

REGION 5 — ONEIDA LAKE BASIN

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Winter 1995-1996 turned out to be the 4th snowiest ever recorded. It was the 5th snowiest December ever. The average temperature for the month was 24.2°F, which was 4.1° below normal. There were 45.1 inches of now, which is 18.3" above normal. There was very little snowmelt for the month. January was another strange month. The average temperature was 21.7°F, which was practically normal. However, a few daily records were set. Temperatures on 6, 7, and 15 January were -24°, -11°, and -15°, respectively, all well below normal. And, of course, there has to be a January thaw. This year it came on 19 January with a record setting 64°F and heavy rain. This melted the snow so quickly that streams couldn't handle the runoff, particularly with the ground still frozen. There were floods everywhere. Adding to January weather problems, a terrible windstorm occurred on the 27th. A wind gust of 54 MPH was recorded in Syracuse at 9:47 am, with reports of hurricane force winds at higher elevations. Many trees, houses and power lines did not tolerate this storm. There were 36 inches of snow for the month, which is 6.4" above normal. February set no records with average temperature of 24.7°F and snowfall of 16.5 inches, nearly an inch below normal, a welcome change.

The dry summer produced little food for wintering birds and the heavy snow covered what little was available. For the first time since they populated central New York, House Finch left feeders in droves for better weather locations. Some areas just to the west and south that had less snow still had House Finch. The conjunctivitis did not seem to cause permanent problems with these birds and overall numbers generally stayed the same. Most other passerine species moved out of the area as well. There were few Blue Jay, sparrows and finches. There were almost none of the regular birds in the woods. Red-breasted Nuthatch, even Black-capped Chickadee seemed to have abandoned their normal haunts. The only bird that appeared in good numbers was the Common Redpoll. It was a long, dull winter.

Tundra Swan put in winter appearances in a number of places. There were 15 at Shackelton Point, on the south shore of Oneida Lake on 8 December. Eight were on Onondaga Lake on 16 December, one 24 February. Seven were seen on 1 January at Baldwinsville. It is unusual for these large birds to stay in the winter because it is difficult to find shallow feeding areas that aren't frozen. The FWC found fewer of most

species. The maximum count of Redhead was 299, with 234 of those being on Skaneateles Lake. Canvasback was low. Greater Scaup was the lowest ever, with a high count of 238. Oldsquaw was also low. A pair of Harlequin Duck at Fair Haven on 25 February was the first time more than one individual has been found in the Region.

Four species appeared on the Syracuse Christmas Bird Count which had never been previously reported here in the winter: Snow Goose, Turkey Vulture, Peregrine Falcon and Bohemian Waxwing. There were sightings of Turkey Vulture throughout the winter season. The highest number was two and they were usually in the Fayetteville, DeWitt area where there is a large summer roost. The Peregrine Falcon pair that moved into the city of Syracuse spent the winter, increasing hopes that they will nest this year. Since Snow Goose numbers have been increasing, it was probably inevitable that some would try to winter. Bohemian Waxwing were at the right place at the right time to be counted.

Except for the Rome area, the three accipiters gave a good account of themselves this winter, with Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks appearing at many feeders. Marge Rusk reported an immature Red-shouldered Hawk in Syracuse on 15 February. Gerry Smith reported a subadult Golden Eagle in the Town of Remsen on 2 December. Three Merlin were at Onondaga Lake on 16 December and two were back at the winter roost at Onondaga Lake Park where only one was found the past few years. Probably the most exciting hawk for this dreary winter period was a sighting by Sue Boettger and Bill Gruenbaum of a gray morph Gyrfalcon at Fair Haven on 14 January. It was well described sitting on snow banks on the breakwall and flying low over the ice floes.

Wild Turkey seemed to be everywhere this winter and were reported by nearly every observer. The maximum was 350 at Holland Patent on 11 December, seen by Gary Lee. The birds are beginning to constitute a problem for farmers by raiding their corn cribs.

The first Lesser Black-backed Gull since 1993 delighted many birders at Baldwinsville from 23 December to 30 January. Bill Purcell located a Thayer's Gull in the same area on 22 and 23 December. A very secretive **Great Gray Owl** was found in a New Hartford city park on 22 February by Matt Perry. Dave Cesari was able to get several photographs before the bird disappeared. It was seen briefly another time, then hit by a car and killed on 18 March. There were very few Short-eared Owls this winter, probably because of the continuing deep snow. The only report was one seen in DeWitt on 9 December. This bird also moved on. Two Northern Saw-whet Owl were reported. One was at Beaver Lake Nature Center on 27 February, and another in Forestport 23 December through 3

January. This latter owl captured birds at a feeder and was captured itself on video tape. Only one Snowy Owl was reported for the entire winter season and that was near Holland Patent. None were found at the usual places such as the Syracuse airport or along Lake Ontario.

Common Raven was in the Old Forge area all winter. Twelve were seen at Lake Julia, Town of Remsen on 2 December. Dorothy Crumb had one near her home in Pompey on 2 January and toward the end of the period, a raven was seen several times only about 5 miles from that location. The two Fish Crow reported last year from Syracuse may have had a successful nesting because there were reports of three or four from the same place this winter.

A record number of 23 Red-breasted Nuthatch was found on the Syracuse Christmas Count, 16 December, but numbers decreased as winter continued. Golden-crowned Kinglet was in average numbers for the count, but was non-existent after that. Eight Bohemian Waxwing made their debut on the Syracuse Christmas Count and seven were seen in Hastings on 9 December. After that, they were only found in Madison and Oneida Counties with a high count of 150 in New Hartford on 30 January. Northern Shrike was seen in the best numbers ever this winter in many locations. The maximum seen in one day was eight in Baldwinsville 1 January. One observer had 17 different individuals in Madison County during the period. The 21 seen on 16 December broke the Syracuse CBC record. They apparently did away with the House Sparrow near the post office in Old Forge.

Sparrow numbers were very low throughout the season. Am. Tree and Song sparrows were below the average on 16 December and although 57 White-throated Sparrow were found that day, the maximum after that was four on 13 January. Horned Lark and Snow Bunting were also difficult to find. Although 200 Snow Bunting were found on 12 and 30 December, almost none were found in February when migration should have started. This might have been because warm weather melted the snow and birds were difficult to see in open fields.

Winter finches seemed to be the only regular bright spot. Common Redpoll was at feeders from mid-January well into March. As many as 200 were estimated at feeders in Pompey. One Hoary Redpoll was found there at the end of February, continuing into the first week in March. Although there was only one report of Pine Grosbeak in the Town of Boylston on 5 December, the birds were scattered throughout Madison and Oneida Counties through February, with 42 seen in the vicinity of Rome on 11 December. Evening Grosbeak was reported widely. There were 52 in the Town of Remsen on 2 December. Eight Pine Siskin and

nine Purple Finch were in that same location on that same date.

Although an extremely poor winter for every day birdwatching, there were definitely many pluses for the winter. Probably the highlight of the winter was the Great Gray Owl, only the 5th ever for Region 5. Gyrfalcon, Tundra Swan, Harlequin Duck, Common Raven in the Town of Pompey, Golden Eagle in the Town of Remsen, Hermit Thrush and Brown Thrasher are all unusual, at least for the winter season. Four species never seen on the Syracuse CBC before were found this year. Fish Crow continued to reside at a shopping mall in the north part of Syracuse. Good numbers of Bohemian Waxwing and some of the winter finches kept birders semi-occupied as they awaited spring arrivals.

Dorothy and Jim would like to thank all of the Region 5 observers who have faithfully sent reports the last two years. Mary Alice Koencke and Bill Purcell will be the new co-editors starting with the spring report. Please continue to send them your seasonal observations.

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Abbreviations: Adks - Adirondacks; CIM - Clay Marsh ONON; DeltL - Delta Lake State Park; DH - Derby Hill OSWE. LSB - Little Sodus Bay, Fairhaven, and vicinity; LOL - Lake Ontario littoral; HIWMA - Howland Island Wildlife Management Area; NPT - northern Pompey Township; OneidL - Oneida Lake; OnonL - Onondaga Lake; OswegH - Oswego Harbor area; SPd - Sandy Pond OSWE; SSSP - Selkirk Shores State Park; SYRCBC - Syracuse Christmas Bird Count. UM - Utica Marsh.

LOONS-DUCKS: **Red-throated Loon:** no reports. **Com. Loon:** only three reports. **Horned Grebe:** two reports, one OswegH 10 Feb; one OswegH 3 Dec. **Red-necked Grebe:** only one report, OneidL 25 Feb. **Double-crested Cormorant:** max 14 OswegH 3 Dec; only single reports after that. **Tundra Swan:** four reports; max 15 OneidL 8 Dec, record winter max (MR). **Snow Goose:** scattered reports across region; first ever on SYRCBC 16 Dec. **Canvasback:** low numbers. **Redhead:** max 234 Skaneateles Lake 13 Jan, highest winter max since 1977. **Harlequin Duck:** max two LSB 15-25 Feb, *first record of more than one in Region*. **White-winged Scoter:** max 54 LOL 24 Dec.

HAWKS-ALCIDS: **Turkey Vulture:** max two SYRCBC 16 Dec, first overwintering report. **Red-shouldered Hawk:** max one IM Syracuse 15 Feb. **Golden Eagle:** one IM T. Remsen 2 Dec (GS). **Merlin:** max three OnonL 16 Dec SYRCBC. **Peregrine Falcon:** max two Syracuse through period; first ever on SYRCBC 16 Dec. **Gyr Falcon:** one LSB 14 Jan. **Wild Turkey:** record max 350 Holland Patent 11 Dec (GL). **Thayer's Gull:** one Baldwinsville 21-23 Dec. **Iceland Gull:** max five Baldwinsville 1 Jan (JB). **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** one ad Baldwinsville 23 Dec - 30 Jan. **Glaucous Gull:** max three OneidL 10 Feb.

DOVES-WOODPECKERS: **Short-eared Owl:** one report Dewitt 9 Dec, unusually low. **GREAT-GRAY OWL:** intro, New Hartford 22 Feb (Photo, MP). **Snowy Owl:** one Holland Patent 6 Feb (MP), unusually scarce. **N. Saw-whet Owl:** two reports, one Beaver Lake 27 Feb; one T. Forestport 23 Dec - 3 Jan (Video). **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker:** one New Hartford 16-27 Dec (MP).

FLYCATCHERS-STARLING: **Horned Lark:** max 70 New Hartford 8 Dec. **Fish Crow:** max three Syracuse 22 Jan. **Com. Raven:** one NPT 2 Jan and last week Feb; max 12 T. Remsen 2 Dec. **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** max 23 SYRCBC 16 Dec, record for SYRCBC. **Carolina Wren:** three reports, one SYRCBC 16 Dec ; one LOL 30 Dec; one T. Cicero mid-Dec (Photo). **E. Bluebird:** scattered reports max five New Hartford 3 Dec. **Hermit Thrush:** one T. Kirkland 13 Jan, only report. **Brown Thrasher:** one T. Kirkland 2 Dec, only report. **Bohemian Waxwing:** eight SYRCBC 16 Dec, first ever on count; max 165 T. Kirkland 19 Feb; several other sightings. **Cedar Waxwing:** max 95 SYRCBC 16 Dec. **N. Shrike:** many reports; max 21 SYRCBC 16 Dec; *intro*.

TANAGERS-WEAVERS: **Am. Tree Sparrow:** max 12 after 16 Dec, below average numbers. **Song Sparrow:** scattered reports max two. **Lapland Longspur:** two reports; max two T. Kirkland 8, 12 Dec. **Snow Bunting:** max 200 T. Kirkland 12, 30 Dec. **Red-winged Blackbird:** arr five LOL 27 Feb. **Pine Grosbeak:** numerous reports from Madison and Oneida co's.; max 42 Rome vicinity 11 Dec (MS). **Purple Finch:** max nine T. Remsen 2 Dec, only report. **Com. Redpoll:** max 100 NPT 27 Feb. **Hoary Redpoll:** one NPT end Feb, only report. **Pine Siskin:** max eight T. Remsen 2 Dec. **Evening Grosbeak:** widely reported; max 52 T. Remsen 2 Dec.

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