (63)	60	Am. Kestrel (67)
185	Sharp-shinned (263)	21	Merlin (9)
79	Cooper's (52)	24	Peregrine (6)
0	N. Goshawk (0.4)	0	Hawk sp. (4)
88	Red-shouldered (58)	1	Swainson's (0.4)
52	Broad-winged (56)	1401	<b>TOTAL (1120)</b>

Contributors to this year's total included: B.J. Grube, B. Bumgardner, J.K. Cassady, L.S. Hinchman, J.C. Kendall, B. Konrady, J.J. McCoy, R.J. Pals, and KJB.

Black Vulture:- The lakefront's sixth and first multiple record was logged at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 7 May when Brendan J. Grube and Brad Bumgardner identified (2) during a longshore flight watch.



For the first time in recorded history Ospreys nested on the Indiana lakefront. This innovative pair took advantage of an athletic field's floodlights near Gleason Park in Gary. Michael A. Topp took this photo on 2 May 2015.

Osprey:- The lakefront's first known Osprey nest was found in Gary on 2 May (Michael A. Topp). The bird took advantage of the light pole of an athletic field for nest construction (see photo).

**Bald Eagle:-** A record flight occurred at the hawk watch with 50 birds reported (TYM=8). The peak count at the Tower was (7), which was recorded on 19 April (Brendan J. Grube). Overall, a record 63 Bald Eagles were reported on the lakefront (hawk watch plus others), which is a new high spring total.

**Swainson's Hawk:-** Brendan J. Grube spotted an adult light morph at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 19 April. This date ties Indiana's fifth earliest record.

**Merlin:-** Brendan J. Grube logged a respectable (10) Merlins during an 18 April longshore flight watch at the Tower. This tally ties Indiana's third largest daily count.

**Sandhill Crane:-** An extraordinary tally of (4765) Sandhills at the birding Tower on 1 April provided Indiana's largest April count by more than a factor of two (Brendan J. Grube).

## SHOREBIRDS

Though limited by habitat, the shorebird migration was better than average with a mean MI/species of +0.043. Heavy rains kept water levels high in McCool Basin, significantly limiting available shorebird habitat. Of the 23 species reported 10 had negative MI values. The season's biggest surprise was the appearance of Black-necked Stilts.

**Black-bellied Plover:-** An alternate-plumed bird just south of U.S. 6 in western Porter Co (Beth Dixon and Kenneth Wysocki), provided the season's only record.

**American Golden-Plover:-** On 16 May John C. Kendall counted (160) in a migrating flock over I-90 in northern Lake Co. This is the state's largest May count in four years.

**American Avocet:-** Michael A. Topp found (1) at Carlson Oxbow on 22 May, providing the season's only report.

**Black-necked Stilt:-** Matt Kalwasinski did it again. Last year he found a Black-necked Stilt in Munster on 21 May. On 7 May of this year he photographed (2) on Wolf Lake (off Forsythe Park) and (2) more at the 129<sup>th</sup> Street reclamation site. These constitute the

lakefront's fourth and fifth records. A pair lingered at the 129<sup>th</sup> Street wetland and was observed copulating on 22 May (Carolyn A. Marsh) and again on 26 May (Matt Kalwasinski). Then on 29 May Carolyn A. Marsh observed one on a nest, providing the first nesting record for the lakefront.



The lakefront's first breeding Black-necked Stilts arrived at the 129<sup>th</sup> Street wetland (s. end of Wolf Lake) on 7 May. One pair lingered throughout the season and provided evidence of nesting. Photo by John K. Cassady.

**Dunlin:-** A singleton at McCool Basin on 6 April (M. Penny Starin) provided the lakefront's earliest spring record (by more than a week).

**Least Sandpiper:-** Most reports of this diminutive shorebird occurred at McCool Basin where M. Penny Starin logged a high count of (32) 5 May.

**White-rumped Sandpiper:-** An early migrant at McCool Basin on 4 April (Jeffrey J. McCoy et al.), provided the lakefront's third earliest spring arrival date.

## GULLS

This spring's gull flight was above normal; of the nine regular species five were reported in below average numbers. However, a Californian Gull plus an unusually strong Great Black-backed flight significantly elevated the overall flight. The average MI/species was +0.063.

**Bonaparte's Gull:-** Lakefront birders enjoyed the best spring flight since 2005, with 164 reported. Despite this encouraging total the 2015 count remained far below the TYM of 288.

**California Gull:-** On 17 March gull aficionado Amar Ayyash discovered an adult standing on the Wolf Lake ice, just south of Forsythe Park. This is Indiana's first record since January 2012.

**Great Black-backed Gull:-** A new high daily count was set for the month of May when Amar Ayyash logged (8) at Whiting Refinery Beach. May's previous maximum was five.



In recent years Common Terns have become quite scarce on the lakefront during the spring flight. This year, however, good numbers were present, including this individual at Wolf Lake on 16 May 2015. Photo by John K. Cassady.

## **TERNs**

Although all four of the expected tern species were recorded, the overall flight was quite poor, with each of the four species reported in below normal numbers. The average MI/species was a dismal -0.212.

**Common Tern:-** On 14 April Lynea S.

Hinchman spied (1) at Hitchcock Road Pond to tie the lakefront's second earliest spring arrival date. This report proved to be the vanguard of the lakefront's best spring flight in four years with 100 birds reported (TYM=223). Despite this spring's improved flight, season totals remained far below normal.

**Black-billed Cuckoo:-** Ten birds were reported this spring, which is the largest spring total ever recorded on the lakefront (TYM=2.75).

**Long-eared Owl:-** A singleton at the Hammond Sanctuary on 10 April (Michael A. Topp), provided the season's only record.

**Snowy Owl:-** On 12 April as Jane Callies was jogging in Marquette Park a Snowy flew across in front of her and landed atop the aquatorium chimney. She snapped a photo with her cell phone. This is the lakefront's fifth April record.

## **FLYCATCHERS**

A spring highlight was the discovery of a Western Kingbird at the Grant Street wetland. Flycatchers staged a very strong flight with a mean MI/species of +0.181. Of the eleven species reported only Yellow-bellied had a negative MI value (and that one was only slightly below zero).



Robert Guth discovered this Western Kingbird at the Grant Street wetland on the same day the Glossy Ibis was found. It remained through 28 May. Photo by Michael A. Topp.

Western Kingbird:- Goshen birder Robert Guth discovered (1) at the Grant Street wetland during the morning of 23 May. The bird then disappeared, but was relocated later that morning by Leland Shaum's group. It lingered through at least 28 May (Kim Ehn) and was seen by many.

## VIREOS

It was another good spring for Vireos. Every species except Philadelphia was reported in above average numbers. The mean MI/species was +0.123.

Philadelphia Vireo:- This season's spring flight was the weakest since 2006, with only 4 birds reported (TYM=6.5).

## SWALLOWS

An otherwise strong swallow migration was weighted down by a miserable Purple Martin flight. Despite the martin's poor showing the group mean MI/species was +0.073.

Purple Martin:- The 49 martins reported this spring constitutes the lakefront's poorest flight since 32 was reported back in 2002 (TYM=98.8).

Cliff Swallow:- Brendan J. Grube established a record early arrival date on 1 April (no joke!) when a singleton was logged at the Dunes S.P. Tower. The lakefront's previous earliest was 7 April 2001.

## WRENS

The spring wren flight was above average with a mean MI/species of +0.098. Only Sedge and Winter wrens were reported in below average numbers.

Carolina Wren:- Following the unusually cold winter it was most encouraging to see an excellent count of 30 Carolina Wrens this spring (TYM=10.1).

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher:- An impressive (168) individuals flew past the Dunes S.P. Tower on 3 May (Brendan J. Grube), providing Indiana's second largest daily count.

## THRUSHES

Every member of this group was reported in above average numbers. The mean MI/species of +0.169, was elevated by an impressive American Robin season total, thanks to Brendan J. Grube's longshore flight counts.

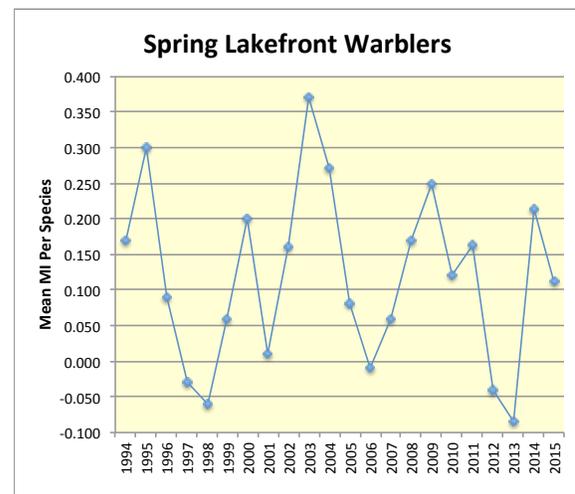
American Robin:- An Indiana record count was set 16 March at the Tower when Brendan J. Grube logged (15,753) during a longshore flight. The previous state maximum was the 11,450 logged at Fort Harrison Park in September 2007.

Gray-cheeked Thrush:- Though well below last spring's record flight, the 35 reported this year was still quite impressive (TYM=18.4). The season's peak count was (8) that Lynea S. Hinchman's party logged in Dunes S.P. during the 9 May count.

Smith's Longspur:- For the sixth time in the last seven years Smith's Longspur was recorded at the Dunes S.P. Tower. This year Brendan J. Grube logged (4) at that site on 3 May.

## WARBLERS

Following a slow start warblers ultimately staged a reasonable flight (see graph). The mean MI/species was +0.113, and only nine of the 36 species reported had negative MI values.



Tennessee Warbler:- This species arrived early and in good numbers. On 9 May Jeffrey J. McCoy logged (34) in eastern Beverly Shores,

which is an impressive count for this early date. The season total was 273 (TYM=116).

Orange-crowned Warbler:- Two records preceded the lakefront's previous earliest date of 17 April 1980. Linda May photographed (1) in the Hammond Sanctuary on 14 April and Matt Kalwasinski found another in Centennial Park (Munster) the following day.

Black-throated Blue Warbler:- On the 9 May Big May Day count Jeffrey J. McCoy logged (6) in east Beverly Shores. This total ties the lakefront's third largest count.

Worm-eating Warbler:- The lakefront's two reports consisted of singletons that Brendan J. Grube found in Beverly Shores on 10 May and that Glenn Perricone found in Dunes S.P. on 25 May (TYM=1.25).



The furtive Mourning Warbler can be devilishly hard to photograph. This adult male cooperatively posed atop the famous Whiting Park Wall on 16 May 2015. Photo by John K. Cassady.

Kentucky Warbler:- John C. Kendall logged (1) in the Hammond Sanctuary for the season's only report (TYM=1.7).

Yellow-breasted Chat:- The five reported this season constitutes the lakefront's best spring count in six years (TYM=3.15).

## SPARROWS

The spring sparrow flight was better than average with a mean MI/species of +0.079. Nelson's Sparrow was not reported this spring. Among the remaining 19 species only three had negative MI values.

Lark Sparrow:- Singletons were reported during longshore flights at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 17 April and 1 May (Brendan J. Grube). Additionally, on 9 May Jeffrey J. McCoy recorded (1) in eastern Beverly Shores during the Big Day Count.

Henslow's Sparrow:- Two (TYM=1.7) were reported for the Season: the first was at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 17 April (Brendan J. Grube) and the second was in the Hammond Sanctuary the following day (Michael A. Topp).

Le Conte's Sparrow:- The lakefront's only report was (1) seen 6 May in prairie grass near the Dunes S.P. Tower (Brendan J. Grube).

White-throated Sparrow:- The season total of 368 is the lowest in four years (TYM=830).

Harris's Sparrow:- One visited the Gibson Woods feeding station on 24 April (Michael A. Topp), providing the lakefront's first spring record in 13 years.



This adult Harris's Sparrow visited the Gibson Woods Nature Preserve feeder on 24 April. This is the lakefront's first spring Harris's Sparrow since 2002. Photo by Michael A. Topp.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak:- Jeffrey J. McCoy logged a whopping (55) in east Beverly Shores on the 9 May count, which ties the lakefront's third largest single-day tally. For the season 242 were reported, which is well above the TYM of 142.

Blue Grosbeak:- A young male was recorded during an 8 May Brendan J. Grube longshore

flight watch at the Dunes S.P. Tower. This report ties the lakefront's fourth earliest arrival date.

**Western Meadowlark**:- On 2 May a migrant landed in a tree almost directly above observers standing on the Dunes S.P. Tower (John K. Cassady et al.). This constitutes the lakefront's first record since 2007.

**Yellow-headed Blackbird**:- Once again Yellow-headed Blackbirds returned to the Grant Street wetland. The first sighting involved a singing male seen on 18 April (Michael A. Topp). A maximum count of 4 (3 males & a female) was recorded by Randy J. Pals on 23 May.

**Rusty Blackbird**:- In concert with this spring's *Rusty Blackbird Blitz* Brendan J. Grube's (1822) Rustys, logged during a 12 April flight at Dunes S.P. Tower, was the state's largest count by a wide margin. This tally was also Indiana's seventh largest daily count.

**Orchard Oriole**:- It was another fine spring for this oriole with 48 birds reported (TYM=22.6). Brendan J. Grube logged the peak daily count of (8) on both 8 and 15 May during longshore flight watches at the Dunes S.P. Tower.

## **WINTER FINCHES**

The major winter finch news was an unexpected Pine Siskin invasion. This was especially surprising, as Siskins were virtually nonexistent during the fall and winter seasons.

**Purple Finch**:- The spring flight was better than average with 131 reported (TYM=73.4). The migration peaked with a daily count of (59) at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 13 April (Brendan J. Grube).

**Common Redpoll**:- The season's only report consisted of a singleton at the Dunes S.P. Tower on 20 March (Brendan J. Grube & Brad Bumgardner).

**Pine Siskin**:- A record flight occurred this spring with 5893 Siskins reported (TYM=522). Surprisingly heavy movements continued well into May: Beginning on 1 May groups of 1 to 30 appeared at feeders across the state. Then on the 4 May a record daily flight of (3922) was recorded at the Dunes S.P. Tower (Brad Bumgardner, John K. Cassady, Bernie Konrady, Jeffrey J. McCoy, & KJB). Longshore flights continued well into May with a peak of (337) on the 16<sup>th</sup> (Brendan J. Grube).

**Explanation of abbreviations** Season totals are frequently compared to average seasonal counts in the "Dunes area" (Calumet Region or lakefront) over the past 20 years, including the present year. This value is abbreviated "TYM" for Twenty Year Mean. The term "STYM" refers to the twenty-year mean for the entire state.

The item "MI" is the Migration Index, which compares the current flight with the previous 20 flights. The following relation calculates this parameter:  $MI = (Total - TYM) / (Total + TYM)$ . Here "Total" refers to the total number of individuals, of a given species, reported during the season. If Total = 0, MI is assigned a value of  $-\ln(1+TYM)$  with a minimum value of -1.00. MI values provide an assessment of the current migration compared to counts over the past 20 years; positive values indicate a better than average flight, whereas, negative MI's reflect a below normal migration.

In considering the TYM and MI parameters keep in mind that observer effort has not been constant over the twenty-year interval, indeed observer effort has surely increased over the past decade. This means that negative MI's should be examined closely as they may reflect significant declines.

