

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 1995-96

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By reading the regional reports, you will discover a host of ways to say it was a long, tough winter with much more colorful adjectives. With more or less expected variations, the pattern was similar across the state. A snowy November was followed by a very snowy, cold December and a first half of January which continued the snow and produced many record cold temperatures. Then came the Big Thaw, with record high temperatures set, rain storms with some lightning and thunder and high winds, and moderate to devastating flooding, as the deep snowcover melted in a rush. January temperatures averaged near normal, a useless statistic. February was tamer, with average to a bit less snowfall and precipitation and average to a little above temperatures. Many regions saw the start of spring migration for waterfowl, hawks, blackbirds, and assorted other species. In many places there were patches of bare ground showing before season's end.

The impact of the weather is often difficult to see in the reports. In several regions the season was split by the CBC period, with decent birding before and through, but birds hard to find later, actually not terribly atypical for winter. In addition to the weather effects, note of very poor wild food crops was universal. Yet, species counts were good for many CBCs across the state and Big January listers in Region 2 turned up an all-time high January list. However, total numbers of individuals was definitely down on most CBCs and the FWC. Still, some species were counted in record high numbers. Impacts of the various factors are never really simple; deep snow and frozen water may kill or push out birds, or it may concentrate them in the remaining usable habitat or at feeders where they are easily counted if the timing is right.

A scan through the checklist seems like a good way to capture the essence of this season. Most water birds were concentrated or pushed out by hard freezes in December through mid-January. This was reflected in most waterfowl counts. By mid to late February, they were on the move back into most Regions. Loons and grebes were scarce, except for the last of the loon counts in Regions 2 & 3 and Red-necked Grebe counts in Regions 3, 9, & 10. Eared Grebe was located in Regions 1, 2, 9, & 10. Double-crested Cormorant numbers were well down for the season. There were few notes relative to the herons and egrets, except for a very rare winter Tricolored Heron in Region 10. Tundra Swan and Snow

Goose were particularly widespread, being sighted in seven and six Regions, respectively. Mute Swan continues to spread, with observations in five Regions. For the second consecutive winter, an imm. Trumpeter Swan appeared in Region 2 for an extended period. [A hot-off-the press update is a newspaper article in Region 2 on a DEC confirmed nesting and hatching of four young on private land in Wayne County this May.] Rare goose reports included: Ross' Goose in Regions 3 & 9 and Greater White-fronted Goose and Barnacle Goose in Region 10. Puddle duck numbers were generally low, though all species except for Blue-winged Teal were located, some rare for the Regions reporting. Among the divers, again the raft counts seemed low. Good numbers, given their depressed populations, are: 12,000 Canvasback in Region 1 and Redhead at 5000 in Region 2 and 7000 in Region 3. There were also big numbers of Common Eider off Montauk point in Region 10. Rarer divers included: a regional first Tufted Duck in Region 2, as well as the usual few in Region 10; Harlequin Duck in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, & 10; and Barrow's Goldeneye in Regions 6 (hybrid), 8, & 10.

Raptors, too, presented a general picture of reduced numbers for most species in most areas, yet good species diversity. On the positive side we find: wintering Turkey Vulture in seven Regions, including Regions 6 & 7 in January!; Black Vulture at a TV roost in Region 2, in addition to the usual birds in Region 9; Osprey late in four Regions; good winter numbers for both Bald Eagle and the rarer Golden Eagle; good accipiter numbers in most regions; Red-shouldered Hawk found in five Regions; Merlin, typically more than one report each from *nine* Regions, including a first in the winter in Region 4; Peregrine Falcon in five Regions; and Gyrfalcon in Regions 1, 5, 7, 9, & 10. There was also a rare "rufous morph" Red-tailed Hawk described in Region 3. On the down side were very poor numbers of N. Harrier and low counts for Rough-legged Hawk in all except Regions 4 & 8, where numbers were better.

The shorebird and gull/tern reports were even more dismal. There were only eleven total shorebird notes aside from a typical five Regions reporting Killdeer. The most interesting were: two very late Am. Golden-Plover in Region 10, a count of 200 Red Knot in Region 10, and a February Long-billed Dowitcher in Region 9. Generally gull numbers were low, but there was a good collection of Thayer's Gull reports from three Regions, Lesser Black-backed Gull in six Regions, and good numbers of Iceland and Glaucous gulls in nine and eight Regions, respectively. Other records of interest were: Laughing Gull in Region 8; very late Ross' Gull and Sabine's Gull in Region 1; Black-legged Kittiwake in Regions 1, 2, & 9; a late Common Tern in Region 10; and, amazing for both rarity and

date, a 10 December Least Tern in Region 1.

Owls made their best showing in many years, possibly being pushed to more accessible locations by deep snow and/or a low prey populations. Snowy Owl was present in very low numbers, except for Regions 6 & 10. N. Hawk Owl visited Region 6. Barred owl was reported in seven Regions. An influx of Great Gray Owl touched Regions 5, 7, 8, and 9, with multiple birds in some of these. Short-eared Owl was scarce in most Regions; records often seem to fluctuate in sync with N. Harrier using the same habitats. N. Saw-whet Owl was noted in all ten Regions, though often dead or in need of rehabilitation. A freshly dead Boreal Owl was picked up in Region 2 on 1 January. Finally, E. Screech-Owl and Great Horned Owl were both found in good numbers on CBCs.

Lumping together a forgotten few and picking up the woodpeckers, we note Wild Turkey in numbers reaching the nuisance level for farmers. Note a total for all CBCs in Region 4 of 2821 turkeys, four times the previous such high. A very late Yellow Rail was reported in mid-December in Region 10. Finally, among the woodpeckers, we find Red-bellied numbers particularly good in range expansion areas and Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker noted in eight Regions, wintering through in most of these. It is always interesting to study the passerine reports in any season, but especially the half-hardies in winter. Nearly all regular species were reported somewhere, often in multiple Regions. Studying the reports, a sample of what you should find includes: E. Phoebe in five Regions; a rare Say's Phoebe in Region 8; Tree Swallow to 30 Dec in Region 10; Carolina Wren still low, but increasing in most Regions; Winter Wren in six Regions; a very late Sedge Wren in Region 10; Marsh Wren in Regions 2 & 8; Ruby-crowned Kinglet in Regions 2, 4, & 8; some widespread concern over E. Bluebird numbers; Hermit Thrush scarce, but reported in six Regions; Am. Robin counts low relative to recent history; Gray Catbird in Regions 4 & 8; Brown Thrasher in Regions 1, 2, & 5; Am. Pipit in Region 10; only four Regions with Yellow-rumped Warbler, but Region 10 with six additional species of warbler, and Region 9 joining them with Palm Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat; Chipping Sparrow in Regions 1, 2, & 8; Field Sparrow in six Regions; Vesper Sparrow only in Region 10; Savannah Sparrow in Regions 2, 7, & 8; Dickcissel in Region 10; Sharp-tailed Sparrow (sp.) in Regions 9 & 10; Fox Sparrow in Region 7; Lincoln's Sparrow in Region 10; White-throated Sparrow counts low, but White-crowned high; and Baltimore Oriole found dead in Region 2 and also noted in Region 10. Certainly a good list for a difficult winter!

Among the more expected passerines at this season, special notes of interest include: Fish Crow expanding to five Regions; Common Raven in

seven Regions; Black-capped Chickadee and Red-breasted Nuthatch invasions not large (see banding notes in the Region 8 account); Tufted Titmouse counts high in expansion areas; a good year for Bohemian Waxwing, reported in nine Regions, with some excellent numbers; and Cedar Waxwing less numerous. This season probably brought the greatest N. Shrike invasion yet recorded in the State. The invasion was statewide and numbers eclipse former highs for day counts and totals in most areas. Also on the upside were: good counts of Lapland Longspur - eight Regions; Snow Bunting - with counts of 1000+ in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 4; E. Meadowlark - six Regions; and Rusty Blackbird - five Regions. In contrast was the bust where we expected a Finch Winter. All species were recorded, Common Redpoll and Pine Grosbeak in decent numbers, but there were almost no crossbills, few Pine Siskin and Evening Grosbeak, and very few Purple Finch. The salvation of the finch story is Hoary Redpoll in six Regions, with multiple birds in most of these. It is interesting to speculate how much of this burst in reports comes from recent articles to the effect that: " You too can confidently ID Hoary Redpoll, even the many which look very much like Common Redpolls."

Truly, it was an interesting season for birds and birders; they all are in some way!! Wrapping it up, the BOTS Award must go to the wayward Northern Fulmar in Region 7, rehabbed and released later on the coast.