

REGION 5 — ONEIDA LAKE BASIN

Fritz Scheider

December gave promise of a mild, open winter and Oneida Lake had open water to January 2. However, January cancelled the promise and produced severe freezing weather (the worst ice conditions on the Oswego River and Lake Ontario in 20 years) and a people-disrupting, bird-decimating blizzard (Jan 30–Feb 2). Much of the blizzard snowfall had gone by mid-February and a few Killdeer and Lapland Longspur returned only to be met by more snow and more cold, the latter continuing to Mar 17 when the first major influx of spring landbirds and hawks occurred. A veritable heat wave and strong south winds for the next week gave hope for an early spring (Oneida Lake was open by March 28) but this was not to be. Cold weather, north winds, rain, and snow in unrelenting sequence started and have not ended as of this date (April 20).

Positive features for the winter include 1) a massive winter finch invasion, dominated by Redpolls and Pine and Evening Grosbeaks with lesser numbers of Pine Siskin and both Crossbills—Purple Finches were, however, scarce; 2) moderate numbers of Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes; 3) a light flight of both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls; 4) small incursions of both Boreal Chickadee and Black-backed Woodpeckers; and 5) an “echo flight” of Snowy Owls.

Minus items in this season's ornithological ledger are 1) a marked drop in the wintering numbers of Common Merganser and Greater Scaup; 2) a continuing paucity of both Canvasbacks and Redheads; 3) extreme scarcity of both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls (even more notable in view of the numbers of Rough-legged Hawks about); 4) the loss of the many December half hardies by the late January blizzard; and 5) the lack of any large spring flights of Snow Buntings.

Rarities for the season include Golden Eagle, Saw-whet Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Hoary Redpoll, and Oregon Junco.

Abbreviations: BBFS—B. Burt's feeder survey, held the first week of each month (all figures are for 100 reports); HIGMA CC—Howland's Island Christmas Count Jan 1 ($\frac{1}{4}$ of the Montezuma Audubon circle); Oneida CC—Oneida Christmas Count Jan 2; Oswego CC—Oswego Christmas Count Dec 23; Syr CC—Syracuse Christmas Count Dec 26; Derby Hill—migration observation site on L Ontario near Texas; HIGMA—Howland's Island Game Management Area near Port Byron; N Syr—North Syracuse; SSSP—Selkirk Shores State Park near Pulaski; Syr Airport—Syracuse Airport; TRGMA—Three Rivers Game Management Area near Baldwinsville; VBSP—Verona Beach State Park; arr—arrival, arrived.

Observers: DA—D. Ackley; J & BB—J. and B. Barker; VB—V. Billings; GL & MC—G. L. and M. Church; MLE—M. L. Estoff; JRH—J.R. Haugh; SH—Stuart Hosler, P & SP—P. and S. Paquette; DBP—D. B. Peakall; JWP—J. W. Propst; AR—A. Raynesford; MSR—M. S. Rusk; FGS—F.G. Scheider; EMS—E. M. Starr.

LOONS—DUCKS: Single Common Loon and Red-necked Grebe on Oswego CC, unreported thereafter despite mild weather of early Jan. Horned Grebe: max 80 on L Ontario Jan 20; none reported from Skaneateles L, a reversal of the wintering birds' usual distribution. Pied-billed Grebe: three wintered at Baldwinsville (SH) Feb 2 to early Mar; arr Mar 4, one, Brewerton (JWP)—very early.

Great Blue Heron: singles reported on three of the four area Christmas counts; an imm Feb 27 near Kirkland (DA, PP) successfully wintered.

Canada Goose: winter flock at HIGMA down to four (lowest in ten years); spring arr Mar 3, Brewerton; max tallies 2200 Mar 26 and 2500 Mar 30, both HIGMA (JWP).

Wintering ducks—Mallard and Black Duck: both down in numbers, Blacks particularly so—max 661 Mallard and 419 Black on WFC, the first year Mallards have exceeded Blacks; severe ice and late hunting may explain this pattern. Half-hardy dabbling ducks: four Pintail, a male Baldpate, and a male Green-winged Teal attempted to winter at Oswego; only Pintail persisted after the severe freezing and great blizzard; *all* of the above dabblers plus a Blue-winged Teal were tallied on Oswego CC, anatine evidence of the very mild Dec.

Redhead: extremely scarce; max 161, Skaneateles L; at Oswego, max six Jan 16; just two reported at Baldwinsville all winter. Ring-necked Duck: a male at Fulton and a female at Oswego attempted to winter; the female persisted but the male was not noted after Jan 16. Canvasback: very low, 53 WFC; most tallies one-20/day; scarce but not as scarce as Redheads. Greater Scaup: winter numbers low with max 3700 Feb 6 Oswego R and Harbor; counts at Skaneateles L 300±, very low. Common Goldeneye: 1613 for WFC; other high counts include 500 Feb 8 and 820 Feb 23, Oswego; low tallies of late Jan thru early Mar are undoubtedly secondary to the severe icing, but no concomitant rise in numbers noted on the few open pools along Oswego R. Oldsquaw: max 323 WFC, second highest in ten years; active courtship noted Jan 16. White-winged (two), Surf (four) and Common (two) Scoters noted on L Ontario Dec 31; only the White-winged survived the early Jan duck hunting season and the severe cold of late Jan and early Feb.

Common Merganser: 2600 on WFC is quite low; no improvement in numbers with severe late Jan weather as sometimes occurs; a complete freeze-up of Cross L eliminated any concentration of this species there. Red-breasted Merganser: winter tallies low—max 48 for WFC, and counts at Oswego averaged only six-eight/day.

Spring ducks—Mallard and Black Duck: vernal flight frankly poor—max 75 Mallards and 150 Blacks Mar 28, and 91 Mallards Mar 31 (combined tally) HIGMA and Seneca R floodlands. Similarly low is a tally of 45 Baldpate Mar 31 HIGMA; also Gadwall were in two-six/day only, Feb 27 (early—MLE, JWP) to Mar 31, quite in contrast to the high counts of last fall. Pintail: arr Mar 13 Derby Hill (JRH) is late; numbers fairly good—700 Mar 17 and 300 Mar 31, both at HIGMA; lesser numbers, 19-60/flock, at Clay Swamp, Bridgeport, Bolivar, and Derby Hill (mob). Green-winged Teal arr Mar 19, Clay Swamp, with Blue-winged Teal there Mar 23; numbers of both species less than ten/day (very low) for remainder of Mar. Wood Duck: Mar 4, two, early; Mar numbers low (only two-four/day).

Migrant Canvasbacks appeared in better numbers this spring with 650 Mar 24, but Redhead extremely low—max *eight* Oneida L Mar 27, and Apr tallies are no better. Ring-necked Duck: max tally 150 Mar 27, eastern Oneida L (P & SP). Hooded Merganser: arr Mar 14, four Derby Hill (JRH, JWP); max 45, Mar 27, Oneida L. Common Merganser: migrants at Cross L peaked at 1660, Mar 20 (MSR); Oneida L tallies, however, much lower (35-60/day) thru Mar.

HAWKS—OWLS: Accipitrine hawks—winter numbers (including Christmas counts) are Goshawk ten, Cooper's 12, Sharp-shinned three, for all observers—the extreme scarcity of the last two is obvious as are the increased numbers of Goshawks (two-four/winter more likely).

Wintering buteos seemed confined to three intraregional enclaves—around Mexico, Texas, and SSSP, max 14 Rough-legged and six Red-tailed with one-three Kestrels; around Phoenix and Peter Scott Swamp seven Rough-legged and four Red-tailed; and some 20 Red-tailed at the various Syracuse dumps on the northern perimeter of the city. With increasing snow cover in early Jan, a light passage (? dispersal) of Rough-legged Hawks was noted—three Jan 4 near Sherrill (DA, AR), one at Syr Airport Jan 7 (FGS), one (?two) at Syracuse dumps and Onondaga L Jan 10-17

(DBP); these birds quickly disappeared and, after the severe blizzard of Jan 30—Feb 1, numbers of Rough-legged at the above enclaves decreased further (? snow-covered mice), and scattered birds were noted moving thru areas devoid of them heretofore, e.g. Tully Lakes area (JWP), Syr Airport and Cicero Swamp (FGS). Red-shouldered Hawk: wintering singles at SSSP Jan 23 (JRH) and Cicero Swamp Feb 6 (FGS).

Bald Eagle: an imm, Brewerton, Dec 26 (JW & K. H. Propst, MLE) is a first for Syr CC and the *only* winter record. Harrier: less than six reported in all of Dec; single noted Jan 1 HIGMA (JRB, CGS); unreported thru remainder of winter (extraordinarily scarce!).

Hawk migration—arrival dates (all Derby Hill): Goshawk Feb 24 (first migrant raptor); Sharp-shinned Mar 3; Cooper's Mar 9; Red-tailed Feb 24; Red-shouldered Mar 3 (two); Rough-legged Mar 6 (ten); Harrier Mar 11; Bald Eagle Mar 17 (one ad); Golden Eagle Mar 18 (two ad); Merlin Mar 14 (one, very early); Kestrel Mar 13—(JRH, mob). Date ranges and totals to appear in spring report.

Ruffed Grouse: numbers as in fall still up—five on Syr CC, 15 each on Oswego CC and HIGMA CC; as many as eight-ten/day in various L Ontario woodlots, notably SSSP and Nine Mile Point.

Killdeer: not recorded on any Christma scout but one Dec 26, Eaton (GLC) and six Jan 9, Otisco L (EMS); first migrants, three Feb 11, Derby Hill (JRH), but major numbers not in until Mar 8–17. Amer. Woodcock and Common Snipe: arr Mar 4, one, Derby Hill (JRH) and Mar 23, two (in courting flight) Peter Scott Swamp (MSR) respectively.

Glaucous and Iceland Gulls: lesser numbers for both species as compared to 1964–65; max five Glaucous and four Iceland, both Feb 6, Oswego; very few at Oswego R pools—most were found at Syracuse and Oswego dumps. Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls: winter max 200 and 22,000 Jan 20, Oswego Harbor and Ontario lakeshore (FGS); the major share of these left the area with the Jan blizzard and severe freezing thereafter, as the Feb and Mar max for the same Oswego harbor sector is only 75 Great Black-backed and 3200 Herring Gulls. Mourning Dove: max 80, TRGMA Dec 9 and 55, HIGMA Jan 1; the many smaller wintering flocks seemed to be cornfield-dependent, a feeding habit made more obvious with the deep Jan snow.

Screech Owl: winter regional total only 13; definitely growing more scarce. Horned Owl: max five, HIGMA Mar 30 (JWP), four Jan 29 and Mar 6, Eaton (GLC); the frequency of reports suggests that this species and also Red-tailed Hawks are holding their own. Snowy Owl: at least seven reported thru winter—two at Syr Airport (mob), two at Phoenix (mob), one Onondaga L (M. Woolley), one Mexico (JRH), one Oneida (DA)—a distinct echo to the superb 1964–65 flight. Barred Owl: single birds at SSSP Dec 2 and VBSP Jan 2–16 (PP, P. & A. Jones), probably northern emigrants as they are not reported regularly from these areas. Long-eared Owl: one, Dec 16 SSSP (FGS) and one, Feb 14 Taberg (D. Lynes) are the only winter records; one netted Mar 14 Derby Hill (JRH) may be either a wintering bird or an early migrant. Short-eared Owl: *only report* Mar 23, one netted Derby Hill (JRH); extraordinarily scarce, especially in view of the numbers of Rough-legged Hawks (q.v.). Saw-whet Owl: two in Wood Duck boxes HIGMA in Jan (George Gage); unreported thereafter until Mar, with first Mar 6 Shackleton Point, one (?three) toot-whistling in Cicero Swamp Mar 8–26, one Mar 20 HIGMA roosting in deciduous thicket, one netted at Derby Hill Mar 23 (JRH). An account of spring owl captures at Derby Hill will appear in a subsequent field note.

GOATSUCKERS—SHRIKES: Belted Kingfisher: birds attempted to winter at Eaton (GL & MC) and Oneida (DA), but the only bird surviving was at Baldwinsville (SH). Yellow-shafted Flicker: many reports of single birds, especially in dying elm woods along creeks and rivers (DeWitt, Oneida, Fulton, HIGMA); three-ten/

BBFS; apparently increasing as a wintering bird. Red-bellied Woodpecker: new site (pair) at Muskrat Bay area of Oneida L Jan 21, seen intermittently to early Mar; this occurrence and the many Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers there are undoubtedly secondary to the great food supply provided by the many dying elms and maples of that area; max of eight on HIGMA CC. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: wintering singles at Oneida (DA) in Dec and thru Jan at Fayetteville (fide B. Burt) but survival to Mar not established for either. Hairy and Downy Woodpecker: 55 and 107 respectively Syr CC; field counts range two-13/day for Downy, somewhat better than last year. Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker: one male and two females noted Dec 26-Jan 13 at DeWitt; also single females reported Dec 12 in the University section of Syracuse (MSR) and Feb 23, Tioughniaga State Game Management Area in s. Madison Co. (F. Welch) and a male Mar 6, Camp Woodland, Constantia (R. L. Richardson).

Phoebe: first noted Mar 23 Derby Hill; reported in next week but very scarce thereafter—did most succumb to the protracted cold weather of late Mar and early Apr? Horned Lark: first returning birds at Syr Airport Jan 27; high counts include 150 Feb 18 Oneida, 110 Feb 24 Airport, 140 Feb 27 along roadside near Utica, 200 Mar 18 Derby Hill. Tree Swallow: Clay Swamp and Derby Hill Mar 19, somewhat early; Purple Martin, one Mar 23 (record arrival date) Derby Hill; fortunately only a few Martins arrived in the Mar 17-22 warm spell as the protracted cold of late Mar certainly killed the locally present birds.

Common Crow: roost at Onondaga Hill active but not surveyed this winter; 1000 at Utica in Jan (VB); migration began Feb 10 with 45 passing Derby Hill; peak tally 10,253 Mar 14 Derby Hill; total spring tallies regularly falling from 1963 on; another victim of the pesticide-laden American world? Boreal Chickadee: the Westmoreland spruce plantation held at least 12 individuals thru the winter (J & BB); also reported at Shackleton Point (MSR, JRH), Fulton (FGS), Brewerton (FGS), Taberg (D. Lynes) and Fayetteville (D. Lindemer); definitely a flight winter; it will be interesting to see whether any pass Derby Hill on migration. Tufted Titmouse: the colony at Oneida L is now up to five-six birds, at three separate sites in the swampy woods; also noted at Otisco L in Feb (fide EMS) and Cazenovia (Mrs. C. Cook), both localities in the higher southern hill country, heretofore devoid of Titmice. Red-breasted Nuthatch: up to 16 Jan 9 at Westmoreland spruce plantation; lesser numbers, one-nine/day, in other spruce plantations locally, yet small numbers were noted at Big Moose Feb 26-27 (MSR, PP, DA), indicating some sedentary individuals persisted thru winter there. Brown Creeper: 20, Jan 1 HIGMA, is an excellent winter count. Winter Wren: reported until mid-Jan; none known to have survived the late Jan blizzard.

Mimids—Single Mockingbirds at Wampsville (fide DA), Bull Hill Rd, Lafayette (Clark), Utica (VB), Chittenango (Mrs. J. Fisher, L. Walker); two Catbirds at feeder in Richfield Springs Jan 1 (Mrs. P. B. Culbert); Brown Thrashers overwintered at Fairmount (Mr. Barlow) and Earlville (Mrs. J. Winslow), and were also reported at Sandy Creek (Mrs. Henderson) and Chittenango (Mrs. Coon). The survival of these half-hardy mimids is certainly helped by and may be dependent on the growing plethora of well-stocked feeders.

Robin: reported on all Christmas counts, noted in multiple numbers at various feeders, and in smaller numbers at Cicero Swamp and White Lake near Syracuse; unreported from north of Oneida L. Hermit Thrush: one Jan 3-31, Utica (VB) apparently did not survive the blizzard. Bluebird: migrants noted Mar 12 Constantia and Manlius, Mar 16 Utica (VB), and Mar 17 Derby Hill (JRH); max eight Mar 18 Derby Hill (mob). Golden-crowned Kinglet: frankly scarce this winter (one-three/day, mainly in spruce plantations at Westmoreland, SSSP, Fulton, Brewerton, N. Manlius), in contrast to the better tallies of Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees.

Water Pipit: arr Mar 29, one Derby Hill (JRH). Northern Shrike: scattered birds (one-two/trip) about equally divided between ad and imm, Dec thru Feb; light

return movement Feb 24–Mar 29; singing birds noted Mar 17–20, Brewerton. Loggerhead Shrike: first noted Mar 26 at Cicero, Derby Hill, Bridgeport, and HIGMA, a pleasant confirmation that this was indeed the arrival date and not the “weekend effect.”

VIREOS–WARBLERS: Myrtle Warbler: one at feeder near Fulton mid-Dec thru the 20th (Mrs. R. Parker); none on any Christmas count.

ICTERIDS–SPARROWS: Eastern Meadowlark: present on only the Syr CC; surprisingly scarce considering the mild Dec; one, Jan 6, Utica (VB), two only, Jan 22, Cayuga Co, and none after the severe Jan blizzard; spring arr Mar 6 Brewerton (R. J. Smith); max tallies at Derby Hill 149 Mar 19 and 142 Mar 23 (JRH). Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, and Cowbird: first two present on three of four Christmas counts, Cowbirds on only two but with better numbers (75+); all three present on BBFS thru winter but Cowbirds showed a sharp drop in numbers after the Jan storm (438 in Jan pre-blizzard to 53 in Feb post-blizzard); major movement of early black icterids began Mar 3 Derby Hill; max 20,000 Redwings and 12,000 Grackles Mar 19 in the evening flight to a local roost. No wintering Rusty Blackbirds. Baltimore Oriole: one attempted to winter in N Syr but did not persist beyond late Dec.

Cardinal: range extension continuing—now present at Talberg (Lynes), Stokes Hill (Adamski), Barneveld (fide VanDresar), all southern Tug Hill Plateau vicinity; increasing numbers in N Syr and Cicero areas (JRH); BBFS tallies now fairly stable ($200 \pm$ /survey). Evening Grosbeak: large wintering population with abundant feeder patronage— $300 \pm$ thru winter at Utica feeder (K. G. Hanson); 15–120/day in most areas including Madison Co highlands (GLC) but lesser numbers at HIGMA and Baldwinsville. Purple Finch: scarce throughout winter; present on only Syr CC and singles only at feeders. Pine Grosbeak: a tremendous incursion with daily tallies six–90 throughout Region (mob); sharp drop in numbers around Mar 4–12 with only one–three/day thereafter. Common Redpoll: dominant winter finch, present widely, 100s to 1000s, especially in weedy fields around Syracuse and L Ontario; 1500 still about Mar 30. Hoary Redpoll: a male Mar 18–19, Syr Airport (FGS, JWP), first record in seven years. Pine Siskin: scarce this winter; on only two of four Christmas counts (max CC 34); some 50, Marcy, Jan 25 (VB); some at feeders but in very low numbers; returning Siskins noted Mar 10–11 at Derby Hill, Syracuse, and Utica (mob). Red and White-winged Crossbills recorded but rather uncommon, especially when compared to Redpolls and Pine and Evening Grosbeaks; max for Red seven, SSSP Jan 3 (JWP) and for White-winged 200, Westmoreland Dec 1 (JWP, MLE); Jan and Feb numbers much lower (five–19/day), correlating with progressive cone crop consumption.

Rufous-sided Towhee: singles present during winter at Taberg (D. Lynes), Syracuse (C. J. Scheider), Oneida (P. Wayland-Smith) and Mexico (Leah Knapp), a bit above the usual one–two reports. Vesper Sparrow: Mar 30, one Liverpool (DBP), is early.

Tree Sparrow: max daily tally 40–50, extraordinarily scarce; return flight began Mar 20 but late Mar tallies low with max only 80, Mar 26; BBFS showed reduced numbers thru the winter and only a moderate early Mar increase. Oregon Junco: one, Mar 27–28, Beaver L (MSR, JWP, FGS). Field Sparrow: a single at Baldwinsville thru winter (SH). White-crowned Sparrow: two, Jan 27, Oneida (DA) and one, Feb BBFS, Brewerton (Mrs. Sibig) are the only wintering birds. White-throated and Song Sparrows: on all Christmas counts, but few survived the severe Jan blizzard except for feeder-frequenting individuals. Lapland Longspur: only winter(?) records, one, Feb 15, and two, Feb 16, both Derby Hill (JRH); four–ten, Mar 16–20, Syr Airport, are the only migrants noted. Snow Bunting: winter figures 30–50/day with max 200, Feb 15, Tully Valley (JWP); return flight poor with some 100–200/day, but no early Mar hordes ($1000+$) recorded anywhere in the Region.

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