

## **REGION 4 — SUSQUEHANNA**

**MARY DOBINSKY**

Once underway, this was a brutal, relentless winter. However, the first three weeks of December were seasonally mild. Temperatures hovered near or slightly above normal and the ground was generally free of snow. Enter the Winter Solstice 21 Dec! Immediately we flipped into nine weeks of continuous cold and snow. The combination of the two really set this winter apart. It was the fifth coldest winter of the century and the coldest since 1935-36, according to Harold Hollis, National Weather Service observer in Cooperstown. For the three month period, the

average daily temperature of 17.6°F was 5.4° below normal. January, the coldest month, had seven successive subzero nights, 15-21 Jan, including a -25.4°F reading at Oneonta on 20 Jan that broke the 1970 record of -22°F. Only five days of the month had temperatures above freezing. Total snowfall measured 87.8 inches, according to Hollis, making it the fourth snowiest winter of record. The season's major winter storm hit the Region 17 Jan with about a foot of snow. However, periodic falls of two to six inches started 21 Dec. By 9 Jan, snow cover over the fields averaged three feet. Snow banks along streets and highways towered to eight feet or more. Nothing changed until the "Big Thaw" 17 to 20 Feb, when temperatures finally rose into the 50s. The thaw ended too soon and more snow and cold rounded out the period.

Open water and mild December weather created ideal conditions for the four Christmas Bird Counts. Record or near record totals were tabulated for Canada Geese (1588), Am. Black Duck (308), Mallard (1856), Red-tailed Hawk (176) and Wild Turkey (719). Several summer residents lingered and winter finches had arrived. By early January, all that good stuff was crushed by the harshness of the winter of '94. Lakes and most creeks froze solid; rivers were mostly frozen. Heavy snows buried wild foods. Evergreen trees bore few cones. Trees retained few seeds. Even manure-spread fields were a casualty of the heavy snows. Apples, sumac, Multiflora Rose and Cranberry Viburnum were among the few fruits available. Most birds disappeared, hopefully escaping to warmer climates.

Horned Grebe, however, was one species in a crisis situation across the state as the birds searched for new feeding areas. In Region 4, twelve grebes were hopelessly grounded 19 and 20 Jan when they confused our blanket of snow with open water. Concerned citizens notified the DEC office in Stamford and wildlife personnel rescued the floundering grebes at 10 sites between northern OTSE and southern DELA. The birds were subsequently released into an open channel of the Susquehanna River at Oneonta. But did they survive? And how many birds perished after landing unnoticed in that vast area? Broome Naturalist Club reported similar grebe rescues in their area.

Great Black-backed Gull may also have been frozen out of usual feeding areas. One or two is our Region's normal winter count, but 89 were spotted in a stretch of open water in the Tioughnioga River CORT 21 Jan. (GWø). Another CORT report of 15 birds was listed for Feb (BT).

Earlier, eight had been reported on two CBCs. A few other water birds and Bald Eagle found the scant pockets of open water in the rivers.

Wild Turkey had more than feeding problems. Their habit of roosting in trees left them dangerously exposed to the extreme cold. Reports indicated many birds, especially young, were found frozen to death at roost sites. One has to marvel, however, at the resourceful survivors.

Hawks, seen in fair to good numbers all season, obviously made the necessary kills. Cooper's Hawks were indicted for killing at least four Northern Cardinal. Northern Shrike was not as successful hunter as the larger predators. The last of four was sighted 3 Jan.

My symbol of survival was a Northern Mockingbird, alone and far from the range of most of his species. He spent the entire winter in a thicket of wild rose bushes in a field on the edge of Oneonta and seemed to feed mostly in sumac bushes. He may not have been happy but he was still there 1 Mar. The barnyard was another refuge. At Burlington Flats OTSE, Nancy Weissflog reported about 30 Snow Bunting "swirling over our cornfields early in the season. As snow piled higher they moved close to the barns and would sit on snow banks and ground feed on cracked corn we put out for our domestic geese and ducks." Three Horned Larks joined them 11 and 12 Feb. Several half-hardy species overwintered, including an unprecedented number of Northern Cardinal; Marie Petuh reports, "I'm inundated; eight to ten every day, max 29 on 8 Feb, mostly females." Cedar Waxwing and sparrows were scarce. Even Dark-eyed Junco, normally a winter stalwart, "pretty much disappeared after the heavy snows" (MP). Except for Common Redpoll, few winter finches were reported after December. Most noticeable was the paucity of American Goldfinch at feeders all season. In assessing winter bird populations for other species, however, one must consider the limited access to birding areas most field observers had. Driving and parking were often dangerous. Hiking was impossible. Don Windsor chose skiing when he checked Whaupaucu State Forest CHEN 25 Dec. His reward? "I spished in about 300 Pine Siskin, an incredible sight. I felt like St. Francis." Winter rarities included Horned and Red-necked Grebe, Mute Swan, Northern Bobwhite, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and *Hoary Redpoll*. Missed species included Ring-necked Duck, both scaup species and Northern Saw-whet Owl. Except for one flock of Red-winged Blackbird, there were no early spring arrivals.

**Observers:** Cutler & Jeannette Baldwin, Les Bemont, Mary Ann & Marty Cuff, Marilyn Davis (MDv), Delhi Bird Club (Christmas feeder count), Mary Dobinsky, Sadie Dorber, Doris Elliott, Tom Elliott, M. Gregory, John Gustafson, Jim Hoteling, Spencer & Catherine Hunt, Sara Kinch, Andy Mason, Robert Miller, Sue Moore, Robert Pantle, Marie Petuh, Steve Rice, Marnie Schrader, Joe Sedlacek, Tom & Norene Tasber, Ron & Irene Tomek, Bill Toner, Chris Vredenburg, Nancy Weissflog, Don Windsor, Glenn Wolford, Irene Wright, Jane Young.

**Abbreviations:** BCBC - Binghamton Christmas Bird Count, 26 Dec; CanRes - Cannonsville Reservoir; CCBC - Chenango Christmas Bird Count, 18 Dec; DOCBC - Delaware-Otsego Christmas Bird Count, 18 Dec; FMHW - Franklin Mt. Hawk Watch site; TCBC - Tioga Christmas Bird Count, 31 Dec. WPR - Whitney Point Reservoir.

**Winter reports:** **Com. Loon:** one TIOG 31 Dec. **Horned Grebe:** *intro.* **Red-necked Grebe:** two Susquehanna R Vestal 11-13 Feb (SK); one upriver at Westover 12-13 Feb (M&MC), first winter report since 1987. **Great Blue Heron:** 18 on four CBCs, good count. **Mute Swan:** one BCBC, first winter report in more than 15 years. **Snow Goose:** five FMHW early Dec (CV); CHEN mid Dec. **Canada Goose:** *intro.* **Wood Duck:** two on two CBCs. **Green-winged Teal:** four BCBC, first winter report in five years. **Am. Black Duck:** *intro.* **Mallard:** *intro.* **Com. Goldeneye:** max 59 TCBC 31 Dec. **Bufflehead:** two Susquehanna R OTSE 18 Jan, always scarce. **Hooded Merganser:** three BCBC 26 Dec and Otsego L 3 Jan; five Unadilla to Cooperstown 18 Jan, good count. **Com. Merganser:** 119 on three CBCs; mid winter max 45 Vestal 11 Feb. **Red-breasted Merganser:** four BCBC; one Otsego L 3 Jan; two others Jan, high.

**Osprey:** imm DOCBC (RM), fourth winter in 10 years. **Bald Eagle:** max five CanRes 22 Jan (DOAS field trip); singles TCBC; Susquehanna R TIOG, OTSE Jan; BROO Feb. **N. Harrier:** seven on three CBCs; one TIOG Jan; one BROO Feb, good count. **Sharp-shinned Hawk:** six on three CBCs; three to five reports/month max two. **Cooper's Hawk:** *intro.* **N. Goshawk:** one CCBC; singles TIOG, two BROO sites Jan; chasing pigeons at feed mill Norwich Feb (DW). **Red-tailed Hawk:** *intro.* **Rough-legged Hawk:** 82 on three CBCs, best count in five years; five to six reports/month Jan, Feb, especially CORT. **Am. Kestrel:** singles several BROO, CHEN sites through period (JH). **Ring-necked Pheasant:** five on two CBCs; two CORT Feb (BT), average count. **Ruffed Grouse:** 32 on

four CBCs, good count. **Wild Turkey:** *intro.* **N. Bobwhite:** covey of 12 T Union BROO 9 Jan (DE); five same area 14 Feb; four Endwell 7 Feb (JS); TIOG feeder Feb, first in seven winters. **Am. Coot:** Susquehanna R Vestal 11 Feb (SK), often missed. **Com. Snipe:** CCBC, first in seven winters. **Ring-billed Gull:** max 200 WPR 1 Dec. **Herring Gull:** 104 on three CBCs. **Great Black-backed Gull:** *intro.*

**Mourning Dove:** 1,070 on four CBCs. **E. Screech-Owl:** four TCBC, only report. **Great Horned Owl:** 13 on three CBCs; five widespread Jan. **Snowy Owl:** CCBC 18 Dec: one w Owego Jan (MS), not seen every year. **Barred Owl:** singles DOCBC, CCBC; two TIOG 5 and 11 Dec (JS). **Belted Kingfisher:** nine on four CBCs; only two/month Jan, Feb. **Red-headed Woodpecker:** TIOG Feb (S&CH). **Red-bellied Woodpecker:** 12 on three CBCs; at feeders BROO, CORT, TIOG through period, good counts. **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker:** three DOCBC 18 Dec; one Binghamton feeder 23 Jan and 8 Feb (SM), first in 11 winters. **N. Flicker:** four on four CBCs; BROO feeder through period (JH); one other report. **Pileated Woodpecker:** record 22 on three CBCs.

**Horned Lark:** four CCBC; flocks Penelope CORT 20 Feb (JH) and 25 Feb (MDv); Greene Airport 25 Feb (MG); *intro.* **Am. Crow:** 3,990 on four CBCs, high count. **Com. Raven:** two Catatonk TIOG 12 Dec (JS), third winter record, second successive year. **Tufted Titmouse:** 223 on CBCs, second only to 263 in 1990. **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** record 40 DOCBC; previous high 30 in 1972. **Brown Creeper:** 26 on four CBCs. **Carolina Wren:** 17 on two CBCs; good counts Jan, only one Feb. **Golden-crowned Kinglet:** 26 on three CBCs; five sites Jan; only CHEN feb. **E. Bluebird:** max eight TCBC; several sightings Death Valley Road Binghamton Dec, Jan, max five (JH); four BROO 6 Feb (JS). **Am. Robin:** three reports/month Jan, Feb BROO, TIOG max 35. **N. Mockingbird:** *intro.* **Cedar Waxwing:** 22 BCBC; max 50 Binghamton 4 Jan, scarce. **N. Shrike:** *intro.*

**N. Cardinal:** 440 on four CBCs, record high; *intro.* **Rufous-sided Towhee:** Owego 8 Jan (C&JB); one other TIOG (SH). **Am. Tree Sparrow:** 211 on five CBCs; six to seven widespread reports a month max nine, several singles, scarce. **Chipping Sparrow:** only CCBC. **Song Sparrow:** seven on three CBCs; one Binghamton through period (SR); only two others. **White-throated Sparrow:** 19 on three CBCs; at several BROO, TIOG feeders max five, scarce. **Dark-eyed Junco:** *intro.* **Snow Bunting:** *intro.* **Red-winged Blackbird:** large flock TIOG 19 Feb (SH). **E. Meadowlark:**

only one TCBC. **Com. Grackle:** singles DOCBC and TIOG Dec/Jan. **Brown-headed Cowbird:** TIOG 13 Jan; BROO 23 Feb, only reports. **Pine Grosbeak:** 22 on three CBCs; flock Norwich 15 Dec (DW); 12 "feeding on ornamental crab fruits" Oneonta 19 Jan (MD). **Purple Finch:** 161 on four CBCs, mostly BROO; otherwise scarce, only three singles all period, so some CBC birds may be the next species. **House Finch:** 1881 on five CBCs; high numbers in selective areas. **Red Crossbill:** one CORT Dec (BT). **Com. Redpoll:** 607 on four CBCs, ties high of 1980; common Jan max 100 BROO 2 Jan, "feeding on birch catkins" (JY), fewer Feb. **Hoary Redpoll:** singles two BROO sites 17 Jan (JH) and 24 Feb (SD), no details. **Am. Goldfinch:** *intro*. **Evening Grosbeak:** 813 on five CBCs mostly CHEN; "a few occasionally midwinter but not common" (DW).

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