

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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With one remarkable exception, everyone was in complete agreement about the dreadful winter of 1976-1977. There was cold and there was snow. It is unnecessary to repeat here the horror story that made news headlines and television reports all across the country. It is a wonder that there are any bird reports from the upstate lake-shore areas. That any birding was done at all is a tribute to the hardiness of the local observers; no "half-hardy" status for this group. The one region that did not complain about the winter weather was the one which is farthest Northeast, Region 7. Such comments as "reasonable snow cover," "reasonable temperatures" and "not a bad winter" will sound odd to the birders in Buffalo and Syracuse.

The results of the extreme winter were not, however, as obvious as might be expected. Most regions complained about the lack of feeder birds. On the other hand, there were a remarkable number of late records in December in spite of the rather cold fall. Warblers were well represented with a Palm on Dec. 30 in Region 1 and on Dec. 26 in Region 2; an Orange-crowned on Jan. 8 in Region 2; a Nashville on Dec. 15 in Region 3; Yellow-rumped in Region 6 (no date); Palm in Region 8 on Dec. 2 and a late Northern Waterthrush on a Christmas count in Region 10. A couple of lingering Lincoln's Sparrows and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak also in Region 10 add to this roster. A very well-described Broad-winged Hawk in Dutchess Co. on Jan. 30 convinced even your most sceptical Highlights editor. This scepticism also led him to omit the report of a very possible Gray-cheeked Thrush from Dutchess Co. in early December. The possibility of the northern form of the Hermit Thrush with very little reddish in the tail and a grayish back can not be overlooked.

Nearly every region commented on the disappearance of the half-hardy species during the winter. The gains that we have been reporting for such species as Tufted Titmouse and Carolina Wren may well have been wiped out. This has long been a pattern for the Carolina Wren in particular at the northern limit of its range, but it had done so well for so many years that one had hoped that the gains were permanent. Perhaps the reports are too pessimistic, for the Region 9 editor reports that they are still doing well and suggests that it is not the cold, but heavy ice glaze which is the prime factor in their survival. In addition to the decrease of landbirds due to the heavy win-

ter, note the drop in waterfowl and larids, particularly in Region 5.

Another area of general agreement was the very poor northern finch flight. Redpolls, siskins, Pine Grosbeaks and both crossbills were generally absent. Evening Grosbeaks were not in the great numbers of some years, but Purple Finches and goldfinches were present in unprecedented numbers at most feeding stations.

With the exception of the Northern Shrike, which made a very good showing indeed, arctic predators were notably absent. Rough-legged Hawks were below normal in numbers and Snowy Owls were very few in most regions. Region 5 reported 5, and the coastal region reported only 4. None of the three rare northern owls were reported.

The problem of wintering accipiters is still with us. I have been taken severely to task for my comments in the past about the relative numbers of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned. This winter, three regions (1, 3 and 6) reported more Cooper's than Sharp-shinned; 5 regions reported the reverse; one region reported none and the other said "usual scattered few accipiters." It would seem that the major body of wintering Cooper's Hawks is in the western part of the state—Region 1 produced well over half of all the individuals reported.

As indicated earlier, the number of rarities was rather limited during the winter. Region 1 produced the usual good gulls including Lesser Black-backed and Black-legged Kittiwake. Region 2 weighed in with very late Red Phalarope and Pomarine Jaeger. In addition to a late Osprey, Region 3 had Lark Sparrow and Brewer's Blackbird, plus a very likely Mountain Bluebird. Region 5 came up with Barrow's Goldeneye, King Eider and Harris' Sparrow. Franklin's Gull and Red-necked Grebe were good for Region 6, but the Bohemian Waxwings would have been exciting for most of the birders in the rest of the state. Another late Osprey appeared in Region 7, but the highlight there was an Eared Grebe for a new regional record. The Varied Thrush in Region 8 was particularly gratifying to all those who were frustrated by the bird just across the line in Conn. last winter. Region 10 reported an imm. Sabine's Gull and a Green-tailed Towhee. The large "Whimbrel" reported from Brookhaven seems more likely to have been the European Curlew rather than the European race of the Whimbrel. Both have the white rump but the Whimbrel has strong head stripes and is the same size as the American form.

The BOTS award must go to the Burrowing Owl in Region 10. Full details are given in a separate article in this issue (see pp. 69-73) but the Burrowing Owl on the Jones Beach strip is far and away the best bird of the season.

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REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

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The dreadful winter was possibly the most severe in history. Lake Erie froze Dec. 14, a record early. A record one-month snowfall of 60.7 inches (154 cm) for Dec. was broken the next month with 68.3 inches (174 cm). The infamous 5-day "Blizzard of '77," starting Jan. 28, and worse by reason of the 38-inch (96.5 cm) snow cover, not only tragically paralyzed Buffalo and surrounding areas, but decimated wintering bird populations regionally. With smaller lakes already ice-locked in November, the Allegheny and Genesee Rivers closed by mid-January except for a few stretches used by waterfowl until becoming turbid about Feb. 20. December temperatures averaged 5.9°F (3.3°C) below normal and January registered a record 9.7°F (5.4°C) colder than usual. Finally, for the first since Dec. 22, the mercury climbed above freezing on Feb. 9 and the back of the winter was broken. Warmer weather then continued, averaging February temperatures to 1°F ($.6^{\circ}\text{C}$) above normal, and bringing optimistic migrants (Canada Geese, robins, icterids) to revive a winter weary Region.

Positives for the winter include 1) excellent Christmas tally of dabbling ducks, bay ducks, Hooded Mergansers and Ring-necked Pheasants; 2) widely reported small Turkey flocks wintering well on available Red Oak acorns, but some culled to the strongest and fittest by the rugged season (Eaton); 3) fine larid numbers; 4) superabundance of Rock Doves, Mourning Doves and Blue Jays; 5) widespread Red-breasted Nuthatches, Cedar Waxwings, N. Shrikes and Am. Robins, until Feb.; 6) Cardinals thriving well on bounty of wild grapes and feeder fare; 7) good numbers of Purple Finches and Am. Goldfinches.

Negatives for the winter include 1) fewer both field and feeder birds (Bander D. Clark caught 951 *less* this season than in '75-'76); 2) low numbers of wintering ducks and Oldsquaws, White-winged Scoters, and Com. and Red-breasted Mergansers; 3) poor showing of Ruffed Grouse, few Am. Coots, no Com. Snipe; 4) no Snowy Owl invasion; 5) absence of most half-hardies (Tufted Titmice, Carolina Wrens, Mockingbirds) after Jan.; 6) almost no Golden-crowned Kinglets, E. Meadowlarks and winter finches; 7) sharp drop in wintering White-throated and Song Sparrows by Feb.; the persistent cold and deep snow too much for half-hardies.

Rarities include Goshawk, Bald Eagle, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake and House Finch. Addenda from the fall are Mute Swan, Goshawk, Hudsonian Godwit, Parasitic Jaeger, House Finch and "Oregon" Junco.

Abbreviations: BOS—Buffalo Ornithological Society; CC—Christmas Census; GMA or WMA—Game or Wildlife Management Area; NP or NS—Nature Preserve or Sanctuary; NWR—National Wildlife Refuge; RCC—Regional CC, Dec. 18-Jan. 2, which includes totals of Audubon CC's from Beaver Meadow, BOS, Hamburg-E. Aurora, Jamestown, Oak Orchard