

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON

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The Winter of 1994-95 was almost a rerun of the winter of 1992-93. December and January were mild and nearly snow free, this time lacking even the nor'easter which hit Regions 9 and 10 in December 1992. Water was open most of the season and similar discussions revolved around the impact of this openness on waterfowl: were waterfowl scarce or just dispersed because of the extensive open water available? Avian variety was good. As in 1992-93, there was a great variety of half-hardy species and irruptive species and winter finches were largely absent. This season, in contrast with 1992-93, the wild food crop was noted as excellent although any effects of this difference were not obvious. In both seasons, February turned very cold and wintry, with a major storm experienced by all on 4-5 Feb and with Regions 1 and 7 receiving significant snow through the balance of the season while most of the rest of the State continued relatively free of the white stuff. The cold drastically curtailed the normal influx of early migrants in late February. Average temperatures and precipitation by month were remarkably uniform across the State for the Regions reporting the data.

Water bird reports produced great contrasts. The loon migration continued well into December, with Red-throated outnumbering Common in Region 2 and persisting well into January; a good push of Common Loon was noted in Region 3 on 10 Dec. The grebe incursion and grounding of last winter was not even echoed this year, with numbers of all species relatively low. *Northern Gannet* was noted in Regions 2, 8, 9, and 10, and an *American White Pelican* was again recorded in Region 10. A pelagic trip on 3 Dec found species thought to be rare in the State at this season, including Greater, Sooty, and Manx Shearwaters, Red Phalarope, and Dovekie. Heron and egret reports were amazingly scarce, but it is difficult to tell whether their absence means there were too few or too many reports to rate mention in Regions 9 and 10. Waterfowl variety was excellent, but counts were generally mediocre, with a few notable exceptions. Highlights for this group include high Tundra Swan counts in Regions 1, 3, and 5; Greater White-fronted Goose in Regions 3, 9, and 10; exceptional winter counts for Snow Goose in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8; poor Wood Duck counts; a record high winter Mallard count in Region 3; half-hardy dabbling ducks widespread on CBCs and the January Waterfowl Count; a record high inland tally of Greater Scaup in Region 2; very high counts of

Common Eider in Region 10; Harlequin Duck in Region 1, 2, 5, and 10; Oldsquaw and White-winged Scoter both scarce, but Surf Scoter up a bit for the season; Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 7, 8, and 9; and Common Merganser numbers good in several Regions, especially Region 5.

Raptors also produced mixed reviews. Numbers were high in some Regions, but down in neighboring Regions, e.g., Rough-legged Hawk counts high in Regions 3 and 4 but low in Regions 1 and 2, and unremarkable elsewhere. There are many noteworthy observations: Turkey Vulture continues to increase its winter presence, with reports from six Regions, including Region 10, and *Black Vulture* again wintered in Region 9. Bald Eagle was noted in all Regions reporting, with an amazing record high count from Region 9. Accipiters were noted in average numbers. Red-shouldered Hawk reports were up a bit, with records from six Regions. Broad-winged Hawk was found in Region 10 and Osprey in Regions 4 and 10. Golden Eagle was noted from Regions 4, 7, 8, and 9, where it is rare in winter. Merlin, formerly considered rare in winter away from the coast was located in seven inland Regions. Peregrine Falcon was observed in Regions 1, 2, 8, and 9. Gyrfalcon was noted in Regions 1 and 7, the former bird seen fairly regularly through the season. Owls were much better reported this season than usual. Variety was excellent across most Regions, though numbers were still low. This was not an invasion year for Snowy Owl, though birds were reported in eight of the nine Regions reporting. Barred Owl was reported from seven Regions and Long-eared Owl from five. Short-eared Owl was noted in eight Regions, with good counts from Regions 3, 8, and 9 and a very high count from Region 7. Northern Saw-whet Owl was tallied in six Regions and a lone *Boreal Owl* was heard in Region 4.

Given the open winter, shorebirds were a disappointment. Variety was good in Region 10 and fair in Region 9, with most of the expected wintering species recorded. Elsewhere, variety of species and numbers were very poor. Even Killdeer and Common Snipe were sparsely reported on CBCs. As usual, this group still had its highlights, with a persistent *Northern Lapwing* in Region 10; Ruddy Turnstone in Region 9; a high count of Western Sandpiper in Region 10; and late dowitcher in Regions 2 and 10. Wintering gulls also were generally unexceptional, but still provided some excellent records, including a good collection of the expected rarities in Region 10; *California Gull* at Niagara Falls for a third consecutive winter; *Thayer's Gull* reported from Regions 1, 2, 5, and 8; Lesser Black-backed Gull in six Regions; both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls in seven Regions; a *Ross's Gull* in Region 3; and a

record high for Black-legged Kittiwake at sea in Region 10. As in the winter of 1992-93, the usual upstate concentrations of Bonaparte's and Little Gulls were dramatically reduced in numbers and length of stay this winter relative to the past 20 years. The lone tern report was a very late Forster's Tern in Region 9, as was a Black Skimmer in Region 10.

The passerines are a bit difficult to organize, but the basic stories are the large number, over 35, of half-hardy species and few irruptive species were conspicuous. With a few exceptions, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, American Tree Sparrow, Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting all were found in relatively low numbers or were absent. Winter finches generally were very scarce, except for a crossbill invasion centered in Region 7 and spilling over to Regions 5 and 8, though most species were recorded somewhere in at least very low numbers. A few other interesting notes include Common Raven from six Regions; Fish Crow inland in Regions 3, 8, and 9, with a late winter double-digit count in Region 8; Black-capped Chickadee invaded Region 9 but was nearly absent at the Jenny Lake study area in Region 8; Carolina Wren numbers down, as expected, except for a record high CBC count from the coldest part of Region 2; a *Loggerhead Shrike* in Region 4; generally low counts for White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows and Dark-eyed Junco; an Oregon type Dark-eyed Junco in Region 8, and blackbird numbers very low, with the only large roost counts being thousands of Common Grackle in Region 10.

Half-hardy species were so prevalent that only the special highlights will be mentioned here. These include Eastern Phoebe in Regions 1, 8, 9, and 10; House Wren in Region 9; *Wood Thrush* in Region 10; American Robin everywhere, with roost counts in the thousands in Regions 2 and 8; 13 species of warblers, the most unusual *Nashville* in Regions 9 and 10, *Yellow-throated* in Region 3, *Prairie* in Region 10, *Palm* in Regions 9 and 10, *Wilson's* in Regions 9 and 10, *American Redstart* in Region 10, and *Northern Waterthrush* in Regions 9 and 10. Rose-breasted Grosbeak tarried in Region 4, Dickcissel in Regions 9 and 10; Vesper Sparrow in Region 2; Lark Sparrow in Region 10; Savannah and Fox Sparrows in Regions 1, 2, 8, and 9; and Lincoln's Sparrow in Region 10.

The similarity this season to the winter of 1992-93 in the lists of half-hardy species, of the lingering eastern migratory species, and of passerine rarities such as *Loggerhead Shrike*, *Dickcissel*, and *Harris's Sparrow*, and the fact that crossbills were virtually the only winter finches present is striking. Before you begin to see some periodicity in these events, read *Chaos* by Robert Gleick to learn that "stable" pseudo-periodicity is typical of systems driven by a set of nonlinear drivers, and

in which a very small change in any factor driving such a system can push it to an entirely new, inherently unpredictable state, which again may be relatively stable and show some other apparent periodicity.

Other noteworthy reports including the continuing decrease in Ring-necked Pheasant and increase for Wild Turkey, with flocks of the latter at 200+ in Regions 4 and 5; the usual few wintering rails; a very high tally of American Coot in Region 2; *Sandhill Crane* in Regions 2, 5, and 10; alcids in Region 10, including both Thick-billed and *Common Murre* and a good count of Razorbill. Observers found good counts of Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, a Black-backed Woodpecker in Region 9 as well as the expected Region 7 reports, and good CBC counts for Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Northern Flicker.

In addition to the litany of species data, there are always interesting notes in the Regional reports. A few which caught my eye were notes on raptor rehabilitation in Region 5; American Robin and Cedar Waxwing persisting at higher altitudes in Region 7; and an host of exotic gulls that escaped from the Bronx Zoo Aviary after a roof collapse, not to be seen subsequently.

The final detail is the selection of the B.O.T.S. Many rarities have been woven in the summary above, and *Townsend's Solitaire* in Regions 9 and 10; and *Harris's Sparrow* in Regions 2 and 9 normally would be strong candidates. However, this season the award goes to the obliging *Northern Lapwing* ogled by many in Region 10.

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