

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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Never before and perhaps never again in our lifetimes will New York birders experience an irruption of Great Gray Owls of the magnitude of this winter's invasion.

In 1974 John Bull (*Birds of New York State*, Doubleday/Natural History Press, Garden City) cited "nearly two dozen occurrences in the state," including two old Long Island specimens. During this winter season over 50 were noted throughout the state, two as far south as Long Island!

The focus of this irruption appeared to be to the southeast, with large numbers of Great Grays reported from western Ontario to New Brunswick, south along the coast to Long Island. Areas lying in the south "shadow" of the Great Lakes reported few owls. In New York, all but two of the Great Grays were reported from Regions 5-8 inclusive. The timing of this invasion was also interesting, with only two reports preceding January 23rd. Following this date, their numbers fairly exploded with new birds being reported throughout February into March. Widespread news media publicity was credited for generating many sightings from non-birders, although many of these reported "Gray Owls" proved to be Barred.

This irruption follows on the heels of a localized Great Gray flight last winter when they moved in large numbers from western Ontario into northern Minnesota. Kim Eckert of Duluth, Minnesota, termed this "spectacular influx . . . the 2nd greatest invasion in the state" (*American Birds* 32: 353-355, 1978). Two stragglers from this irruption reached Ottawa, and the vicinity of Lake Champlain, New York.

Bull (*loc. cit.*) stated that "very few ornithologists have ever seen a live wild Great Gray Owl in New York," 18 of the reports being "specimen records." I would now wager that a majority of currently active New York birders have seen at least one, and some as many as four in one day! None of the New York Great Grays was collected as a scientific specimen, but several lost their lives to a sometimes uncaring public and unfeeling motor vehicles. Many of the owls were described as "starving," ready to accept handouts (literally!) of live mice or dead squirrels.

An explanation of this winter's unprecedented Great Gray Owl flight will hopefully appear somewhere, sometime. It is interesting to note the numbers and distribution of other "northern" predators

this winter. Snowy Owls staged a modest flight but were outnumbered by Great Grays! The Boreal Owl, a rather secretive bird, appeared in December, February, and March at three scattered upstate locales. A Hawk Owl was noted in the Adirondacks, but the Gyrfalcon was lacking. Rough-legged Hawk numbers were unimpressive throughout the state, while Northern Shrike numbers swelled to near unprecedented totals in the southernmost regions. Our other northern visitors, "winter finches," were nearly nonexistent following last winter's excellent flight. A scattering of Bohemian Waxwings appeared in Regions 2, 6 and 8.

Region 10 Christmas Count totals of Tufted Titmice reflected last fall's unprecedented irruption. This was scarcely reflected elsewhere except for several birds at feeders in the eastern Adirondacks. Red-bellied Woodpecker, another southern invader, spread into New York on two fronts: up the Ohio River valley into the Western Tier and up the eastern seaboard into the Hudson River valley. The older Western-Tier population seems well established and healthy, perhaps still spreading further to the St. Lawrence Valley. The unstable New York City-Long Island population, subject to great fluctuations these past few years, now shows signs of establishing itself, numbers of Red-bellieds even wintered in most New York City parks. Yet another southerner, the Boat-tailed Grackle, has spread northward along the coast to central New Jersey in recent years, reflected in a scattering of individuals to Long Island. A *group* of Boat-taileds on western Long Island this winter raises hopes this species will breed in the not too distant future.

Feeder rarities were way below par: Gray Jay (Region 8), Varied Thrush (Regions 4 and 10), Yellow-headed Blackbird (Region 10), and Black-headed Grosbeak (Region 9). A total of 11 other *Pheucticus* grosbeaks were reported as Rose-breasteds, of which a "flock of 6" was deleted for lack of supporting details, and none of the remaining birds was substantiated by photography. A total of only four wintering *Pheucticus* grosbeaks seen by this writer over the years have all been Black-headeds, which should not be taken to mean that the Rose-breasted never occurs. Most of this winter's birds were probably correctly identified, yet the separation of these species can be difficult and hybrids do occur. Selective collecting of specimens would serve to clarify their wintering status, while a conscious effort to photograph them would clarify the situation in large part.

Unprecedented seasonal occurrences were registered only in the

state's two southernmost regions: Long-billed Dowitcher, Ruff, Parasitic Jaeger, Western Kingbird, Swainson's Thrush, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

A litany of rarities includes a Black Guillemot in the Finger Lakes Region, one of very few inland reports; a Harlequin Duck in Region 4, well away from its normal Great Lakes-Atlantic Ocean wintering habitat; the previously-reported Lesser Black-backed and California Gulls at Rockland Lake in Region 9; a Burrowing Owl wintering on the prairie-like habitat of JFK International Airport, Long Island, survived winter's worst in a man-made niche, a storm sewer pipe; and a Wheatear made a brief appearance on Staten Island. The BOTS award was unanimously awarded to the Great Gray Owl, the headliner of this report.

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REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

To appreciate the spring, one needs a bit of winter's chill—but why this excess for three consecutive winters? The season began reasonably enough with near normal December temperatures. Then those praying for a white Christmas overdid it and, along with much of the Southern Tier, were snowbound for the day by a record twenty-two to thirty-six inches. Although brief thaws and a few rains occurred during January, temperatures for the month averaged 4.2° F. (2.3° C.) below normal and precipitation was 2.5 inches (6.4 cm.) above the expected. A four to twenty-one inch snow cover persisted from early January through February, burying food and protecting the mouse and vole population as well as hampering birders. Between the bitter days of February 9th and 20th, temperatures dropped below 0° F. (-17.8° C.) every day except the 15th and broke the five-day record cold spell set in February 1899. In spite of warmer weather the final eight days of the month, bringing the average temperature up to 10° F. (5.6° C.) below normal, it was the coldest February this century except for 1934. Lake Erie reached the freezing point on January 4th, and by February 16th Lake Ontario was 70% ice covered—the most ice ever recorded here—and shortage of food sent waterfowl overland seeking open water. Miserable ice storms, especially during December and January, brought birds to feeders but caused power outages and hazardous road conditions.

Results of the State Waterfowl Census, conducted by the Department of Environmental Conservation January 4th to 19th, showed the fewest birds since