

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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This winter continued the string of relatively negative or dull seasons with only local bright spots. Birding apparently was best in Regions 8 and 10 where snowfall was the greatest. It was good once again to see a report from Region 10 and to learn that next season there should be reports from all of the Regions.

The season's weather was fairly uniform across the state. The winter storm track generally by-passed the western snowbelt areas by moving to the south and then swinging up the coast. December generally was warm and wet, January closer to average, and February was **cold**. Over most of the state, February approached or set records for lack of precipitation and abundance of sunshine. The easy winter Upstate was not reflected well in records of half-hardy species. The standard reasoning, that these birds were not driven to feeders, is "proved" by the better reports from the snowier Regions. By the season's end there was little sign of the start of the spring migration, with very few waterfowl on the move, only a scattering of hawks past the watches, and a few blackbirds arriving.

In evaluating the winter season, we typically consider the waterfowl, winter raptors, half-hardies, and incursives including the winter finches. Quantitative comparisons with the past are best made from the refined Christmas Bird Count data and the Federation Waterfowl Census tables published later. Looking through the Regional reports relative to these topics, you first will find waterfowl numbers generally average to a bit low. Waterfowl highlights and notes include: continued large numbers of lingering Canada Goose; Wood Duck in five Regions; Blue-winged Teal in Regions 3, 5 and 10; Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 2 and 3 and with at least 12 in Region 10; good Canvasback counts in Regions 8 and 10; and a peak report of six Barrow's Goldeneye in Region 6. Among the raptors, you will find: Bald Eagle reported from all Regions except 10, with fair numbers, but Region 9, which typically produces the highest counts, did not report; Turkey Vultures in Regions 2 and 5 continue the recent increase in winter records; Accipiter numbers fairly good, though reduced from last winter; Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel with mixed reviews; Merlin in four Regions; Peregrine Falcon in Regions 7, 8 and 10; and owls generally more widely noted than usual. In the general incursive category you will find: Rough-legged Hawk in very good numbers, especially at the start of the season; white-winged gulls scarce except in Region 6; Snowy Owl widely reported, with good numbers in most Regions and again numbers best

early in the winter; Black-capped Chickadee and Red-breasted Nuthatch not particularly numerous; Bohemian Waxwing in large numbers in Regions 6 and 7, scarce or absent in the other Regions; Northern Shrike reported in all Regions, with good counts in most; American Tree Sparrow numbers low; average numbers of Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting; and winter finches very scarce except for a large invasion of Common Redpoll across the state, accompanied by Hoary Redpoll reports from Regions 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Half-hardy species were quite variable across the state, with the coast having variety and numbers far above the rest of the state as one would expect. Among the normally most widespread half-hardy species, we find: Great Blue Heron wintering across the state; Killdeer reported in four Regions; Common Snipe only in Regions 2 and 5; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in four Regions; Northern Flicker counts good, with an excellent peak of 13 in Region 1; no Eastern Phoebe; generally good numbers of Carolina Wren; Winter Wren in four Regions; Ruby-crowned Kinglets in Regions 1, 2 and 3; Eastern Bluebird well reported, with flocks in six Regions; Hermit Thrush **very scarce**; Gray Catbird from Regions 2, 3 and 8; nine species of warblers recorded, with the best: Yellow to 5 Dec in Region 3, Cape May in Region 2, Pine in Regions 1 and 10, Palm in Regions 5 and 10, Ovenbird in Regions 1 and 10, and Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 10; Rose-breasted Grosbeak only in Region 10; Rufous-sided Towhee in four Regions; Savannah Sparrow in Regions 3 and 10; Song and Swamp Sparrows noted as scarce in several Regions; White-throated Sparrow numbers low; blackbirds unusually scarce, though a very high inland count of 50 was recorded in Region 7; and no reports of Northern Oriole at feeders.

By scanning the Regional reports carefully, you may find many other notes of interest. This season the only heron other than Great Blue reported outside of Region 10 was a Green-backed Heron in Region 2. A large number and variety of woodpeckers frequented a Region 1 feeder and 75 Blue Jays spent all winter at a Region 3 feeder. In Region 7, Blue Jays were observed eating brittle chips of polyurethane. In Region 6 the St. Lawrence River remained open all winter, while in Region 7 water was open for nine miles of canoe coverage on one Christmas Bird Count. Region 8 reported that 90% of the checklists received noted the Eastern Bluebird, certainly encouraging for that troubled species. Also from Region 8, you may read of the good winter for ski-birding. From experience, I can add that you will probably need an external harness for your binoculars to practice this sport effectively; skiing with loose binoculars, you will acquire a bruised chest and/or beat-up binoculars, while if you tuck them inside your jacket, you acquire fogged lenses, but if you keep them in a backpack, they are

useless for quick looks at anything you may encounter. Your reading of these reports will uncover other items that interest you.

This season the rarity list is relatively short, though some of the reports are very unusual indeed. As expected, the variety from Region 10 far eclipses that of the rest of the state. Many species which are very rare elsewhere in the state are regular as vagrants along the coast. Running through the Regional reports, we find: Region 1—the Rock Wren tarrying into December; Region 2—Western Grebe, a likely holdover from Fall, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Black-headed Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Varied Thrush, Cape May Warbler, and Hoary Redpoll; Region 3—Yellow Warbler; Region 5—Turkey Vulture, Thayer's Gull, Boreal Chickadee, Bohemian Waxwing, Palm Warbler, and Hoary Redpoll; Region 6—Carolina Wren; Region 7—Carolina Wren; Region 8—Hoary Redpoll; and Region 10—Eared Grebe, Greater Shearwater, Barrow's Goldeneye, Azure Gallinule of uncertain origin, Purple Gallinule, Franklin's Gull, single-observer report of Ross' Gull, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and a "Bullock's" Oriole. Except for the question marks, either of Region 10's rarest would be BOTS, as would the Rock Wren of Region 1, had it not been discovered last season. These eliminated, the BOTS Award for this season goes to Region 8's first Say's Phoebe, seen by many 7-9 February.

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Standard abbreviations: county names are shortened to their first four letters; months are shortened to their first three letters; ad—adult; arr—arrival or first of season; CBC—Christmas Bird Count; Ft—Fort; I—Island; im—immature; *intro*—see introduction to report; j—juvenile; L—Lake; max—maximum; mob—multiple observers; NWR—National Wildlife Refuge; NYSARC—report to New York State Avian Records Committee; P—Park; Pd—Pond; ph—photographed; Pt—Point; Res—Reservoir; SP—State Park; spm—specimen; subad—subadult; T—Town of; Twn—township; WMA—Wildlife Management Area.