

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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For once all the regions in the state were in complete agreement about the winter weather—it was dreadful. December was more or less normal but then the snows came. Inland and coastal storms combined to give the state record snow depths. To compound the difficulties was the extreme cold of January and February with no thaw to diminish the snow cover. In many of the regions the temperature rose above freezing on only two or three days during the two-month period. Birds were concentrated at feeding stations, although one suspects that this is partially due to the concentration of the birders enjoying the indoor warmth rather than braving the elements. Active field work in Region Two produced the best species total for the season in at least five years. About the only positive comment came from Region Ten which reported less harbor freeze-up than last year and, therefore, less waterfowl displacement. Apparently the Brant, however, learned to enjoy the taste of lawn grass, for hundreds of them were feeding on parkway shoulders and golf courses when their normal water habitat was still open.

As always in the winter season the National Audubon Christmas Counts provide much of the data that follows. These counts provide an excellent picture of the local bird populations at the time that the count was taken. Unfortunately the count period is relatively early in the season and does not truly reflect the winter picture. The half-hardy species are still present, but most either move out or die off shortly thereafter; note the decline in Ring-billed Gulls from 3600 to 20 in Region Five. In all too many cases no follow-up counts are taken. It is also remarkable how many rare and unusual species are seen *ONLY* on the count day. One reason for this is the extensive coverage by large numbers of people. Another is, unfortunately, the rather competitive nature of the counts and the resulting over-enthusiasm of some observers. In the following reports the regional editors have, in most cases, accepted the judgment of the local compiler although a few private doubts were expressed. The final decisions, of course, rest with the editors of *American Birds*.

The heavy snow cover provided safety for many of the raptor's prey species. Feeders were plagued, or blessed, depending on your point of view, with numbers of accipiters. Without adding further to my previous comments on identification and distribution, I merely

report the following: one region had no accipiters; in two of the regions the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's were equal in number; in five of the regions the Sharp-shinned outnumbered the Cooper's by a wide margin. The totals for the state cannot be given because Region Nine reported Sharp-shin as "too numerous to record." It is clear, however, that the Cooper's is more numerous in upstate regions than in eastern and downstate areas.

One of the main features of the season was the flight of "winter finches." All of the species made some kind of a showing, although different areas had varying results with individual species. The movements of these birds are confusing and present a real challenge to someone interested in a serious field study. The crossbills are notoriously nomadic and come and go according to the local food crops. Evening Grosbeaks seemed to leave the area during the middle part of the winter and then built up again toward the end of the season. Presumably they had moved further south and were returning, but one wonders why they depart in the first place, with all the free(?) food still available. Pine Grosbeak numbers varied considerably with no observable pattern. Siskins and goldfinches increased steadily during the period. Were they coming into the regions from outside or merely appearing at the feeders as natural food sources gave out? There was very little agreement as to the extent of the Purple Finch flight. The star performer of the group was unquestionably the Common Redpoll. The flight followed the classic pattern of small numbers early in the season and then an explosion in late January and February. Almost certainly this is a result of a southward migration for there were no detectable flights early in the season. Careful observation produced reports of Hoary Redpolls in six regions and an indication of admirable restraint and caution in the identification of this difficult species.

There was little agreement as to the effects of the severe winter on the expanding southern species. Titmice seemed to be well up in most regions and Red-bellied Woodpeckers made a good showing. Mockingbirds were reported down in a number of areas. Reports of Carolina Wrens vary. Region Two reports few losses but Regions One and Five report serious losses. Most regions reported them as "surviving." By the way, note the potential soap-opera situation of the Carolina Wrens in Region Five; tune in next season and see what happens.

Another species of interest is the Varied Thrush, which appeared in five regions with some multiple reports. Dick Guthrie speculates

that perhaps this species is following the pattern of the Evening Grosbeak and becoming established with a small breeding population in the Northeast. I had suggested this a number of years ago in the New Hampshire Audubon Quarterly, because of the concentration of records from the northern areas of New England, and still think that there is a very good possibility of regular breeding somewhere in the northeastern forests, albeit in very small numbers.

Although we had nothing like the spectacular flight of northern owls reported in Minnesota, there are reports of Boreal, Great Gray, and Hawk-Owls. Snowy Owls were very low in numbers again although the Rough-leg flight was excellent. Northern Shrikes were also widely reported.

Nearly everyone commented on the continued population explosion of the House Finch and one editor suggested that careful notes be kept to evaluate the ecological effect that this is having on other species and the local food supplies. Is it in direct competition with the House Sparrow and if so, will the numbers of the House Sparrows diminish? Would this really be a change for the better?

The Turkey population continues to expand in many areas. Care must be taken to resist the pressures to hunt this noble bird during this re-establishment period. Eventually it may once again become a valid game bird but not for a long period of time.

There is little space to comment on much of the interesting data in the following reports and I can only urge that each one be read carefully. A tremendous amount of work has gone into their preparation. A few regional highlights follow:

Region One: A flock of 12,000 Common Mergansers, Parasitic Jaeger on Dec. 1, Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, Bohemian Waxwings. **Region Two:** Gyrfalcon and Peregrine Falcon, Boreal Owl, Eastern Phoebe on Feb. 7, three Yellow-headed Blackbirds, great counts of Snow Buntings with a max flock of 5000 and a day's count of 7500. 50 Short-eared are also impressive. **Region Three:** Osprey Feb. 11 (early or late?), Hawk-Owl, (excellent notes submitted), Northern Three-toed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee at a feeder which was the only one reported. **Region Four:** Golden Eagle, Pine Warbler Feb. 6-16. **Region Five:** Eared Grebe, Barrow's Goldeneye and King Eiders, Red Phalarope, Dickcissel and "Oregon" Junco. **Region Six:** Black-legged Kittiwake, increase in Gray Partridge in spite of the winter, 1100 Great Black-backed Gulls, 300 Bohemian Waxwings. **Region Seven:** Lake Champlain area produced 2 adult Little Gulls, Black Guillemot, Great Gray Owl and 200 Bohemian Wax-

wings. In contrast, a hike up Mt. Marcy in February produced zero birds. Also note the impressive Raven counts. **Region Eight:** Note the number of raptors on the Cossackie Flats, Gray Jay, Chipping Sparrow and Lincoln's Sparrow for the third year (!). **Region Nine:** 55 Turkey Vultures in Dutchess Co., Golden Eagles performing courtship displays in Clove Valley, 200 Laughing Gulls, Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker at Vassar College and a Wood Thrush in Rye. **Region Ten:** Pelagic species lead the list. Most remarkable is the Sooty Shearwater and 5 Skuas in February. The Federation pelagic trip produced 83 Razorbills. Also good were Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Western Kingbird, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Lark Bunting and Lark Sparrow.

These may not be the items that the regional editors would have chosen to single out, but they seem to be of the widest interest.

As always it is very hard to decide on the BOTS award. This season I have had to give co-awards. On December 13 an exhausted Say's Phoebe was picked up near Ithaca and taken to Cornell. It died soon afterwards and now constitutes the second specimen for the state. There are several valid sight records. On December 8 and again on January 13 an immature Ivory Gull was seen at Hawkins Point, Massena. Excellent field notes were submitted. There are two specimens and several sight records for the state. Except for Niagara Falls, this is the only inland record as far as I know.

The Winter lingers on; Spring refuses to come. Let us all hope that warmth and warblers will soon put an end to this rather dreary period of the year. However, a look at the following records shows that all was not in vain.

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REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

What a dreary, elongated winter this was—and the second snowiest on record, its 132 inches (4 m.) topped only by last year's snowfall. Frequent storms characterized December and January, a result of "split Westerlies." This year the prevailing winds divided at the Pacific Coast, one segment to take the more normal path to Alaska and then back across the northern states, and the second to follow roughly our southern border before bending north along the east coast. Although December repeatedly alternated periods of rain and snow, tem-