

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

ROBERT SPAHN

Is the weather ever typical or average? This winter swung from the coldest ever December over most of the state to a record or near record warm January, followed by a generally warm February. Precipitation was heavy in western New York in December, average to low in Regions 7-10. It was interesting that large snowfall depths often were recorded from relatively little actual precipitation; the snow was light, fluffy stuff. In January and February precipitation ranged from average to a bit above. Ice storms in mid February did considerable shrub damage in some areas and certainly caused some hardship for small birds. As suggested by Ken Able in the Region 8 report, we might well learn something about the factors which control bird distribution and abundance by studying the effects of dramatically atypical weather such as this winter's. It was interesting that CBC's totals in late December were average or only slightly below, with fair numbers of half-hardy species, in spite of the prolonged, extreme cold. Food was abundant in many Regions. In Region 8 many half-hardy species were found at higher elevations where the food supply was better rather than in the sheltered valleys, even during the worst of the winter weather. As pointed out in the Region 10 report, we really don't know much about the effects of weather on birds and birding. A great deal could be learned through careful observation, documentation, and publishing of notes. Mike Peterson in the Region 7 report illustrates how simple observations published may turn out to be of significance to students of bird behavior scattered around the world.

Following the pattern of last year's report, let us first look at the major groups which many monitor in winter. Water bird reports were similar to those of last winter, possibly a bit better for numbers of some of the less common wintering species. Red-throated Loon was found in five regions, Common Loon in all regions reporting except the north country in Regions 6 and 7. This season the only heron reported was Great Blue Heron, found in all but Region 7. However, several heron species regularly occur coastally in Region 10, and usually are not mentioned in Regional reports. Waterfowl reports were fairly good, with good numbers of less common species recorded, including: Greater White-fronted Goose in Regions 8, 9 and 10; Wood Duck in six Regions, and Snow Goose, Green-winged Teal, N. Pintail, Ring-necked Duck, and

Red-breasted Merganser from five Regions. Relatively poor counts were noted for American Black Duck, Canvasback, Redhead (save for a good count from Region 2), both scaup, and White-winged Scoter. Rarer species noted included: **Ross' Goose** in Region 10, a "Richardson's" Canada Goose in Region 2, Barnacle Goose in Region 9, Tufted Duck in Region 10, Brant in Region 3, Barrow's Goldeneye in Region 1, and King Eider in Region 5. There were two sizeable waterfowl kills reported: 500+ in Region 5 apparently succumbed after eating moldy corn; and 51 were frozen into the ice in Region 7 after being induced to linger so far north so late by local handouts. Among the waterfowl, spring migration was evident from geese and some of the hardier ducks heading north after about 18 February.

No outstanding raptor concentrations were reported this season. Rochester area hawk banders captured some 60 Rough-legged Hawks on the Pt. Peninsula in Region 6 during December and January. Interesting raptor notes include: Turkey Vulture noted in seven Regions, including an immature captured, rehabilitated and released in Region 7; Black Vulture in Region 10; Bald Eagle in very good numbers from all Regions reporting; the usual, interesting Sharp-shinned/Cooper's hawk ratio, high downstate, low upstate; Merlin in Regions 1, 3 and 10; Peregrine Falcon in Regions 1 and 10; and Gyrfalcon in Regions 9 and 10. The owls showed in good variety but generally unimpressive numbers, with Snowy Owl in six Regions but considered scarce everywhere; Long-eared Owl in five Regions; N. Saw-whet Owl in six Regions; and Short-eared Owl reported from all Regions. It is interesting to note one large group of Short-eared Owls in Region 8 was decimated by Great Horned Owls as the winter progressed, with their feathers ending as nest lining to confirm the source of their demise.

Gull watching was not very fruitful. There was a scattering of white-winged gull reports from most regions and Little Gull was reported from Regions where they are now expected. The only other reports of note were Thayer's Gull in Region 8, Lesser Black-backed Gull in Regions 1, 2 and 10, and Black-legged Kittiwake in Region 1.

Irruptive passerine species, while widespread, were much higher in expectation than in actual numbers. Bohemian Waxwing was reported in seven Regions, with excellent counts of 201 in Region 5, 150 in Region 6, and 215 in Region 7. They were reported only sporadically and in small numbers in most of the other Regions. Northern Shrike also occurred in seven Regions, though only in fair to low numbers. This fall winter finches raised high expectations, which were realized only by White-

winged Crossbill, with a peak count of 1146 on the Saranac Lake CBC in Region 7, and the greatly increasing numbers of Pine Siskin toward the season's end. There is reason to look for both breeding in New York again this year, but that may already have occurred as this is summary being written and probably will be completed before you read it. Other species of finches were reported in most Regions, but often by very few observers and in very small numbers. Purple Finch was specifically flagged as very scarce in five Regions and Evening Grosbeak numbers again were subpar. The single rarity noted was a Hoary Redpoll in Region 5. The visiting winter flocks such as Horned Lark, Am. Tree Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting appeared in average numbers in most regions, low in a few regions in each case.

Region 10 recorded record late dates for Least Sandpiper, Roseate Tern (sickly individual), and Forster's Tern and very late dates for Semipalmated Plover, Western Kingbird, and House Wren. Half-hardy species were a bit more numerous than in the past few winters. Many were tallied on CBC's, and certainly nearly all which survived to late December had a fair chance of overwintering successfully, with abundant food in many areas and only the local February (and later March) ice coatings with which to contend. Species expanding their range northward from the south did well, all at least holding their own at the fringes of their range. Some of the more notable half-hardy reports included: Marsh Wren in two Regions; Eastern Bluebird in seven Regions; Hermit Thrush in six Regions; 8 species of warblers, including Cape May in Region 9, **Yellow-throated** in Region 1, Pine in four Regions, Ovenbird in Region 1, and Orange-crowned, Common Yellowthroat, and Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 10; the best sparrow contingent in several years, with Vesper, Grasshopper, and Lincoln's Sparrow in Region 10, Savannah Sparrow in three regions, and Fox Sparrow in four Regions, in addition to the more regular species; the best E. Meadowlark winter total in many years from Region 9; and N. Oriole in Region 8. The only real negatives in the group were Swamp and White-throated Sparrow numbers in several Regions. Most blackbird species were reported in average numbers this winter, but by mid to late February they were on the move northward along with the returning waterfowl.

Gathering up the loose ends, we find: Double-crested Cormorant well represented in Regions 1, 3, and 5, harbingers of too much of a good thing; Ring-necked Pheasant still generally low but Wild Turkey still

increasing; the best Gray Partridge count in quite a while from Region 6; a scarcity of Belted Kingfisher reports; Red-headed Woodpecker generally scarce, though noted in four Regions; Black-backed Woodpecker observations from Regions 7, 8 and 9; Common Raven continuing to increase, with reports from six Regions; Fish Crow holding on to expansion toeholds in Regions 3, 5, 8 and 9; a good irruption of Red-breasted Nuthatch noted in five Regions; and high N. Cardinal counts in Regions 1 and 7. Especially high counts not woven in above include winter Regional highs for Rusty Blackbird in Region 9 and Yellow-rumped Warbler in Region 8.

Early spring notes include Red-shouldered Hawk courting two weeks early in Region 1 and Tree Swallow on 9 Feb in Region 9. The latter helps to point out the Regional editors' problems with spring arrival dates when many birds overwinter. Are late February half hardy species and waterfowl early arrivals or are they just overwintering individuals or flocks simply beginning to move around a bit more widely but still locally?

In reading through the reports, be sure to find the notes on wintering birds in the Finger Lakes National Forest from Region 3, Bald Eagle reports contrasted with numbers 10 years ago in Region 7, and from Region 10, notes of more alcids than in recent years, Red-tailed Hawks wintering in good numbers around dumps, and a good summary of the birds commonly found near the beaches and which are at best uncommon elsewhere in the state at this season.

Several Regional editors have commented that tardy reports make their job unnecessarily difficult and frustrating, especially when the offenders provide valuable information about some otherwise uncovered part of a Region. Faced with editorial deadlines, they have to choose between delaying *The Kingbird* or producing an incomplete report. Neither choice is satisfactory. If you find the report for your Region does not properly reflect your birding experiences there, and you don't submit a report, submit one next season. Your editor needs your report approximately a week after each reporting season ends. If you report tardily, be punctual. If you are guilty of neither offense, then thanks for your contribution to our journal. Remember that your editor may not know as much as you do about your favorite birding areas and the local significance of the records you submit. Help your editor by including both details for the more significant reports that you submit as well as an explanation as to why you think those reports deserve special attention.

Typically, every Region had their good birds this season. At least one species, Dickcissel, was widespread with records from Regions 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10. The best of the rest not referenced earlier included: Region 1 - Varied Thrush; Region 3 - Western Grebe; Region 6 - Golden Eagle; Region 9 - **Townsend's Solitaire**; and Region 10 - **Common Murre**. An European Goldfinch in Region 1 likely was an escape from captivity. Look through all the notes above and this listing; what would be your choice for the BOTS award? To me, it falls to the Townsend's Solitaire in Region 9, a very cooperative individual, staying near where it was first found from early January into March.

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; ! — 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; y — young.