

REGION 1 - NIAGARA FRONTIER

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I would like to begin this first report by complimenting my predecessor Willie D'Anna for the tremendous job he has done as Editor for this Region. I will attempt to continue his efforts.

Weather conditions for the period from December through February were unquestionably influenced by the Pacific heating phenomenon meteorologists term El Niño. The split jet stream locking all the cold air in Canada really set in. Virtually no lake effects events occurred after mid December, with most of the synoptic storms being rain. While season snows were still fair, the snow drought from mid January to the end of February was amazing.

Monthly specifics are as follows: December turned into a relatively mild and open month throughout western New York. While snowfall was close to normal, most of it fell in three events. A lake effect storm from the 5th to the 7th with strong westerly winds was centered over Chautauqua County, with over two feet falling from Sherman to Lake Chautauqua and up to a foot falling in southern Erie County, but nothing in Buffalo. The other two events were largely synoptic. One, on the 10th, brought 8 to 12 inches in the western Southern Tier and from 4 to 7 inches into the Buffalo area during the late afternoon. The other, on the 29th to 30th, brought around 3 to 5 inches to the Buffalo region. None of the snows lasted, melting off quite quickly.

The month's average temperature was 31.8°F, a couple of degrees above normal, and the precipitation total of rain and snowfall water content came in at 2.97 inches, almost an inch below normal.

January was a very mild and wet month across the western region. The big story of the month was the unprecedented rainstorm of 2.5 to 4.5 inches of rain in a 48 hour period from the 7th to the 9th. Widespread flooding occurred throughout the Region. This was the same system that brought the disastrous ice storm to the Adirondack and Canadian regions. Snow amounts were well below normal. During mid month an upper level jet stream brought heavy snows from Niagara County eastward. Six to 8 inches fell north of Buffalo and 6 to 10 inches across Allegany and Cattaraugus counties. At month's end Lake Erie was still free of ice, only the 9th time in 70 years. January was the warmest in eight years and the sixth warmest in 55 years of record keeping at the Buffalo airport weather station. It was also the seventh wettest January of the century, with 5.61 inches of precipitation - more than double the norm, most in the form of rain.

The final month of this report, February, can best be summed up by Stephen E. McLaughlin, chief meteorologist for the local office of the National Weather Service. He states: " Winter was virtually absent on the Niagara Frontier during the month, as the Region was treated to its warmest and most snow-free February in history." To continue, "the Region is nearing the end of its warmest winter in

66 years.” The month’s average temperature was 34.1°F. The old record of 33.8°F was set in February 1984. Precipitation for the month was a near normal 2.28 inches, almost all of it rain. Lake Erie temperatures held at 35 degrees, the warmest readings this late in the winter since the first records in 1927.

While the 1996-97 winter was also relatively mild, it was not influenced by any unusual system such as the one we experienced this year. However the low number of birds reported from feeders last year seemed to be repeated once again this year.

The winter period was one of a few rarities and much frustration. While irruptive finches were reported from Central New York and Southwestern Pennsylvania, Region 1 did not produce the numbers that were reported from those areas. There were isolated records of the Fringillidae throughout the Region, but nothing to rival our neighbors. Many believed that our poor food crop may have contributed to the low numbers.

An examination of the ten CBCs in this Region, compiled by Jim Landau, identified 9 highs and 10 lows relative to the past nine years. Among the rarities was a first for the count of Mew Gull reported and properly verified by Bob Sundell in the Jamestown CBC. Listed among the highs for the period were: Pied-billed Grebe, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, and Red Crossbill, the latter making it’s first appearance in nine years.

Species recorded as lows were: Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser*, American Coot, Brown Creeper, American Robin, White-crowned Sparrow, Common Grackle**, Brown-headed Cowbird**, House Finch**, and House Sparrow. A double asterisk indicates that the bird has had three consecutive years of low counts and a single asterisk means one prior low count in the last three. Again, the interpretation of the data may not be significant or it could signal a Regional population decline.

The 113 species recorded equaled the nine-year average, and, while the number of birds observed – 145,528 – was below the average of 155,234, it was the highest count produced since the 1991-92 year. A most promising statistic was the increase in observers to 227, which is the highest participation since the 1992-93 year.

As mentioned, Region 1 escaped many of the weather factors which disrupted lives and property in other parts of the country. The unusually mild conditions impacted the avian population in both positive and negative ways. The unusual ice free conditions of Lakes Erie and Ontario, as well as many inland waterways, brought different birding conditions from normal. While the usually *Anatidae* abundance in the Dunkirk Harbor was lower than the past, the open conditions of Lake Ontario resulted in reports of record numbers of White-winged Scoters, Greater Scaup and other divers in large wintering concentrations, unfortunately for this report most often to the west of our Region. These are supported by the growing population of zebra mussels. Reports of later than usual waterbirds seemed to be the issue of the period. Two

Brant, rarely seen after mid November, were reported on Lake Ontario at Olcott Beach in the Town of Newfane in Niagara County on 18 January by Peter Yoerg and Barbara Henderson. This was only the fourth January record in the past 12 years. Peter and Barbara also reported 3 Red-throated Loons, adults in basic plumage, near that area on the same date. This is a record high count for this study area for the month of January. Red-throated Loons continued to be reported and verified from Lake Ontario through the month of February. While the Niagara River is renowned for gulls, occasionally the Dunkirk Harbor produces a rarity. A report of a California Gull observed in the Dunkirk Harbor on 6 January by Allen Benton and yours truly is only the second record for Chautauqua County. Documentation is pending on this bird. Another California Gull was reported and documented for the third consecutive month from the Niagara River by Gordon Bellerby on 2 January. On 18 January Willie D'Anna reported 20 Iceland Gulls in the Niagara River, a record high number for this area.

In general, February arrival dates, while especially early compared to previous years, were still within previous documented dates in the records for this Region. One exception was the sighting by Willie D'Anna of a pair of Wood Ducks flying over the Village of Olcott in the town of Newfane In Niagara County on 16 February. Early Turkey Vultures were reported by Richard and Dorothy Rosche over the Town of Cheektowaga in Erie County on 25 February. A record of particular interest was the sighting of a Lesser Black-backed Gull, subspecies *Larus fuscus graellsii*, in an unplowed cornfield in the Town of Yates on the border of Niagara and Orleans Counties on 22 February. This is only the second record for this Region of this gull in a cultivated field habitat.

Snowy Owls irrupted in modest proportions in Region 1, with one female found by a number of observers from December thru the season in the Wyoming County Town of Sheldon. Other sightings noted thru the winter period were sporadic, with reports of single appearances on Grand Island, the City of Buffalo, and in the Town of Java in Wyoming county.

As already reported with the CBC data, the finch irruption here paled in comparison with our neighbors to the east and west of Region 1. To add insult to injury, Cornell University, in an article in *Birdscope*, Vol. 12, No. 2 entitled *A Flurry of Finches*, stated that: "when it comes to finches, the United States has experienced, during the winter of 1997 and 1998, a finch invasion of monumental proportions." Here, the significant reports submitted included several counts of 300+ Common Redpolls, up to 73 Evening Grosbeaks, a peak of 65 White-winged Crossbills, but only two reports of Pine Grosbeak. The highlight of the finch season for this area consisted of a sighting of a Hoary Redpoll.

Contributors: Robert Andrie, Gordon Bellerby, Allen Benton, Robert Brock, Elizabeth Brooks, Bruce Chilton, Willie D'Anna, Dean DiTommaso, Kurt Fox, Walt Franklin, Tom Harper, Barbara Henderson, Paul Hess, Audrey Horbett,

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Abbreviations: ASP - Allegany State Park, CATT; BISP - Beaver Island State Park, Grand Island, ERIE; BWWTP - Batavia Waste Water Treatment Plant, GENE; BuSP - Buckhorn Island State Park, Grand Island; CaL - Cassadaga Lake, CHAU: CBCs - ten combined Christmas Bird counts, 20 Dec - 4 Jan; BRBA - Buffalo Rare bird Alert; CWMA - Conewango Wildlife Management Area, CATT; CSG - Countryside Sand and Gravel Pits, T Dayton, CATT; DH - Dunkirk Harbor, City of Dunkirk; FMSCP - Four Mile Creek State Park, NIAG: FNSP - Fort Niagara State Park, NIAG; GHSP - Golden Hills State Park, NIAG; GI - Goat Island - Niagara Falls; GSF - Greenwood State Forest, ALLE; INWR - Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, GENE/ORLE; NF - Niagara Falls; NPP - Niagara Power Project on Niagara River, Town of Lewiston; NR - Niagara River; OOWMA - Oak Orchard Wildlife Management Area, GENE; Tift NP - Tift Nature Preserve, Buffalo; TWMA - Tonawanda Wildlife Management Area - NIAG/GENE; WB - Woodlawn Beach, ERIE.

LOONS - DUCKS

Red-throated Loon: 1 T Porter 28 Dec; 3 FMSCP 28 Dec; 3 Olcott 18 Jan (PY!); 1,2 various Lake Ontario sightings 15, 16, 22, 28 Feb (mob).

Com. Loon: 1 CaL 3 Dec; 2 FNSP 7 Jan.

Pied-billed Grebe: total 40 CBC's 20 Dec - 4 Jan; 5 DH 12 Jan; 9 DH 10 Feb.

Horned Grebe: 8 max GHSF 8 Jan; 57 Shadigee T Yates ORLE 22 Feb; various other sites thru.

Red-necked Grebe: arr 1 Olcott NIAG 28 Feb.

Double-crested Cormorant: 14 DH 1 Jan (CBC's); 16 DH 8 Feb.

Great Blue Heron: 19 NR 17 Dec; 25 NR 28 Jan.

Black-crowned Night-Heron: 1 Buffalo 16 Dec; 2 NF 8 Jan; 1 Motor Island NR 26 Feb. Turkey Vulture: arr 2 T Cheektowaga ERIE 25 Feb (RR,DR).

Snow Goose: arr 2 INWR 27 Feb.

Canada Goose: 1000-2000 DH Jan thru (DM).

Brant: 2 Olcott 18 Jan (PY!).

Tundra Swan: 23 BSP 25 Jan; 1-30 at many locations 1-28 Feb.

Wood Duck: arr 2 T Olcott NIAG 16 Feb (WD).

Gadwall: arr 2 Tift NP 24 Feb.

Am. Wigeon: 2,3 INWR & OOWMA 28 Feb.

N. Shoveler: arr 1 OOWMA 28 Feb.

N. Pintail: 2 BWWTP GENE 11 Jan.

Green-winged Teal: arr 2 INWR 28 Feb.

Canvasback: total 14548 CBC's; 3700 GI 10 Jan.

Ring-Necked Duck: 1,4 BWWTP GENE 4,11 Jan.

Greater Scaup: 5500 WB 9 Dec.

Harlequin Duck: 1 Olcott NIAG 17 Jan (WD); 1 Bird Island Pier Buffalo 3 Feb (PY,BH).

White-winged Scoter: max 160 Barker NIAG 28 Jan; 500 T Wilson & Olcott NIAG 16 Feb.

Oldsquaw: 2580 NR 25 Feb.

Hooded Merganser: 17 BISP 3 Dec; 1 WB 9 Dec.

Ruddy Duck: 2 CaL 3 Dec; 1 DH thru Jan, Feb (DM), appeared injured; 6,7 LaSalle Park Buffalo 12,18 Jan (BA,MM).

HAWKS - ALCIDS

Bald Eagle: 1 T Lewiston NIAG 6 Dec; 3 ad, 8 imm Allegany SP; 1 ad T Salamanca CATT 11 Jan; 1 imm ASP 25 Jan.

Rough-legged Hawk: 1 T Charlotte CHAU 3 Dec; 2 T Boston ERIE 15 Dec; 5 T Leon CATT 31 Jan; 1 Otto CATT 26 Feb.

Peregrine Falcon: 1 Buffalo 18,25 Jan; 1 various locations and dates thru Feb.

Ruffed Grouse: 2 GSF ALLE 2 Feb.

Am. Coot: 40 DH thru.

Purple Sandpiper: 3,4,2 GI 6,7,16 (mob) Dec; 2 NF 21 Dec; 6,2 GI 25,28 Jan; max 6 GI 14 Feb.

Dunlin: 1 GI 21 Dec; 1 GI 17 Jan (BA).

Little Gull: 2 T Lewiston NIAG 6 Dec; 1 various sites 1,10,11 Jan; 6 Lewiston T NIAG 28 Feb.

Bonaparte's Gull: max 4540 NR 9 Jan. (GB !); 1 DH 6 Jan (AB,RM).

MEW GULL: 1 Jamestown CBC (Bob Sundell)

Iceland Gull: 4 NR 7,17 Dec; 20,17,12 NR 18,24,28 Jan (mob); 6 NR 22 Feb

CALIFORNIA GULL: 1 NR 2 Jan Lesser Black-backed Gull: total 7 CBC'S; 1 T Yates NIAG/ORLE 22 Feb (MM!).

Glaucous Gull: 1-4 NF 7,13, 28 Dec; max 4 NF 1-31 Jan; 1 Silver Creek Feb thru (mob).

Great Black-backed Gull: 950 NF 14 Dec.

PIGEONS - WOODPECKERS

Snowy Owl: arr GI 18 Dec; 1 T Sheldon WYOM 21 Dec; 1 C Buffalo 24 Dec; 1 various sites Jan thru.

Long-eared Owl: 3 T Porter NIAG 28 Dec.

Short-eared Owl: 4 T Shelby ORLE 31 Jan.

N. Saw-whet Owl: arr 1 Wilson-Tuscarora SP NIAG 28 Feb (BP).

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: 1 Lewiston NIAG 28 Dec; 3 ASP 17 Jan (BS), high count for area and time.

FLYCATCHERS - WAXWINGS

N. Shrike: 1 T Holland ERIE 20 Dec; 1 various sites thru Jan; 1 Dunkirk Airport T Sheridan CHAU 20 Feb.

Com. Raven: 1 T Java WYOM 3 Dec; 2,2 T Ward ALLE 10,17 Dec; 1 Amity Lake 13,17,19 Dec; 1 Catt SP 21 Dec.

Horned Lark: Eremophila p. praticola 18 T Somerset NIAG 29 Jan (FR, AH).

Winter Wren: 1 FMCSP 28 Dec; 1 BISP 5,31 Jan.

E. Bluebird: 2 T Lewiston NIAG 13 Dec; 5 T Pomfret CHAU 15 Dec; 2 T Stockton CHAU 15 Dec; 3-6 var 24 Jan.

Hermit Thrush: total 4 CBC's.

Am. Robin: 200 T Porter NIAG 24 Jan.

Gray Catbird: 1 BISP 5 Dec; 1 BISP 5,12,16-18 Jan.

N. Mockingbird: 4 DK 3 Jan.

WARBLERS

Yellow-rumped Warbler: 7 T Porter NIAG 28 Dec; 2 BISP 5,12,31 Jan; 2 BISP,FNSP 6,22 Feb.

TANAGERS - WEAVERS

Fox Sparrow: 1 Buffalo 2 Dec, late.

Swamp Sparrow: 1 BISP 5,25 Jan; 2 T Lancaster ERIE 31 Jan.

White-crowned Sparrow: 1 T Porter NIAG 28 Dec.

Lapland Longspur: 20 T Somerset NIAG 19 Jan.

Snow Bunting: 42 T Porter NIAG 7 Dec; 350 T Somerset NIAG 19-29 Jan; 400 T Leon CATT 31 Jan; 1002 Freedom T CATT 7 Feb.

Red-winged Blackbird: 21 at feeder T Lancaster ERIE 14-27 Jan; arr 40 NF 11 Feb.

E. Meadowlark: 1 TWMA 31 Jan.

Com. Grackle: arr 1 NF 11 Feb.

Brown-headed Cowbird: 10 T Tonawanda ERIE 18 Dec; 9 T Tonawanda 28 Jan.

Pine Grosbeak: 6 T Yates ORLE 21 Jan; 2 f T Evans ERIE 29 Jan, both RBA reports.

Purple Finch: 4 f T Wilson NIAG 1-31 Jan.

Red Crossbill: 2 GHSP 14 Dec; 1 ASP 25 Jan.

White-winged Crossbill: max 65 Houghton ALLE 7 Jan; 1,2,1 T Ward ALLE 9,17,19 Dec; 2-7 various sites 11-26 Jan.

Com. Redpoll: max 325 AR 27 Dec; 300 T Yates ORLE 29 Jan (FR,AH); 300 T

Newfane NIAG 1 Feb (WD).

HOARY REDPOLL: 1 T Newfane NIAG 1 Feb (WD!;NYSARC).

Pine Siskin: max 8 Amity Lake ALLE 11
Jan; 4 T Colden ERIE 2-25 Dec; 1-6 various
sites 15-28 Feb.

Evening Grosbeak: total 129 CBC's 20
Dec to 4 Jan; 73 T West Almond ALLE 4
Jan (PY,BH); 31 Amity Lake CATT 11 Jan;
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25 T Eagle WYOM 5 Feb; 12 T Machias
ALLE 25 Feb.

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