

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

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This winter could be characterized by one word - brutal - for birds. But it also was brutal for birders, who had to endure knee deep snow along with bitter wind chills. Most of December was benign, with warmer than normal temperatures and below average precipitation. In the last week of December, however, the weather did an about face and the lake effect machine dumped fifteen inches of snow on Christmas eve alone and wind-chills fell to -35°F . That bitter week brought the temperature average and precipitation total for Buffalo to near normal for the month. January was the coldest month since January 1982. Its snowfall totaled 35 inches, ten inches more than normal and the most since December 1985. The average temperature of 17.2°F was a whopping 6.4° below the norm and, combined with frequent strong winds, it made outdoor activities for the unprepared downright dangerous. Weather details for the month include a high of -1° on 19 Jan, only the second subzero high in 60 years; a 41 hour stretch of below zero temperatures from 18 to 20 Jan, the longest such period since February 1934; a record low of -10°F on 19 Jan, the coldest temperature in twelve years, and it was much colder away from L Erie; and an average temperature of just 4°F for the week of 15-20 Jan. As bad as it was in Buffalo, the snow belts south of the city endured worse, getting soaked with an additional two feet of snow on the 7 and 8 Jan. With Lake Erie frozen solid, the snow moderated somewhat in February but still totaled 21.6 inches compared with a norm of 18.4. The average temperature of 22.8°F was 1.7° below normal. A dry 11 Feb ended a string of 55 days with at least a trace of precipitation at Buffalo and a welcome thaw on 17 to 21 Feb produced the first spring migrants and, less welcome, some flooding due to ice jams on a few creeks. For the period it was the coldest winter in twelve years.

By far the most obvious effect of the severe weather was the downing of Horned and Red-necked Grebes on land and water. Data was supplied by Mark Kandell with assistance from Gail Spann, both of the Department of Environmental Conservation. Reports from wildlife rehabilitators to the DEC indicate that at least 206 birds were picked up on land, including 188 Horned Grebe, ten Red-necked Grebe, two Eared

Grebe (one in West Seneca and one in Holland, both in ERIE), two Common Loon, two merganser species, and one "Arctic Jaeger" (no details for the latter nor, other than location, for the Eared Grebes). Many of these birds were picked up in the snow belt south of Buffalo during and following the bitter week of 15-20 Jan. Fortunately, most were uninjured and required just a few minnows before being returned to open water, specifically the upper Niagara River, Dunkirk Harbor, and the Allegheny River. The dates of recovery, with the number of individuals of all species in parentheses, are: 6 (one Eared Grebe), 14 (one), 16 (one), 17 (two), 18 (five), 19 (56), 20 (61), 21 (31), 22 (39), 23 (three), 24 (nine), 25 (three), 26 (two), and 31 Jan (one), and 10 (one Red-necked Grebe), and 11 Feb (one Red-necked Grebe). Birders added some other observation. On 22 Jan, 26 Horned Grebe were counted at Dunkirk Harbor with slowly diminishing numbers there through January and February. Incredibly, the maximum count on the Niagara River was only two, indicating that the "released" birds were not simply content with open water. Red-necked Grebe was much more successful at finding open water on its own, and they liked what they found. After the first sighting on the Allegheny River on 16 Jan, birds were found in numbers starting on 10 Feb. Sightings increased to record levels of this species on 15-21 Feb, with 53 seen along the Niagara River, 33 at Dunkirk Harbor, four on Lake Ontario, and five on the Allegheny River. The reason that the grebes were migrating at this time is believed to be the rapid and extensive freeze of all of the Great Lakes, not just the shallow Lake Erie. What is intriguing, however, is that numbers of Red-necked Grebe are simply not recorded on the Great Lakes during most (all?) winters! Why would they be there this year?

The American Birding Association (ABA) held its biennial convention in Niagara Falls, Ontario 2-6 Dec. Claudia Wilds and Rick Blom gave an excellent program on gull identification and the following day, 5 Dec, Richard Knapton discovered a *California Gull* on one of the ABA field trips at the Robert Moses Power Plant on the Niagara River, the same area where the Regional first was found last year.

Once again Gerald Rising compiled the nine Christmas Bird Counts in the Region. Among the highlights were the Chestnut Ridge CBC's second consecutive *Gyr Falcon*; one Common Snipe, 16 Bohemian Waxwing, 1 *Palm Warbler*, and 17 White-winged Crossbill on the Jamestown CBC; 24 Pine Grosbeak on the Niagara Falls CBC; and four

Red-shouldered Hawk. Species with high count totals were 398 Wild Turkey (a dead turkey, probably starved, found by Baird in January may, however, portend a bleaker future), 653 Great Black-backed Gull, 53 Red-bellied Woodpecker, 5169 Black-capped Chickadee, 270 Tufted Titmouse including 103 on the Chestnut Ridge CBC - incredible numbers, 162 Red-breasted Nuthatch, 1391 Northern Cardinal, 2070 American Tree Sparrow, and 3142 Common Redpoll. On the down side were 124 Canvasback, a very low total though their numbers increased in January, and 836 Bonaparte's Gulls.

Ever since the discovery of Gyrfalcon along the Niagara-Orleans Countyline Road in the Towns of Somerset and Yates last year, birders have checked these extensive and heavily manured fields on a regular basis. This winter, in addition to hundreds of Snow Bunting and Horned Lark (mainly of the northern race, *Eremophila a. alpestris*) there were a few Lapland Longspur and both Short-eared and Snowy Owls. In the previous spring this area hosted several Rough-legged Hawk, a Peregrine Falcon, several Snow Goose, and numbers of migrant dabbling ducks. These fields bear watching at all seasons except perhaps summer.

Other hotspots were the Niagara River near the Peace Bridge and Dunkirk Harbor. Two of the very few large bodies of open water, these areas harbored, in addition to the aforementioned grebes, an abundance of diving ducks, in particular Greater Scaup, Redhead, Canvasback, and Common Merganser, as well as a sprinkling of rarities.

A spring migration burst occurred during the warm spell of 17-21 Feb. Flocks of Canada Goose, American Robin, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, and Brown-headed Cowbird were noted as well as smaller numbers of Tundra Swan, Snow Goose, Wood Duck, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Rough-legged Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, American Coot, Killdeer, and Rusty Blackbird. Unexpectedly early were Turkey Vulture and Fox Sparrow.

In spite of the frigid conditions and low numbers of passerines this winter, birders still managed to find a good variety of birds and an excellent assortment of rarities. The best of the rare birds were Red-throated Loon, Red-necked Grebe, *Northern Gannet*, Harlequin Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, *Gyrfalcon*, *California Gull*, Black-legged Kittiwake, *Eastern Phoebe*, Bohemian Waxwing, *Palm Warbler*, Chipping Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, and *Hoary Redpoll*.

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Abbreviations: DH - Dunkirk Harbor; INWR - Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge; NF - Niagara Falls; NR - Niagara River.

Winter reports: **Red-throated Loon:** two DH 22 Jan (WD!, FR!); one DH 18-19 Feb (BC!, FR!). **Com. Loon:** one NR Buffalo 19-20 Feb, only report after Dec. **Pied-billed Grebe:** one Salamanca 6 Feb (TB), only report away from DH. **Horned Grebe:** *intro.* **Red-necked Grebe:** *intro.* **Eared Grebe:** *intro.* **Northern Gannet:** imm NR Lewiston 16 Dec (RA!, DR!); same bird at NR mouth 17 Dec (GB!), seventh Regional record. **Double-crested Cormorant:** a few entire period at DH and upper NR. **Great Blue Heron:** CBC total 114; second max only 15 at Motor I NR 16 Jan (MH). **Black-crowned Night-Heron:** as many as six in a large spruce tree in residential area of Buffalo (RBr), fourth straight year that overwintering birds have roosted here. **Tundra Swan:** six Strawberry I NR 21 Jan (RA, JT), the only wintering birds; arr 15 T Yates 19 Feb (WD). **Mute Swan:** DH 22 Jan (WD!), 6 Feb (WW!, MG), only report. **Snow Goose:** one white morph Salamanca 20, 26 Feb (TB!, BS!), only report. **Wood Duck:** max six CBCs; arr T Clarence 21 Feb (WW, MG). **Green-winged Teal:** last two Buffalo CBC 17 Dec. **N. Pintail:** CBC total 13; arr Stillson's Pd CATT 13 Feb (BS). **N. Shoveler:** last two Batavia 3 Dec (WL). **Am. Wigeon:** a few above Niagara Falls as expected; arr five Tiff Nature Preserve 20 Feb (WW, MG). **Canvasback:** max 1091 upper NR 22 Jan (DR, KC), *intro.* **Redhead:** max 291 NR Buffalo 19 Feb (WW, MD), a good winter count. **Ring-necked Duck:** 2-1 NR Buffalo after 1 Jan; arr DH 18

Feb (LH). **Greater Scaup:** *intro.* **Harlequin Duck:** NR Buffalo 3 Jan-27 Feb (mob). **Black Scoter:** DH 22 Jan (RS, FR, WD!), late. **Surf Scoter:** last NR Niagara Falls 1 Jan (MG). **White-winged Scoter:** NR Buffalo 5 Feb (MG, WW); five DH 18, 19 Feb (LH, FR); rare on L Ontario this winter, the only expected locality after Dec. **Hooded Merganser:** 530 Chautauqua L 7 Dec (RS), 46 Allegany SP 4 Dec (BS), good counts.

Turkey Vulture: arr INWR 20 Feb (PY!, BH), record early. **Bald Eagle:** ad Allegheny Res 12 Dec (BS); ad T Hamburg 2 Jan (MH); ad, imm lower NR after 5 Dec (mob); two ad Navy I NR 19 Feb (RM), the last Regional nesting site before INWR and which probably sees too much recreational use for the eagles to try again. **Sharp-shinned Hawk:** good numbers, most at feeding stations. **Cooper's Hawk:** ditto. **Red-shouldered Hawk:** two T Gerry 21 Dec (RS!) may have been lingering; Salamanca 16 Jan (BS!); Bliss WYOM 30 Jan (DJ!&MJ); this species is probably regular in winter, especially south of Buffalo; arr East Aurora 22 Feb (LH). **Rough-legged Hawk:** good numbers CATT and CHAU, scarce on L Ontario plain. **Merlin:** Best Street Buffalo 20 Dec (BC!); a different bird returned to Univ. Buffalo for second year 21 Dec-25 Feb (ES!, DS!). **Peregrine Falcon:** two ad Buffalo through the period, DEC is trying to encourage these birds to nest by installing a box on a downtown building. **Gyr Falcon:** gray morph Buffalo Harbor intermittently 28 Dec-11 Feb (RV!, mob). **Wild Turkey:** *intro.* **Am. Coot:** 28 DH where regular, only wintering report; arr 26 Feb Tonawanda WMA (MG). **Killdeer:** arr Cheektowaga 18 Feb (RA). **Purple Sandpiper:** last two NF 5 Dec (RA), first time in several years that none overwintered. **Little Gull:** max only three lower NR on several dates. **Bonaparte's Gull:** only one or two left at NR Lewiston after early Jan. **California Gull:** *intro.* **Iceland Gull:** two DH 27 Feb, only report away from NR. **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** at least five birds on the NR in Dec; one ad upper NR 6, 11 Feb (RA!, FR!). **Glaucous Gull:** DH 27 Feb (GS); Chautauqua L 28 Feb (RS), only reports away from NR. **Great Black-backed Gull:** continues to increase, *intro.* **Black-legged Kittiwake:** NR Buffalo 2 Jan (WD!, BP), only report.

Snowy Owl: at least six birds seen this winter. **Barred Owl:** one in suburban Lackawanna 10 Feb (MZ), very unusual location. **Long-eared Owl:** only two singles T Porter and Wilson-Tuscarora SP after 27 Dec (BP). **Short-eared Owl:** CBC total 22, scarce afterward. **Red-headed Woodpecker:** none for the first winter in several. **Red-bellied Woodpecker:** *intro.* **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker:** two Dunkirk CBC 2 Jan.

E. Phoebe: T Gerry 21 Dec (RS!), first Regional winter record. **Horned Lark:** max 150 T Somerset 22 Jan and 300 on 26 Feb (WW), 145 T Freedom 26 Feb (BS). **Com. Raven:** CBC total four; five reports CATT and ALLE where resident. **Black-capped Chickadee:** *intro*. **Tufted Titmouse:** *intro*; up to 20 at a feeding station Belmont ALLE in Jan (BB fide VP), phenomenal count; will this species continue its success after this harsh winter? **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** *intro*. **Carolina Wren:** only three reports ERIE. **Winter Wren:** T Ward 2, 23 Jan (EB), only report. **Golden-crowned Kinglet:** fewer than usual. **E. Bluebird:** two reports in Dec, seven reports in Jan, four reports in Feb. **Gray Catbird:** Chestnut Ridge CBC 2 Jan; T Porter 8 Jan (WD), only reports. **Bohemian Waxwing:** *intro*; T Somerset and 11 Golden Hill SP 4 Dec (WD!); T Machias 5 Dec (BS!), third CATT record, last season's CATT record was actually the second and not the first as reported; Fort Niagara SP 29 Jan (WD!); remnants of the fall incursion. **Cedar Waxwing:** 165 Fort Niagara SP 29 Jan (WD) and 110 T Hamburg 24 Feb (RA), good winter counts. **N. Shrike:** five reports this winter, below average.

Yellow-rumped Warbler: three L Erie SP 22 Jan (WD), only report. **Palm Warbler:** Jamestown CBC 19 Dec, unverified.

N. Cardinal: *intro*. **Am. Tree Sparrow:** *intro*. **Chipping Sparrow:** NF feeding station 7, 24, 27 Feb (DR!), rare in winter. **Savannah Sparrow:** with large flock of Am. Tree Sparrow T Porter 8 Jan (WD!), second consecutive winter for one on L Ontario plain. **Fox Sparrow:** arr T Great Valley 26-28 Feb (BS!), early. **Swamp Sparrow:** E Aurora 20 Jan-14 Feb (LH), only report. **White-crowned Sparrow:** CBC total seven, only records. **Lapland Longspur:** four Oak Orchard CBC 27 Dec; T Sheldon 16 Jan (WD,BP); T Machias 26 Feb (BS); only reports away from L Ontario plain; max 15+ T Somerset 12, 23, 30 Jan (BC, TH). **Snow Bunting:** max 700 T Somerset 12 Jan (BC) and 375 T Freedom 22 Jan (BS). **Red-winged Blackbird:** 20 Tift Nature Preserve, only wintering birds; arr 20 T Hamburg 19 Feb (RA). **E. Meadowlark:** six Jamestown CBC 27 Dec, only report. **Rusty Blackbird:** CBC total two; Grand I 13 Feb (MG,WW); arr E Aurora 21 Feb (LH); only reports. **Com. Grackle:** arr four T Hanover (RA), four T Great Valley (BS), and two T Sheridan (R&CB), all on 20 Feb. **Pine Grosbeak:** up to 24 T Porter 5-27 Dec (mob); 11 INWR 20,25 Feb (PY,BH); *intro*; good counts, especially considering these were the only reports. **Purple Finch:** CBC total 37, scarce. **Red Crossbill:** none. **White-winged Crossbill:** *intro*. **Com. Redpoll:** 2017 on the Oak Orchard CBC

27 Dec is a great count; widespread, an invasion year. **Hoary Redpoll:** Beaver Meadow WYOM 13 Jan (DJ!); T Sheldon 14,15 Jan (JS, GR!, DR!, MH!); T Elma 20 Jan (JD!); INWR 26 Feb (MG!); first records in twelve years. **Pine Siskin:** max 280 Scio CBC 18 Dec; up to five Warsaw WYOM through the winter (HK), only other report. **Evening Grosbeak:** several flocks of up to 50 s and e of Buffalo.

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