

REGION 1 — NIAGARA FRONTIER

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The weather in December and January was greatly affected by El Niño, the Pacific Ocean event that split the jet stream and kept arctic air to our north. December, like the November preceding it, was particularly quiet with temperatures 5°F above normal and precipitation an inch below normal at 2.67 inches. Winds for the month were the lightest on record at Buffalo and it was also much sunnier than normal. Eight inches of snowfall in Buffalo and 10 inches in the snowbelts south of the city were far below monthly averages of 24 and 60 inches, respectively. January is when Lake Erie usually becomes its notorious self. This year it had to struggle with El Niño for control of our weather. It managed to dump a foot of snow in Buffalo on 3 Jan, after leaving nearly twice that in the snowbelts the day before. This was the heaviest one day snowfall in January in ten years. However, the period from 12 to 21 Jan averaged more than 20° above normal with record high temperatures recorded on 14 and 15 Jan, while the final days of the month saw seasonal temperatures and only light snowfall. For the month, temperatures averaged nearly 6° above normal while the snowfall total was about average. At Amity Lake ALLE, the temperature from mid Dec to mid Jan averaged 34°F compared to 17°F for the same period last year (VP). Residents of our Region were hopeful that the mild open winter would continue and then translate into an early spring. Besides the weather, birders were enjoying the gulls on the Niagara River and a good number of half-hardy species. Unfortunately, February was just January with another name. Mainly lake effect snows dumped 35 inches of the white stuff, making it the snowiest February in 35 years. Temperatures averaged 2.6° below normal with generally strong winds making for bitter cold conditions. To illustrate the effect that the weather change had on the birds are Gordon Bellerby's counts of Bonaparte's Gull as they flew out the mouth of the Niagara River to roost on Lake Ontario: 16,500 on 3 Feb, a February record, and none on 6 Feb!

The nine Christmas Bird Counts in our Region, compiled by Gerry Rising, were very close to the previous two years in total individuals (116,253) and species (106). Species with highest counts compared to their average over the past five years were Red-throated Loon, Tundra Swan, Canada Goose, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Brown

Creeper, American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Rufous-sided Towhee. Most of these continued in above average numbers through the rest of the winter. Low counts were obtained for Great Blue Heron, Redhead, Greater Scaup, Cooper's Hawk, Ring-necked Pheasant, Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, Rock and Mourning Doves, Eastern Screech-, Great Horned, Barred, and Short-eared Owls, Belted Kingfisher, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Shrike, Northern Cardinal, White-crowned Sparrow, Snow Bunting, Pine Siskin, and American Goldfinch. It is difficult to make absolute statements about this data. However, declines in Ring-necked Pheasant have been indicated previously, and that this is the third count during the past 12 months with low totals for Great Horned Owl. Perhaps the unrelenting development is even taking its toll on this adaptable species.

Last winter's grebe fallout was not repeated. This season not even one Red-necked Grebe was reported. Unusually high numbers of Tundra Swan and American Coot were evident on the Niagara River, Lake Erie, and Chautauqua Lake, an effect of the mild winter. Three Harlequin Duck was a great showing with a handsome pair cooperating for birders at Buffalo.

Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk were found in good numbers, most at feeding stations, particularly in February. Age in adult birds is rarely documented. Thus, it is pleasing to report three cases of raptors returning to the region. At Buffalo Harbor a *Gyr Falcon* was back for its third winter and birders managed to see it several times unlike previous years when it could be found only sporadically. A Merlin returned to the University of Buffalo's Main Street campus for the fifth year, although it was only encountered the first few days of January. Finally, a sub-adult Bald Eagle with a green wing-tag, recorded on the lower Niagara River in Jan 1986, has been seen almost every year since, making it at least 11 years old!

Of the passerines, Tufted Titmouse continues to do well while another southerner, Carolina Wren, is at a low point of its cycle after peaking two to three years ago. Eastern Bluebird was well reported from many areas and American Robin was incredibly numerous, even abundant at times. One flock near East Aurora on 1 Jan contained 650 birds (MM), the second highest winter count ever. It was also noted in high numbers in ALLE (VP), as well as the lake plains where high counts are less unusual. Another berry eater, Cedar Waxwing, was also noted in good numbers. Also interested in the birds eating these berries were the many Northern Shrike reported. Winter finches were practically absent

all winter. Purple Finch, however, was reported in good numbers, especially in the hillier counties of WYOM, ALLE, and CATT.

Unusual sightings this season included Peregrine Falcon, *California Gull* for the third year in a row, Marsh Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Savannah Sparrow for the third straight winter, Fox Sparrow, and the first ever Jan record for *Eastern Phoebe*.

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Abbreviations: BH - Buffalo Harbor; BISP - Buckhorn I SP; DH - Dunkirk Harbor; INWR - Iroquois NWR; NF - Niagara Falls; NR - Niagara River.

Winter reports: **Red-throated Loon:** max 11 T Porter 27 Dec (BE, WD); Fort Niagara SP 7 Jan (MM); T Newfane 15 Jan (WBr); rare after Dec. **Com. Loon:** only reports after Dec NF 1 Jan, T Wilson 4 Feb. **Pied-billed Grebe:** up to six DH all season. **Horned Grebe:** four Golden Hill SP 23 Jan (WD); only report after Dec. **Red-necked Grebe:** none. **Double-crested Cormorant:** max 16 DH 22 Feb (RS). **Great Blue Heron:** max 19 Strawberry I NR 21 Jan (WW). **Black-crowned Night-Heron:** DH 3 Jan (JG,AB), 5 Feb (TM), only report. **Tundra Swan:** 68 CBCs; max 45 over Jamestown 18 Jan (RS), 31 BISP 18 Feb (BC). **Mute Swan:** DH 29 Jan (WBr), only report. **Wood Duck:** 20 CBCs; 1, 2 Celoron CHAU 5, 18 Jan (RS), rare after Dec. **N. Pintail:** max 10 BISP 24 Dec (BC). **Gadwall:** max 33 INWR 10 Dec (WW). **Am. Wigeon:** T Amity 28 Feb (VP), wintering or first arrival? **Redhead:** max 138 upper NR 19 Feb (WW). **Ring-necked Duck:** max 25 T Wheatfield 17 Jan (RA,JT). **Greater Scaup:** max 2750 BH 30 Jan (MD), high count. **Harlequin Duck:** imm male Four Mile Creek SP 27 Dec (WD, DD); ad male Buffalo-NR 14 Jan-2 Feb (RV, MT), female 30 Jan-19 Feb. **Surf Scoter:** three T Ellery 1 Dec (RS); mouth of NR 13-22 Jan (GB, WD!); NF 14 Jan (WD!, BP); Buffalo 17, 25 Jan (RA, MD); DH 11,

17 Feb (RS, FR); more than usual. **Hooded Merganser**: six reports involving 20 birds in Jan, more than usual. **Ruddy Duck**: only reports two T Dayton 10 Dec (BS), DH 16 Jan (FR,AH).

Turkey Vulture: Youngstown, NIAG 3 Dec (WBr!), record late. **Bald Eagle**: *intro*. N. Goshawk: St. Bonaventure CBC CATT 17 Dec; ad T Wethersfield 12,13 Dec (DJ, MJ). **Red-shouldered Hawk**: four CBCs, only report. **Rough-legged Hawk**: low numbers in southern tier, fewer on the L Ontario Plain. **Merlin**: one Buffalo early Jan (ES!, DS!). **Peregrine Falcon**: Dunkirk 18 Jan (FR!). **Gyr Falcon**: ad gray morph Buffalo Harbor after 23 Dec (MM!, mob). **Ring-necked Pheasant**: scarce. **Am. Coot**: 59 LaSalle P Buffalo 24 Dec (WW); Jan record max 232 DH 16 Jan (FR,AH); Feb record max 184 there 22 Feb (RS). **Purple Sandpiper**: three NF 3 Dec (MM); five Goat I NR 22 Jan (MD); only reports. **Dunlin**: last three NF 10 Dec (WD). **Com. Snipe**: Jamestown CBC 18 Dec, only report. **Little Gull**: max 11 mouth of NR 29 Jan (GB); several at Buffalo, NF, and Lewiston on NR, usually mainly confined to lower NR after Dec. **Bonaparte's Gull**: record Jan max 16,200 mouth of NR 29 Jan (GB); *intro*. **Ring-billed Gull**: "few thousand" NR Buffalo in Feb; low counts. **California Gull**: second-winter plumage RMPP 3 Dec (RF!, NF!, mob). **Thayer's Gull**: at least six different birds NF and RMPP Dec and Jan. **Iceland Gull**: at least ten NF and RMPP; DH 5 Feb (TM, LN), only report away from NR. **Lesser Black-backed Gull**: at least five birds on the NR in Dec; three RMPP 28 Jan (WD!), ad and imm NF 30 Jan (WD!), usually departs after early Jan. **Glaucous Gull**: max five NF 28 Jan (MM); Golden Hill SP 22 Jan (D&DS), only report away from NR. **Great Black-backed Gull**: 490 NF 30 Jan (WD), large count.

Snowy Owl: T Java 23 Dec (MJ); T Arcade 31 Dec to 18 Jan (DJ, MJ, HL, LH); Bird I Pier Buffalo 6 Jan (PY); T Arkwright in Jan; only reports. **Long-eared Owl**: 13 five locations NIAG, only report. **Short-eared Owl**: Kuckville ORLE 22 Dec (BE); 2, 1 T Porter 27 Dec, 2 Jan; only reports. **Red-headed Woodpecker**: Fort Niagara SP 4, 27 Dec, 1 Jan (WD, WBr). **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**: Bond L P NIAG 24-27 Dec (WD, DB); Chestnut Ridge CBC 1 Jan; rare in winter. **N. Flicker**: eight T Yates 23 Jan (WD, BP), good winter tally. **Pileated Woodpecker**: 6-7 Allegany SP 19 Feb (PY), good count.

E. Phoebe: T Eden 1 Jan (DH!, DM). **Horned Lark**: max 150 *alpestris* 23 Jan. **Am. Crow**: 2000 Buffalo 16 Jan (WBr), impressive. **Com. Raven**: T Amity 19 Feb (VP!), only report. **Carolina Wren**: four reports. **Winter Wren**: Williamsville Glen ERIE 14 Dec (PY); BISP 12 Jan, 18 Feb (BC). **Marsh Wren**: Tonawanda WMA 24 Dec (PY!), very rare in winter. **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**: Four Mile Creek SP 13 Feb (WD!, BP); rare in winter. **Hermit Thrush**: T Portville 17 Dec (BS), only report. **Am. Robin**: very

numerous. **Gray Catbird**: T Portville 17 Dec (BS); N. Tonawanda NIAG 18 Dec (BP); only reports. **Cedar Waxwing**: max 1589 CBCs, an excellent total; counts of 100+ ORLE, WYOM. N. **Shrike**: particularly numerous on L Ontario plain.

Yellow-rumped Warbler: record max 32 Bond L P NIAG 24 Dec (WD), previous winter high 31 in 1980; up to five reported from each of seven other locations, impressive showing.

Savannah Sparrow: T Pomfret 24 Jan (TM!). **Fox Sparrow**: Jamestown CBC 18 Dec, very late. **Swamp Sparrow**: E. Aurora 1 Dec to 11 Jan (LH); Tonawanda WMA 24 Dec (PY); 1, 2 BISP 12,29 Jan (BC,D&DS); a good showing. **White-crowned Sparrow**: only reports two Chestnut Ridge CBC 1 Jan; six T Pomfret 5 Feb (TM). **Lapland Longspur**: 4, 7+ T Somerset 23 Jan, 26 Feb (WD). **Snow Bunting**: max 110 BH 25 Dec, 150 T Somerset 31 Jan, few other reports. **Red-winged Blackbird**: max 92 CBCs; six reports through. **Rusty Blackbird**: 29 T Conewango 10 Dec (BS); two T Lewiston 27 Dec (DB); T Pomfret 22 Jan (TM); a good showing. **Com. Grackle**: Tonawanda ERIE 27 Jan (WW); two T Tonawanda 31 Jan, 22 Feb (WW,PH); two T Pomfret 19 Feb (TM), rare after Dec. **Purple Finch**: max 8-30 Warsaw WYOM 1-28 Feb (HK); *intro.* **Pine Siskin**: eight CBCs; Bond L P NIAG 24 Dec (WD); Wellsville ALLE 1-31 Jan (MB); T Amity 14 Jan (VP); only reports. **Evening Grosbeak**: 30 down to 1 Beaver Meadow Wildlife Refuge WYOM 17-21 Dec (DJ), only report!

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