

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

For the third year running, a relatively warm Fall has been followed by warm periods through at least the early Christmas counts. The pattern was quite similar across the whole state. Where details were presented, December was at or near the all-time warmest, averaging 6-8° F. above normal. Record highs were set early and/or late in the month, in Regions 1, 3, 4, and 9. Late February brought an early taste of Spring and a similar burst of record highs in Regions 9 and 10. This also brought the start of spring migration for waterfowl, some raptors, blackbirds, and a few other early species. In between, January to early February provided us with winter cold and snow with, as examples, 45 straight days of snowfall in Region 2, 34 days in a row below freezing plus the second snowiest January on record (66") in Region 1, and parts of Region 7 going from bare ground in late December to burial under four to six feet of snow by late January. A trial for everyone included record flooding in Region 5 in December, and further flooding with the February thaw in Region 6.

The general tone of birding matched the seesaw weather pattern. There were widespread complaints of few birds at feeders, consistent with reports of an excellent wild food crop in all regions and a warm, open fall and early winter. Yet the CBC's were at average to above for species counts, with many "half-hardy" reports and scattered very high totals, as well as a few lows for some of the traditional count species. January's snow brought a few more species to feeders, but the wild food was apparently sufficient for most birds. The short duration of the really severe cold ensured that many of the lingerers made it through the season. In terms of the major groups sought by birders in winter, the "half-hardies," in spite of feeder watcher complaints, were well recorded; winter finches were poorly reported outside of Region 7 and points immediately adjacent; and winter incursive species were generally quite low, particularly Rough-legged Hawk, Snowy Owl, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern Shrike, and Evening Grosbeak – all reported, but low to zero across the several regions. Continuing the general look, we find, as usual, that Region 10 is in a class by itself this winter, with 192 species recorded, 88% of the state's total for the season. However, this year provided the North Country with what was "... possibly the winter of the century for the Adirondack-Champlain Region and certainly so for the post-WW II period for which good comparative quantitative data are available," according to John Peterson. This excitement centered around the massive invasion of crossbills and siskins,

including CO Atlas records for each species by season's end, but also included excellent late dates and high counts for their CBC's in spite of abominable weather. Region 9's report causes us to look ahead with the comments attributed to Frank Murphy that it is unlikely that plants will expend as much energy on seeds and fruits two years in a row, so that next winter should provide a sharp contrast – little wild food and, maybe (?), lots of feeder birds.

Let's now take our usual, seasonal mental ramble through the checklist, and this time I will try to pick up most of the highlights in one pass, including some of the exceptional high counts and late dates. Each year it becomes a bit more difficult to pinpoint new state records as we add years from John Bull's landmark compilation (*Birds of New York State*, Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y., 1974) and one must pour through all the intervening issues of *The Kingbird* or trust fallible memory. Loons, grebes, and waterfowl were well represented across the state with open water nearly everywhere at least through the CBC's, often through the January Waterfowl Census. Highlights included very high counts of 402 Hooded Mergansers in Region 1 and 27,000 Brant in Region 10, and such rarities as Eared Grebe and Western Grebe in Region 10, Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 9, Eurasian Wigeon in Region 8, and Harlequin Ducks in Regions 1 and 5, the latter two, of course, were present in numbers in Region 10, as expected. Double-crested Cormorant continues its increase across the state, even at this season, appearing in seven regions. Will we soon hear an outcry as flocks of cormorants clean out the fish in small farm ponds inland? Among the herons, Region 10's report reads like a roster of the breeding season. Across the state we find state late dates for Cattle Egret – 12/12 in Region 10 and 12/21 in Region 2 and Green-backed Heron very late in Regions 2 and 3, as well as 10. The raptor picture is fairly typical of winter, with special notes including: early Turkey Vultures in Regions 1 and 2 in late February and a single in Region 7 in late January; Bald Eagles in all regions scattered thru the season; no less than three Broad-winged Hawk events in Region 9, with three on 12/22, one adult on 2/7, and an unprecedented 18 on 2/17 along with a passing group which included ten Red-tails, five Rough-legs, and one Osprey – also a month early!!; the usual few Merlin and Peregrine Falcon reports, spiced a bit by a report from Region 4 where a farmer flushed a late Wood Duck only to see it blasted from the sky by a streaking Peregrine . . . read the report for details of the fate of one and all; and finally a cooperative gray phase Gyrfalcon in Region 10 thru the season. Even the rails had their day this year with the Black Rail late date extended to 1 January in Region 10. Wild Turkey continues to increase in nearly all regions and Ring-necked Pheasant to decrease. Shorebirds were present in

typical numbers in both coastal and inland areas with a few late dates, as expected in a year such as this, with Spotted Sandpiper at record coastal and inland dates – 12/16 in Region 10 and 12/1 in Region 3 – and Dunlin very late on 1/6 in Region 1, plus American Woodcock early with the February thaw in Regions 1, 7, 9, and 10. Gulls are represented by high counts in Region 10, most notably 68,000 Herring Gulls and a record high 1,500 Black-legged Kittiwakes on 12/15, and by rarities such as a first regional, winter Laughing Gull in Region 1 from 1/29 to 2/16 and Thayer's Gull in Regions 6, 7 and 8. Alcids of note included a second regional, third inland Razorbill in Region 1 on 1/2 and a Common Murre in Region 10 on 12/30. Owl reports were up a bit. Possibly owling is more appealing on warm nights. Northern Saw-whet Owl was reported from six regions and Region 7 again reports Great Gray Owl.

Pause for a breath, —, then off through the second half of the checklist. Among the woodpeckers, we wonder again whether last year's Long Island Red-headed Woodpeckers really were our (Region 2) local birds as this year Long Island is back to their normal few, while our local colonies are repopulated with the return of a normal acorn crop. Moving into the passerines, we will find a host of late dates. Late flycatchers included E. Phoebe in Regions 9 and 10 and a record late Eastern Kingbird on 12/30 in Region 10. Somewhat surprisingly, there were no late or early swallow records. Common Raven continues to expand its range, with reports from Regions 1, 6, 7, 8, and 9. The only out-of-place Boreal Chickadee was in Region 2. Wrens saw a Carolina in winter in Region 7, House in Regions 9 and 10, Winter in seven regions, and Marsh in four regions. Both kinglets were reported in good numbers scattered across the state. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were recorded at record late dates in two regions, with two on 12/10 and one on 12/20 in Region 10 surpassed by one from 12/15-30 in Region 9. Thrushes provided two interesting notes with Swainson's reported in Regions 9 and 10 at very late dates and American Robins roosting in incredible, unprecedented numbers in Region 8 – a conservative 50,000 in one roost (locally in Region 2, we had been impressed by a record CBC count of an over 1800 total). Robins were flagged as up in nearly all regions for the season. Cedar Waxwings, too, were noted in good numbers in most regions. Our waning state population of Loggerhead Shrike was represented by a single wintering individual in Region 9. These are becoming "chase birds" for year listers in this state. As another indicator of the mild fall and winter, two species of vireos and 13 species of warblers were tallied. The most notable late records were: the state late Solitary Vireo on 12/29 in Region 10, a state late Red-eyed Vireo on 1/23 in Region 9, Cape May Warbler in Region

2 on 12/9, a Black-throated Blue Warbler on 12/1 in Region 1, the state late Yellow-throated Warbler on 12/1 in Region 3, an American Redstart on 12/23 in Region 9, and very late Wilson's Warblers on 12/22 in Regions 8 and 10. In the face of all those late warbler records, the Yellow-rumped Warbler was relatively scarce thruout the state. Northern Cardinals were cited as low in several regions, possibly due to scarcity at feeders with all of the wild food available. There were only two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, but one of these on 2/16 in Region 2 was suggestive of successful wintering thru. The sparrow group provided abundant "half-hardies"; I'll leave it to you to ferret out your favorites. Of special note were a "Spotted" Towhee in Region 8 and a high count of 512 Dark-eyed Juncos from Region 1. There are also several reports of "Pink-sided" Junco from Region 7. The icterids gave us a state late Bobolink on 12/15 in Region 9, a first regional Brewer's Blackbird on 12/6-14 in Region 7, one Yellow-headed Blackbird in Region 2, and an amazing new high of 39 Boat-tailed Grackles wintering in Region 10. Finches bring up the rear. Winter finches are most of their story, mainly confined to Regions 7 and 8 and the higher parts of Regions 4 and 5, except for scattered small numbers. Note the discussion of separable subspecies of Red Crossbill in the introductory section of the Region 7 report. Interestingly, all regions but Region 7 reported Evening Grosbeaks virtually absent this winter. Tune in to next year's changing picture.

As always, there are numerous interesting notes dispersed through the regional reports and I can't pass bringing a couple more to your attention. How many individuals do you have at your feeder in those flocks of sparrows or finches? In Region 4 a bander had 20-25 Purple Finches coming, banded 100+, and still had many unbanded individuals in any group of 20-25 present at a given time. Unless you find distinctively marked individuals or lone rarities, you generally have no idea of the real numbers of individuals visiting your feeder. Again from a bander, this time in Region 8, we have a House Finch recaptured on 1/20/85, banded on 12/8/73 in the same city! You can surely find more to match your own special interests.

This season the rarities have been woven into the species notes above. As you have seen, there are no records standing far above the rest, thus no B.O.T.S. Award for this season. Let's hope that spring brings a better selection to tempt us all afield.

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580