

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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This winter season is well summarized by DeBenedictis as “—best finished and forgotten as quickly as possible.” The Regional highlights from across the state generally support this. Once again, we are left with major gaps in coverage, with no reports from Regions 8 and 10.

The winter's weather provided few extremes of any duration to unduly tax either birds or birders in most areas. The most stressful period for birders would have been surviving Buffalo's gloom and snowfall on 29 of December's 31 days. The weather was relatively uniform across the state. December was cold and the snowiest month. The first half of January was cold, followed by a thaw that lasted into early February. February ended on a cold note. Total snowfall typically was well below average. There are many reports of half-hardy species present surviving at least into February. At the season's end there was little sign of early spring migrants, in contrast with the past several years.

As suggested by the opening line, the general birding picture was blah. Even the Christmas Bird Counts, which we look to as indicators of the season, mostly logged average numbers. Wild food crops generally were reported as low, as expected after last winter's superabundance. The result was somewhat better numbers of birds at feeders than last winter. Winter incursive species were scarce in most Regions, as were the typical half-hardy species. The winter finch year we have awaited for several years now, and which appeared imminent in November, petered out as numbers of most species fell off rapidly through December. Even small flocks were hard to find by the time lists started anew on 1 January.

Focusing on the major families and groups, waterfowl generally were low in numbers in spite of open water in many areas. Regions 3 and 9 reported the best concentrations and Regions 4, 6, 7 and 9 had good counts for the Federation's annual Waterfowl Census in mid-January. Of special interest, we note a Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 9; wintering Wood Duck in six regions, with a record winter high of 24 in Region 2; overwintering Ring-necked Ducks in four regions; 15,000 Oldsquaw in Region 1; and Harlequin Ducks in Regions 6 and 7.

Unexpected among the raptors were Turkey Vultures in Region 2 and 3, an Osprey in Region 1 in mid-January, and a light phase Gyrfalcon in Region 5. Bald Eagles were present in all Regions that reported with an excellent count of 58 individuals in Region 9. Accipiter numbers were high in the Regions that noted them. American Kestrels generally were scarce. There was a fair mix of owls reported, but numbers were down from last year; was this a weather effect?

Turning to incursive species, Rough-legged Hawks were present in good numbers only in the central to eastern southern tier of Regions 3, 4 and 9. There were few Snowy Owls. Red-breasted Nuthatches were scarce except in Regions 4 and 7. Bohemian Waxwings were noted across the northern tier of Regions, with very high counts of 134 in Region 5 and 400 in Region 6. Northern Shrikes were noted in all Regions. American Tree Sparrow numbers were good. Lapland Longspurs were scarce. Snow Buntings were present in all Regions, with the best count 3000 from Region 2. The winter finch incursion included Hoary Redpolls in only Regions 5 and 6 and very high Christmas Bird Counts for Pine Grosbeak in Region 6.

Shorebirds were very scarce, as expected in the absence of the Region 10 report. A surprise was two jaeger species from Region 1 and a Parasitic Jaeger in Region 2. Gulls were best in Regions 1 and 5. Other notes of interest included Thayer's Gulls, the best numbers of white-winged gulls, and very high counts of Great Black-backed Gull, all in Regions 5 and 6.

The general passerine picture was of good variety overall, but of low numbers of half hardy species at any given location. Of special note for lack of numbers were Northern Flicker; Hermit Thrush; Song, Swamp, and White-throated Sparrows; and most of the blackbirds. Of special note as rarer winter visitors were an Eastern Phoebe in Region 4; a Ruby-crowned Kinglet in Region 2; a Loggerhead Shrike in Region 9; and eight species of warblers, with the best, a record late American Redstart in Region 5, a Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 3, a wintering Black-throated Blue Warbler in Region 4, and a Cape May Warbler in Region 9. Rose-breasted Grosbeak appeared in Regions 3 and 9 and Northern Oriole in Regions 3 and 4.

A careful scan of the reports yields the usual notes of personal interest. The following popped out in my reading. A concentration of 17 Pied-billed Grebes was found in Region 1. Wild Turkey numbers continue to grow across the state. A Bald Eagle with a green wing tag was noted in Region 1. In Region 3, the early Pine Grosbeaks were seen to eat partridge berries (That's what they were doing all over the ground in the woods at first!), and later birds were found carefully extracting the seeds from crabapples. Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkeys were noted feeding on seeds in deer beds in Region 6. In Region 7 a hungry Red-tail caught more than it could handle. Finally, in Region 9, the fall rains refilled the drought-emptied reservoirs at last. Surely any of you can find items that appeal to your own interests.

The rarities are a bit more scattered under the new report format, so gathering the best (not mentioned earlier) of each Region we have:

Region 1—Eared Grebe, Laughing Gull, and Common Black-headed Gull; Region 2—Great Cormorant, Boreal Chickadee, and Yellow-headed Blackbird; Region 3—Varied Thrush; Region 4—Golden Eagle; Region 5—Common Black-headed Gull and Pine Warbler; Region 6—Lesser Black-backed Gull; Region 7—Iceland Gull; and Region 9—Great Cormorant, Golden Eagle, Western Tanager, and Brewer's Blackbird. The BOTS award is a difficult choice this season. In the end it falls equally to the three record-late warblers: Region 4's Black-throated Blue, Region 3's Yellow-throated, and Region 5's American Redstart.

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Standard abbreviations: ad—adult; arr—arrival CBC—Christmas Bird Count; im—immature; max—maximum(a); mob—multiple observers; NYSARC—report to New York State Avian Records Committee; P—Park; SP—State Park; Twn—Township *or* Town of.