

BLACK SWIFT (*Cypseloides niger*)

THE EASTERN TIP OF LONG POINT, ONTARIO.

MAY 21, 2006

TIME OBSERVED: 1345 to 1348

DISTANCE FROM BIRD: 20-30m to 300m

AGE/SEX:

The bird was best aged as an after hatch-year with an unknown sex as no conclusive ageing/sexing characteristics were noticed.

OBSERVERS:

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OBSERVER EXPERIENCE:

Mackenzie has been birding for over 20 years and banding for 13 throughout North and Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe. He has previously observed Black Swifts in Costa Rica interacting with a number of different species.

Optics: 8.5 X 42 Swarovski EL.

Brown has 13 years of birding experience, mostly in southern Ontario. No previous experience with Black Swift. **Optics:** 10 X 42 Nikon LX Premier.

Robert has over 20 years of birding experience, and 5 years of banding experience throughout Europe, North America, Australia, the Caribbean, and Antarctic Regions. No previous experience with Black Swifts. **Optics:** 10 X 42 Leica Ultravid.

SCENARIO:

On May 21, 2006 Dave Brown and Stu Mackenzie were sitting in a shanty at the extreme eastern Tip of Long Point from about 1130 to 1350. Winds were largely from the west-north-west at about 50 km/h, or about Beaufort scale five. We had spent the majority of the time examining the gulls and terns at the Tip, and scanning for incoming passerines, swallows and swifts which had been slowly trickling in off the water all morning. At about 1345 we noticed a group of nine swifts about 300m south of us fighting their way toward the Tip. Eight of them were easily identified as Chimney Swifts; long narrow wings, light and fast erratic flaps, thin cigar shaped bodies and a light throat. The other swift immediately grabbed our attention as it already appeared darker and larger! Flaps were more controlled and had stiffer, shallower wing beats. We didn't dare take our eyes off the group of swifts as they worked their way along the waters edge flying between swells. The swifts approached the shoreline, flew almost overtop of us, veered west, quickly gained altitude and disappeared down the point. A part from its size, a number of other obvious characteristics became noticeable as the swift flew closer. We immediately noticed that it had a dark throat! 'That swift has a dark throat' Stu said astounded to Dave. 'It has a square tail' Stu yelled again. We left the Tip immediately following the shoreline in hopes of another view. About 100m west of the shanty we saw Henri Robert approaching from the dunes on the north beach looking somewhat confused. Upon seeing us Henri immediately asked – 'Hey! - Did you guys see that swift?' Henri had caught a glimpse of the swifts, in particular 'a large dark one', as they were gaining altitude and heading west before he lost them further down the point.

THE BIRD:

The swifts were first noticed at a distance of about 300m from shore, and as the birds flew toward the Tip of Long Point darting in between the waves, one swift, slightly separated from the others was larger, darker and had a distinctly different wing beat. The flight was much more confident and directed with strong short beats bringing the wings only slightly above the head as opposed to the Chimney Swifts whose wings regularly rose above the plane of the body. The erratic flight of the accompanying eight Chimney Swifts made picking the other swift out from a distance relatively easy. When the Chimney Swifts would get caught by the wind or veer off their course, the other swift would continue a steady flight and maintain its heading. As the bird got closer to shore the looks became briefly magnificent as the birds flew overhead, quickly gained altitude and were lost down the point. The bird appeared about 1/3 larger than the Chimney Swifts, as much in girth as in length. An interesting way to describe it would be a cross breed between a Chimney Swift and a Purple Martin. No plumage characteristics were obtained besides it being a very dark brown/black over the entire body. When the bird banked it revealed a distinct tail, for a swift, in both its projection from the body and in its square shape. As the bird approached and flew overhead a completely dark throat was noticed!

HEAD:

The head was substantial and proportionate to the larger body when compared to the smaller headed Chimney Swifts. No plumage characteristics were obtained besides being entirely dark brown/black.

UPPER PARTS:

The upper parts were entirely dark brown/black.

UNDER PARTS:

The under parts were also entirely dark brown/black, including the throat and chin.

TAIL:

The tail projected noticeably from the body and differed from the subtle more rounded tail of the Chimney Swifts. The under-tail coverts extended to about $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the tail, unlike the *Chaetura* swifts which typically extend down much of the tail. It was as broad as the body and square, with a very subtle fork when closed.

WINGS:

The wings were long and broad based for a swift, almost delta shaped in flight, especially when compared to the nearby Chimney Swifts. The slope of the wing was very distinct, curving gently from the wrist to wing tip. They were entirely dark brown/black on the upper side. The only contrast noticed on the entire bird was that of the under-wing coverts with the slightly lighter underside of the flight feathers which appeared blackish-grey in the light. This created a slightly two-toned appearance to the under-wings.

PLUMAGE:

Basic plumage is typically completed over winter. The plumage was entirely dark brown/black. No other colours or patterns were observed.

OTHER BLACK SWIFT MOVEMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA:

(See North American Birds Vol 60: No.3, 2006. for details)

Although there were no other records outside of their normal range, most large concentrations noted in the spring of 2006 coincide with the sighting at Long Point on May 21. Unfortunately, the furthest easterly records that I am aware of currently only extend to Saskatchewan and Colorado.

MAY 22 – ‘a record-breaking 1100’ feeding over Swan Lake. Vernon, British Columbia.

MAY 26 – 440 at St. Andrews, Douglas, Washington. ‘2nd highest count for the east side’

MAY 27 - 2 in Camas, Washington.

MAY 29 – 6 near St. George, Washington, Utah.

SPECIES DIVERSITY AT LONG POINT AROUND MAY 21, 2006.

100 species were observed at the Tip of Long Point alone on May 21. Spring migration at this point was heavily dominated by *Dendroica* warblers and mix of *Emberizids*.

Other significant species seen in the Long Point region on or near May 21 were a SY Male Yellow-headed Blackbird at the Tip May 21. Second-year, male, Summer Tanager and Western Meadowlark (observed and heard) at the Tip, May 23.

SIMILAR SPECIES:

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*): Note reasons described above. The swift in question was much too big and dark to be a CHSW. The dark throat and square tail also eliminated the species. Note: Lowther and Collins (2002) note that Black Swifts are regular found in mixed swift flocks.

Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*): Same reasons as Chimney Swift.

Chestnut-collared Swift (*Cypeloides rutilus*): The swift in question was much too big and robust to be a Chestnut-collared. It lacked a chestnut collar although this can be hard to see in the field, and some females lack the collar. Flight characteristics of Chestnut-collared Swifts tends to be more *Chaetura*-like which tend to have quite narrow, slender and shorter wings compared to the other two *Cypseloides*. The bird in question had a distinctly different flight from the *Chaetura* swifts. Chesnut-collared Swifts also do not migrate further north than central Mexico.

White-chinned Swift (*Cypseloides cryptus*): White-chinned Swifts are relatively short-tailed, short-winged and have a square tail when compared to *C.niger*. Also no whitish frosting to the chin or face was noticed which tends to be more consistent and noticeable in *C. Cryptus*. Separating these two species is extremely difficult, but *C.Cryptus* have also not been found north of south-west Mexico.

White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*): Swift in question was not THAT big, lacked long *Streptoprocne* wings, and white collar.

White-naped Swift (*Streptoprocne semicollaris*): Swift in question was not THAT big, lacked long *Streptoprocne* wings, and white nape.

Common Swift (*Anus apus*): Lacked light throat and forked tail. Similar reasons for other *Anus* swifts.

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*): The bird in question was not as bulky in the body as a Purple Martin, and had a shorter tail with only a subtle fork at best, unlike most if not all Purple Martins which have a long pronounced tail and a distinct fork. The head of the bird was distinct for a swift, a round extension from the body, not nearly as pronounced and pointed as they are in martins. Purple Martins also have necks, the bird in question didn't. The wings were long and slender with a gentle curve extending from the wrist to the wingtip and were kept fairly perpendicular to the body, unlike martins which tend to have a distinct wrist,

and swept back wings, especially in flight. Flaps were stiff and strong originating from the body and extending through the entire wing unlike *Hirundinidae*, martins and swallows, whose flaps tend to be smoother and carried out mostly by the distal parts of the wing. Wings of these species also tend to be swept back and pushed forward in flight, especially under windy conditions. The bird in question maintained the stiff wing shape throughout the observation and did not ‘flick’ its wings at all in flight as *Hirundinidae*s tend to do. When gliding between waves or flying bouts, the bird in question maintained straight, stiff wings. There was no light on the underside, and there was no purple or gloss to the body.

ATTACHED SKETCHES:

Sketch 1. Completed by Dave Brown, May 21, 2006.

Sketch 2. Completed by Stuart Mackenzie, May 21, 2006.

WEATHER AND MAPS:

The weather that day was dreary and overcast with moments of rain and patches of bright sunlight. A large low pressure system blew over Lake Erie on the evening of the 20th and had passed by mid-day. Very strong North-east winds at dawn, switched abruptly west-north-west early in the morning. At the exact time of the observation the skies were quite dark over the lake and surrounding the point, but there were patches of sunlight along the lakeshore. Winds were from the west north-west at Beaufort strength of 4 gusting to 5 and 6, or around 50km/h.

Temperatures were around 10 C for most of the day.

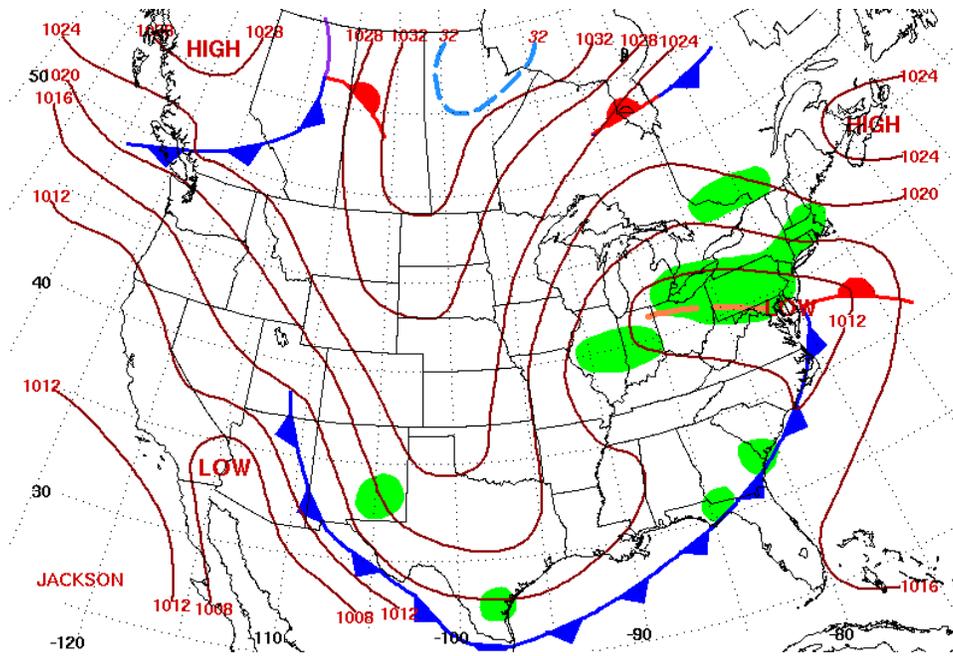
In the days leading up to May 21st, the Long Point region experienced fairly sustained mixed westerly winds (Table 1.), and unstable weather conditions with lots of rain.

Table 1. Average wind direction and speed at the Tip of Long Point – May 15-21, 2006.

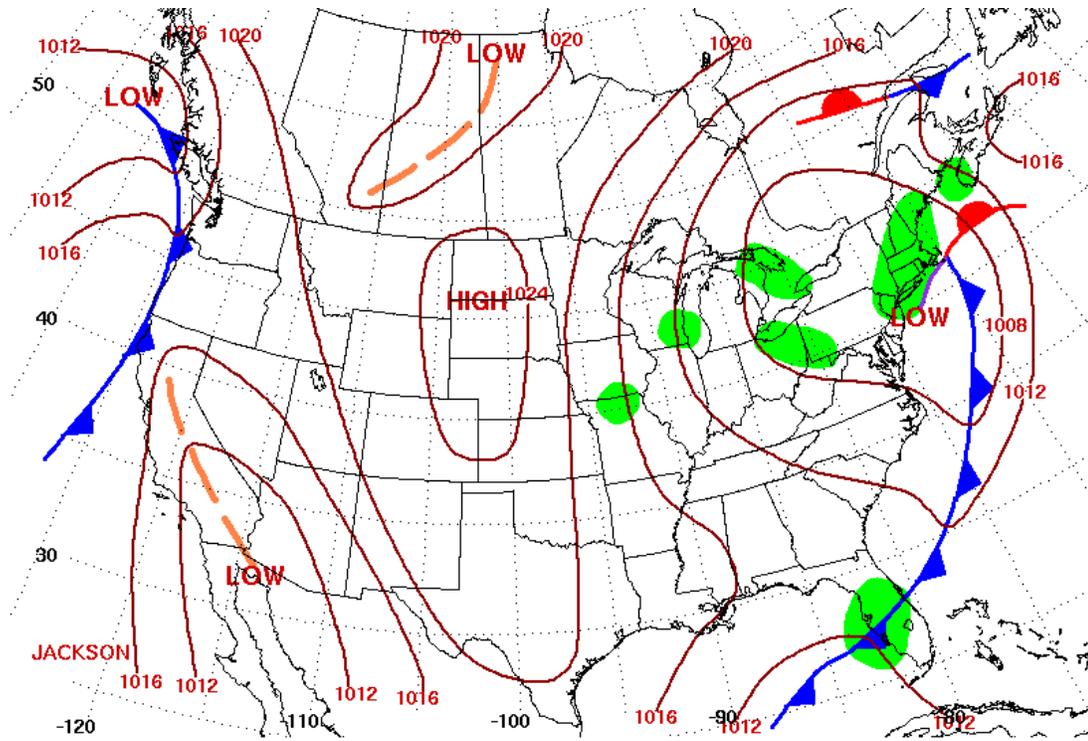
DATE	AVERAGE WIND DIRECTION	AVERAGE WIND STRENGTH (BEAUFORT)
May 15	NE	4
May 16	SW	3
May 17	W	3
May 18	SW	4
May 19	SW	4
May 20	NW	3-4
May 21	WNW	4-5

The attached historical weather maps were taken from the National Centre for Environmental Prediction, Hydrometeorological Prediction Center. – http://www.hpc.ncep.noaa.gov/dailywxmap/index_20070312.html. They demonstrate a sustained low pressure system over the north-east creating the unstable rainy weather conditions during this period. The maps also demonstrate the front positions throughout the week. On May 19th a low pressure system formed in the mid-west and moved south. It then pushed into the north-east on the 20th and collided with a fairly substantial cold front over the Great Lakes on the 21st. The pressure system movements are fairly inconclusive for this observation, but the sustained westerly winds were likely helpful as were the strong fronts and stormy conditions surrounding the 21st.

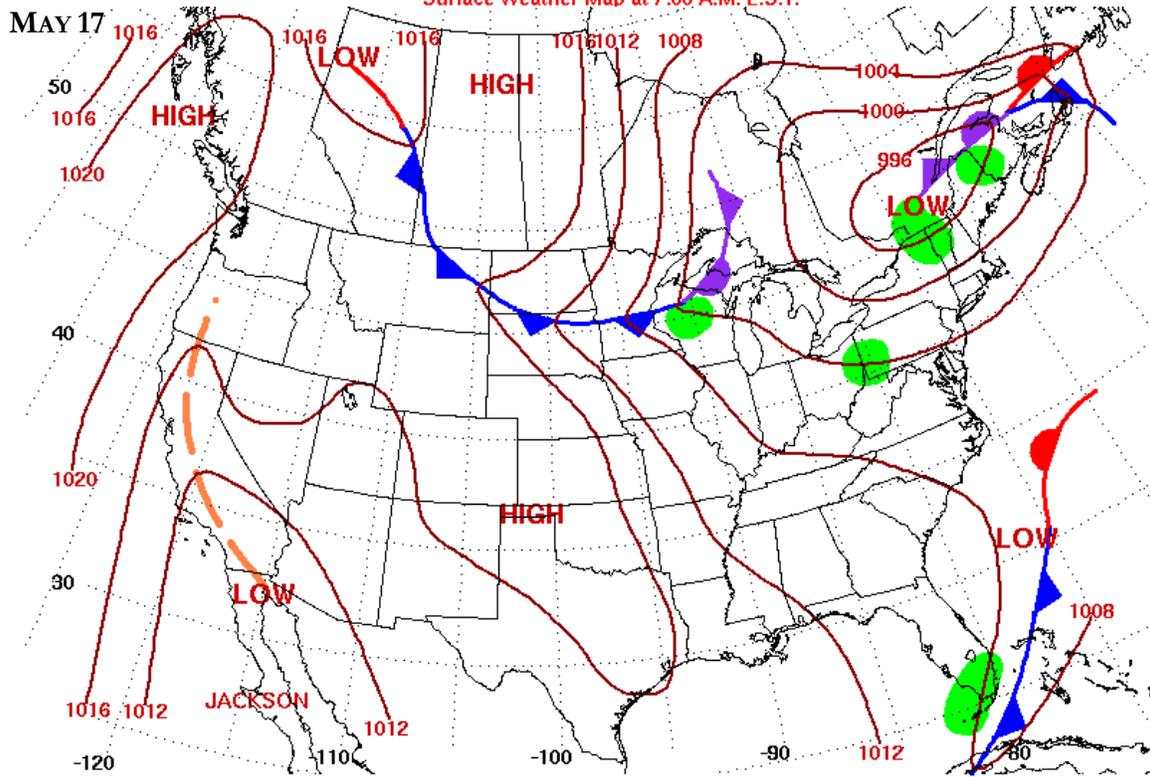
MAY 15



May 16

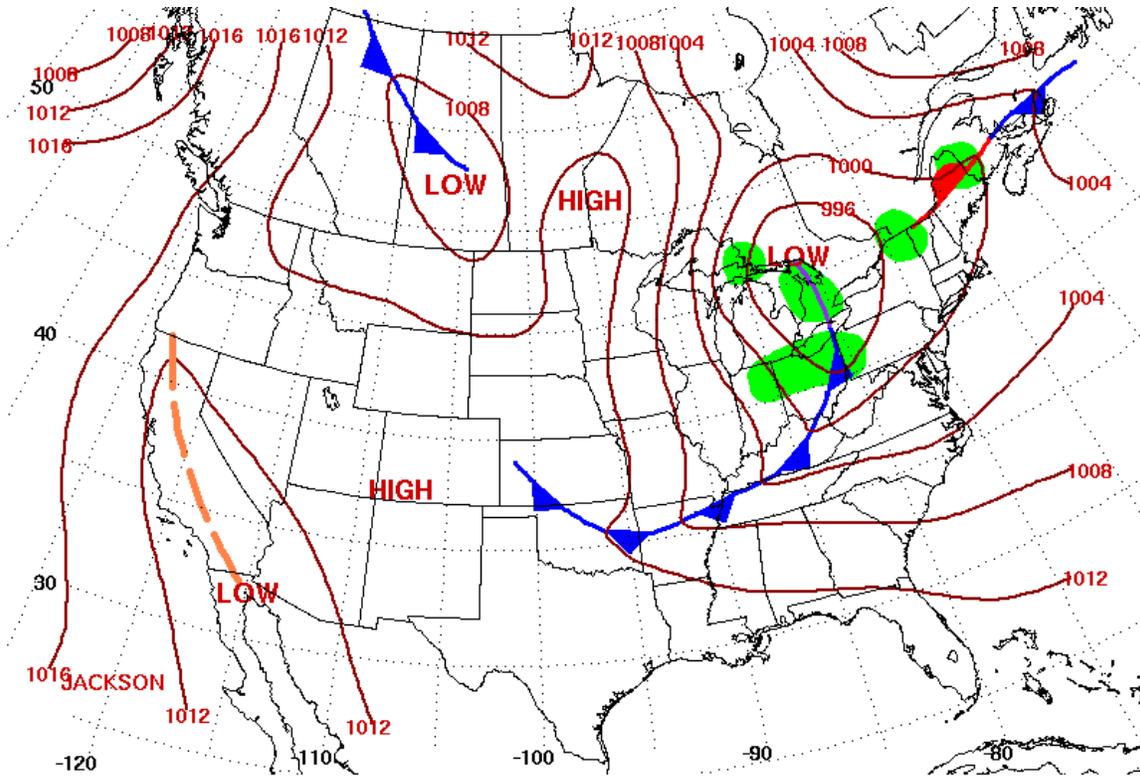


Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.



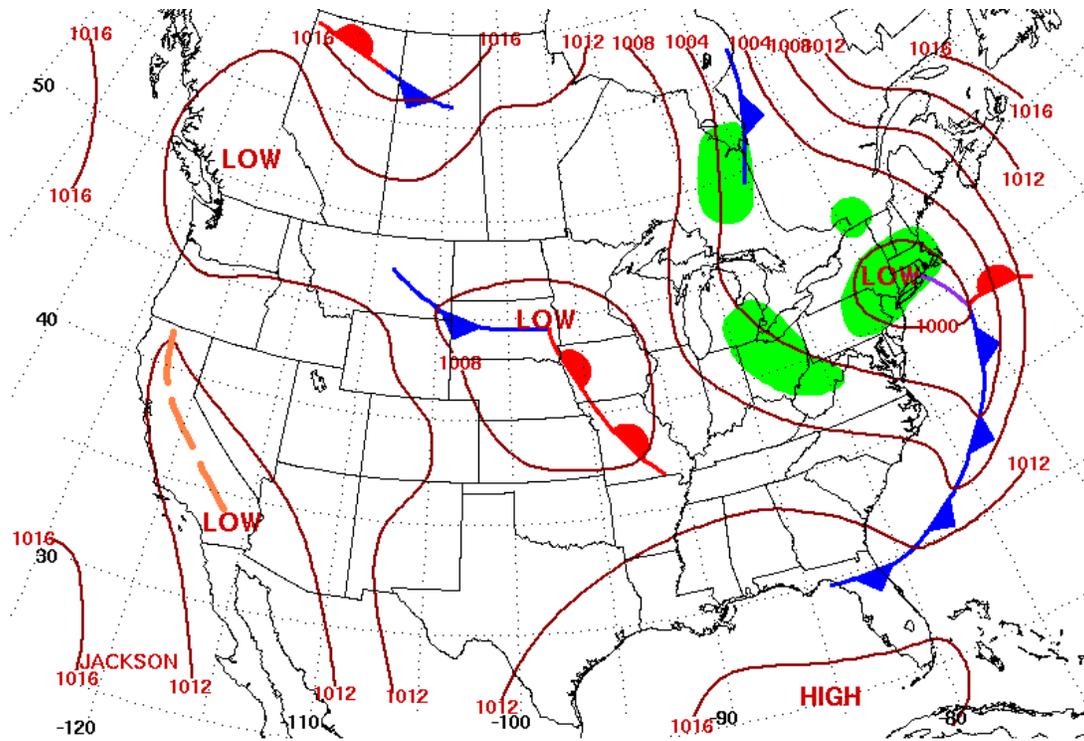
Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.

MAY 18



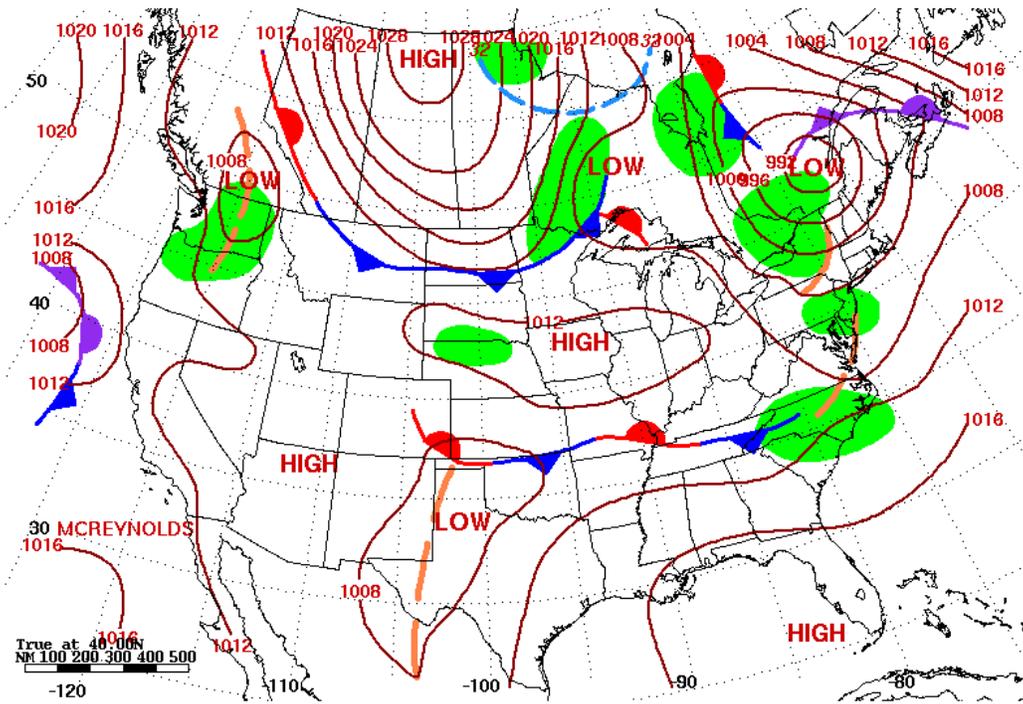
Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.

MAY 19



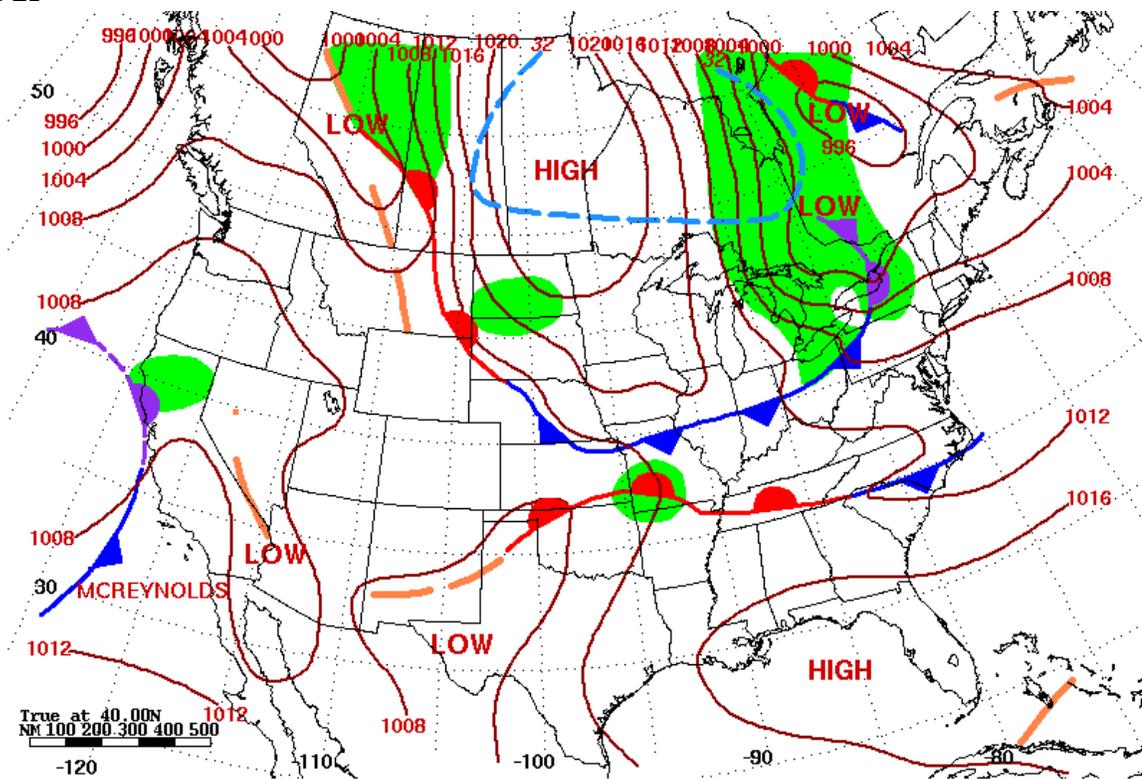
Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.

MAY 20



MAY 21

Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.



Surface Weather Map at 7:00 A.M. E.S.T.

REFERENCES USED:

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SKETCH 1-

DAVE BROWN, MAY 21, 2006.

