

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FALL SEASON

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There is now no doubt that the weather for the fall of 1976 was sending us a clear message: Brother, it's gonna be a cold winter! September was relatively decent but October was the coldest on record in many places and November brought more cold and snow in many areas. Areas in Region 7 reported snow "for keeps" as early as October 10. Many areas of open water froze early, driving out the few waterfowl that were being reported. The conditions were not good for birders to be in the field.

The effect on the birds, however, was contradictory and in many cases quite unexpected. Conventional wisdom would have said that summer birds should depart very early and that there would be an influx from the north with early arrival dates. Note, however, the very late dates reported from many regions. In Region 1 there was a Blue-winged Warbler on Sept. 29. Region 2 produced a Common Nighthawk on Oct. 16, a Chimney Swift on Oct. 19, an Eastern Phoebe on Nov. 11 and an American Redstart on Nov. 28. Region 5 had a Rough-winged Swallow on Oct. 4 and a Nashville Warbler on Nov. 5. There are other examples in the various regional reports. On the other hand, the winter finch flight was reported zero to poor in all regions except the Adirondack area and there were few reports of Rough-legged Hawks or Snowy Owls. Inland regions also reported that the more southerly species such as Mockingbird, Tufted Titmouse and Carolina Wren were either holding their own or increasing.

There were, of course, some early arrivals such as the Purple Sandpiper on Oct. 7 and the Lapland Longspur on Sept. 6 in Region 5, and the Iceland Gull on Oct. 13 in Region 8. A good flight of Northern Shrikes developed with the first on Oct. 15 in Region 5 for a local early record and coming close to the state record of Oct. 6. Region 5 also had the greatest number of Northern Shrikes, with a total of 26 individuals—the overall total was 44 for the season.

Many regions had good numbers of land bird migrants during the fall. The outer beaches of Long Island had fantastic numbers of Hermit Thrushes, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and especially sparrows, of which there were an estimated maximum of 100,000 birds along the Jones Beach strip on Oct. 24. Region 5 reported a "great flight" between Sept. 30 and Oct. 6 on the Ontario Lakeplains. Dr. Scheider found the birds gathering in large "feeding assemblages" with other

areas nearly devoid of birds. This is surprisingly reminiscent of the situation in the tropics where the birds gather in feeding flocks containing many different species. Perhaps this thought could help to mitigate the effects of the local weather conditions.

The continuing growth of interest in hawk migrations is reflected in reports from several new locations. Observers are finding that local lookouts can be as rewarding as some of the better known places—and they are much less crowded. Note the results in Regions 3 and 5 as well as the usual reports from Region 9.

From the evidence of the fall reports, it almost seems that the jaegers have deserted their oceanic habitat in favor of Lake Ontario. Sea trips off Long Island reported very few jaegers although the Skua reports were a positive bonus. Region 1 had a single Parasitic; Region 2 had 4 Pomarines and 3 Parasitic; Region 5 had 1 Pomarine and a fantastic 50 Parasitics with 31 seen in one day.

The popular name “sea gull” has always been a wretched one but never more so than this past season. It was a superb larid season in many of the inland regions. Region 1 had 11 species of gulls including Lesser Black-backed, Black-legged Kittiwake and Sabine’s. Region 2 had 10 species with the best being Thayer’s, Franklin’s and Black-legged Kittiwake. Region 5 had fine numbers of the rarer small gulls: 18 Little Gulls, 6 Franklin’s and 14 Black-legged Kittiwakes. Region 6 joins the party with Laughing and Franklin’s and Region 8 produced another Lesser Black-backed. Although one expects gulls in Region 10, a third Lesser Black-backed, Franklin’s and Sabine’s are noteworthy. Inland shore-birding was quite variable depending on local water levels. Montezuma Wildlife Refuge had 27 species until the water level was raised “to facilitate the duck hunters.” Is this the proper purpose of a “refuge”—to ruin the habitat for one group of species to help out a very small proportion of the human species?

Along this same line is the report from nearly every region concerning the low numbers of blackbirds and the absence of some of the normally large roosts. Only Region 9 reported a major flight. Has the army at last succeeded in something that they set out to do?

Previous comments in the *Highlights* about the relative numbers of Mallard and Black Ducks are emphasized by the counts in these reports and more importantly in a recent article by Johnsgard and DiSilvestro in the current issue of *American Birds* (vol. 30, no. 5). After analyzing 75 years of Christmas Bird Counts they come to the following conclusion: “It seems likely that the relatively specialized Black Duck, through increased competition and hybridization with

the more broadly adaptable Mallard, will continue to become an increasingly rarer component of the North American bird fauna." It is indeed a shame that a semidomesticated species is replacing the classic "wild duck" of the east coast.

Except in the coastal region, the number of spectacular rarities was very low. Numerous very good local records were well documented in the following reports. In addition to the previously mentioned gulls, Region 2 produced an Eared Grebe and Yellow-throated and Kentucky Warblers; Region 3 a Wheatear and Bohemian Waxwings; Region 5 added Louisiana Heron to the regional list and Region 7 did likewise with a White-eyed Vireo; Region 8 can boast of another Wheatear and a Western Kingbird, the latter species also turning up in Region 9 along with Kentucky Warbler, Blue Grosbeak and Lark Sparrow (the latter two reported with no date!).

As is so frequently true in the fall, most of the vagrants moved to the coast. Among the more regular wanderers were Yellow-throated Warbler, Western Tanager, 5 Blue Grosbeaks, 10 Lark Sparrows and a Clay-colored Sparrow. The Common Puffin was one of the very few records for the state although undoubtedly there would be many more if boat trips were undertaken by hardy observers in the winter. Puffins have been seen regularly in small numbers (max. 16) off Maryland. A third Wheatear was seen in what must be called the greatest "flight" ever reported in one season. Two Brewer's Blackbirds were very well seen and described and must be added to the few good sight records for this difficult-to-identify species.

Three species certainly qualify for the Bird of the Season award. The Townsend's Warbler was seen by one person. There are six previous sight records, only one of them in the fall. The Gray Kingbird was seen by several observers. There are two specimens and three good sight records for the state. The BOTS award must go, however, to the Spotted Redshank seen on Oct. 4 at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Because it was seen by only one observer and not photographed it must remain on the hypothetical list for the state but the excellent details of the observation leave no doubt as to the correctness of the identification. There is no previous state record although the species has been collected in Connecticut and seen in Ontario. It is unfortunate that such a good bird was overlooked by so many observers in an area that is as heavily birded as anywhere in the country. It certainly pays to take a second look at a presumably common bird!

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