

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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Three years ago when I wrote these highlights for the first time (viewed as a one-shot effort at the time), the season was one of the warmest on record with loads of late dates and rare-for-winter records. Now, in my first winter as Highlights Editor, the situation is wilder yet. I have always viewed the winter and summer seasons as the two where we can really try to do quantitative analyses of trends from CBC data and Breeding Bird Survey data. What are we to do with a season with abnormal weather being a major factor in determining numbers and variety of birds present and/or observed? Certainly, most positives must be suspected of having substantial weather biases. Probably only strong negative trends for resident species can be clearly viewed as real, apart from the strong weather influence.

The weather! Best summarized by Bill Cook's, "This was the winter that wasn't." All regions had each month of the season well above normal for temperatures, from 3-9° F. For most, it was the mildest winter in at least 30 years, with many records broken for individual dates and monthly highs. In various locations, spring peepers and tree frogs were peeping off and on thru December and even into January. In Region 9, earthworms, ants and honey bees were out and about in early February. Except for January and February in Region 10, all precipitation levels reported were below average. Incredibly, Regions 9 and 10 reported the largest snowfalls, shutting out Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. Even the High Peaks area was short-changed, with about three feet of accumulation thru the season. For those who missed the various meteorological presentations, this winter's weather may be blamed on El Niño (off the west coast of South America) which developed in a pattern usually seen about once every 100 years. An excellent production by Environment Canada claimed that once this effect was in place and the water temperatures in that region of the Pacific Ocean measured, their math models of the related ocean and atmospheric currents predicted very accurately precisely the North American weather patterns observed. The major problems were: 1) it was not predicted or modelled until after the unusually strong El Niño was in place, and 2) they could not really predict, even in March, when or how it would finally break up.

Given the substantial uniformity in weather across the state, it is interesting to read the variety of descriptions of the general birding scene. There is unanimous agreement on the lack of winter finches

and northern visitors in general. There are several comments along the lines of good wild food crops, probable dispersion of birds across snow-free landscapes with plenty of open water, and near desertion of feeders. However, there are substantial differences in perceived numbers and variety of "half-hardies," supported to some extent by the Christmas Bird Counts, e.g. very high in Regions 6 and 9 and notably lower than recent averages in Region 10. Coming into play here to varying extents in different regions is certainly an effect noted by "Mike" Peterson in Region 7: "When rarities fail to appear, the expert birders tend to be scarce, too." Thus, coverage suffers a bit, fewer birds are found and round and round. Region 10's report is a classic in this regard: "... it was a dull winter," and it was; there were no species reported which would pull a long-time life-lister away from a warm fire. Yet Region 10 produced a species list exceeding all the other regions combined and including many regional and state late dates and high counts for winter. Region 9 was not far behind for "half-hardy" variety, and actually all the rest certainly had some exciting finds.

Merging the data from the reports, what interesting notes can we glean? In fact, we find many reports contrasting significantly with information published just about a decade ago in John Bull's *Birds of New York State* (Doubleday: Garden City, NY, 1974). Double-crested Cormorant is certainly regular now in winter in several locations (six regions, max 49 in Region 10), compared with: "In the winter this species is rare even on Long Island..." Canada Goose is wintering in ever increasing numbers as reported from all regions. In Region 3's report, Walter Benning ties this together—the decrease in Ring-necked Pheasant, shifts in wintering raptors, and the drop in Horned Lark, bunting, and longspur reports—with the impact of modern farming methods—crop shifts, dairy farm decreases, hedge row bulldozing, etc.—in at least the upstate area. Many raptors, with the specific exception of Red-shouldered Hawk, appear to be making slow comebacks in numbers. Note wintering Ospreys in Regions 3, 7, and 9. Sharp-shinned/Cooper's Hawk ratios remain different across the state, 1/1+ in Regions 1-7 vs. 2+/1 in Regions 8-10. Shorebird variety was good (16 species) for winter, particularly in Region 10. Snowy Owls were an exception to the lack of northern visitors, appearing in nine regions and lingering long in several. Tufted Titmouse is increasing and spreading, with no less than 25 individuals wintering in Region 7. Carolina Wren was down in spite of the mild winter; an effect of last spring's April storms? Eastern Bluebird seems to be im-

proving with time. The warblers were well reported for winter (eight species), especially in Regions 9 and 10; 1,030 Yellow-rumped Warblers on one CBC in Region 10! The sparrows left behind representatives of nearly every species in the East. Purple Finch numbers were very good, possibly allaying some of the fears that House Finch is crowding them out. House Finch continues its surge in numbers, e.g. CBC total of 2,448 in Region 3 and a maximum of 848 in Region 9. Certainly with study you can find many more examples in your particular family of special interest.

In the realm of high counts and late dates, I cannot begin to cover all the data for this season; Regions 9 and 10 alone would provide pages of such data and would nearly require reproducing those reports in these highlights. Instead, allow me to simply whet your appetite by sampling some of the most outstanding records by region. From Region 1 we have: Barrow's Goldeneye, two February Dunlins, a Red Phalarope, four Common Ravens, four Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and a Harris' Sparrow. In Region 2 were: a Great Cormorant, a January Red-necked Phalarope and Pomarine Jaeger, a Barn Owl, Jan. Tree Swallows, an Ovenbird, and a Northern Oriole. For Region 3 note: 40-50,000 Canada Geese, a "Richardson's" Goose, 180,000 Mallards, a Veery on 16 Jan. and a Cape May Warbler. Region 4 reports: a regional first winter record for Great Black-backed Gull, a Fish Crow, and a House Wren. Among Region 5's finds were: a Thayer's Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, an adult male King Eider, and 10,000+ American Crows passing Derby Hill on 19 Feb. Region 6 turned up 14 Iceland, 51 Glaucous, and 600 Great Black-backed Gulls as peak counts in mid-February, a House Wren, crossbills, and an out-of-place Gray Jay and Black-backed Woodpecker. From Region 7 we have: winter Tundra Swans and Wood Duck, two Iceland Gulls for first reports in 45 years, a first winter record for Red-headed Woodpecker, and a CBC total of 2,801 Evening Grosbeaks. In Region 8 were: a Peregrine Falcon, two Thayer's Gulls, a banded Hairy Woodpecker showing an age of at least 6½ years, and a Varied Thrush. Region 9's report includes: Greater White-fronted Goose, seven Blue-winged Teal, Harlequin Duck, a female Barrow's Goldeneye, an imm. Broad-winged Hawk, Spotted Sandpiper at a state-late 5 Jan., Lesser Black-backed Gull, two Common Ravens, *two* Swainson's Thrushes, an Orange-crowned Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Ovenbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a Dickcissel. Again, Region 10's report should be read carefully in its entirety to find the likes of: 1,317 Northern Gannets, 109 Great Cormorants, most of the breeding herons of New

York State, 30,395 Brant, 147 Black-bellied Plovers, an 8 Jan. Semipalmated Plover, 3,774 Dunlins, two February Long-billed Dowitchers, a 27 Dec. Yellow-billed Cuckoo (not loon! CUCKOO!!!), 16 Palm Warblers, a Lincoln's Sparrow, and identifiable races: "Black" Brant, "Eurasian" Teal, and "Ipswich" Sparrow.

Among the multitude of good records, there is none really outstanding from the rest, so let the (BOTS) Bird of the Season be all those "half-hardies" which picked the right winter to linger and so lived to see Spring.

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REGION 1 – NIAGARA FRONTIER

VIVIAN MILLS PITZRICK

Storms to the east of us, storms to the west of us and to the south of us o'erwhelmed and conquered, but ours not to wonder why, ours but to bask in the balmiest winter in years. Any brief periods of colder weather were at once followed by warmer conditions so that even though Lake Erie first touched 32° F. a couple days in mid-January, it promptly warmed again to end the season at 34° F., making this its first ice-free winter since 1953. The Allegheny and Genesee Rivers, too, remained open all winter. Small lakes and ponds were open through the warmest December in 60 years with temperatures 5.8° F. above normal and reaching 60° F. on Christmas Day. To complete a six-month sequence of warmer than usual weather, the final months of the season were also milder than normal, January by 3.2° F. and February by 4.6° F. Following the dry fall, precipitation was again below normal, December by .7 inches, January by 1.3 inches and February by 1.5 inches, with almost no snow. In December the 12 inches around the 21st soon melted as did the six inches in mid-January and the two five-inch falls the 9th and 25th of February. (Weather Data: WKBW-TV, Buffalo, and Wellsville Water and Light.)

Lack of snow cover most of the season and plentiful wild foods caused near desertion of feeders. Food must have been readily available to the north too, as northern finches were almost absent here, and even American Tree Sparrows and Evening Grosbeaks were down in numbers with none of the latter in many areas where usually plentiful in winter. However, several other species, less common for this season, did stay on to save themselves a trip south, painting a confusing picture of the migration. Were they coming or going? Canada Geese were widespread, wintering on a bounty of ear corn gleanings which Wild Turkeys also enjoyed. A flock of the latter was tracked in late January to discover they fed on ferns and green sedge leaves, sensitive fern spores and plentiful red oak acorns (Eaton). Winter banding was largely unexciting. However, at Farmersville Station, of the 568 birds netted in January, 486 were returns or repeats, a very high rate for small birds (D. Clark). Noteworthy bandings at Alfred Station were