

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

As suggested by Paul DeBenedictis, this winter was an eminently "forgettable experience" to nearly all the state's birders, possibly excepting those in Regions 9 and 10. Over most of the state hopes of a winter filled with exciting half-hardy species went unfulfilled. Yet, Christmas Bird Count totals, where noted, generally were average or better and at least a few unusual birds were located in every Region.

The season's weather was relatively uniform over much of the state, warm and dry with little snowfall and only brief cold snaps. The western third to half of the state saw a return to seasonal or worse weather in February, with average or lower temperatures and average or more snowfall in several Regions. At the season's end there was little or no sign of the coming Spring. No really early arrivals were noted. In Region 10, so many half hardy species wintered that for several species which normally arrive during February, it was essentially impossible to distinguish any new arrivals from overwintering birds.

Winter is a season to sort through the rafts of wintering waterfowl and flocks of gulls for rarer visitors, to find meadows overrun with voles and watch the feasting raptors, to observe the flocks of winter finches, and to search out the lingering half hardies. For most of us, nearly all of these activities were futile most of the time. The searches for water birds turned up Common Loon in all Regions and Red-necked Grebe in five Regions, above average for winter. Great Blue Heron was noted overwintering in most Regions, with very high counts in Regions 2, 3 and 4. The only other heron noted was a very late Green-backed Heron in Region 10. Surely several other heron species were present in Region 10 but occur there too regularly to be noteworthy. Waterfowl counts were reasonably good but not outstanding, with a variety of scarcer species buoying CBC totals in most Regions. Those of special positive note included a Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 6, Wood Duck in all Regions reporting with high winter counts in Regions 2 and 3; several good Am. Black Duck totals; above average winter reports for Green-winged Teal, N. Pintail, N. Shoveler, and Gadwall; Common Eider offshore in Region 10; and good scoter counts in Regions 2 and 10. Negatives were centered on unimpressive totals for Canvasback, Redhead, and Greater Scaup. Raptor watchers generally did not find any spectacular concentrations this year. Irruptives were scarce except for Rough-legged Hawk in Regions 1 and 4, but some interesting

observations include wintering Turkey Vulture in Regions 2, 6 and 9; Osprey in Regions 4, 9 and 10; Bald Eagle in all Regions except 6; accipiters, except for N. Goshawk, generally well represented; Red-shouldered Hawk in four Regions, more than in many summers now; Merlin in four Regions; Peregrine Falcon in Regions 2 and 10; and a Gyrfalcon observed by a large party of raptor aficionados and photographed in Region 2. The voles were even relatively safe at night this winter as very few Snowy Owls were reported although they were found in seven Regions. Short-eared Owl concentrations were noted only in Regions 1 and 2. Scanning gull flocks also generally proved unrewarding in most Regions, with only a few white-winged gulls noted outside of Region 1. The only other gulls of note were the Laughing and Common Black-headed in Region 10, the Lesser Black-backed in Regions 1, 3 and 10; and the Black-legged Kittiwake in Region 1. The occurrence of both Iceland and Glaucous Gull in Region 7 is also notable. The search for winter finches and other irruptives was almost totally unsuccessful. Only very small numbers of finches were located in very few locations scattered across the state, best in Region 7. Even Evening Grosbeak was very scarce, the lowest in 20 years in several Regions. Among the other winter visitors, flocking birds, such as Horned Lark, Am. Tree Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting were generally scarce; just a single Bohemian Waxwing appeared in Region 1; and N. Shrike, while reported in seven Regions, was present in low numbers only.

Half-hardy species, while not numerous away from the coast, at least added a touch of interest to most Regional reports. First, the species whose northward range expansion many have been following generally had a good winter. Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, and N. Mockingbird were again noted in good numbers at the northern edges of their ranges, with the interesting note in Steve Eaton's Region 1 report that high titmouse numbers often accompany good beechnut crops. Carolina Wren appeared in 8 of the 9 Regional reports and a total of 110 were found on the Region 10 CBCs. Other species noted for good numbers or in unusually high number of regions included Eastern Phoebe, Tree Swallow, Winter Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Pine Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird, and Northern Oriole. Species which regularly winter, but which seemed particularly scarce this winter included American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, and Song, Swamp and White-throated Sparrows.

Almost any organized grouping of the season's information leaves out some loose ends, so let's wander back through the checklist and the Regional reports looking for additional interesting tidbits. First, some highs and lows. Wild Turkey continues to prosper, as indicated by counts of over 50 in Regions 1, 2, 3 and 9. It would appear that American Coot bears watching, with very few reports in this open winter. Few shorebirds of any kind were noted; again I assume that the Region 10 editor simply elected not to report the species commonly found along the coast in the winter. Red-headed Woodpecker has disappeared from some of its regular haunts, but was found in Regions 4 and 9 and noted in good numbers in Region 1. Another range expansion success is noted in Region 10, with 103 Boat-tailed Grackles counted at a winter roost. The more interesting observations also include note of the Iroquois NWR Bald Eagles already starting nest work in early February; feeder survey data from Region 1; Montezuma NWR waterfowl peaks from Region 3; good comparative data from Region 4; and some banding notes from Region 7.

In spite of the complaints about a birdless winter in many areas, all Regions managed to locate at least a few birds very rare for the season, several of which are rare in the state at any season. The best included Region 1's Sandhill Crane (a first record for this season), Ruby-throated Hummingbird (which expired 10 Dec) and Bohemian Waxwing; Region 2's Gyrfalcon, Common Barn-Owl, record late Yellow-throated Warbler and Brewer's Blackbird; Region 3's Lesser Black-backed Gull; Region 4's Osprey, E. Phoebe, Savannah Sparrow and N. Oriole; Region 5's Fish Crow and possible Swainson's Thrush; Region 6's Greater White-fronted Goose; Region 7's Glaucous Gull, Wood Thrush (very unusual for both date and location) and Rusty Blackbird; Region 9's Sora, Say's Phoebe, Pine Warbler, Dickcissel and Pine Grosbeak; and Region 10's Western Tanager and Summer Tanager plus the many other species not highlighted there but which are very rare elsewhere in the state. Additional rarities, probably most properly lumped under exotics, include the Trumpeter Swans in Region 1, probably some the birds introduced at Long Point, Ontario; Ruddy Shelduck in Region 7; and the Barnacle Goose and Chilean Flamingo (which succumbed shortly after 17 Dec) in Region 10. The BOTS Award decision this season was a very difficult choice with so many very late birds, but this time I leaned toward absolute rarity and the award falls to the Region 9 Say's Phoebe.

716 High Tower Way, Webster, New York 14580

Standard abbreviations: county names are shortened to their first four letters and appear in UPPER CASE; months are shortened to their first three letters; 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; y — young.

Late breaking news - the new editor for Region 8 is:

Dr. Ken Able
Dept. of Biology
SUNY at Albany
Albany, NY 12222