

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 1996-97

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In most areas of the state, this was one of the warmest winters on record, and one characterized by little snow cover over much of the season. December and February averaged 4-7 and 3-9°F above normal, respectively. January was the coldest of the three months, but still averaged near normal to about 2°F above. There were storms, mainly in December and January, but the impact was spotty and any snowfall not generally long on the ground. Late February brought a major thaw, with record highs set on the 21st, including the first 70+°F temperatures ever recorded for the month in Regions 1 & 2. This brought a burst of early migrants across the state, with many early waterfowl reports, Killdeer in seven Regions, Am. Woodcock arrivals in Regions 8 & 9, Tree Swallows in Regions 3 & 9, and blackbirds on the move in most Regions. This warmth concluded with a major windstorm on the 27th, peak gusts to 81 mph in Buffalo, ushering in the first month of the spring season (to provide some of the most winter-like weather of the official winter season). In most Regions, water was late to freeze and early to open again, providing some of the best waterbird reports for the season in many years. The light snow cover and good wild food crops were cited as probable causes for low counts of feeder birds in many Regions on the CBCs and through the winter.

Looking first to the broad brush picture, we find waterfowl (and other waterbirds) one of the bright spots of the season. Region 4 recorded many species as first or best in many years or even decades. Only Region 8 specifically noted relatively poor waterfowl counts. Raptors were flagged as particularly scarce in Regions 2, 4, & 6, especially the "mouse raptors" in Region 6. Gulls varied, with particularly interesting reports or counts in Regions 1, 2, 6, 8, & 9, but note few white-winged gulls from Region 5 and few Bonaparte's Gulls and accompanying rarities from Region 10. Finally, the half-hardy and irruptive groups we search for in winter received mixed reviews. Irruptives were generally very scarce across the state. Rough-legged Hawks were scarce except in Regions 3, 6, & 8; Snowy Owls dropped off significantly from fall in all but Regions 3, 6, & 10; Bohemian Waxwing amounted to only two birds in early December in Region 2, missed in Region 7 for only the third of the past 18 winters; N. Shrikes were noted in all Regions, but with counts only a faint echo of last year's massive invasion; and winter finches were virtually absent outside of the Adirondacks. Half-hardies were termed scarce in Regions 1, 2, 5, 7, & 10. Yet in the other half of the Regions they were termed good and the winter warbler list from Regions 9 & 10 was exceptional. Overall the half-hardy total included at least 41 species, eleven of these warblers and ten of them sparrows. The most outstanding of the finds were: Western

Kingbird in Region 10; House Wren in Regions 4 & 8; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Region 8; Nashville Warbler in Regions 9 & 10; Cape May Warbler in Regions 5 & 9; Black-throated Blue Warbler in Region 9; Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 8; Black-and-white Warbler in Region 9; Wilson's Warbler in Regions 9 & 10; Indigo Bunting through the season in Region 9; Chipping Sparrow in seven Regions, mostly with multiple sightings; Field Sparrow in six Regions; Fox Sparrow in Regions 3 & 8; and Baltimore Oriole in Regions 5 & 9.

Focusing more closely, let us now look at the waterbirds. Loons stayed late in many Regions, with Red-throated in seven Regions outstanding, including the first in Region 4 in twenty years. Heron and egret counts, even for Great Blue Heron, were low, especially given the season's weather. This made the Cattle Egret staying to the end of December in Region 10 all the more surprising. Among the waterfowl, as noted earlier, there were many good counts and interesting finds, including: Tundra Swan late and in higher than usual numbers in many Regions and returning early in late February; Trumpeter Swan in Regions 1 & 3, with the bird in Region 1 seen to be banded and determined to be from the Ontario reintroduction program (This species is not officially on the New York State checklist.); Snow Goose in all ten Regions, with notably high counts in many and with a flock of 39 in Region 2 on **January 15** accompanied by a Ross' Goose; a total of at least 24 Greater White-fronted Geese in Regions 1, 2, 8, 9, & 10, with groups of 7 each in Regions 9 & 10; very high counts of Canada Geese, with a peak count of 43,000 in Region 3; an incredible estimated 50,000 Mallards at one site in Region 3; a record high winter count of 17 Blue-winged Teals in Region 3; large Greater Scaup counts in Regions 1 & 2, average numbers in Region 5, but counts well down in Region 6; 10,000+ Common Eiders off Long Island in Region 10; reasonably good scoter counts, though White-winged Scoter numbers down a bit on the coast; as many as five Barrow's Goldeneyes in Region 7; mergansers good except for very low Common Merganser counts in Region 6; and Ruddy Duck noted in five Regions, a bit above average for winter.

Among the raptors, we find: Turkey Vultures in six Regions plus a possible in Region 6, paralleling a general increase northward for several decades; Ospreys in Regions 4, 5, 8, & 10, including February arrivals in the first three of these Regions; Bald Eagles noted in all Regions; Red-shouldered Hawks up slightly, recorded in Regions 1, 3, 4, & 8; a Broad-winged Hawk seen 8-15 December in Region 10; Golden Eagles in Regions 4, 7, & 9; Merlins and Peregrine Falcons continuing their increased winter presence, sighted in seven and six Regions, respectively; and the only Gyrfalcons were two found in Region 10. Flagged for particularly low numbers in multiple Regions were: N. Harrier, the accipiters - especially N. Goshawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel, this latter a disturbing, continuing trend. Owl reports were

generally the typical few for most species, with special notes, in addition to Snowy Owl covered earlier: N. Hawk Owl in Region 6 in February, a scarcity of Short-eared Owls (another mouse raptor), and a few more reports of N. Saw-whet Owl than usual for the season.

Shorebirds was another family with few species and generally low numbers. Still, there were interesting records, including: Am. Golden-Plover at two locations in Region 10 to a record late 7 December; a very-rare-for-winter Willet in Region 10; an unprecedented Semipalmated Sandpiper in January in Region 10 [There are no valid records for Semipalmated Sandpiper in New York State during the winter months, nor north of Florida for that matter. In order for this sighting to gain credence it is recommended that it be submitted to NYSARC with full documentation.]; and Long-billed Dowitcher on 6 December in Region 2 and through the season in Region 10. Among the gulls and their allies, we find: the large jaeger movement on Lake Ontario concluding with both Pomarine and Parasitic seen into early December in Region 2; a very high and late inland count of six Laughing Gulls in Region 3; Franklin's Gull in December in Region 2; a Mew Gull on 28 January in Region 2 [details to NYSARC]; Thayer's Gull reports in Regions 2 & 8; California Gull with at least **three** individuals in Region 1 and one in Region 2 [The proliferation of California Gull records is a recent phenomenon. Previous to 1996 NYSARC has only accepted two sightings and rejected several others. Again, hopefully, all California Gull records will be submitted to NYSARC.]; Lesser Black-backed Gull noted in eight Regions, most with multiple reports; good numbers of white-winged gulls found in several Regions; and a rare January Black-legged Kittiwake in Region 1. Alcids notes are all from Region 10, topped by several Razorbill reports and a Black Guillemot from 1 to 22 February.

Moving along to the passerines, a great deal of the story was covered earlier in the notes on the lack of irruptives and the good half-hardy records. Additional interesting reports included: an American Crow roost estimated at > 40,000 in Region 3; Carolina Wren still generally low, but with the Region 8 CBCs totaling 67; an incredible 48 Winter Wrens on a single CBC in Region 9; the second Mountain Bluebird (male!) in four years in Region 6 only three miles from the 1993 site, staying from 19 February onward; Am. Pipit to 21 December in Region 5; Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow in Regions 9 & 10; no Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in Region 10, in spite of concerted efforts to locate them; Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting well reported in nearly all Regions; and blackbird numbers generally low, but Yellow-headed Blackbird found in Regions 3 & 4 and a very large count of 262 Boat-tailed Grackles noted on 21 December in Region 10. Finally, of special note is a breeding record for January!! - European Starling with nest and three young on 5 January in Region 5, totally unprecedented! Was this the aftermath of some bizarre light-level cycling and release project?!

If you've read this far, you've already encountered notes of all the rarities woven in above. If you've turned here to find a rarity summary, you've been tricked into reading the whole report or even the Regional Reports this season. The B.O.T.S. Award for this winter season goes to the many late and rare-in-winter warblers found this season.

In closing, I would like to point out that the official New York State checklist is encoded to indicate which species should be reported to NYSARC. In addition, NYSARC periodically updates it "want" list, and publishes same as necessary in *The Kingbird*. All observers are urged to refer to the *Checklist of the Birds of New York State* to ascertain whether their particular record should be submitted to NYSARC. Please note that submission to NYSARC is not a prerequisite for inclusion in *The Kingbird*.
