

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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Another mild winter was the consensus from all Regions, a bit warmer to the southeast in January and colder to the north, and somewhat drier in the eastern half of the state than in the west, especially in January. Still it probably was as uniform a season for weather as we will ever see. Such a winter brings many confounding factors into play when analyzing seasonal trends. Certainly, the warmth induced more half-hardy species to linger in most Regions than is normal, and this trend is supported at least by the variety of such reports, if not by the numbers of individual birds, in nearly every Region. However, wild food crops were noted as poor, which probably constrained the numbers which might have tarried, and open water and bare ground left the potential for wide dispersal for most of the winter. This was cited by several Regional editors to explain poor feeder counts and poor totals on field trips. Still, many CBCs reported very good species totals and record high counts for many species scattered from waterfowl to passerines. Obviously biological systems as large as New York State are complex and interpretation of events influenced by a multitude of complex, interacting, and uncontrolled variables always will be extremely difficult.

There were some observations that were widespread and relatively straightforward. In most Regions, waterfowl variety was good through at least January and many good counts were recorded. Some examples are large counts for Mute Swan in Regions 8, 9 and 10 and the increasing numbers in Region 2, where their invasion draws mixed emotions; a count of over 105,000 Canada Geese in Region 3; Snow Goose in nine Regions, with peak counts of 300 and 500 in Regions 5 and 9 and a record high 12,000 in Region 7; Wood Duck wintering in eight Regions, again with up to 50 located at one site in Region 2; a good representation of other less common wintering dabbling ducks scattered over the state; peak counts of 3000, 2000, and 2500 Canvasback in Regions 1, 9 and 10; Ring-necked Duck in eight Regions; King Eider and Harlequin Duck in Regions 2, 5, 6 and 10; Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 6, 7 and 10; a peak count of 2500 Common Goldeneye in Region 6; Hooded Merganser in eight Regions, with a peak of 560 in Region 1; 10,000 Common Merganser in Region 6; and a continuation of the recent trend to have

many more Red-breasted Mergansers wintering inland on fresh water than in the past. In Region 10, some really rare waterfowl, **Pink-footed Goose** (of perhaps uncertain status), **Ross's Goose**, and **Greater White-fronted Goose**, were recorded along with the now annual Tufted Duck and Eurasian Wigeon.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, several other of the families of water birds also provided interesting records. Common Loon was noted in seven Regions. An Eared Grebe appeared in Region 10. **Northern Gannet** was noted in Region 1 and 4-5,000 were sighted on 1-2 December in Region 10. Double-crested Cormorant was observed in six of the eight inland Regions, including a first winter record in Region 7; I assume the species was not reported from the coastal Regions because they are not noteworthy. The long-legged waders included Great Blue Heron in all Regions; Black-crowned Night-Heron in Regions 1 and 2 in January; Tricolored Heron in Region 10 in December; Glossy Ibis in Region 10 in December (barely); and an inland record late immature *Plegadis ibis* in Region 2. An Osprey was seen in mid December in Region 8. Gulls brought us Little Gull through late February in Region 1 and through late March in Region 2, where they typically depart by mid January; Common Black-headed Gull only in Region 10; Thayer's Gull in Regions 3 and 6; Iceland Gull in eight Regions, with incredible and unprecedented February maxima from Region 6; Glaucous Gull in seven Regions in more modest numbers; Great Black-backed Gull in large numbers, with a inland record high count in Region 6; Lesser Black-backed Gull in Region 3; and Black-legged Kittiwake in Regions 1, 5, 6 and 10. Forster's Tern was noted late in Region 10 and set a state record late in Region 1. Finally, alcids put on their best show in 25 years in Region 10, with numbers of **Dovekie**, a **Black Guillemot**, and substantial numbers of **Razorbill** noted. Shorebirds were the only disappointing water bird group, with variety and numbers noted very poor. Other than the few typical, annually lingering species, only late Sanderling and Dunlin in Region 5 were notable.

The major land bird highlights of the season were raptors and the half-hardy species, and again, both of these highlights were at least partly weather related. Starting with the former, wherever vole populations were high, raptors gathered, typically including N. Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, and Short-eared Owl. The highest concentrations were in Region 6, with peak counts of 54 Red-tailed

Hawk, 39 N. Harrier, a record high 69 Short-eared Owl and an incredible peak of 125 Rough-legged Hawk, with one tally of 39% dark morph birds. Elsewhere, a peak of 79 Red-tailed Hawks in Region 4 was also impressive. Numbers tended to drop through the season and in rare periods and areas with snow cover late in the season. Region 10 notes specifically increased visibility of raptors in the region, leading to the mixed blessing of a *New York Times* article on hawks attending feeders. Additional raptor highlights included **Black Vulture** again in Region 9 and Turkey Vulture in five Regions; Bald Eagle reported from all ten Regions, with the typical peak wintering concentrations in Regions 4 and 9; the typical accipiter pattern of more Cooper's than Sharp-shinned in western New York gradually shifting to the reverse in the eastern regions; and N. Goshawk numbers continue very low. Falcon reports included American Kestrel declining in Region 10, Merlin in **seven** Regions, and Peregrine Falcon in **four** Regions, with two pairs wintering near breeding sites in Region 10. Of the owls, Snowy Owl appeared in eight Regions and in better numbers eastward; both Long-eared and N. Saw-Whet Owl reports were more widespread than usual; and a few were lucky enough to see **N. Hawk Owl** in Region 2 or **Great Gray Owl** in Region 7.

In spite of the 'open winter blues' and the 'full (with untouched food) feeder' complaints, the CBCs and other hard-working observers turned up an impressive total and variety of half hardy species scattered all over the state. Nearly all are irregular winter visitors; it is the total numbers in areas like Region 10 and the overall variety which were most impressive. Many of the species were reported in five to seven of the ten Regions, rather than the normal two or three. Just a few of the best (to whet your appetites to search out more in the Regional reports): House Wren in Region 10; Orange-crowned Warbler in Regions 2, 9 and 10, with a total of 10 in Region 10!; a "**Spotted**" **Rufous-sided Towhee** in Region 2; Savannah Sparrow in Region 2 and Fox Sparrow in Region 9; and both E. Meadowlark and Rusty Blackbird in six Regions, though wintering blackbird numbers in general again seemed relatively low. The state's newest blackbird arrival, Boat-tailed Grackle, tallied 58 on a Region 10 CBC. The only surprising misses were Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Northern Oriole. Species currently undergoing range expansion all were present in typical or improved numbers at the edges of their ranges. The most amazing number was an estimate of the total Carolina Wren population size in Region 10.

Not all was rosy. The bird flocks of winter fields and brush generally were noted as hard to find or present in low numbers. However, in Region 6 a flock of 154 Lapland Longspurs was located, American Pipit was noted in four Regions, and last fall's "**Gray-headed**" **Dark-eyed Junco** was relocated in Region 2 near the winter's end. There were no major, widespread irruptions. Red-breasted Nuthatch stayed home; Black-capped Chickadee staged only an interesting mini-invasion, well documented in Region 8; Bohemian Waxwing was noted in four Regions but numerous only in Region 6; and winter finches were noted only in very small groups at widely scattered dates and locations. The most positive irruptive notes were of N. Shrike in all regions, increasing to double digit total reports east of Region 3, and of Evening Grosbeak back up a bit after several years of very low numbers.

No attempt at organization seems to package neatly all of the season's highlights, so here are a few more birds and some of the more interesting regional notes. Wild Turkey continues to flourish and spread, with representative peak counts of 100 in Region 4, 50 in Region 5, 85 in Region 8, and 30 in Region 9. Among the typically few rail reports is **Black Rail** (listers turn green) in Region 10. Finally, additional misfit rarities included a Sandhill Crane in Region 3 in February, Varied Thrush in Regions 2, 6, 9 and perhaps also 8, and a **Western Tanager** in Region 10. In the Region 1 report find an interesting summary of a feeder survey, with 6% of the feeders noting Pileated Woodpecker — are they really becoming that much less shy? Region 6 notes Rough-legged Hawk displacing Snowy Owl at some feeding sites, a report I found interesting having seen Short-eared Owls haze Rough-legged Hawks off fields on several occasions in the past. For the marsh stompers, we have a good winter list from Queen Catharine Marsh in Region 3 (but is it not typically birded or is this an unusual list?), and an update on Humpo Marsh, a hotspot in Region 9 where the old beaver dam finally breached and the water level plummeted. In the latter case, will observers document population changes as the old pond bottom grows over or will someone look for a pair of DEC transplant beavers to rebuild?

This season the rarities were woven in the summary above. All that's left is Bird of the Season. **Pink-footed Goose** would seem to be the obvious choice as a first state record, but waterfowl are notorious for their potential as escapes and no supporting details accompanied the report. **Black-billed Magpie** is next in line, but again this species often

has been cited as a frequent escape and there is no commentary to aid the evaluation. These species eliminated, I will display pure personal bias and award the BOTS to Region 7's **Great Gray Owl**.

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Standard abbreviations: county names are shortened to their first four letters and are in UPPER case; months are shortened to their first three letters; ! — details seen by Regional editor; ad — adult; Alt — Alternate plumage; 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.