

REGION 1 - NIAGARA FRONTIER

Willie D'Anna

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension, Niagara Falls NY 14304-4522

December continued the cold snowy conditions from November and mid-winter reigned before the season even officially began. Sixty-one inches of snow fell in Buffalo, a full three feet above normal, making this the second snowiest December in history. A 24-hour record, 38 inches of snow, plastered the city on 9 and 10 December, the result of a very narrow and unwavering lake effect band. At Grand Island and Niagara Falls, just north of Buffalo, less than two inches fell on those days! The average temperature of 24.5°F was 4.6° below the norm, making this the coldest December in six years. With November and December combining for one of the harshest early winters in decades, it is not surprising that Lake Erie hit 32 degrees on 12 December, the earliest date ever. Amity Lake in ALLE began heavy ice cover on 17 November, also exceptionally early (VP).

In spite of the fact that the east coast's "Blizzard of '96" missed the Region, January saw the weather continue as one of the most frequent topics of conversation. The first two weeks of the month were bitterly cold with the thermometer falling to -10°F at Buffalo on the sixth. On the same date it reached -34°F at Cuba ALLE. The next two weeks brought warm air, rain, and major flooding on the Allegheny and Genesee rivers, the two largest drainage sources in the Region. As a result, a state of emergency was declared for ALLE and parts of CATT on 19 January. For the month snowfall was about normal at 25.3 inches, and the average temperature of 22.5°F was 1.1° below normal. The severity of winter to this point should have meant few half-hardies. Even though observer effort was about average, such was not the case. Many of the songbird sightings were at feeding stations, as might be expected, but many were also not.

February offered a respite from the intense weather preceding it. The 12 inches of snow were six below normal while the average temperature of 24.2°F was almost exactly normal. Conditions were often benign and the ground was bare in many parts of the Region through much of the month. A warm spell 7-11 February brought the first migrant Am. Robin, Red-winged Blackbird, Com. Grackle, and Brown-headed Cowbird.

Nine Christmas Bird Counts were conducted in the Region 16 December to 1 January and were compiled by Gerry Rising. Although the species total of 113 was only average, it was seven more than last year,

during a much milder winter. Among the highlights were impressive numbers of waterfowl on the Buffalo count, including over 12,000 Canvasback, nearly 10,000 Common Merganser, and 308 Lesser Scaup. Studying groups of species shows hawks, gulls, and finches at six-year lows while woodpeckers and sparrows plus allies were at six-year highs. Species markedly down were: N. Harrier, Ruffed Grouse, Ring-billed and Herring gulls, European Starling, Red-winged Blackbird, Com. Grackle, and Brown-headed Cowbird. House Finch was down 36% from the previous low, last year. It is commonly held that the major cause of this is an eye infection which many birders can notice on this species at their feeders. Many of the birds in the above list were undoubtedly down because of earlier departures than normal from the Region, an effect of the harsh weather. This may be particularly true of the gulls and the blackbird group. Species at significant six-year highs were: Red-bellied Woodpecker (about twice the previous high), N. Cardinal, White-crowned Sparrow, and Snow Bunting (five times the previous high). Wild Turkey was also way up at three times its previous best. Numbers of this species have been consistently increasing. There were few exceptional sightings. The best were: Merlin, the latest-ever Sabine's Gull, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, E. Phoebe, Bohemian Waxwing, Chipping Sparrow, Pine Grosbeak, and White-winged Crossbill.

The last half of January saw a large concentration of waterfowl on the Niagara River between the ice boom on Lake Erie and the Peace Bridge at Buffalo. Red-breasted Merganser and Greater Scaup were present in the highest numbers. It is believed that Buffalo's Gyr Falcon, back for its fourth straight year, may have supplemented its Rock Dove diet with duck soup from this area. Several less than common species of ducks were found between the Peace Bridge and Niagara Falls, including a Harlequin Duck. After the superlative fall season for gulls, numbers dropped rapidly in December. On 20 Jan Gordon Bellerby had the unique experience of not finding a single gull or duck on the lower Niagara River! He attributed this to the muddied waters from the recent snowmelt. An influx of Mute Swan in February, both on the river and on Lake Ontario, was unusual. This species has not been regular in the Region since the long-lived individual of the Buffalo waterfront died a few years ago. Perhaps we are overdue to have this alien species establish itself here but its destructive tendencies toward other nesting waterfowl do not endear it to birders.

Wintering owls and Rough-legged Hawk were well down in numbers, especially Snowy Owl. N. Shrike, however, were more numerous

than I have ever experienced, being found throughout the Region.

Snow Bunting was widespread during the harsh weather, though usually not in huge flocks. When it turned mild they were difficult to locate. Am. Tree Sparrow was in well-above-average numbers as were Red-breasted Nuthatch and Brown Creeper. Normally rare but regular on the Lake Ontario Plain in winter, White-crowned Sparrow was relatively numerous there with sightings elsewhere as well. Com. Redpoll and Evening Grosbeak were found in good though not high numbers, with the Southern Tier producing most of the sightings. Purple Finch and Pine Siskin were scarce. White-winged Crossbill and Pine Grosbeak were found at one location each while Red Crossbill was unreported.

Rarities not yet mentioned include Eared Grebe, Turkey Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Black-legged Kittiwake, **Least Tern**, and **Hoary Redpoll**.

Contributors: Robert Andrie, Gordon Bellerby, William Bogacki, Robert Brock, Elizabeth Brooks, Doris Burton, Drew Campbell, Bruce Chilton, Willie D'Anna, Michael Davis, Dean DiTommaso, Marcy Foster, Walt Franklin, Joanne Goetz (JGz), Joe Gula, Barbara Henderson, Linda Holmes, Audrey Horbett, Hans Kunze, David & Marty Junkin, Ronald Lange, Michael Morgante, Judy Mosher, Terry Mosher, Catherine Mueller, Michael Pitzrick, Raymond Pitzrick, Vivian Pitzrick, Betsy Potter, Karen Rader, Frances Rew, Gerald Rising, Donald Roberson, Chuck Rosenburg, Olga Rosche, Kayo Roy (KRoy), Bert Schweigert, Gail Seamans, David (Buffalo RBA) and Debra Suggs, Robert Sundell, Joe Thill, Michael Turisk, Roberta Vallone, Regina VanScoy (RVS), William Watson, Anita Wierzbza, Peter Yoerg.

Abbreviations: BH-Buffalo Harbor; BRBA-Buffalo Rare Bird Alert; CBCs-nine combined Christmas Bird Counts, 16 Dec-1 Jan. DH-Dunkirk Harbor; INWR-Iroquois NWR; NF-Niagara Falls; NR-Niagara River.

LOONS-WATERFOWL: **Red-throated Loon:** no reports! **Com. Loon:** last NF 5 Jan. **Pied-billed Grebe:** up to five DH thru; one Buffalo thru; Olean 7,13 Jan (BS), rare CATT in winter. **Horned Grebe:** 1,2 DH 1,5 Feb (FR), only report after early Jan. **Red-necked Grebe:** last NF 4 Dec; two DH 13 Jan (BRBA); T Somerset 17 Feb, rare in winter. **Eared Grebe:** NR-Buffalo 2 Dec (RA!); rare. **Great Blue Heron:** three T Cold Spring 13 Jan (BS), exceptional number CATT for winter; max 31 Motor Is.-NR 17 Dec (WW). **Black-crowned Night-Heron:** two returned to Buffalo back yard spruce tree thru 11 Jan (RB). **Tundra Swan:** max 28 upper NR thru; Jamestown 8 Feb (BRBA); only reports after Dec. **Mute Swan:** two Golden Hill SP 25 Feb (MM!); two T Wilson 25 Feb (MM!); four Buffalo-NR 25 Feb

(CM!,WW!), unprecedented influx. **Snow Goose**: max 13 white + two blue Oak Orchard WMA 2 Dec (WW); last blue T Porter 23 Dec (WD!). **Wood Duck**: last DH 28 Dec (TM). **Green-winged Teal**: last one Chestnut Ridge CBC 30 Dec. **N. Pintail**: Buffalo 5 Jan (MM), only report. **N. Shoveler**: last 46 Batavia Sewage Lagoons 2 Dec (WW). **Am. Wigeon**: arr Jamestown 28 Feb (BRBA). **Canvasback**: 12719 CBCs, very high total; *intro*. **Redhead**: max 146 upper NR 14 Feb (DR). **Ring-necked Duck**: max 24 Buckhorn Is. SP 22 Dec (BC); up to six upper NR thru; Olean 7 Jan (BS), rare CATT in winter; more than normal. **Greater Scaup**: *intro*. **Lesser Scaup**: more than normal NR; 308 CBCs total. **Harlequin Duck**: female returned Buffalo-NR to 18 Jan. **Surf Scoter**: ad male Buffalo 28 Jan (WD!) and Buckhorn Is. SP 18 Feb (MM!,PY!), same bird? **White-winged Scoter**: fairly common L. Ontario this winter. **Hooded Merganser**: seven Olean 13 Jan (BS), rare CATT in winter; more than usual NR and DH. **Com. Merganser**: 9923 CBCs; *intro*. **Red-breasted Merganser**: *intro*. **Ruddy Duck**: last three Batavia Sewage Lagoons 2 Dec (WW).

HAWKS-ALCIDS: **Turkey Vulture**: arr Evangola SP 26 Feb (DD!), continues a trend of early sightings. **Bald Eagle**: adult with green wing-tag, at least 13 years old, returned to lower NR in Dec; multiple sightings included seven NR and three Chautauqua L, most ever recorded in winter. **Merlin**: Buffalo CBC 17 Dec (RL!), only report; the female at Univ. of Buffalo did not return for a sixth year. **Peregrine Falcon**: one chasing a Short-eared Owl Buckhorn Is. SP Dec (BRBA); pair downtown Buffalo through Feb (PY!). **GYRFALCON**: ad gray morph Buffalo Harbor returned for fourth winter 11 Nov, last reported 15 miles to south T Evans 17 Feb (CR!). **Ruffed Grouse**: *intro*. **Wild Turkey**: *intro*. **Am. Coot**: up to three Buffalo-NR thru; 376 Dunkirk CBC 1 Jan, exceptional Jan count. **Killdeer**: last Conewango WMA CATT 31 Dec (BS). **Purple Sandpiper**: DH 2 Jan (JG), only report away from NF. **Red or Red-necked Phalarope**: NF 3 Dec (BS); either species is rare. **Little Gull**: max 16 mouth of NR 24 Feb (GB), usual mid-late winter influx; two DH 10 Dec (TM); one Four Mile Creek SP 23 Dec (WD,DD), only reports away from NR. **Bonaparte's Gull**: max 16500 mouth of NR 2-21 Dec (GB); down to 0 on NR late Jan. **Thayer's Gull**: three Buffalo and NF 3-4 Feb (WD,DD), only NR report after Dec; second-winter T Somerset 17 Feb (WD,DD), rare away from NR. **Iceland Gull**: first-winter Chaut. L. where rare 3,4 Feb (BRBA), only report away from NR and Great Lakes. **Lesser Black-backed Gull**: three reports, probably four birds, NR Jan and Feb, more than usual for after Dec. **Glaucous Gull**: only small numbers NR and Great Lakes. **Great Black-backed Gull**: 270 DH 1 Feb (FR), high count. **Black-legged**

Kittiwake: three NF 2 Dec (mob); ad Niagara Power Project-NR 3 Dec (PY!,BH), very rare plumage; last Lewiston-NR 1 Jan (WD!,MT!). **ROSS' GULL:** Buffalo 1 Jan (MF,DC), probably same bird seen here in Nov. **Sabine's Gull:** NF-NR 1-23 Dec (mob), latest ever. **LEAST TERN:** imm. DH 10 Dec (TM!,JM), extraordinary both for its rarity and lateness, same bird as seen 6 Nov?

DOVES -WOODPECKERS: **Snowy Owl:** Beaver Meadow CBC 16 Dec; T Wheatfield 17 Feb (WD), only reports. **Long-eared Owl:** two T Lockport 1 Jan (CR), only report away from L. Ontario plain; scarce. **Short-eared Owl:** max six T Lancaster 24 Dec (MM), only location away from lake plains. **N. Saw-whet Owl:** Jamestown CBC 17 Dec, only report. **Red-headed Woodpecker:** Jamestown CBC 17 Dec, only report. **Red-bellied Woodpecker:** 108 CBCs, highest ever. **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker:** Beaver Meadow CBC 16 Dec, only report.

FLYCATCHERS-STARLING: **E. Phoebe:** Evangola SP 16 Dec (BC!); Jamestown CBC 17 Dec; T Java 19 Dec (DJ!), all very late. **Am. Crow:** 4363 CBCs, six year low belies burgeoning numbers in Region. **Tufted Titmouse:** 231 CBCs, second highest count ever. **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** *intro.* **Brown Creeper:** *intro.* **Carolina Wren:** max eight CBCs, only three on CBCs last year. **Winter Wren:** no reports after Dec. **Hermit Thrush:** Four Mile Creek SP 1 Jan (BP); T Porter 12 Jan (WD), only reports after Dec. **Am. Robin:** 90 T Porter 20 Jan (WD); only singles elsewhere, scarce. **VARIED THRUSH:** Grand Island ERIE 11,12 Dec (AW,WBu!,ph), about the ninth Regional report. **Brown Thrasher:** East Aurora ERIE 25 Feb (MD), only report. **Bohemian Waxwing:** three T Porter 22,23 Dec (WD!); T Newfane 11 Feb (KR), only reports fall and winter. **N. Shrike:** 47 CBCs, six-year high; *intro.*

VIREOS-WARBLEDERS: **Yellow-rumped Warbler:** ten Dunkirk CBC 1 Jan; T Lewiston 3 Feb (WD,BP); T Porter 17 Feb (MD,KR), only reports after Dec.

TANAGERS-WEAVERS: **N. Cardinal:** 1514 CBCs, six year high. **E. Towhee:** six Jamestown CBC 17 Dec, high count; Williamsville ERIE at least through 7 Jan (BRBA), only reports. **Am. Tree Sparrow:** *intro.* **Chipping Sparrow:** Buckhorn Is. SP 4 Dec (BC!); T Wheatfield 25-31 Dec (WD!,BP); East Aurora 30 Dec thru (BRBA); Buffalo 8 Feb thru (PY!,BH), more than usual. **Field Sparrow:** five CBCs, six year high; T Great Valley all season (BS), rare after Dec. **Swamp Sparrow:** two CBCs; last Buckhorn

Is. SP 22 Dec (BC). **White-crowned Sparrow**: 43 CBCs, six year high; 28 T Porter 23 Dec (mob); Williamsville Glen ERIE 11 Jan (PY); T Somerset 17 Feb (BP); two Belmont ALLE 1 Dec through (DB), excellent showing. **Lapland Longspur**: three Beaver Meadow CBC 16 Dec; T Freedom 7 Jan (BS); max 39 T Somerset 12 Jan (WD), highest count in five years; DH 14 Jan (FR,AH), only reports. **Snow Bunting**: 3580 CBCs, six year high; 600 T Freedom 7 Jan (BS); 1000 T Somerset 14 Jan (PY,BH), max counts. **Red-winged Blackbird**: 23 CBCs, six year low; 28 T Tonawanda 13 Feb (WW), mix of wintering birds and migrants. **E. Meadowlark**: two T Wilson (D&DS), only report after Dec. **Rusty Blackbird**: arr T Leon 16 Feb (FR), only report. **Com. Grackle**: eight CBCs, six year low; four T Tonawanda 13 Feb (WW), mix of wintering birds and migrants. **Brown-headed Cowbird**: max 210 T Tonawanda 20 Dec (WW). **Pine Grosbeak**: ten 23 Dec (WD); seven T Porter 21 Jan (MD,KR), only reports. **Purple Finch**: T Great Valley 28 Jan (BS), only report after CBCs; *intro*. **House Finch**: *intro*. **White-winged Crossbill**: 12 St. Bonaventure CBC 16 Dec, only report. **Com. Redpoll**: 110 CBCs; 78 T Porter 1 Jan (MM, WD); 120+ five locations ALLE Jan and Feb, max counts. **HOARY REDPOLL**: ad male T Somerset (DD!,WD!), very rare. **Pine Siskin**: four CBCs, six year low; T Warsaw 1 Dec thru (HK); Greenwood ALLE 3 Dec (WF); T Wales 29 Jan (OR), only reports. **Am. Goldfinch**: 701 CBCs, six year low. **Evening Grosbeak**: counts of 25-100 ALLE, WYOM, CATT, scarce north of Buffalo.