

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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This seasonal highlights report will be as brief as the winter of 1980-81 but not as bitter. Statewide temperatures averaged nearly 4° F. below normal from late December through early February. This hard freeze closed most of the state's open waters including the western end of Long Island Sound. Numbers of waterfowl, gulls, and other water birds were low. Yet snowfall was generally light and many "half-hardies" persisted through the season including frugivores and ground-foraging birds. Numbers of American Robins and White-throated Sparrows were especially notable upstate. Mid-February brought a dramatic turnabout in the weather, with temperatures ranging far above normal for the latter half of the month, including several record-breaking highs in the 60's upstate. This sudden warming triggered an earlier than usual migration of waterfowl, raptors, and icterids.

Among irruptive species, only Rough-legged Hawk was singled out for its better than usual to unprecedented numbers—164 individuals registered on the Watertown Christmas Count more than doubles the previous maxima cited in John Bull's *Birds of New York State*, (1974, Doubleday/Natural History Press, Garden City, NY.). A predicted winter finch invasion fizzled. All the winter finches were reported including Hoary Redpoll, but numbers of most species were confined to the vicinity of the Adirondacks, with Pine Grosbeak and Common Redpoll the only species reported in any appreciable numbers. A sprinkling of Bohemian Waxwings brought birds to four upstate regions. Theodore Mack cites the species' appearance in Essex County for the third consecutive winter, and suggests this might be attributed to an extension of the bird's winter range.

Outstanding rarities of the season included a white Gyrfalcon at Nassau County, Long Island and an apparent Boat-tailed Grackle at Rochester. The Gyrfalcon lingered from late January to early March and was a frustratingly difficult bird to locate. It ranged over a series of salt marshes extending over 20 miles by a mile or two in breadth. The bird appeared to hunt a given area for several days then switch to another spot when its prey, mainly waterfowl, grew too wary. The Gyrfalcon was seemingly capable of capturing prey at will and spent most of the daylight hours sitting on the ground or perched

in isolated groves of trees, further complicating efforts to find and observe it.

A large grackle present at Rochester was identified as Boat-tailed, with a full report including photographs to NYSARC. If confirmed, this represents a truly bizarre occurrence, for the species is virtually unknown north of Florida away from coastal salt marsh habitat. Boat-tailed Grackles have been slowly spreading north along the coast this past decade and have possibly bred on Long Island where they remain rare, with an average of three to four reports annually over the last five years.

The highlight of the season was an "invasion" of Ivory Gulls with up to four individuals reported. Immatures were observed in late December at Niagara Falls, mid-January at Newburgh on the Hudson River, and late January at Rochester, and an adult in mid-January at Newburgh. The immatures were noted on non-overlapping dates and all photographed but the photographs have not yet been compared to ascertain whether the same individual was responsible for two or more of the reports. The distribution of these Ivory Gulls and lack of reports from New England suggests these birds emanated from the Hudson Bay region in central Canada.

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## REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

The cold, cold December did "make cowards of us all" and we continued to shake through January into the first week of February, fearful lest this winter be even worse than those such a short time ago. While December temperatures averaged 3.9° F. (2.2° C.) below normal, and Lake Erie froze during the last week, about a week early, the mean for January was 6.1° F. (3.4° C.) below normal. Rivers closed more than usual and ice on Amity Lake measured 22 inches (59 cm.) in midwinter. As the cold finally broke during the second week of February, temperatures to the end of the period brought the month's average to 8.1° F. (4.5° C.) above normal. The drought of summer and fall persisted through January, with total precipitation nearly 2 in. (5 cm.) below normal with little snow except in the snow belt, which had 3 in. (7.6 cm.) above average. When at last relief from the prolonged cold arrived in February, most of the inch-