

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

FRITZ SCHEIDER

Everybody agrees — it was a long, cold, snowy, rough winter. Record snowfalls were achieved (if you can call that an achievement) in Rochester, Ithaca, Syracuse, Binghamton, and Albany and the Adirondacks Sector was a problem area all by itself. Read the Region 7 report for a short description of winter non-birding! And as bad as the winter was, March — “our first month of spring” — compounded the meteorological felony with unseasonable cold and at least two blizzards. This hibernal heritage left the fields capped with foot thick snow cover and the ponds, lakes, and rivers plugged with record thick layers of ice. March saw precious little in the way of migration and massive tardiness of migrants was the rule, not the exception. Similarly everyone agreed it was the best non-finch winter in decades. A few Evening Grosbeaks and a occasional Purple Finch were all that were about to remind one that there was such a group as winter finches.

A residue of Red-throated Loons (1,4,5,8,9) and a few Eared Grebes (1,3,5,8) highlighted the divers section of the checklist. The spring Canada Goose flight was described as only poor or fair in most areas but Region 3 had 100,000 plus in late March with some spillage of this great anserine horde into Region 5. Many more Blue and Snow Geese were reported in late March upstate and, exceptionally, a few of either Blue or Snow Geese wintered (1,2,3). Despite the severity of the winter, both Gadwall (1,2,5) and American Widgeon (1,3) seemed up in wintering numbers but the Black Duck winter picture seems one of steady and marked decline.

King Eiders were reported in above average or record numbers upstate (1,2,5 with a specimen in 3) and Hooded Merganser winter numbers increased slightly (3,5), rather surprising in view of the severe continuous freezing. Common Merganser numbers were down in all the western sectors but increased numbers (? increased concentration) were noted in Region 6 on small sections of the St. Lawrence River.

Only two raptores showed enough numbers and consistence to merit comment — high counts of Red-tailed Hawks, well above average, were noted in Regions 2,3,5,6,8,9, this despite the deep snow cover. However, the Rough-legged Hawks, normally regular if not common wintering birds in Region 3,5,6, were reported in reduced numbers there but increased somewhat in Region 8 and 9 where normally scarce and very high tallies were noted in parts of Region 1.

The mild November weather may have deluded some of the half-hardy shorebirds as more December reports of Killdeer (2,4,5,8,9) and Common Snipe were received and some few of these individuals were known to have wintered over successfully. Glaucous Gull tallies seemed low on

the Great Lakes and the single exception of 24 in Region 6 again probably reflects concentration secondary to the severe icing of the St. Lawrence River. Great Black-backed Gull numbers appeared decreased in both Region 2 and 5 and this should be carefully watched in further winters to see if it is an ice-dependent phenomenon. It would have been interesting to know if the marine counts of this species had gone up sharply with the severe weather upstate.

Uniformly (1 thru 9) reported were increased tallies of Mourning Doves, this despite the deep snow. Reports of feeding stations supporting sizable flocks of Mourning Doves seem a new feature in upstate birding. No major concentrations of Short-eared Owls appeared and no Snowy Owl flight could be said to have occurred although a few individuals were noted (1,2,3,5,6).

Yellow-shafted Flicker tallies upstate, particularly Christmas Count figures, were quite high and lesser numbers of Sapsucker were reported. Both species, where found, seemed to survive the winter rather well. However, Red-breasted Nuthatches (1 thru 9) and Golden-crowned Kinglet (2,3,5,7,8) were reported very scarce, mirroring the absence of winter finches and further enlarging the birding dullness of this winter past. The one positive chord in the dismal symphony of the many absent northern species was struck by the abundance of Northern Shrikes (1,2,3,5,8,9 but curiously not in 6!).

Most Christmas counts had good numbers of Eastern Meadowlarks but their survival thru January's deep and persistent snow was almost nil; in contrast, the increased numbers of wintering Icterids, particularly Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds, seemed to fare rather well as they readily utilized feeders (1,2,4).

Sustaining the advances of the past decade, Cardinals continue to spread and numbers in known occupied areas appear to be rising (1,3,4,5,6); whether the severe deep snow will cut back this advance for the next one or two years should be watched closely. The reports of winter finches consist of many negatives and the occasional finch that showed its feathers was most likely Goldfinch (low numbers in 4 thru 9 but numbers described as average or above in 1 thru 3) or the advancing House Finch (3,4,5,8,9) which will undoubtedly become an attractive nuisance upstate in ten to fifteen years. Like the shorebirds, many half-hardy sparrows, notably White-throated, Song, and Swamp Sparrows, attempted to winter — those with feeder fodder and good cover nearby seemed to do well but the field-found birds of the numerous Christmas Counts were virtually gone by late January and by mid-February even Tree Sparrows were sparse in the snow-rich hinterlands. Perhaps a true incursion of Oregon Juncos occurred this winter or perhaps these stray birds were concentrated in feeder situations; either way, almost all sectors had at least one Oregon Junco reported and some had several.

Rarities for the season — and some were most unseasonal! — included

Barrow's Goldeneye (3,5), Harlequin Duck (5), Common Eider (1,2), Turkey Vulture (7), Black-headed Gull (1), Great Gray Owl (8), Black-backed Woodpecker (6), Common Raven (7), Boreal Chickadee (1,3, — perhaps a shadow flight of the '69-'70 incursion), Varied Thrush (9), Wood Thrush (3), Western Meadowlark (3), Yellow-headed Blackbird (2), and Bullock's Oriole (4,9).

A perfect score for regional summaries was marred by the absence of one from Region 10 — c'est dommage!

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(Editor's Note: The Region 10 report was excusably slightly late, but apparently no copy was sent to Dr. Scheider. The report, however, speaks for itself. J.W.T.)

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

ROBERT A. SUNDELL

Except for December (nearly normal temperature and precipitation), this winter was one of the coldest in recent years. The first three months of the year were several degrees below normal resulting in the accumulation of an unusually thick ice cover over most water. Snowfall was close to normal for the period. Brief thaws in late February and mid-March brought a few migrants but winter-like conditions quickly returned. Waterfowl appeared to be the only category of birds migrating in widespread and substantial numbers during their usual time schedules. The wintry weather and unfavorable winds severely retarded most of the other regular or occasional March migrants.

Significant points or trends to note from the report are (1) a fine variety but small numbers of the larger fish eating species such as loons, grebes, cormorants and herons, (2) an insignificant maximum count of Canada Geese compared with the past several years, (3) average numbers of many species of ducks, (4) exceptional count of Rough-legged Hawks in an area where they are usually rare, (5) small numbers of many species of gulls but a good variety nevertheless, (6) small numbers of owls, (7) high Christmas Count numbers of Mourning Doves and Blue Jays, (8) a superb flight of Northern Shrikes which could not be documented due to lack of time, (9) a very poor flight of winter finches except for the Evening Grosbeak, (10) high Christmas Count totals of the Cardinal, Slate-colored Junco and Tree, White-throated and Song Sparrows plus the Snow Bunting.

Rare species reported were Eared Grebe, Barrow's Goldeneye, Black-headed Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Boreal Chickadee and House Finch.

Abbreviations: Bflo—Buffalo; BOS—Buffalo Ornithological Society; CC—Christmas Count; Chaut—Chautauqua; imm—immature; INWR—Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge; Nia—Niagara; NYSFBC—New York State Federation of Bird Clubs; Ont—Ontario.

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LOONS—DUCKS: Common Loons are virtually unknown after Dec in recent years so individuals Jan 8 INWR (JSM et al) and Jan 14 Hamburg Town Park (TLB) and