

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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Reviewing past highlights, it appears that the weather for most seasons can be termed unusual in some sense to the extent of modifying bird populations. This season was no exception. The winter started relatively warm, with many half hardies lingering through the Christmas count period, but then temperatures plunged to record lows through late December and much of January, with several regions reporting suspected high avian mortality. Precipitation was generally average to well above average in December, below in January, then average to above in February. The two week thaw in mid to late February affected all regions, bringing in early spring migrants or, in the case of Region 9, causing wintering waterfowl to depart early. The season ended with a major storm bringing heavy snow to western and northern areas and mush to sleet and rain farther east and south. Note the comment in Region 7 that this was one of the cleaner storms, "a snowfall only four times as acid as it should be." All in all, it was probably a relatively typical winter on a long range scale.

Much of the data assembled for this season's reports comes from Christmas Bird Counts (CBC's) and the state waterfowl count. In both cases we have long term comparable data against which to judge the results. In scanning the reports you will find a mix of record highs and lows varying from region to region or even among counts in a single region. Many of the highs are among the waterfowl and are well distributed across the state. This certainly reflects the warm, open weather of early December. With even a casual study of the regional reports, we are reminded of the tremendous difference between birding on the coast and elsewhere in the state. Region 10 once again reported more species than all of the others combined. Region 9 shows some similarity, but is only a shadow of the coastal giant. Lake Ontario provides its neighboring regions about two-thirds of the species total of the coast, while land-locked regions drop to two-thirds of that, and the Adirondack birders have the toughest bird-finding time of all, compensated by the presence of species most of us can view only by visiting there on vacations. Many of the half hardies asterisked and written up in detail for CBC's in Regions 1-8 are found in tens in Region 9 and multitudes on the Region 10 CBC's.

From the data amassed in the regional reports we can pull some general trends and contrasts. First, many of the "winter species" were absent or present only in low numbers; winter finches, while all recorded except Hoary Redpoll, did not meet hopes for an invasion

following last year's sparse reports—maybe next year?; Snowy Owls were generally few; Rough-legged Hawks were average to low in all but Regions 3 & 4, where the meadow vole population was very high; irruptives were generally scarce; and Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings were present, but certainly not widespread in large flocks. Waterfowl were typically good, with scattered very high counts including: 1,600 Tundra Swans in Region 1 on 23 February; 1,775 Snow Geese on 25 February in Region 5, three times the previous high; and 10,480 Common Mergansers in Region 1 on 17 December. The pseudo-Spring of mid-February started migrants on their way, with early waterfowl moving in large numbers, flocks of blackbirds and crows on the move, hawk flights at both Braddock Bay and Derby Hill, Killdeer arriving, and American Woodcock displaying in several regions.

Scanning back through the reports in more detail one can, as usual, find numerous interesting observations and regional contrasts for individual species. I'll provide a sample of these to stir you to further reading. Horned Grebes staged a massive invasion, with large numbers observed in fallouts from storms and on CBC's upstate in December, then as huge concentrations on the coast—740 on 4 February and 2,000 +, a new state high, on 19 February, both off Montauk in Region 10. Red-necked Grebes also built to the highest coastal count in 50 years at 100+ on 18 February in Region 10. Among the waterfowl reports we find a repeat of a periodic disaster when fog envelops Niagara Falls. On the night of 15-16 January, with many ducks present above the falls, some 2,000+ were swept over, more than 650 of these apparently perishing. Barrow's Goldeneye, normally considered a rarity, was found in six regions (1, 5, 6, 7, 9, & 10) this winter. Turkey Vultures continue their dramatic increases of recent years with Regions 2, 3, 5, 6, 9 & 10 all reporting them this season when a few years ago a single winter report was an event. Shorebirds were down a bit from last year at 14 species, but American Oystercatcher set a new late date with three present on 10 January in Region 10. An exciting find at any time of the year, two Black Rails on 11 December in Region 10 added a new bird to the list for this season. Two Parasitic Jaegers on 17 December in Region 10 is a new late date. Lesser Black-backed Gull is now regular, with reports in five regions this season, a first record though for Region 6. Its larger cousin, the Great Black-backed Gull, was reported in record numbers in Region 10, with 13,500 on 17 December. Following the large movement of Black-legged Kittiwakes on Lake Ontario last Fall, it is perhaps not surprising that the lakeshore regions all had singles lingering into December. In contrast, note the peak count in Region 10 of 1,380 on 17 December.

Another good find on a CBC in Region 10 was the first record of a

Forster's Tern in the state in the winter in nearly 60 years. The major event of the north country was the large invasion of Great Gray Owls in Regions 6 & 7, with a couple of strays south to Region 10. Surprisingly, this was attended by far less fanfare than the 1979 invasion; probably because most of the rabid listers "got their life bird" in 1979? This season, several upstate regions report the disappearance of old colonies of resident Red-headed Woodpeckers, probably associated with a very poor acorn crop following last summer's heat and drought. Reading the Region 10 report, we may have found where many went in a very high count of 22. You can still find your seasonal parrot fix in Region 9's report, though only a Maroon-bellied Conure this time. Varied Thrush, another rarity, turned up in three regions (3, 4, & 10) this winter. The Water Pipit is considered rare inland at this season, yet it occurred in five inland regions associated with CBC's or the early spring in February. Loggerhead Shrikes were reported more widely than has been typical of recent spring and summer reports, appearing in Regions 1, 2, 9 & 10. Nine warbler species were typical of winter, most appearing in Region 10, but winter occurrences of a Magnolia Warbler in Region 4 from 13 to 18 December and a Prairie Warbler in Region 9 on 16 December are extremely unusual. Another rarity of the past extending its foothold in New York is Boat-tailed Grackle, recently added as a breeder, now with 12 reported in Region 10 on 17 January. Finally, for those who don't read the regional reports in detail, let me call your attention to a request in the Region 7 report for input to two books in progress on birds of two Adirondack counties.

Among the half hardies, sparrows are probably the most abundantly reported both for numbers of species and individuals. Among these, Chipping Sparrow is normally relatively rare at this season and here provides an opportunity to point out an increasing nightmare for the regional editors. This season they were reported in six regions, typically in singles or several reports of singles in the cases of Regions 9 & 10. Hopefully, some of these were not American Tree Sparrows sighted by inexperienced observers. The tremendous growth in numbers of observers has been both a boon and a curse to regional editors. The increase in reporters should improve our picture of bird distributions, but the increase in inexperienced observers and second and third hand reports from observers of unknown ability does complicate the editors' lives. This dilemma was flagged by Mike Peterson for the case of the Great Gray Owl records for Region 7. The extreme responses are to accept everything or to reject anything without "sufficient" documentation; sufficient depending on level of rarity and ease of identification. Any suggestions from readers? Editors vary in experience. Some regions filter all records through regional records committees.

To finish on a lighter note we return to many reader's starting point and consider the rarities. This season most are rare by virtue of date or are locally rare. Among those of special note not discussed above are: a very rare wintering, immature Broad-winged Hawk, photographed, in Region 2; a Boreal Owl in Region 5; a Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 9; and a Gyrfalcon in Region 10. However, the B.O.T.S. Award for the season must go to the White-eyed Vireos found in Region 5 on 18 December and Region 10 on 17 December, unprecedented for New York at this season, though populations do winter in the south in this country, so that vagrancy in the early, warm part of winter isn't a total shock.

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REGION 1 - NIAGARA FRONTIER

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With the exception of an abnormally warm 14-day period in February, it was a cold and snowy winter on the Niagara Frontier. A record 52 inches of snow was recorded at the Greater Buffalo International Airport in December, which was also the seventh coldest in 114 years of meteorological record keeping. The snow squalls which beset the area during the last few days of November continued into the first week of December, and a heavy snowfall on the 16th was followed by bitter cold weather which gripped the region until the end of the month. Record low thermometer readings were registered on 20 December (-7° F), 21st (-8° F), and 26th (-3° F). During the height of the squall activity in the last ten days of the month, many reports were received at the Buffalo Museum of Science concerning Horned Grebes forced down by the high winds and zero visibility in blowing snow, and landing with ice-caked wings on highways and other cleared surfaces, apparently mistaking them for open water. January was a very cold month with more record low temperatures on the 16th (-10° F) at Buffalo and on 21 January when readings between -25° F and -30° F were recorded in several localities in the Southern Tier counties. Snowfall at Buffalo in January measured only 13.4 inches for the month and a flow of warm gulf air in early February reversed the weather pattern, melting the snow cover and bringing many local streams and rivers to flood crest. In the 15-day period between 9 and 24 February, two record high temperatures of 61° F on the 13th and 62° F on the 23rd were recorded before the jet stream, which had been far north of its usual track, capriciously reversed itself again on the 25th. A deep low pressure system accompanied by high winds and heavy snow moved into the region on 27 February. 15 inches of snow brought by this system combined with heavy