

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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The winter 1991-92 was another mild, open one across the state, this time with birding records much as might be expected. Most Regions experienced generally warm temperatures with a few cold spells. Precipitation and snow cover were low, and precipitation often came as rain, especially in the southeast and even in the northern Regions. Wild food crops, except for cones, were noted as very good. With open water in most Regions much of the season, there were many good waterfowl records and unusual patterns of water bird distribution this season. Half-hardy species were plentiful, often through the whole season, yet feeder watchers bemoaned their few visitors, perhaps because good wild food crops and little snow gave little reason for birds to concentrate at feeders. The hoped for winter finch invasion faded to a few isolated reports scattered across Regions and the season. Fortunately, visiting raptors stirred excitement in several Regions, and the half-hardy lingerers kept the listers hopping and building record high January and February month lists in most Regions. Several Regions noted excellent species counts and total numbers for both their Christmas Bird Counts and the waterfowl count.

With much open water this winter, it certainly was not surprising that most Regions produced good records and perturbations of normal winter patterns of distribution. Only Region 7 noted the impact of significant cold during the waterfowl count period. Loons were typical for a good winter, with a bonus of **Pacific Loon** in Region 10. Grebe reports were up a bit, but overall counts were still low. Eared Grebe in Regions 1 and 8 were noteworthy. Great Cormorant numbers were high in Regions 9 and 10, with 100+ in Region 9 a record high for the lower Hudson. Double-crested Cormorant was noted in eight Regions, at record high counts for winter in several. There was a good collection of wintering herons, mostly on the coast as usual. A February American Bittern in Region 2 and Green-backed Heron in Region 10 were the most unusual reports. Among the waterfowl, interesting reports included Snow Goose from eight, Wood Duck from nine, and both Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler from six Regions; many more Eurasian Wigeon than usual in Region 10; better scaup numbers; Tufted Duck in Regions 8, 9 and 10; good eider counts off Montauk Point in Region 10; Common Goldeneye numbers good in all but Region 9; Barrow's

Goldeneye in Regions 6, 7, 8 and 10 and putative hybrids with Common Goldeneye were noted in Regions 6 and 9; and merganser numbers generally were good. Only Redhead numbers were negative everywhere except Region 3. From Region 10 we have note of good Northern Gannet and alcid counts from shore. Finally, in Region 2, a wintering Sora was unusual.

Wintering raptor numbers were good over most of the state. Only Region 6 specifically noted low vole populations and corresponding low raptor totals. Turkey Vulture appeared in six Regions; Osprey, rare in winter, was in Region 9; Bald Eagle counts were very high, with a record high estimate of 175+ and 98 totaled on a Jan aerial survey in Region 9; Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks were well reported; Red-shouldered Hawk numbers were up a bit, with records from six Regions; especially good Rough-legged Hawk concentrations were found in Regions 3, 4 and 8; Golden Eagle was found in Regions 3, 4, 5 and 9; and both Merlin and Peregrine Falcon from Regions 2, 9 and 10 plus additional Merlin from Region 3 and 5. All "regular" owl species were up in numbers from normal winter totals. Barn Owl was noted in Regions 3, 8 and 10 and Northern Saw-whet Owl in eight Regions. Rare visitors from the North included **Great Gray Owl** in Regions 1 and 6; **Northern Hawk Owl** in Regions 5, 6 and 8; and **Boreal Owl** in Region 2. The Snowy Owl invasion was one of the best in many years and touched all but Region 4, with good counts in all but Region 9. A banding effort from Region 2 trapped over 80 individuals along the whole New York shore of Lake Ontario. Useful information included weight loss in nearly all individuals retrapped through the season and the finding that what seemed like a stable 3-4 birds at several locations included frequent new arrivals, with only the total at a site remaining constant. Special raptor notes of interest include a one day circuit of Cayuga Lake turning up 56 birds of prey and a count of 81 Short-eared Owl plus 56 Rough-legged Hawk and 49 N. Harrier and other assorted raptors, both from Region 3; a Cooper's Hawk crashing through a 10 x 14 inch window into a Region 5 home, after which it was subdued and released; and notes from Region 10 that Floyd Bennett Field is a prime winter raptor spot.

Open water areas also contributed a number of interesting gull and tern records. White-winged gulls, in particular, were up a bit in many regions, with record high counts of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls in Region 6 and even one Iceland Gull in Region 7; up to 55 Little Gull were in Region 2 plus others in Regions 5 and 10; Lesser Black-backed Gull in seven Regions; and Laughing Gull was unexpected in Region 5 and Franklin's Gull in Region 10.

In Region 3, an individual effort to check several landfills regularly produced several white-winged gulls and Thayer's Gull on three dates. Common Tern tarried into winter in Regions 1 and 10, Forster's Tern in Regions 9 and 10, and a Black Tern set a state record late date in Region 1.

We usually don't think of shorebirds in winter away from the coast, but this year very late to record late reports inland included Piping Plover in Region 2 and Dunlin in Regions 2 and 5. On Long Island Sound late Ruddy Turnstone and a record late Spotted Sandpiper were in Region 9. The Region 10 report specifically notes seven shorebird species, one less than Region 9, but there surely were others which occur so regularly that they were not mentioned. Of the species noted, American Oystercatcher both remaining late and arriving early relative to dates in Bull's *Birds of New York State* the most noteworthy.

Half-hardy passerines produced so many interesting reports that it is hard to summarize them. Start with **flycatchers** in winter!! — Eastern Phoebe in Regions 3, 4, 9 and 10; Least Flycatcher in Region 10; and Western Kingbird in Regions 9 and 10. Tree Swallow lingered in Region 10; Fish Crow was sighted in Regions 3, 8 and 9; Carolina Wren appeared in high numbers all over the state; House Wren was noted in Regions 9 and 10; and Marsh Wren was located in Regions 2, 8, 9 and 10. Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher set a record late date in Region 10. Hermit Thrush was surprisingly scarce, given all the other half-hardy species present. However, both Eastern Bluebird and American Robin kept the thrush numbers high. Gray Catbird was found in three Regions, Brown Thrasher in four and American Pipit in three. Even **Loggerhead Shrike** was recorded, a single in Region 9. There was a good selection of warblers, most in Regions 9 and 10. The most unusual were **Black-throated Gray Warbler** in Region 10, American Redstart in Region 1, and Ovenbird in Regions 1 and 10. Rose-breasted Grosbeak was found in Region 1 and a **Black-headed Grosbeak** in Region 10. Rufous-sided Towhee was found in six Regions, Chipping Sparrow in three, Field Sparrow in five, Savannah Sparrow in five, Vesper Sparrow in Regions 8 and 10, Fox Sparrow in Regions 1, 8 and 10, and Lincoln's Sparrow in Region 9. Song, Swamp, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows were located in low to average numbers, and Dark-eyed Junco was scarce except in Region 9. Finally, a very rare-for-winter **Bobolink** was sighted twice in Region 5; Eastern Meadowlark reports were up a bit; lingering Rusty Blackbird was numerous; and Northern Oriole was represented by a **Bullock's** race individual in Region 10.

Irruptive and winter-flocking species were mixed. There was no sign of a Red-breasted Nuthatch invasion. Bohemian Waxwing was scarce, though noted in Regions 1, 2, 6 and 7. Northern Shrike reports were good in all Regions. American Tree Sparrow numbers were generally low, except in Region 9. Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting numbers were modest to poor everywhere, as were all cardueline finches except House Finch and American Goldfinch.

Wild Turkey counts exceeded Ring-necked Pheasant + Ruffed Grouse totals on some Region 1 CBCs; rescues of Common Loon and Sharp-shinned Hawk are detailed in Region 4; and 20 American Woodcock on a porch plus others at suet feeders in Region 9 after a March blizzard are astounding.

Nearly all of the rarities of the season have been mentioned above, and most were rare with respect to season or date rather than for the state as a whole. Selecting a BOTS for this season was very difficult. After much thought, the award goes to the two wildest out-of-date-range records for the season, the Bobolink in Region 5 and the Least Flycatcher in Region 10, both hopefully well documented to NYSARC.

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