

REGION 1 - NIAGARA FRONTIER

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The winter season was quite mild, yet not without some typically harsh weather. December averaged 4.4 degrees above normal, with heavy snow confined to the snow belts south of Buffalo. The snowfall total of 18.9" was 4-1/2" less than normal. Compare that with Silver Creek on Lake Erie, less than 30 miles south of the city, which received nearly three feet of snow on the 20th alone! The precipitation total of 3.2" was 1/4" below average but still helped to make 1996 the fifth wettest ever at Buffalo. The first week of January continued very mild, with a record 62 degrees on the 5th. Then real winter began, with cold temperatures and near daily lake effect snow the rest of the month. Half of the monthly total of 42.4" of snow, 17" above normal, fell during a major storm on the 10th and 11th. The average temperature of 24.7 degrees was one degree above normal. By contrast, Amity Lake in Allegany County was usually beyond the reach of lake effect snow and the average temperature there was nearly four degrees above normal (VP). Precipitation at Buffalo was 4.25", 1-1/2" above normal. January was also very windy, with ten days seeing the anemometer top 40 mph. February was mild and had little snow, not unusual since by then Lake Erie was mostly frozen over. The average temperature of 30.1 degrees was 5-1/2 degrees above normal and the 9.3" of snowfall was half of normal. Precipitation, on the other hand, was 0.7" above normal at 2.97". The month saw its first 70 degree day ever on the 21st and a major windstorm on the 27th which caused some property damage, especially north of Buffalo (a peak gust of 81 mph at Niagara Falls). The second greatest 24-hour drop in temperature ever at Buffalo occurred 21-22 February when the thermometer fell from 70 to 25 degrees. For the entire period, the average temperature was nearly four degrees above normal.

The generally mild conditions allowed for a few half-hardies to persist at least into January. However, given the weather and a large effort by January listers, more were expected. A general lack of activity at feeders did not help, as birds were able to find plenty of food on their own.

It was the feeder birds that were markedly down on area CBCs. Mild conditions on nearly all the counts, as well as a good supply of wild food, were the probable culprits. The nine Region 1 CBCs, compiled by Gerald Rising, show several species at seven-year lows. In this group were Greater Scaup*, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-tailed Hawk*, American Kestrel**, Ring-necked Pheasant**, Rock Dove**, Eastern Screech-Owl*, Great Horned Owl**, Northern Flicker**, Black-capped Chickadee*, White-breasted Nuthatch*, Carolina Wren*, Northern Cardinal, Red-winged

Blackbird**, Brown-headed Cowbird*, House Finch**, and Pine Siskin (none!). Since this data can be very misleading by itself, I have indicated species which I have flagged for low counts in this column since the winter of 1994-95 (analyzing B.O.S. Counts as well as CBCs). A single asterisk, *, means it was mentioned once previously; a double asterisk, **, indicates it was flagged at least twice. Whether these are just temporal fluctuations, long-term declines, or the result of uncontrolled count techniques remains to be seen. The only species with seven-year highs were Canada Goose and Tundra Swan. The highlight of the counts must be the second-winter **California Gull** discovered, not on the Niagara River, but on the Chadakoin River on the Jamestown CBC by Bob Sundell.

Although noted only in low numbers on the CBCs, Greater Scaup arrived *en masse* at the head of the Niagara River during January. They were observed gorging themselves on what are believed to be zebra mussels, the Eurasian alien that has been responsible for the enormous flocks of diving ducks which have been recorded on Lakes Erie and Ontario in recent years (as well as more deleterious effects on man's mechanisms). With the scaup were up to five Surf Scoters, a species reported with increasing frequency in winter and migration.

Owls and winter finches are two groups of birds always hoped for during the winter. Among the former, only Snowy Owl put in a good showing and even they became scarce after early January. The winter finches were virtually absent except for Purple Finch, which was especially numerous in Allegany County.

December and, usually, early January is a good time to study gulls on the Niagara River, especially the larger four-year species. **California Gull** was noted both months this season. From personal observation I believe there were at least three adults on the river this season (including November). California Gulls are actually quite variable, so distinguishing individuals is sometimes possible. With the intense interest in gulls in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of sightings of probable hybrids. Taking many different forms, these individuals can be extremely challenging to figure out. The urge to stick a name on them, like Slaty-backed Gull or Glaucous-winged Gull, for example, should be resisted until the possibility of a hybrid is considered. Possible hybrids observed this season include Great Black-backed X Herring Gull, Glaucous X Herring Gull, and another that defied all attempts at deciphering. The latter was like an adult Herring Gull in size, iris and bare parts color but with a mantle as dark as the darkest California Gulls.

Though there were no outstanding rarities this season, there were several good finds. Here are the best: Blue-winged Teal, Turkey Vulture, N. Goshawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, **California Gull**, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Chipping Sparrow.

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Abbreviations: BRBA-Buffalo Rare Bird Alert; CBCs-nine combined Christmas Bird Counts, 16 Dec-4 Jan. DH-Dunkirk Harbor; INWR-Iroquois NWR; NF-Niagara Falls; NR-Niagara River; Tift NP-Tift Nature Preserve, Buffalo

LOONS-DUCKS: **Red-throated Loon:** max 13 T Somerset 15 Dec; DH 2,15 Feb, almost annual there; T Somerset 9 Feb (MM!), rarely found on L. Ontario in Feb. **Com. Loon:** last two NF 4 Jan. **Pied-billed Grebe:** up to four DH thru; two North Tonawanda 15 Jan; only reports. **Horned Grebe:** 84 DH to Evangola SP 3 Jan, high count; two Golden Hill SP 2 Feb and one DH 15-25 Feb, only reports after early Jan. **Red-necked Grebe:** last NF 1 Jan; arr two DH 15 Feb. **Great Blue Heron:** max 24 Motor Is.-NR 15 Jan, comparable to recent winters; six T Randolph 16 Feb, high count for the location. **Black-crowned Night-Heron:** seven returned to Buffalo back yard spruce tree 28 Feb, may have overwintered but not noted earlier. **Tundra Swan:** 92 CBCs, seven-year high; max 210 Celoron CHAU 26 Feb. **Trumpeter Swan:** T Lancaster 9,11 Feb (MM!); Sunset Bay CHAU 25 Feb (RA!); both birds banded - same bird(?), Morgante read band on Lancaster bird and followed up - it is a product of Ontario Restoration Program. **Mute Swan:** Buffalo-NR 20 Jan; two NR mouth 1 Feb; still very uncommon in Region. **Snow Goose:** blue morph Grand I - NR 20 Jan; one white + seven blue DH 31 Jan - 25 Feb (FR!,RA!), record winter count. **Canada Goose:** 9576 CBCs, seven-year high. **Wood Duck:** ten T Elba 16 Jan (GS), record winter count. **Green-winged Teal:** T Lancaster 2 Jan, only report. **N. Pintail:** max six T Elba 16 Jan. **Blue-winged Teal:** female Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant 5 Jan (WD!,DD!), second Jan record ever. **Redhead:** Belmont ALLE 2-28 Feb, rare away from NR and Great Lakes. **Ring-necked Duck:** max 26 Lewiston Res 29 Dec; up to six upper NR thru; arr three DH 25 Feb. **Greater Scaup:** seven-year low CBCs; 10000 Buffalo-NR mid-late Jan, high count. **Black Scoter:** DH 17 Feb (WD!), rare in winter. **Surf Scoter:** two Silver Creek CHAU 15 Jan; up to five Buffalo-NR 15 Jan thru; two DH 15 Feb thru; unprecedented winter showing. **Com. Goldeneye:** 1149 CBCs,

seven-year low. **Com. Merganser**: 982 CBCs, seven-year low. **Red-breasted Merganser**: 51 CBCs, seven-year low. **Ruddy Duck**: last T Somerset 7 Dec.

HAWKS-ALCIDS: **Turkey Vulture**: Chestnut Ridge CBC 4 Jan, first ever Jan record. **Bald Eagle**: a few NR and CHAU thru; doing well. **N. Goshawk**: imm T Hamburg 29 Dec (FR!); ad Belmont ALLE 15 Jan (M&RW), rare. **Red-shouldered Hawk**: ad T Darien 22 Dec thru (TH!), rare in winter. **Red-tailed Hawk**: 275 CBCs, seven-year low. **Rough-legged Hawk**: max nine CATT 16 Feb. **Am. Kestrel**: 46 CBCs, seven-year low. **Merlin**: NF-NR 14 Dec (WD!,DD); DH 31 Jan (FR!); annual last seven winters. **Peregrine Falcon**: imm Point Gratiot CHAU 31 Dec; Buffalo two 5 Dec, one 18 Feb, the breeding pair? **Ring-necked Pheasant**: 11 CBCs, seven-year low. **Wild Turkey**: Tift NP mid-Jan, unusual location. **Am. Coot**: max 82 DH 2 Feb. **Killdeer**: two Buffalo CBC 22 Dec, only winter report; arr CHAU, CATT, NIAG 23 Feb. **Purple Sandpiper**: up to five NF-NR entire period, only location. **Com. Snipe**: T Ellicott 11 Jan (RS,WS), rare but probably regular in CHAU during winter. **Little Gull**: max ten Lewiston-NR 3 Feb, good numbers here all winter. **CALIFORNIA GULL**: ad Lewiston-NR 7 Dec (WD!,DD), third individual on NR including Nov; second-winter Jamestown CBC 22 Dec (RS!), first record away from NR; Goat I-NR 9 Jan (DD!,BP). **Iceland Gull**: max 22 NR 26 Dec (BRBA), high count. **Lesser Black-backed Gull**: at least eight NR Dec and early Jan, still increasing. **Great Black-backed Gull**: ad Amity L ALLE 29 Dec (VP!,RP), first ALLE record. **Black-legged Kittiwake**: imm NF-NR 18 Dec (DD!); lower NR 4-18 Jan (WBr,WD!); rare but regular on NR.

DOVES-WOODPECKERS: **Snowy Owl**: at least 13 NR and lake plains 3 Dec to 4 Jan, scarce after. **Barred Owl**: nine CBCs, a good total. **Long-eared Owl**: two T Pendleton 20 Feb; T Lockport 12-26 Jan; only reports, scarce. **Short-eared Owl**: T Porter 18 Jan; three T Yates 26 Jan; three T Shelby mid-Feb; only reports. **Red-headed Woodpecker**: 1-2 Point Gratiot CHAU thru, only report. **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**: Forest Lawn Cemetery Buffalo 18 Jan (DD,WD), rare in winter. **N. Flicker**: 59 CBCs, seven-year low.

FLYCATCHERS-STARLINGS: **Com. Raven**: six St. Bonaventure CBC 21 Dec, probably a Regional 1st CBC record; continued reports from ALLE and CATT. **Black-capped Chickadee**: 3290 CBCs, seven-year low. **White-breasted Nuthatch**: 287 CBCs, seven-year low. **Carolina Wren**: four locations; at low point of cycle. **Winter Wren**: five locations, more than usual. **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**: Buckhorn I SP 3,28 Feb (BC!), rare in winter. **Hermit Thrush**: no reports after Dec. **Am. Robin**: max 125 Beaver I SP 1 Feb, unusual location for winter max. **Gray Catbird**: Jamestown CBC 22 Dec; Lake Erie SP 19 Jan; Four Mile Creek SP 20 Jan; more than usual. **Brown Thrasher**:

Houghton ALLE 28 Dec; T Portland 30 Jan; rare in winter. **Cedar Waxwing**: 125 Amity L ALLE 31 Jan, high winter count. **N. Shrike**: many less than last winter, still good numbers, though.

WARBLERS-VIREOS: **Yellow-rumped Warbler**: max 12 T Porter 12 Dec, 24 Jan, high winter count; more reports than usual this winter.

TANAGERS-WEAVERS: **N. Cardinal**: 594 CBCs, seven-year low. **E. Towhee**: three Jamestown CBC 22 Dec; two Grand I ERIE 10 Jan; T Pomfret 14-31 Jan; two Scio ALLE 17 Jan; more than usual. **Chipping Sparrow**: Alfred 10 Dec (EB!); T Porter 8,29 Dec (WD!,WW!); Grand I ERIE 22 Dec; continues recent trend of winter sightings. **Field Sparrow**: three Scio CBC 21 Dec; three T Porter 8 Dec to 20 Jan; two T Pomfret 2,20 Jan; two T Newfane 11 Jan; more than usual. **Swamp Sparrow**: three Tift NP 21,29, only report after Dec. **White-crowned Sparrow**: six ALLE 21 Dec and one Jamestown CBC 22 Dec, where rare; six T Porter 29 Dec; two T Wilson 24 Jan; nearly annual L Ontario plain. **Lapland Longspur**: 30 T Wilson 11 Jan; eight T Yates 19 Jan; only reports. **Red-winged Blackbird**: two CBCs, seven-year low; arr 100 T Clarence 21 Feb. **E. Meadowlark**: T Royalton 2 Feb, only report after Dec. **Rusty Blackbird**: Jamestown CBC 22 Dec; arr six T Evans 26 Feb; only reports. **Com. Grackle**: last three T Wheatfield 7 Jan; arr four T Eden and one Tift NP 25 Feb. **Brown-headed Cowbird**: 135 CBCs, seven-year low. **Purple Finch**: 39 ALLE 21 Dec; 15 in Jan and 32 in Feb Amity L ALLE; excellent totals. **House Finch**: 2089 CBCs, seven-year low; eye disease still very prevalent in Region. **Red Crossbill**: max six Bush Hill State Forest CATT 14 Dec thru, only location. **Com. Redpoll**: 16 Jamestown CBC 22 Dec; 12 T Porter 21 Jan; only reports. **Pine Siskin**: no winter reports for first time in my memory. **Evening Grosbeak**: 20 Scio CBC 21 Dec; one Jamestown CBC 22 Dec; only reports.
