

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 1997-98

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If nothing else, the winter 97-98 will long be remembered for its mildness. Thanks to a media blitz, every above average warm day since last fall is now credited to El Niño, the Pacific Ocean current that has such a powerful influence on the weather in North America. While this weather making phenomenon has little to do with daily fluctuations, its effect on a season can be dramatic. This season, El Niño helped to produce what was likely the warmest winter on record in the state. December was only 2 to 3 degrees above normal and with above average snow in most Regions, it felt like a typical New York winter was on the way. However, January was about 8 degrees above normal in most Regions and February up to 9.5 degrees above. These remarkable deviations from the norm kept most Regions generally snow free, providing mild open conditions for birds and a long list of half-hardies. The state was not entirely unscathed by winter as the "Great Ice Storm of 98" hit hard in Regions 6 and 7. John Peterson's Region 7 account of this event is a must read.

After the strong movement noted last season, it is not surprising that every Region recorded most if not all of the winter finches. What is interesting is that many of the Regions were disappointed by their showing. No, I am not suggesting that these colorful winter ornaments were unwelcome, only that expectations were higher than the numbers seen. I cannot help but wonder if the internet is partly to blame. Birders could read on the "net" about masses of these birds a short distance away in Pennsylvania being seen practically at that instant. Knowing that this was an invasion year prompted thoughts that they would soon be everywhere, leading to a letdown when they did not show. Of course it was never so obvious as during an El Niño winter that what drives these birds south is food, not weather. The poor cone crop in many Regions kept the two crossbills, arguably the most sought after species in this group, from lingering. Sy Schiff and Al Wollin's Region 10 account provides additional insight on this subject. Hopes and expectations aside, it really was a good season. Common Redpolls were numerous and widespread with Hoary Redpolls accompanying them in Regions 1 through 8. White-winged Crossbills were in unprecedented numbers in Region 7 and made it all the way to Region 10 with some sizeable flocks. Red Crossbills set a record on one Region 7 CBC but in other Regions were found in small groups only. Pine Grosbeaks were in good but not great numbers in the northern Regions 6 and 7, with only dribs and drabs making it to other locations. Evening Grosbeaks showed in well above average numbers for recent winters. Pine Siskins, while cited as scarce in most Regions, produced some sizeable early season flocks in Region 9.

It was an outstanding winter for half-hardies, perhaps not surprising with the mild temperatures and limited snow cover. However, those same conditions can disperse birds, making them difficult to locate. This year, the sheer numbers of half-hardies along with a strong effort by birders to find them, especially in Region 2, overwhelmed the birds' attempts to stay hidden, at least in most Regions. While the species in the following group are regular in winter in New York, their widespread occurrence this winter was remarkable: Turkey Vulture in nine Regions (mid winter in four), Brant in seven, Ruddy Duck in six, Killdeer in eight (mid winter in four), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in seven, Eastern Phoebe in four, Gray Catbird in six, Yellow-rumped Warbler in all ten Regions, Common Yellowthroat in five, and Fox Sparrow in five. A few of the rarer half-hardies included Common Moorhen in an incredible three Regions (2,5, and 6); Orange-crowned Warbler in Regions 9, 10 and over wintering in northern Region 6(!); Black-crowned Night-Heron in Regions 1 and 5; Savannah Sparrow in Regions 2 and 6; Lincoln's Sparrow in Regions 8 and 10; American Pipit in Regions 2 and 4; Sora, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers in Region 2; and Osprey in Region 7. As usual, with a coastal influence, some of the most astounding finds occurred in Regions 9 and 10: in Region 9 – Nashville and Black-throated Green warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak (over-wintered) and Baltimore Oriole; in Region 10 – Piping Plover, over wintering *Empidonax* flycatcher and White-eyed Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, House Wren, Black-throated Blue, Palm, Prairie, and Black and white warblers, Ovenbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Wow!

Some miscellaneous notes on birds on the increase: Merlin, formerly extremely rare in winter, now regular and found in five Regions; Common Raven and Wild Turkey spreading and filling in even more niches; Mute Swans with a sharp increase in Regions 2 and 5; Great Cormorants were thought to have leveled out, but this winter they were reported "well inland" in Region 9, one continuing from fall in Region 5, and a remarkable three in Region 2. Declining species are much more difficult to document. Even still, Ring-necked Pheasants were noted again as becoming scarce.

Impressive counts (or estimates) were made for Horned Grebe (300+), Redhead (8000 – state record?), Greater Scaup (15,000), and Yellow-rumped Warbler (250) in Region 2; Snow Goose (1206) in Region 3; Lapland Longspur (300 on a CBC) in Region 4; Tundra Swan (125 – possible Regional record), Rough-legged Hawk (75), Glaucous Gull (44), and Great Black-backed Gull (1580) in Region 6; White-winged Crossbill (446 on a CBC) in Region 7; Snow Goose (4000+) and Common Redpoll (1411 on a CBC) in Region 8; Ruddy Duck (2500) and Razorbill (104 on a CBC) in Region 10.

With approximately 11 Trumpeter Swans in Region 2 this winter, five in Region 3, and the early return of the breeding pair in Region 6, it appears this species may be (re?) established in the area. However, there are continued reports that the young of Trumpeters breeding on private property in Wayne

County are being released into the wild. Are these birds banded? Is this legal? In any case, as I understand it, in order for NYSARC to add this species to the official checklist, it must be shown to have established a viable self-sustaining population and that the birds which occur in the state are from that population. At this point, records submitted to, and reviewed by NYSARC, are insufficient to make that determination. Trumpeter Swans are breeding successfully in the wild in Ontario as well as in Region 6. Whether these constitute a viable population or whether they are being augmented by additional stocking, as has been reported, requires more research. Not only Ontario, but Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, and South Dakota have Trumpeter Swan restoration programs as well (Anderson and others 1996). If you do see a Trumpeter Swan in New York, you should note the color and markings of any wing tags, neck collars, or bands in your NYSARC report.

In the rarities-of-less-complex-status department, Barrow's Goldeneye was found in six Regions (2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10) and Golden Eagle in four (4, 5, 8 and 9). Some of the best rarities by Region were Mew Gull, and two California Gulls (including one not on the Niagara River) in Region 1; Great Cormorant, Franklin's and California gulls, and "Oregon" Junco in Region 2; Eared Grebe, and California Gull in Region 3; Tundra Swan in Region 4; Great Cormorant, and Golden Eagle in Region 5; Harlequin Duck and a dark-morph Red-tailed Hawk in Region 7; Eared Grebe, Greater White-fronted Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, and Varied Thrush in Region 9; Greater White-fronted Goose, "Black" Brant, Purple Gallinule (later died), Northern Fulmar, Common Murre, Dovekie, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Western Kingbird, and Clay-colored Sparrow in Region 10. My selection of the Bird of the Season is made difficult by some of the exceptional half-hardies noted earlier. And while there are very few records of "Black" Brant and Purple Gallinule, I have to go with a first state record of a live Yellow-billed Loon, found in Region 5, which remained for over two weeks.

LITERATURE CITED

Anderson LJ, Lumsden HG, Ranta WB. 1996. Trumpeter Swans in the Kenora District of Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 14(3): 105-110.

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