

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON DECEMBER 1 - MARCH 31

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The winter of 1960-61 will be remembered for some time to come. As to just how it would compare to some of those fabled old-fashioned winters, perhaps no one can say, but all were agreed this season was a rough one. The pattern of the previous year was reversed and accentuated. Whereas in 1959-60 our winter weather occurred primarily late in the season, this winter it arrived early and was with us almost continually through the first few days of February when milder temperatures began to generally prevail. The real temperature extremes were experienced the last half of January and in very early February, and reporting the lowest thermometer readings was a game which every community seemed to be winning. Tom Lesperance reports 18 consecutive days when the reading was below -5° , and New York City had, during the same period, a record stretch of below freezing weather, a string which ended, oddly enough, on the day when the city received its heaviest February snowfall on record and its heaviest single fall since the "big snow" of December 1947. Most of this year's snowfall, like the frigid weather, arrived early in the season. From the standpoint of expected, or normal, snowfall the southern and western parts of the state were harder hit than the northeastern regions. But there was more than ample to go around in any case.

The winter finch flight was, like the weather, quite a contrast to that of a year ago. The heavy Evening Grosbeak flight, to which we have become accustomed in recent winters, did not materialize. All areas reported these birds, but they were few in number and irregular in appearance. More were probably seen during March than in any other month. The Redpoll, the other winter finch to invade the state so heavily in 1959-60, was extremely scarce this winter. Most areas had only scattered reports of very small groups or individual birds, and some regions had no reports whatsoever. The species which showed the greatest change over last year in a positive direction was the Red Crossbill. Flight years for this species are relatively few, but this was certainly one of them. These birds were quite generally reported early in the winter, and then there was a big resurgence in March. White-winged Crossbills were seen simultaneously in lesser, although still above-average, numbers. The Pine Siskin was reported in excellent numbers in all but the southeastern portion of the state, and it was described by some as *the* winter finch in areas where it occurred. Goldfinches, too, were more conspicuous than normal; this might be expected in view of the heavy Siskin flight. Pine Grosbeaks were scarce in some areas and completely absent in others; they were nowhere common. Purple Finches were scarce in most areas, but in other sectors there was at least the average number of reports, especially late in the winter.

The status of some of our other normal or expected winter landbirds may be summed up briefly. There were reports of Black-backed Three-toed Woodpeckers in four of the ten reporting regions, but with the exception of the Syracuse observation documented in the field notes section of this issue, all records were apparently of single birds. The possible mild influx

hinted at late in the fall did not take place, as the number of reports statewide was perhaps average for the season. Red-breasted Nuthatches put in a very poor showing, but Northern Shrikes had one of their better years, certainly an improvement over the previous winter. Boreal Chickadees and Gray Jays were reported only from the Adirondacks where they are, of course, resident. It was another good year for Snow Buntings and an even better one for Lapland Longspurs; the high count for the latter species was a flock of well over 100 seen in the Buffalo area.

Snowy Owls were generally reported with decreasing frequency as the winter wore on, although this was not always the case. Nine separate birds were seen by one group of observers in Region 1 in one day during the second week of March. Honors for the most unusual location, however, would go to the bird seen repeatedly inside prison grounds, an incident reported upon by Fred Hough. I steadfastly resist the temptation to make any further comment. As is usual during a Snowy Owl flight year there were the unfortunate reports of birds being killed or wounded by thoughtless gunners. There were scattered observations of the Saw-whet Owl. Goshawks were reported in no less than eight of the ten reporting regions, and Rough-legged Hawks were seen in good numbers throughout, a continuation of the trend that had become apparent in late autumn. White-winged gulls were quite scarce, except on Long Island, where two Black-headed Gulls were also seen.

Feeding stations, of course, provide their share of the ornithological highlights in any winter season. While we perhaps had nothing quite as exotic as the Varied Thrush and Green-tailed Towhee which appeared in neighboring states, there was a considerable amount of interest nevertheless, and the severe weather was undoubtedly a factor. Blackbirds of several types, including at least two Baltimore Orioles, were encouraged to stay on by feeding stations. A blackbird tentatively identified as a Brewer's was sighted in Region 4. Oregon Juncos were observed in several areas, and a Dickcissel was a feeder visitor in Region 8. An unprecedented nine White-crowned Sparrows were seen at or near feeders in Region 2, and there were reports of this species from several other areas. Many southern species, such as the Red-bellied Woodpecker, have spearheaded their way first into western and central parts of the state, and the appearance of one of these handsome woodpeckers at a Millbrook feeder in mid-winter constituted a first Dutchess County record. And feeding stations undoubtedly had a very important effect on the ever-increasing number of Cardinals reported. One was even seen in the central Adirondacks.

Waterfowl in general were reported in good numbers where there was sufficient open water, although some divers were still low. As Fritz Scheider suggests, the freezing over of some of the more northerly and normal wintering grounds was undoubtedly a factor. As an example, the icing conditions in the Niagara gorge forced waterfowl concentrations elsewhere. The results of the mid-January Federation Waterfowl Count are carried elsewhere in this issue, and readers will note that a record number of waterfowl was seen. There were the usual few and scattered reports during the winter of such species as the King and Common Eiders, Harlequin Duck, and Barrow's Goldeneye. The Lesser White-fronted Goose seen on Long

Island has been present there since early October and has received much local publicity; it is considered possibly an escaped bird. An Eared Grebe was reported from Region 1 in December. The March swan flight was considered quite good in the western part of the state.

As usual there were a few early December records of late southbound migrants. Chief among these was the empidonax flycatcher, probably a Yellow-bellied, that appeared in Region 9. A Scarlet Tanager was seen on Long Island through December 1. A Parasitic Jaeger on December 3 in Region 2 constituted the year's only report for that region. There was a Common Tern in Region 1 on December 3. Single Golden Plovers were seen the first week of December in both Regions 1 and 2, and a Red Phalarope was also noted in Region 2 on December 3.

Among other birds of especial interest during the winter were a Boreal Owl in Region 9 and a Hawk Owl in Region 4, and readers are referred to the respective regional summaries for details. A field note will be forthcoming on the latter record. In early February a Gyrfalcon was sighted over Katonah in Westchester County.

March was a sufficiently mild month to bring in the early landbird migrants, such as the Phoebe and Tree Swallow, about on schedule. Several areas reported moderate hawk flights. Two Greater Yellowlegs were noted in Region 2 late in March, and there was an early Pine Warbler in Region 1 on March 29.

Bluebirds were reported in somewhat encouraging numbers from several areas late in the winter, and this is a situation that will merit additional attention as the spring season develops.

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

RICHARD C. ROSCHE

Following an unusually mild and pleasant November, weather conditions reached the opposite extremes during the next two months. During January and February the average temperature at Buffalo was about seven degrees below normal, an unusual amount of deviation from the mean. Frequent snow storms and blowing, drifting snow helped make these two months what many called "an old fashioned winter". Although a record —20 degrees was registered February 2, this month, with its above normal temperature and precipitation, was a welcome relief from the previous two. The last half was considerably more mild than in most years and by month's end, early spring conditions generally prevailed. March was very changeable, but more mild than normal, and the usual storms were less intense than in most years. A record high of 71 degrees was reached on March 27.

A variety of conditions made the winter occurrence and distribution of birds interesting. Waterbirds, in general, were more scarce than in most years. An ice bridge formed in the gorge at Niagara Falls in mid December, thus rendering this area unsuitable for the normal concentrations of a variety of waterbirds through the end of the period. Lake Erie was said to be completely iced over from about late January to early March. However, parts of the harbor at Dunkirk remained ice free all winter. During the most severe weather conditions sections of the Niagara River were ice covered to a greater extent than usual. Inland, most ponds and lakes were frozen from early December through mid February, although Chautauqua Lake remained opened until at least mid December. During the last week of February many small ponds and lakes became ice free and remained so through the end of the period. Continuing below normal precipitation was reflected during March in the 'sink' regions, especially in the Towns of Clarence and Newstead. There, many of the usual depressions attractive to migrant waterfowl either lacked water altogether, or were in a constant state of flux.