

THE WINTER SEASON 1998-99

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WEATHER EFFECTS

For most of the state it was a winter of extremes. Conditions were remarkably mild and dry throughout the season, except for a three-week stretch from late December to mid-January. Cold weather in this period and near constant snow in the January portion (Region 10 and the southern portion of Region 9 notwithstanding), produced some of the harshest weather birds ever have to deal with in New York. With deep snow cover, even Snow Buntings resorted to feeders in some locations and in Region 5, iced wings caused the demise of at least two Double-crested Cormorants with six others unable to fly. A Pine Warbler at minus 25° in Region 7 was not likely to have survived. Of course, what we see is usually only the tip of the iceberg and we can only speculate on the full extent of mortality. Many half-hardy species were not reported after mid-January, which is certainly not unusual in winter. Is mortality the reason or do birds retreat further south or is it simply that many birders hang up their binoculars until spring? I would guess "all of the above" and suggest that birders doing a "Big February" could add a lot of data to help us answer these questions.

HALF-HARDIES

It was another winter with impressive numbers and variety of half-hardies. For the second winter in a row a Prairie Warbler was found, this time in Region 1. This is only about the fourth record at this season. A Broad-winged Hawk in Region 4 is exceptional inland and should be verified to rule out Red-shouldered Hawk. A Spotted Sandpiper would be a great find anywhere at this season but in northern Region 7, it is extraordinary. In Region 8, a House Wren is one of very few away from coastal areas in winter, and an Osprey there is only slightly less unusual. In Region 9 a Scarlet Tanager would probably be the latest ever in the state but it must be kept in mind that both Western and Summer tanagers are more likely at this season. A Cattle Egret in Region 10 was one of the latest ever in the state. Also exceptional, even for the coastal Region were,

Piping Plover, Whimbrel, Caspian Tern and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Of the birds listed in this paragraph only the first three were recorded after December.

Found in three Regions or more were the following: Red-shouldered Hawk (four Regions), Virginia Rail (three), Common Snipe (three), Eastern Phoebe (three), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (seven!), American Pipit (three), Pine Warbler (three), Common Yellowthroat (five), Fox Sparrow (five), and Baltimore Oriole (three). Numerous other half-hardy species are sprinkled throughout the Regional reports.

MAJOR GROUPS

Waterfowl in general had a fine season, mentioned by several Regional Editors either for high numbers or good variety. Tundra Swans were found in five Regions with large numbers overwintering in Region 1. The first state record of Ross's Goose was in 1983 but the species is now nearly annual - one each was in Regions 2 & 3. Another prospering goose is the Greater White-fronted. Eleven in Region 1 was the second most ever and the largest winter concentration ever in New York. Normally not found in winter, Blue-winged Teal occurred in four Regions. Diving ducks were noted in large numbers in Regions 1, 2 & 3. Highlighting this group were Harlequin Ducks in four Regions, including an inland record maximum of five in Region 5, Barrow's Goldeneye in five Regions, Common Eider in Region 2, and Tufted Duck in Region 1.

Owls were a disappointment. Very few Snowy Owls turned up. The numbers of the other regular species were unimpressive, and none of the rare northern owls was found.

Although nobody reported especially large concentrations, with the possible exception of Region 10, gull variety was very good, with Lesser Black-backed, Iceland, and Glaucous found in almost every Region and Thayer's Gull reported in five. The situation with the latter species is problematical and possibly exacerbated to some extent by birders "routinely" identifying the species on the Niagara River. As many birders know, it is now widely, though not universally, believed that Thayer's and Iceland gulls interbreed extensively and that they should be lumped into a single species. Some birds, believed to be intergrades, can look almost exactly like a typical Thayer's Gull, differing by only a single subtle character. Thus, identification of a Thayer's Gull requires a long and careful study at fairly close range. For an excellent review by an author who believes in lumping the two species, see "Taxonomic History of Thayer's Gull" by Ron Pittaway (*Ontario Birds* Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 2-13).

Smaller gulls of note included a Black-headed and a late Franklin's in Region 1, Black-legged Kittiwake in Regions 1, 5 & 10, and Laughing Gull in Region 10. A California Gull graced Region 2 for the second straight year.

After their first invasion in many years last winter, it was hoped that an echo flight of winter finches would follow this season. Disappointingly, that was not the case. In Region 7, where an influx of these birds would probably be felt first and foremost, American Goldfinch was the most abundant species, not the kind of finch birders were hoping for. What is interesting, however, is that Algonquin Provincial Park, less than 150 miles from New York, experienced an excellent mid-winter influx of winter finches with large numbers of White-winged Crossbill, Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, American Goldfinch, Common Redpoll, and Evening Grosbeak. Is a poor cone crop the reason we were spurned?

MISCELLANEOUS

No longer endangered in the state, it is great to see such healthy numbers of Bald Eagles reported this season in Regions 7, 8 & 9. Eastern New York would seem to be the winter stronghold of the species in our state. In several Regions Rough-legged Hawk numbers improved over recent years, and there was a fine late season count in Region 1. Unfortunately, without a Region 6 report, their status this winter in the Cape Vincent/Point Peninsula area stronghold is unknown. Probably due to the mild conditions Red-headed Woodpeckers overwintered in relatively high numbers with up to 10 at one site in Region 10. American Robins, staying through in large numbers in the mild winters of recent years, continued the practice this year with reports even coming from the higher elevations of Region 7. Two examples of unusual feeding behavior were noted: a Golden-crowned Kinglet eating suet and donut crumbs in Region 7 and a Carolina Wren caught in a mouse trap inside a garage in Region 5. Since cheese is not the only kind of bait used on mice, it would be interesting to know what was used here.

RARITIES

Except for the period from late December to mid-January it was an easy winter to be afield and the rewards were many. Pretty much annual in winter, Varied Thrush was found in Regions 1 & 7. It strikes me as odd that this species, which has a fairly restricted winter range in the far

western states and British Columbia, should occur with such frequency so far east. And unlike other regular western and mid-western strays such as Western Kingbird, Lark Sparrow, and Dickcissel, the Varied Thrush does not usually end up at the coast. Sandhill Cranes are occurring more frequently in seasons other than spring with Regions 1, 2, 3 & 10 reports this season. Northern Gannets were moving around Lake Ontario and were picked out in Regions 1 & 2. Parasitic Jaegers lingered in Regions 1 & 7, the latter location away from a Great Lake being particularly unusual. Eurasian Wigeon was found in Regions 8 & 9 and considered "numerous" in Region 10. Late shorebirds included Black-bellied Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Dunlin in Region 2, Greater Yellowlegs and Common Snipe in Region 8, and a rare Red Phalarope in Region 10. The really unusual warblers were found in the milder Regions 9 & 10. These included Palm and Orange-crowned warblers, Ovenbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 9 and Nashville Warbler and Northern Waterthrush in Region 10.

In Region 3 a King Eider was a rare find away from the coast and Great Lakes while a Yellow-headed Blackbird was a rare find, period. A Western Tanager was a first record for Region 4 while the state's first Anna's Hummingbird was a holdover from late fall. It was speculated that the Yellow-billed Loon in Region 5 might be the same individual which spent a few weeks on Lake Ontario last winter. Regardless, it should be considered the third state record. Although the loon did not return to Oswego Harbor, two Great Cormorants did. A Savannah Sparrow was a good find in Region 8, while Sora and Rose-breasted Grosbeak were reported in Region 9. With three chances in three locations, those who missed the Mountain Bluebirds in Region 9 must really be feeling blue. This is an unprecedented number for a season. In Region 10, Eared Grebe, White-eyed Vireo, and Brewer's Blackbird were found. Two "Black" Brant provided a second report in as many winters for Region 10 while a "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal and a Mew Gull (also known as Common Gull, *Larus canus canus*) made for a banner season for larids on the coast. The gull was in first-basic plumage, an extremely difficult field identification challenge but from photos and discussion on the internet, it appears to be correct.

Again, there were many outstanding rarities and half-hardies found this season, several of which would vie for the Bird-of-the-Season award in a typical winter. However, I have to go with yet another first state record, a Black-tailed Gull in Region 10. For the full account of this sighting see Wilson, A. and Guthrie, A. in *The Kingbird* (49:2-7).