

REGION 5 — ONEIDA LAKE BASIN

DOROTHY W. CRUMB AND JIM THROCKMORTON

In an area of New York where snow and cold are not unusual, this winter season put all of us at the verge of finding warmer climes for our birdwatching efforts. Weather was *the* story of this winter season. The first three weeks of December, 1993, were relatively mild with little snow. The cold, snowy weather started with heavy snow storms on 21 Dec, 26 Dec and a record 8.6 inches on 30 Dec. A total of 34 inches of snow fell during the month, which was 8.1 inches above normal. Even with the mild start, December averaged 26.9°F, a full 1.4° below normal. January 1994 was the coldest January on record for Syracuse, averaging only 12.7°F, almost 10° below normal. The thirteen days with temperatures of zero or below was also a record. There were record lows set on 10 (-10°F), 16 (-21°F) and 27 Jan (-16°F). Record low daily highs were set or tied on 19 (0°F), 20 (8°F) and 26 Jan (8°F). On top of the cold, this was the fourth snowiest January on record, with record snowfalls of 18 inches on 4 Jan and 8.4 inches on 5 Jan. A total of 57 inches of snow fell during January, which was almost two and one-half *feet* above normal! This was the official total at the Syracuse airport. Snowbelt areas on the east and southeast ends of Lake Ontario easily doubled that total. In all, 26 of January's 31 days had at least a trace of

snowfall, and 18 of those days had measurable amounts of snow. As only one example of the impact of the cold and snow, The Automobile Club of Syracuse received nearly double the number of emergency road service calls it received in January of 1993. The 23,700 calls for the month were the most received by the club in its 93-year history. February continued the cold and snow, although not at record paces. February averaged 19.2°F, 4.8° below normal. A total of 30.8 inches of snow fell during the month, which is 5.6 inches more than normal.

The extended cold and snow cover had a massive effect on the birdlife. For the first time in at least 15 years, Lake Ontario was at least 80% frozen. All the area lakes and rivers were frozen solid or there were only small open areas near power stations or stream outlets. The period 5 Jan to 18 Feb set a record for consecutive days with a foot or more of snow on the ground. Unfortunately, bird populations did not have AAA to call to help in an emergency. Many, many species that are commonly seen in the Region during the winter season were not seen after the stormy weather started, or were seen only in very small numbers. Double-crested Cormorant, Red-throated Loon, Common Loon, Horned Grebe and Red-necked Grebe were all observed before the storms but not at all or in small numbers through the rest of the period. The freezing of Lake Ontario took away the source of food and ultimately caused a massive flight south of these lake dwelling species. During the forced migration, many weakened birds landed on the small portions of open water. The seven Red-necked Grebe seen on Onondaga Lake on 12 Feb were the most seen since 1958, and a few appeared at two other sites on the same date. Three different rehabilitators around the Region received weakened Horned Grebe that were found in parking lots and on sidewalks. At least 18 Horned Grebe were reported from the fallout and we suspect hundreds more fell in remote locations and were unreported. Six Eastern Screech-Owl received by rehabilitator Cindy Page during January and February were in such bad condition that only three survived.

By the end of the period, the birds that remained in the Region, were struggling to find food. For example, the normally grain eating Mallard and Canada Goose were observed eating Gizzard Shad on 7 Feb in an open area of the Seneca River in Baldwinsville. Great Black-backed Gull was observed eating Mallard in the same area. The crow roost in Pompey attracted at least 1500 American Crow, the most observed in this season

since 1972. Presumably these were birds forced south from points north and attracted to the manure spreads and sumac bushes of the area. Wild Turkey was seen in many locations and in flocks of up to 66 as they concentrated where fields were swept relatively snow free by the wind. Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull and Great Black-backed Gull were compressed into the south end of Onondaga Lake, the small open areas in Oswego Harbor, the Seneca River near Baldwinsville, and refuse transfer stations near Syracuse and Jamesville.

Many other species were impacted by the weather. Wood Duck, Common Grackle and Purple Finch were not reported in the Region. Oldsquaw, which normally winter in the Oswego Harbor in large numbers, was absent from most reports. Merlin, recorded for the fourth consecutive winter in a Syracuse park, was not seen after the storms. There was only one report of Belted Kingfisher after the waters froze. Brown Creeper was reported only three times, American Robin only twice, no Song Sparrows were reported and House Finch was reported in much lower numbers than usual after the middle of January. Golden-crowned Kinglet was scarce after the storm and White-throated Sparrow was rare throughout the period. American Tree Sparrow continued its decline of recent years, while Carolina Wren was noted only on scattered reports after mid December. Northern Cardinal was observed more than usual as this species was forced to rely on feeders because of the weather.

There was a bright side to this seasons bird reports. Joe Brin found a *Eurasian Wigeon* in Baldwinsville on 29 Dec. The bird lingered until 3 Jan, giving many observers their first look at this species since 1989 and our first winter season record ever. John Hanyak located an Oregon-type Dark-eyed Junco on 27 Jan at a feeder in Elbridge. There were three different sightings of Bohemian Waxwing, marking the first winter since 1991 with records here. Pine Grosbeak was widely scattered, with records coming from 10 locations. Common Redpoll was, well, common across the Region and reported in large numbers for the first time since 1972. There were two sightings of *Hoary Redpoll* in Pompey.

The Syracuse CBC on 18 December was favored with open waters and mild temperatures which produced six new maximum records including 2652 Common Merganser and 13 Carolina Wren. Two species vied for the honor of taking home a toy stuffed owl symbolic of The Bird of the Count: a Common Yellowthroat was found for the first time

since 1987, while a Blue-winged Teal was only the second recorded on the 45 year modern records of the Syracuse count.

The annual New York State Waterfowl count in January was hindered by lack of open water and mist due to the bitter cold temperatures. All waterfowl except Redhead were reported in low numbers.

Derby Hill's new hawk watcher, Brian Sullivan, started counting on 15 Feb. On 16 Feb, he saw a dark immature *Gyr Falcon* (NYSARC) for only the third Derby Hill record and the first in the Region since 1985. Through 28 Feb a total of 117 raptors had migrated over Derby Hill. Welcome Brian!

Highlights of the season were *Eurasian Wigeon*, *Gyr Falcon* and *Hoary Redpoll*. Interesting also were multiple occurrences of Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak and the significant invasion of Common Redpoll. Overall, 25 hardy contributors noted 108 species, one subspecies and one hybrid (an apparent Mallard x American Wigeon), compared to 113 and 115 forms the previous two years. Bill Purcell summed up the season best when he reported: As February rolled on with no relief, it became very easy to find other things to do on days with minus windchills rather than see the same birds in ever dwindling numbers.

Contributors: Sue Adair, Sue Boettger, Joseph Brin, Dorothy Crumb, Paul DeBenedictis, Robert L. Evans, Craig Fosdick, Bill Gruenbaum, John Hanyak, Elva Hawken, Gene Huggins, Mary Alice Koeneke, Gary Lee, Dave Longley, David Nash, Bill Purcell, Steve Rulison, Marge Rusk, Jeanne Ryan, Maureen Staloff, Brian Sullivan, Jim Throckmorton, Judy Thurber, Glen Wolford, Judy Wright, C. Kendall Zoller.

Abbreviations: DH - Derby Hill, OSWE; LSB - Fair Haven, Little Sodus Bay and vicinity, CAYU; NoyS - Noyes Sanctuary, OSWE; ONON; OnonL - Onondaga Lake, ONON; OswH - Oswego Harbor, OSWE.

Winter reports: **Red-throated Loon:** *intro.* **Com. Loon:** *intro.* **Horned Grebe:** *intro.* only other report one OnonL 30 Jan - 12 Feb. **Red-necked Grebe:** *intro.* **Double-crested Cormorant:** *intro;* max ten OswH 19 Dec. **Snow Goose:** max seven Clay Marsh ONON 27 Jan. **Canada Goose:** *intro.* **Wood Duck:** none. **Mallard:** *intro.* **N. Pintail:** only four sightings, max four Webster Pd Syracuse 22 Jan. **Blue-winged Teal:** *intro.* **N. Shoveler:** last LSB 5 Dec. **Gadwall:** max 42 LSB 10 Dec. *Eurasian Wigeon:* *intro.* **Am. Wigeon:** max 42 LSB 10 Dec; arr four DH 20 Feb. **Canvasback:** max 11 OnonL 12 Feb. **Redhead:** *intro;* max 35 LSB 5 Dec. **Ring-necked Duck:** max 15 LSB 5 Dec. **Greater Scaup:** max 3500 (high) Scriba 12 Feb.

Oldsquaw: *intro*; max 27 OswH 6 Feb. **White-winged Scoter:** only three sightings of singles OswH and Fulton 5 Dec through 23 Jan. **Hooded Merganser:** max 16 LSB 10 Dec. **Com. Merganser:** *intro*. max 1000 OnonL 7 Feb. **Red-breasted Merganser:** max 43 OswH 23 Jan.

Bald Eagle: max four Phoenix after mid Jan. **Sharp-shinned Hawk:** 17 reports. **Cooper's Hawk:** 13 reports. **N. Goshawk:** only four reports away from DH. **Rough-legged Hawk:** only eight reports away from DH, max 6 Mexico 29 Jan. **Am. Kestrel:** scarce during winter. **Merlin:** *intro*. **Gyr Falcon:** *intro*. **Ring-necked Pheasant:** scarce through winter. **Ruffed Grouse:** scarce through winter. **Wild Turkey:** *intro*. **Am. Coot:** max 12 LSB 5-10 Dec, only report. **Killdeer:** none wintered; arr sw ONON 19 Feb. **Com. Snipe:** three reports, singles only. **Ring-billed Gull:** *intro*; max 1800 Oswego 6 Feb. **Herring Gull:** *intro*; max 600 OswH 29 Jan. **Iceland Gull:** five reports, single birds. **Glaucous Gull:** two Jamesville 25 Jan, two OswH 29-30 Jan, one OnonL 30 Jan. **Great Black-backed Gull:** *intro*.

E. Screech-Owl: *intro*; only five reports. **Snowy Owl:** two Syracuse airport through mid Jan; one OnonL 8 Dec; one Scriba 1 Jan. **Barred Owl:** only reports two Beaver L ONON through period, one Baldwinsville 4 Feb, one NoyS 6 Feb. **Short-eared Owl:** max three Verona Beach 12-28 Dec. **N. Saw-whet Owl:** singles T Marcellus 2 Feb, DH 20 Feb, only reports. **Belted Kingfisher:** *intro*. **Red-headed Woodpecker:** one at feeder Wampsville after 13 Dec. **Red-bellied Woodpecker:** one s Oriskany Falls 21 Feb minor expansion s of its known range. **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker:** three early winter sightings.

Horned Lark: max 250 Fabius 27 Feb, highest max since 1980. **Gray Jay:** one at feeder Forestport February, one T Remsen early Jan. **Am. Crow:** *intro*. **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** one-four widespread at feeders. **Brown Creeper:** *intro*. **Carolina Wren:** *intro*. **Winter Wren:** only two reports in Dec. **Marsh Wren:** one Clay Marsh ONON 18 Dec. **Golden-crowned Kinglet:** *intro*; max 12 Whiskey Hollow T Van Buren 23 Dec, only three reports after 4 Jan storm. **E. Bluebird:** one Baldwinsville 19 Feb, one Camillus 25 Jan, six Jamesville 6 Feb, only winter reports. **Hermit Thrush:** last Syracuse 18 Dec. **Am. Robin:** *intro*. **Bohemian Waxwing:** *intro*. **Cedar Waxwing:** max 60 Dewitt 18 Dec. **N. Shrike:** only three reports.

Common Yellowthroat: *intro*.

Northern Cardinal: *intro*; max 75 Tully 21 Jan, high. **Rufous-sided**

Towhee: only two reports at feeders, Chittenango and Elbridge. **Am. Tree Sparrow:** *intro*; max 38 Marcellus 2 Jan. **Field Sparrow:** only report two Wampsville 24 Jan. **Song Sparrow:** *intro*. **White-throated Sparrow:** *intro*. **Lapland Longspur:** max four Elbridge 5 Feb. **Snow Bunting:** max 250 Fabius 13 Jan. **Rusty Blackbird:** only report one Marcellus 2 Jan. **Pine Grosbeak:** *intro*; max 15 Scriba 14 Dec, scattered reports from 10 locations. **Purple Finch:** *intro*. **House Finch:** *intro*. max 227 Syracuse CBC 18 Dec. **Com. Redpoll:** *intro*; max 450 Hannibal 19 Dec. **Hoary Redpoll:** one in a European Larch (*Larix decidua*) plantation n Pompey Twp 11 Jan (DWC); one at feeder Pompey after 19 Jan (mob, NYSARC, ph). **Pine Siskin:** five reports of single birds, max three Oswego 18 Dec. **Am. Goldfinch:** max 65 Cazenovia through period, other counts low. **Evening Grosbeak:** max 31 Erieville 5 Feb, few other scattered reports.

3983 Gates Road, Jamesville, New York 13078