

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON

GORDON M. MEADE, M.D.

My presentation of the highlights of the 1981-82 winter season takes a somewhat different approach. I hope the deductions I draw, and the implications I see in the data presented from the regions will be of some interest.

The only necessity for speaking of the season's weather is to make an historical record. There was no dispute that it was a dismal winter without an excess of snow, but what came was enduring because of the persistent deep cold, ice storms, and bitter, incessant wind. Only the hardest birders were much afield and feeders enjoyed a rushing business.

My birding in New York State began seriously in 1918. If one views this past winter's season from the perspective of almost 65 years of birding, some interesting facts come into view, things known to some older birders but not realized by more recent recruits to birding.

As I review the regional reports I am impressed by the fact that a number of the reported species were essentially unknown or rare prior to 25-30 years ago in the areas where they are now common. An historically oriented discussion of a few of them may be illuminating.

Turkey Vulture—Eaton (1914) said this species was only a summer visitant on Long Island and western New York in limited numbers in July and August, and was not known to breed in the state. Now it is fairly common and widespread throughout the state. During the first two years of the Breeding Bird Survey it has been confirmed as a breeder in Regions 1, 2, 7 and 8 and found as a "Probable" in the other six regions. The current season reports indicate the possibility of a change to year round status. Region 2 reports a bird on 12 January, Region 3 found six or seven over Sapsucker Woods on 4 February, and, most remarkable, Region 9 tells of a nightly roost of 15 birds at Pound Ridge. There is no doubt this bird is prospering as another of the northward moving southern species.

Red-bellied Woodpecker—Eaton (1914) said this species "was common on Long Island and lower Hudson Valley 50 years ago (1860's) but now has entirely deserted that region—only two reports during the last 30 years. It must be regarded as uncommon or local in western New York." That its status has changed statewide is evi-

denced by regional remarks of "lots of RBWs," "95 on our CBCs," "one on Tug Hill plateau, unusually far north," "one at Henderson through season," "scattered reports through region," "continues its slow increase—one or more on most CBCs in Region 9." It is doing well despite rigorous winters and has become a regular feeder bird. And according to the Atlas Project its breeding has been confirmed in all regions except Region 1 where it is "Probable." Quite a change since 1914!

Tufted Titmouse—Eaton (1914) knew of no breeding record for the state except once on Long Island and said that in the rest of the state there were reports of occasional stray birds. When I started birding, the species in western New York was purely an accidental which occasioned excitement among birders. Like other southern invaders the "pioneers" have generally appeared in early winter. Our current season says it is "doing well," "181 on CBCs with 96 at Ithaca," "thrived at feeders in Region 4," "more numerous at feeders than usual—one unusually far north at Old Forge," "at feeders up the Champlain Valley and into the central mountains," "reported in very good numbers." An extraordinary contrast to the past. Now confirmed as a breeder in all regions but 6 where it is rated "Probable."

Mockingbird—As another southern invader which was an accidental or a rarity 30 years ago we find it mentioned in eight out of nine of this season's reports in terms of "encouraging numbers," "continued good numbers," "42 birds on our CBCs with 24 at Ithaca," "seems more abundant than ever," "one spent three weeks at Canton," "six on the Plattsburgh CBC, one at Ticonderoga," "large numbers on seven CBCs," "fantastic numbers on CBCs when you consider the bird was absent before the late Fifties." The Mockingbird is a continuing "success story." Eaton (1914) reported some evidence that it had bred on Long Island and possibly in southeastern New York. The current breeding bird survey has confirmed its breeding in every region of the state except Region 1 where it is considered a "Probable."

House Finch—A population explosion since the early 1940's has been that of the introduced House Finch. The magnitude of this phenomenon becomes increasingly clear. In this winter season it was reported from all regions in such terms as "usual abundance," "record highs on CBCs," "upward spiral continues," "thrived at feeders," "reports now so widespread that winter reports of Purple Finch are suspect," "outnumbers Purple Finch almost ten to one," "continues

to increase.” And the Atlas Project now has confirmed its breeding in every region of the state. Question: Will we come to regret this introduction as we did those of the House Sparrow and Starling?

Cardinal—To some it may be surprising that I include this species with the others as a recent invading species. But it is quite true that in 1914 the bird was a local resident confined to southeastern New York, Staten Island and the west end of Long Island. In the rest of the state it had been occasionally reported as a rare visitor. I can recall well the excitement a male in Rochester created in February 1926. Just about 40 years ago it became a regular species on CBCs in western New York and its numbers have increased steadily. Today it is so commonplace it merits mention on only half of the regional reports but that it is still moving is evidenced by the fact that it is included on the rarity list from Region 7 where it appeared at Piseco, Tupper and Saranac Lakes, and Plattsburgh!

From this rather cursory discussion it can be seen that our regional reports can give evidence of long term, widespread changes in abundance and distribution of avian populations. Thus reports of even common and unexciting species can add to the unfolding picture. Avian demography is not static.

Flock Interchange

In Region 4 a partly albino House Finch came sporadically but at fairly regular intervals to be with a feeder group. The observer was led to speculate that there might be rotating flocks and that the 60 birds he counted daily might not always be the same birds. An experience I had in 1950 encourages me to assure him that he is correct in his surmise, that the flock composition undergoes constant change. At my feeder in Saranac Lake I had a daily flock averaging 30 birds. Over a period of three weeks I trapped one or two birds a day for a total of 20 birds, painted their upper mandibles with bright blue model enamel, and released them back to the flock. As time went on blue-billed birds were reported to me at the many feeders all over the village but I never had more than two of them in my flock of 30 at any one time—usually only one. It was obvious that the blue-billed birds were scattering elsewhere. My calculations at the time indicated there were probably about 400 birds in all in the interchanging flocks.

Raptor Predation

The concentration of small birds at feeders provided fine hunting for the protein-hungry Goshawks, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks and Northern Shrikes which were widely and frequently reported

throughout the state. In addition to small birds, Mourning Doves, Gray Squirrels and Cottontail Rabbits were victims.

Chickadee Irruption

Those regional editors who made note of such a common species as the Black-capped Chickadee felt that the high CBC counts and the unusual activity at feeders represented an irruption of the species. This phenomenon bears promise of an exciting and spectacular return migratory movement of these birds eastward along the south shore of Lake Ontario. When this happens they move steadily along for hours at a time—an extraordinary sight.

Along with this there was a definite south and west movement of that more septentrional species, the Boreal Chickadee, which appeared at a feeder as far west as Cheektowaga, and as far south as Jones Beach, Shelter Island, Rye and Slide Mountain. One wonders if these two species derived from the same areas or were simply impelled to move by the same factors. As in past years they very likely will be found among the Black-cappeds returning east along the lake.

The "Late-Stayers"

Year after year the fall and winter season Highlights report summer species that are still lingering. For example, this winter we have reports of American Bittern, King Rail, Sora, Brown Thrasher, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Nashville, Black-throated Green and Pine Warblers, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Oriole, Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak—all species that should have long since responded to the hormonally regulated migratory drive.

Ever since reading of the pioneering experiments of Rowan in the 1930's on the stimulation of the migratory impulse by changing amounts of daylight, I have been intrigued by the question of whether these "late-stayers" may be birds in which disease of the gonads may be responsible for a lack of hormonal response and hence a failure to migrate. If this should be true, these are crippled birds just as much as the Black-throated Green Warbler with an injured wing which lingered at Rye until 5 December. Opportunity for revealing research lies in a study of the health of these "late-stayers."

Redpoll Invasion

This was a redpoll incursion year with reports from all ten reporting regions that the birds were common to "present in numbers up to 1500." Feeders were overwhelmed. Dorothy Crumb in Region 5 banded over 600 at her feeders. Along with them came a consider-

able sprinkling of the rare Hoary Redpoll, giving birders a chance to sharpen their diagnostic eyes and judgment. There were problems with individual birds which after careful scrutiny were concluded to be light-colored Commons. In Keene, an albinistic Common revealed another possible source of identification confusion. There is no doubt that there were numbers of Hoarys, but with such a highly-desired Life List species there is always the possibility of caution slipping and a resultant misidentification. Take extra care!

Another species being identified with increasing frequency is the Lesser Black-backed Gull. Four, and possibly five birds appear in the winter reports. One, at Cohoes Falls, is identified as a first-year bird. If this is correct, the conjecture arises as to whether this species is now breeding on this continent. The increasing number of reports throughout the northeast may lend support to this conjecture. Both the Lesser Black-backed Gull and Hoary Redpoll identification problems underline the danger of error when a species becomes a "popular item" and the need for extra care in diagnosis.

Rarities

When one counts all the species listed by the different regions as rarities—a total of 47 species—it becomes obvious that the reasons for listing a species as a rarity are quite variable. What is rare in one region is not considered so in another. Some species are called rare because they are present out of season such as the wood warblers, Scarlet Tanager; some are escapes—Black-hooded Parakeet, Blue-black Grosbeak and European Goldfinch; others are misplaced or wandering birds out of normal range—California Gull, Say's Phoebe; and some species are common species invading new territory—Fish Crow, Tufted Titmouse, Mockingbird and Cardinal; others are simply rare in the region; some are difficult to classify. So what should a statewide Highlights list as rarities? Out of the 47 species I have chosen Common Murre, California Gull, Say's Phoebe, Varied Thrush, and Harris' Sparrow as species truly rare in the state as a whole. For the BOTS I nominate the Ivory Gull at the Saratoga Springs feeder, primarily because of its outrageously incongruous location and activity.

Perhaps from this review I have made some deductions, and sensed implications that will add a little breadth to the mass of data compiled in the regional reports.

27 Mill Valley Rd., Pittsford, New York 14534