

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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The weather of the winter of '79-'80 was highly unusual, to say the least. All regions reported temperatures much warmer than usual, at least through mid-January, with snowfall and in most cases total precipitation well below normal, and a very late and short freeze-up compared with normal.

Given these conditions, I am in close agreement with Richard Guthrie of Region 8: "Because of the rather unusual nature of this winter, one is cautioned against drawing any conclusions about the apparent trends in the species reported here." This greatly simplifies my task. Normally one would expect the data base of the Christmas Bird Counts (hereafter CBC's) to allow one to make some definitive statements about trends, with much time to be spent sorting through the Regional Editors' analyses for the brightest gems to be included here. In fact, real trends are few indeed, except for those resulting from a very mild winter following on the heels of a warm fall.

The regional reports are generally as one might expect: there are many late dates, many new or seldom recorded winter species, many new high counts for regularly wintering species, and few records for most winter visitors from farther north. In total, at least 221 species were recorded in the state this winter. There are several instances of disparity between reported opinions of the season and actual results. Many observers, particularly feeder watchers, thought birds scarce. Yet several CBC's approached or exceeded record totals for species and numbers of individuals of many species (Regions 1, 2, 7 & 9) and the state waterfowl census in most regions was at a record high. The watershed date for record CBC counts appears to have been December 16 in most regions. Region 10 described the season as "unexciting and lacking in change of pace," yet they recorded 14+ species of shorebirds, 11 species of warblers, and more than 30 records that are new high counts or observations for which there are fewer than ten previous state winter records. In some respects there *was* no change of pace; it seemed like eternal fall with a continuous stream of later and later fall-type records, while those awaiting winter raptors, white-winged gulls, or winter finches met with disappointment in nearly all regions.

If one takes the time to study the regional reports carefully, there

are some signs of possible longer-term trends: the Ring-necked Pheasant continues to decline; the Turkey is spreading through both introduction and expansion; the Red-bellied Woodpecker continues to expand northward and southward into higher country in Regions 3, 5, 6 & 8; the Horned Lark was very low in Regions 1, 3 & 6; the Blue Jay was high in three regions and low in two; Carolina Wrens and Mockingbirds were generally up from the lows of the past few winters; American Robins were plentiful again with a peak of 3450 in Region 5; the House Finch is booming in all regions reporting it; and Tree Sparrows were noted as very low in most regions once again.

In addition to these potential trends, there are numerous interesting observations most certainly related to this winter's weather pattern. Wintering Whistling Swans were low in the normal locales of Region 1 and up in several regions to the east. Canada Geese wintered in good to record numbers in all regions. With most bodies of water staying open very late, most waterfowl species were present in excellent numbers. Diving ducks were noted as arriving late in Region 3 and as scarce in Region 10, presumably due to open water farther north. While White-winged Scoters were low in the usual wintering area off Long Island, an unprecedented 10,000 were reported in Region 2 in early January. All regularly occurring and many rarely recorded waterfowl were reported. Turkey Vultures were reported in record winter numbers with five regions reporting them and with a maximum of 53 in Region 9. Bald Eagles were late gathering at their St. Lawrence River wintering area in Region 6. Rough-legged Hawks and Snowy Owls were both very scarce. White-winged gulls were generally scarce, especially along the coast, but Region 1 reported maxima of 25 Glaucous and 8 Iceland and Region 6 maxima of 35 Glaucous and 7 Iceland. Early December brought a deluge of gulls to Region 2, peaking December 10 with an estimated 195,000, 85% to 90% Ring-billed and the balance Herring, covering the lakeshore from Irondequoit to Braddock bays. While this number dropped (to approx. 85,000 by the Dec. 16 CBC) with time, Little Gull numbers increased to an incredible 61!! by December 28, surely a North American high count. Of this number, only two were immatures. With help from interested readers, the origin of the massive flock of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls may be established in that a substantial percentage were badly oiled. Any nearby oil spills in late November or early December? The Northern Shrike was reported very scarce in all regions in sharp contrast to last winter. The Yellow-rumped Warbler

was the most widespread of the 13 warblers reported; while scarce on the coast, excellent inland counts were 40 and 80+ in Region 2 and 31 in Region 1. There was an unusual report of a completely melanistic House Sparrow from Region 2. Most normally rare winter feeder birds were present in several locations: e.g., Northern Oriole—nine regions, Dickcissel—five regions, Rufous-sided Towhee—six regions, and many others in two or three regions. There were almost no winter finches, though actually all species were reported in small numbers.

The mass of rarities this winter, many first regional or first winter records, is nearly overwhelming. As a stimulation to your reading the regional reports, a *sample* of the best is: Region 1: Sabine's Gull, Common Raven, Northern Waterthrush, and Lincoln's Sparrow; Region 2: Gannet, Black Vulture, Sora, Northern Phalarope, Pomarine Jaeger, Hawk Owl, Tree Swallow, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Region 3: Sandhill Crane, King Rail, Hawk Owl, and Fish Crow; Region 4: Golden Eagle, Eastern Phoebe, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Region 5: Barrow's Goldeneye; Region 6: Turkey Vulture, Common Raven, and Varied Thrush; Region 7: Northern Three-toed Woodpecker; Region 8: Green Heron, Pomarine Jaeger, Great Gray Owl, and Gray Jay; Region 9: Broad-winged Hawk, Sora, Lesser Black-backed Gull, House Wren, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Nashville Warbler; and Region 10: Tufted Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, American Oystercatcher, Marbled Godwit, Parasitic Jaeger, Black Guillemot, Western Kingbird, "Audubon's" Warbler, and Boat-tailed Grackle. The BOTS award easily falls to Dansville's (Region 2) Painted Redstart, viewed by over 750 birders.

As a one-shot seasonal Highlights Editor, one request, as an aid to future editors, is that, wherever possible, the Regional Editors do a more thorough job of putting their rarer records into historical perspective, e.g., xth state or regional seasonal record. This would save much time in highlighting in the face of deadlines.

May the spring be as interesting as this winter.

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