

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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In many respects this season was nearly a carbon copy of the winter 1986-87. As Mike Peterson suggested for Region 7, in most areas it was a relatively easy winter for both birds and birders, though a relatively dull one for the birders. Steve Eaton reminds us in the Region 1 report that the presence of species during the winter is a complex function of weather, food crops, prior breeding success and other factors.

The general description of weather patterns was very similar to last year's over the season and quite uniform across the state. This season, December was generally warm until the last few days, dry and short of snowfall in most areas. The winter storm track typically passed south, then up the coast again, so the southern and eastern parts of the state generally received more of the fluffy white stuff than did the traditional Upstate snowbelt areas. January seesawed between cold and several thaws, with precipitation generally closer to normal. Across the state, a late January thaw brought record or near-record temperatures on 31 Jan. February brought some good cold snaps and more snowfall, but still averaged nearly normal. The combination of very poor wild food crops in most areas, excepting Region 9, and the cold and snow in February may have terminated some overwintering attempts by half-hardy species.

To further this comparison of winter seasons, I first evaluated reports of waterfowl, raptors, incursive species, and half-hardies as I did last year. Many Regions had open water through much of the season and good waterfowl variety, though relatively few high counts of individuals. Jay Lehman, in the Region 4 report, does a particularly good job of putting this season's data into historical context. There, waterfowl were at their second best in 10 years. Among the waterfowl with good counts were Canada Goose, increasing nearly everywhere as a wintering species; Wood Duck, with record winter counts in Regions 2 and 3; American Black Duck, up a bit, best in Region 8, but still very poor in an historical context; Mallard, with a peak of 87,000 in Region 3; Gadwall at a record 35,000 in Region 3; Hooded Merganser in Regions 1 and 3; and Red-breasted Merganser in Regions 2 and 5, where it usually is relatively scarce in winter. Diving ducks were generally scarce this season, with Canvasback best in Regions 1, 8 and 9; Redhead in good numbers only in Region 3; scaup and scoters low everywhere they were reported. A bright spot was six Barrow's Goldeneyes in Region 6. The open water did bring increased reports of scarcer wintering waterfowl, with reports of Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and American Wigeon scattered across the state.

This winter apparently saw a relatively widespread vole population explosion, with attending large gatherings of raptors in many places. Most prominent were Rough-legged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and Northern Harrier on the day shift, with Short-eared Owl taking over at night in the same fields, with some interesting interactions at dawn and dusk. Both Rough-legged Hawk, with a peak count of 130 in Region 6, and Short-eared Owl, with a peak of 92 in Region 2, set state record high counts. Among the other raptors, Turkey Vulture reports continue to increase during the winter season, with reports from Regions 1, 2, and 9. Up to 15 birds overwintered in Letchworth State Park in Region 2. A very late Osprey was recorded in Region 2 on 28 Dec. Bald Eagles were again recorded in all regions, with the highest counts in Region 9. Accipiters appeared in typical numbers, except for a scarcity of Northern Goshawk in all but Region 7, and falcons, other than American Kestrel, were scarce, with no Merlin and only one Peregrine Falcon reported. Nonetheless, there were Gyrfalcons in both Regions 2 and 9.

It was not a great winter for incursive species. Rough-legged Hawk, noted above, was numerous. White-winged gulls were scarce except in Regions 5 and 6. Snowy Owls appeared in all but Regions 7 and 9, with the best numbers in the Regions bordering Lake Ontario. Both chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatch wintered in relatively low numbers. Bohemian Waxwings were noted only as singles away from Regions 6 and 7. Northern Shrike was reported from eight Regions, with good early winter numbers decreasing with time. American Tree Sparrow, and most of the other winter visitant sparrows for that matter, were present in low numbers only. The winter, open-field birds, Horned Lark, Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspur, were present in only average to low numbers in most Regions, with the latter by far the scarcest. It was not a winter finch year. Only Pine Siskin appeared in large numbers in all Regions to feed on a bumper crop of eastern hemlock cones and to drain our niger feeders on the side. The rest of the winter finches were found only irregularly, in small numbers, with Region 7 having the best variety. A small Common Redpoll outbreak was noted in Regions 5, 6 and 7, accompanied by a Hoary Redpoll in Region 5.

The number of reports of half-hardy species was pretty dismal in most Regions, though overall most of the expected lingerers were found in 3-5 Regions each. Of particular interest were Great Blue Heron in all Regions; Common Snipe only in Regions 1, 8 and 9; Northern Flicker numbers low in all regions; Eastern Phoebe in only Region 1; Eastern Bluebird reports mixed, with some feelings that numbers had dipped a bit again; Hermit Thrush numbers very low across the state; American Robin numbers uniformly down; only four species of warblers (certainly biased by the lack of a Region 10 report), the most unusual being the

Pine Warbler in Region 1 and the Ovenbird in Region 3; Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Region 4; Savannah Sparrow only in Region 9; Vesper Sparrow, a winter rarity, in Regions 2 and 9; Fox Sparrow in Regions 1 and 4; and Northern Oriole in Regions 6 and 9. Song, Swamp, and White-throated sparrows and most blackbirds were noted as quite scarce in most Regions, with a pleasant surprise of Eastern Meadowlark appearing in all Regions except 7. This winter should have had little negative impact on species whose range is expanding northward, e.g., Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, and Northern Mockingbird, which were noted at many typical locations at the edge of their respective ranges.

There are a number of reports which didn't fit neatly into the above categories plus a few of the usual tidbits to ponder, all of which set this season off from last winter. There were only a few very late records, less than one might expect after a mild early winter. Most notable were a record late Semipalmated Plover, Osprey and Common Moorhen in Region 2, and an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron and an Indigo Bunting in Region 9. With the large increase in Double-crested Cormorants nesting on Lake Ontario, the low number of winter reports from Upstate Regions seems surprising. From Region 5 we have note of an albino Red-tailed Hawk. Reports of Wild Turkey indicate continued increase across the state, with counts of over 100 reported from Regions 4 and 6. Thayer's Gulls were carefully sorted out in Regions 5 and 6. As a legacy of the Olympic opening ceremony, one can now locate Rock Doves easily in Region 7 near Lake Placid. The story of the exploding House Finch population reached another milestone with wintering numbers of Purple and House Finches now reported to be about equal in Region 6, not a particularly positive note. To make observers stop, rub their eyes and wipe their lenses, then look again, we read of a "golden" Evening Grosbeak in Region 7 and another with white wings and tail in Region 6. Finally, a problem for the records committee, we have a Ruddy Shelduck from Region 7 reported to NYSARC, very highly likely an escape, but... I note this species in particular, as our local records committee took the approach of simply filing (very close to the "circular file") the flurry of reports received from last fall to present here. Up to two pairs were recorded at a refuge, the spookiest of the waterfowl present, but with escape from captivity so highly likely and proof of vagrancy in such a case so difficult it seemed not be worth the time and effort to review the reports.

The rarities of this season generally were half-hardies and/or of local rarity only, not species rare statewide, excepting the Gyrfalcons, Thayer's Gulls, and Hoary Redpoll noted above. I'll leave it to the reader to check the various Regional reports. The BOTS award goes to a Great

Gray Owl found in Region 6 for several days in mid December and again, at the same location, on March 6. Did it disappear in between? Did anyone look? Were the phone lines and mail routes severed for the winter?

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Standard abbreviations: county names are shortened to their first four letters and appear in UPPER CASE letters; months are shortened to their first three letters; ! - details seen by Regional editor; ad - adult; arr - arrival or first of season; CBC - Christmas Bird Count; I - Island; imm - 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.