

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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The Winter Season was one of great contrasts—of weather, of birds, and particularly of opinions among the active birders. Many people found this to be a very exciting winter with many oddities to keep up their interest while others found it “dull, dull, deadly dull.” To be sure, some of the adjacent states seemed to gather in most of the more glamorous birds, but one suspects that their press agents were merely working harder. One sad case along this line will be mentioned later, however.

The Regional Editors were in complete agreement about the weather. December was nearly normal; January was bitterly cold and snowy; by the end of February the state was basking in record high temperatures and early migrants gave a false hope of the spring that was still, alas, weeks in the future. The large numbers of geese, ducks, and icterids that appeared during the last week of the month were very welcome, however; it was a joy to hear the American Woodcock performing its aerial spectacular before the first of March. The March let-down was inevitable.

The contrast in the list of birds for the season was fantastic. Region 5 could boast a Spotted Sandpiper and an irruption of Bohemian Waxwings. Region 2 lists Osprey and gallinule among the normally wintering birds from the north. Great numbers of White-throated Sparrows wintered throughout the state and Virginia Rails made a number of appearances. This latter species may be a much more common wintering bird than is currently suspected. The increased use of a tape recorder in the non-breeding season may well change our opinions on a number of rather secretive species that have been wintering undetected. The response is far short of that in the breeding season but at least one Virginia Rail in Dutchess County called briefly in answer to a tape and, on another occasion, popped its head out of the reeds, albeit silently. Again it should be stressed that the tapes do not work nearly as well in the winter but the technique should be tried. As would be expected, Region 10 provides the most remarkable list of half-hardy lingering birds, including Least Bittern, Common Gallinule, American Oystercatcher, Willet, Least Sandpiper, Whip-poor-will, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting (also reported from Dutchess Co.), and Lincoln's Sparrow. Even the remarkably warm weather at the end of February, however, does not prepare one for the records of Forster's Tern and

Rough-winged Swallow in the same region.

From the north the appearance of Boreal Chickadees continued. These were over-shadowed in many minds by the flocks of Bohemian Waxwings in Region 5 and the immense group of 400 in Region 6. No less remarkable were two, and possibly three, Gray Jays that took up residence in Dutchess County and remained for most of the period. Winter finches proved to be somewhat disappointing after an auspicious start, with only the flocks of Common Redpolls providing excitement during the latter part of the period. The two reported Hoary Redpolls come with excellent references and this editor accepts them with more than a touch of envy. A number of other "possible" Hoaries were very wisely left unreported although a number of them were undoubtedly good. The interested reader is referred to the superb photographs in the *Kingbird* of May, 1967 (vol. XVII, no. 2, p. 66).

A number of observers are beginning to comment on the decline of the Black Duck as a wintering bird and at least one editor (Region 5) blames this on the great increase in the feral Mallard population. There may be studies already published on this subject but if so, I am not aware of them. There might be a need to control this semi-wild population of Mallards in the foreseeable future. We need much more information on this.

At the risk of being overly repetitive, care is once again urged in the identification of wintering accipiters. It is hard to believe that the Cooper's Hawk could ever outnumber the Sharp-shinned. In fact, I suspect that the Goshawk is more numerous in most areas than the Cooper's in the winter time. Observers tend to shy away from identifying the "rare" Goshawk and assume that a big accipiter must be a Cooper's. Likewise, a hawk flashing by the picture window as it goes after a bird at the feeder is going to look VERY large. I fully admit that this is a bias on the part of your editor but one which has been built up over a number of years. A good-sized female accipiter seen very well both perched and in flight was the subject of much argument in northern Dutchess Co. and was finally left unidentified. Subsequent sightings only added to the confusion in many minds.

The recent reappearance of European Goldfinches on central Long Island is most puzzling. The comments by the editors of Region 10 deserve careful consideration. John Bull in *Birds of the New York Area* states that there were fewer than six birds in 1955 and that they did not survive much later than that. It seems impossible that

they could have maintained a viable breeding population without detection in such a well birded area for 20 years only to surface suddenly once again. On the other hand, there has been no evidence of deliberate or accidental re-introduction. In view of the legal problems involved, this is, perhaps, not surprising. The suggestion that they were put there to validate the species' position on various New York State bird lists is amusing and opens up a vast, and fortunately unexplored, area of listing, but is not to be taken seriously. Until more evidence is in (or until I see the birds) I will continue to regard them as escapes but will certainly hope for up-to-date reports on the progress of the population. The same should be said for the Monk Parakeet, which has vanished from these records. Has it truly vanished from the state or is it just not being reported?

In a similar vein, I welcome the reports of the "Spotted" Towhee and "Oregon" Junco from Region 2. Do not fail to report identifiable races when they appear. The taxonomists who are responsible for most of the recent changes in status of many familiar "species" are among the first to point out the need for this type of information. A mere name change does not mean that the creature has become an un-bird. I know of none of the lucky observers in Region 9 who saw the "Audubon's" Warbler who said, "Oh, well, it's just another Yellow-rumped."

From a lister's viewpoint, the most frustrating bird of the season does not appear in the following reports. "A perfectly plumaged male Varied Thrush spent the month of January 300 ft. over the state line from Dutchess Co. at Lakeville, Conn., much to the dismay of New York State listers," writes Ed Treacy. Every attempt was made to lure it over the line. Apples were spread on the ground just inside of New York State; a tape recording was played seductively from the nearby bushes. It was all to no avail. In spite of this recalcitrance, one had to admit that it was a handsome bird.

There are a number of candidates for the BOTS award this season. The Ivory Gull that expired most untimely, the two Hoary Redpolls, the variety of out of time and place wanderers. I think, however, that the immature Harris' Sparrow in Chatham gets the nod. It was a handsome bird in a lovely location and the warm hospitality of the Wayne Trimms made it a joy. Many thanks from all who saw the bird.

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