

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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For once nearly all regions were in complete agreement about the weather conditions for the season. There was disagreement, however, on the effects of these conditions. Dr. Scheider, with his usual clinical and diagnostic mind, characterizes the season most effectively. The winter was mild and open with less than average snow except for the mountains and the snow belt of Region 5. Also of importance in many of the regions was the late freezing of the lakes and streams. In many cases there was more than normal open water throughout the winter.

One obvious result of the mild winter was the large number of half-hardy species which remained in all of the regions. There were far too many to mention here but note the number of warblers away from the coast (Black and White, Cape May, chat, etc.), various sparrows such as Grasshopper and Chipping, and the remarkable number of heron species wintering on the coast. Perhaps of greatest interest were the nearly universal comments on the increase of Carolina Wrens in the northern and central parts of the state. This will be a species to keep an eye on in the future. It frequently has extended its range in the northeast during a series of mild winters but is particularly susceptible to a sudden wipe-out after a severe winter. Dr. Scheider wonders if, indeed, they survived the snow and cold of March in his area. Numbers should be carefully noted for this species.

Very similar conditions can affect local areas in quite different ways. The waterfowl reports show this quite clearly. Many of the regions report a poor flight with no build-up of the diving species. This was explained by the lack of ice forcing them into restricted areas where they could be observed. On the other hand, Region 6 reported that the large amount of open water resulted in many excellent waterfowl observations with wintering birds. "One man's meat"

Another area in which there was substantial agreement was the nearly complete lack of the far-northern finches. Purple Finches and, particularly, Evening Grosbeaks made a good showing but redpolls, crossbills, siskins and Pine Grosbeaks were virtually absent. There is absolutely no correlation between finch flights and local food supply. Region 5 reported a huge cone and seed crop, which remained uneaten. The decisive factor is, of course, the size of the food crop

much further north. If there is plenty of food near the breeding grounds, the birds do not come south. I must say that I prefer Mrs. Pitzrick's explanation rather than prosaic facts.

One finch item, however, deserves headlines. A nest of a White-winged Crossbill was found in Region 7 on Feb. 22. This is the first proven nest for New York state. Readers should consult John Bull's *Birds of New York State*, pages 568-570, for a complete discussion of other possible nestings. Bull makes the point that the birds breed very early, long before most birders venture into the northland. The discovery of this nest shows how true this is. At this point it is not known if the nest was successful and if young were actually fledged.

The winter raptor counts were quite good, with an excellent flight of Rough-legged Hawks and several good roosts of Short-eared Owls. Snowy Owls were in good numbers on the coast but very spotty inland. The coast had more wintering Merlins than ever before. This represents a continuation of a recent trend. Until the late 1950's this species was considered very rare in winter on the coast and unknown inland. Although still rare, they are regular on the coast every winter. There were two inland reports: the March 29 report from Region 2 was probably a spring migrant but the Dec. 18 bird in Region 7 is very unusual and should be fully documented. In some areas the counts of wintering Cooper's Hawks were nearly as great, or in one case greater, than counts of Sharp-shins. Winter accipiters should be identified with great care.

Another hawk which requires careful identification before the first week of April is the Broad-wing. One was reported from Region 8 on March 19 and Region 9 reported 2 on March 9 and 1 on March 29. It is interesting to note that as late as April 19th NO Broad-wings had been reported at the famous hawk migration spot on Derby Hill.

Two notes point up the opportunities that many observers are missing. Region 2 commented on the presence of two races of Horned Larks. Region 5 noted that 60% of the Rough-legs were light-phased birds. There is a great deal of information of this kind that can be obtained by more careful observations. In the good old days when listers were happily counting subspecies we always knew when the migrant Prairie Horned Larks arrived among the wintering Northerns. In New England this was often the first sign of spring migration. The more northerly "Black-backed" Robins have an entirely different migration schedule from that of our resident birds. Likewise it is useful to know such information as the numbers of the three color forms of

the Harrier, the ratio of adults to immature eagles (as given in Region 9) etc. These details add much that is of value to the records.

The list of rare and unusual birds is delightfully long and will be obvious from a reading of the records. Eared Grebes turned up in three regions, King Eider on three lakeside regions, Black-backed Three-toed Woodpeckers in four regions and Northern Three-toed in three regions. Note the record of a Chipping Sparrow in Region 2. It will be interesting to learn if it molts into adult plumage in the spring. The Raven and Fish Crow are remarkable in Region 3 and were well documented. The chat in the same region was noted with commendable caution. Region 5 produced another Hawk Owl and Region 7 came through with 50 Bohemian Waxwings. The coast had its usual group of regular rarities such as Lesser Black-backed Gull and Tufted Duck. Really outstanding in that region, however, was the Boreal Owl that was picked up dead in a pine grove on Jones Beach.

Two birds stand out above all others, however, and must be considered as co-winners of the BOTS (Bird of the Season) award. A light-phase Northern Fulmar was observed just east of Oswego in Region 5. This is the first live individual seen inland and the second record for the region. It is interesting that the very dead individual found nearby in 1971 constitutes the only specimen for the state. The other winner was the first state record for Mountain Bluebird. It was found at Coxsackie in Region 8 and seen and photographed by a great many people. What a fine way to enliven the long winter season.

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REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

It was a kingfisher—oops, *halcyon*—winter, mild for the third consecutive year. With above normal temperatures in Dec. through Feb., Mar. seemed more severe than the actual 4°F. below average. The Niagara River was ice free with no ice bridge at the Falls until Feb. 11, and Lake Erie reached only 33° Mar. 28. Although the Genesee River had remained mostly open all winter, at the close of the period upland lakes were still icebound. Snow accumulation was minimal, even with 6 inches above average in the snow belt.