

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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The weather was the major factor behind most of the birding highlights this winter season. There are many comments by the Regional editors on the persistent harsh conditions. This was one of the coldest, snowiest winters on record for the State, the most prolonged cold and the longest period of continuous snow cover for most of the State in well over a decade. However, the first three weeks of December were warm and basically snow free. Possibly concentrated by the snow and cold, the survivors from this period set late records and good species counts continued into January. Records decreased in February, an unspecified combination of the toll of the harsh weather on avian survival and on reduced observer effort. It will remain until the breeding season reports and next winter's counts to see the real impact of this winter, particularly on species at the limits of their range in New York.

Most of the high counts and late departure records fell within the first three, warm weeks of December or in the following couple of weeks as winter increased its icy squeeze. The best way to summarize these seems to be a pass through the checklist. Loons were reported much more widely than in most winters. Heron reports were sparse, but this was the second consecutive January with American Bittern in Region 2 and the fourth consecutive winter with Black-crowned Night-Heron in Region 1. High waterfowl counts included 41 Tundra Swan in Region 6; 1002 Snow Goose in Region 8; at least ten Eurasian Wigeon in Region 10; 200 and 300 Common Eider in Region 10; and 530 Hooded Merganser in Region 1. Brant overwintered in Region 2, and Blue-winged Teal lingered in Regions 2, 5, 9, and 10. Harlequin Duck enlivened Regions 1, 7, and 10; and Barrow's Goldeneye in six Regions, including four reports of females were noteworthy. Among the raptors, records of interest included Osprey in Regions 4, 6, and 10; great Bald Eagle counts in Region 9; five Regions noting Red-shouldered Hawk; Golden Eagle in Regions 6, 8, and 9; Merlin in six Regions; and *Gyr Falcon* in Regions 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7. With shorebirds scarce, American Oystercatcher in Region 10; Spotted Sandpiper setting late dates in Regions 9 and 10; and Western Sandpiper tarrying in Region 10 are of special note. Forster's Tern to 17 Dec in Region 10 was a record late date. As expected, Region 10 produced the

only alcid reports of note, Common and Thick-billed Murres and Razorbill. The number of owl reports generally was up, though numbers were still small. Of special note are Barn Owl in Regions 2 and 9, Great Gray Owl in Region 7, and low counts noted for Short-eared Owl when it was mentioned at all. Eastern Phoebe was found in Regions 1, 9, and 10. Perhaps just more concentrated this year, Horned Lark counts were up in several Regions. Tree Swallow persisted late in Regions 2 and 10, though not as late as last winter. Good American Crow roost counts appear in Regions 2, 4, and 5, and Common Raven reports from *seven* regions are remarkable. Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Northern Cardinal counts were particularly high in many Regions. Late House Wren in Regions 3 and 9, record late Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Region 10, Veery in Region 10, late American Pipit in Regions 9 and 10 upped the season's species count. Bohemian Waxwing appeared in six Regions, and there were a few Northern Shrike reports in each of Regions 1 to 8. *Nine* warbler species were reported in Region 10 and Palm Warbler was found in Regions 1, 2, and 10, Ovenbird in Region 9, and very rare winter records for Northern Parula and Wilson's Warbler in Region 10. An Indigo Bunting persisted in Region 7. Counts for most sparrows were low, but Chipping, Savannah, Sharp-tailed, Fox, and "Oregon" Dark-eyed Junco were all good finds at this season. Lapland Longspur is noted in nine Regions, and Snow Bunting numbers were good, with some actually reaching feeders as conditions worsened. Low blackbird counts made Brewer's Blackbird in Region 2, 90 Boat-tailed Grackle and a "Bullock's" Northern Oriole in Region 10, especially interesting.

As one would expect from such a winter, there are numerous notes and anecdotes in the Regional reports specifically related to the harsh weather. There was a major movement and many groundings of grebes, particularly Red-necked Grebe, as Lake Ontario approached 80% ice cover. This is noted in Regions 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9. Region 1 gives the most detailed summary of numbers brought to rehabilitators. Totals for Red-necked Grebe included nearly 100 in Region 1 and 105 in Region 3, all in mid February. The freezing of most inland bodies of water concentrated the remaining birds of many waterfowl species to small areas of deep water, moving water, or warm ponds, such as those at power plant outlets. This brought many interesting reports and some high counts, but also led to an outbreak of the viral disease DVE in

Region 3. Fortunately it was late enough that the birds were able to disperse soon after with spring's arrival. Shorebird reports were very few, except in coastal Regions, and gull concentrations were well down.

Raptor concentrations also were generally poor, with the exception of good Rough-legged Hawk counts in Regions 4, 7, and 8. Stories supporting the weather's impact on raptors include Northern Goshawk hunting in downtown Ithaca, American Kestrel and Red-shouldered Hawk at suet feeders in Region 9, and many raptors found dead, also in Region 9.

Last Fall had brought some promise of a "finch winter," though reports were decreasing by that season's end. Generally, this winter saw sparse reports of all these finches except redpolls, whose numbers remained high in many Regions throughout the winter. Some very high Common Redpoll counts include 2017 in Region 1, 3000 in Region 2, 4000 in Region 3, and 1594 in Region 7. Nine of the ten Regions reported *Hoary Redpoll*, an unprecedented influx and reporting event. Incidentally, I feel that this bird probably is far *under* rather than *over* reported and that it is not quite as difficult to identify as many would have us believe, *if* the observer knows what to look for and has a really good look. Hopefully most of these reports will be submitted to the NYSARC. Region 7 observers noted over a dozen individuals, with five of at least six present at one feeder banded. There was also a carefully observed "Greater" Common Redpoll present at that same feeder.

A major thaw during the period 17-20 Feb brought the first big push of early spring migrants to remind us that even such a brutal winter finally comes to an end. With this came several good early records, including Turkey Vulture and Fox Sparrow in Region 1, Long-billed Dowitcher in Region 10, and a very high early count for such a winter of American Woodcock in Region 6.

Among the many rarities reported this season, those which especially caught my eye were: the *Western Grebe* in Region 9, the state's first winter record for *American White Pelican* in Region 10, the immature Trumpeter Swan of unknown origin in Region 2 after mid February, the second return of Brooklyn's *Spotted Redshank* in Region 10, the *California Gull* on cue for the gull workshop field trips in Region 1, the *Ivory Gull* in Region 2, and *White-winged Dove* in Region 10. One could develop personal arguments for any of these, or even for the great influx of *Hoary Redpoll*, to be labeled the B.O.T.S. How would you vote?

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