

REGION 1- NIAGARA FRONTIER

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The 1998-1999 Winter season was another strange one indeed for all of western New York. The total season snowfall was actually normal or slightly above over all areas, but this masked the fact that the bulk of winter was actually quite mild and open. There was, however, one period of severe winter weather during the first two weeks of January.

Winter began very late, as the mild, dry conditions of autumn lingered into December. Conditions changed over the holidays, when colder air crossed over Lake Erie creating the well known lake-effect snow conditions. Winter really roared into the area in early January when severe lake snows struck the areas east and northeast of the lakes. These storms were followed by general snowfalls as low pressure systems moved in and stalled during the second week of the month. Most areas had more snow on the ground by the 15th of January than at any time in the last 22 years. This combination of lake-effect and synoptic storms gave the Buffalo region the third snowiest January ever.

The pattern changed abruptly in mid-January though, and mild conditions returned and continued right through the month of February. In summary, the western region of the state fared better than the east end of the Lake Ontario region, where over 300" of snow was recorded. In the western New York area, the highest amounts were recorded over the ridges of Chautauqua County with 170", while the Buffalo area and surroundings recorded 80-90 inches and 120 inches, respectively.

Monthly significant statistics were as follows: December had major snows of up to 10" near Perrysburg and a foot south of Buffalo on the 31st. The average temperature for the Region was 35.3° F, over six degrees above normal and the third warmest December in 55 years of record keeping. Precipitation totaled only 1.54 inches, making the month the driest in 55 years. Sunshine totaled 34 percent of possible daylight.

January roared into our Region, as previously mentioned, with some of the most severe winter weather in many years. However, when the month ended the data showed that January had normal temperatures, but was also the sixth wettest and third snowiest in 115 year of meteorological data. While the average temperature was 0.1° below normal, the month was actually marked by extremes between the first half and second half. The heavy snows and consequent melt created some of the

worst destructive flooding conditions in 40 years in some locales in the Region. Lake Erie remained partially free of ice cover, particularly in the eastern basin near Buffalo. Sunshine prevailed for only 7 percent of available daylight.

Finally, February provided a drastic turnaround for the Region. Mild conditions prevailed for most of the month. Temperatures averaged 31.0°F, 6.5° above normal, making it the tenth warmest February in 129 years. The only cold spell occurred between February 19th and the 23rd. With 1.1 inches of precipitation, it was the eighth driest in that same 129 year period. Sunshine occurred for 43% of the possible daylight hours.

Avian activity received considerable attention in the press as well as from the general public, as many people remarked about the unusual sightings of what are normally considered summer birds, such as robins and bluebirds, throughout the period. This provided many opportunities for local birders to seize the moment and relate to their non-birding friends about the wonders of birding and the "whys" of natural phenomena. For those more aware of such conditions, the period brought many rewarding sightings to our area.

Significant reports for the period included **Franklin's Gulls**, which began their invasion in fall and lingered into the winter period. Sightings of one or two birds were reported from the beginning of the December through the 13th, from the Whirlpool area of the Niagara River. The Niagara River Corridor, identified as an Important Birding Area (IBA) by the National Audubon Society, continues to be one of the leading producers of wintering larids. Thirteen species were recorded during this period, highlighted by a possible "Nelson's" Gull (Herring X Glaucous hybrid) observed on December 13 and 26. From the Lake Ontario region near the Town of Porter, an immature **Northern Gannet** was sighted on 27 December by Willie D'Anna. Another oceanic species, the Parasitic Jaeger, that was reported in the fall report, remained in the Dunkirk Harbor through the 4th of December. This bird was observed by many and videotaped by your editor at very close range while it sat on a dock 20 feet from the car.

A **Greater White-fronted Goose** sighted by Bill Bogacki on December 23 at the Tift Farms Nature Preserve west of Buffalo and a **Sandhill Crane** reported by Bruce Chilton on December 11 in the Town of Wilson in Niagara County added a touch of excitement to the Region. A touch of spring was added to the winter season with the sighting of a **Prairie Warbler** at Buckhorn Island State Park on Grand Island near Buffalo. This bird was reported by Peter Yoerg on the 6th of December, and observed again by David Suggs and Willie D'Anna on the 13th and 14th of that

month. This is a first known winter record for this Region. The month of December concluded with the annual Christmas Bird Counts. Jim Landau serves as compiler for this important event and reported the following species at high counts for the last nine years: Double-crested Cormorant, Canada Goose, Tundra Swan, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Hooded Merganser, American Coot, American Robin, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Red-winged Blackbird. At a low for the period was House Finch at 1901, continuing a steady decline. Additional noteworthy reports were Northern Gannet at Niagara Falls, 11 Greater White-fronted Goose at Oak Orchard, and Prairie Warbler in Buffalo.

The month of January started out somewhat disastrous for overwintering birds due to the previously mentioned snowstorm. An example was an **American Woodcock** found frozen on the morning of 4 January. This bird was the first January record for the Buffalo Ornithological Society study area, though actually found in Fort Erie, Ontario. Numerous accounts of other frozen or incapacitated birds were reported, some even noted in the *Buffalo Evening News*.

Feeding stations were in demand, bringing expectations of rarities. A **Varied Thrush** appeared at the Alden home of James Bottlinger. This bird is the 13th record in this area since 1970. Other significant records reported during this first month of the year occurred in the open water areas of the Great Lakes, with estimates of waterfowl running as high as 50,000, mostly Greater Scaup and Common Merganser, but with an occasional rare visitor expected. Mike Morgante found just such a bird with the sighting of a **Tufted Duck**. The bird remained in the area for about two weeks and was observed by many birders on both sides of the US and Canada border. Local experts are considering this a "wild" bird, citing the increase in Zebra Mussels in the Region as an attractant since this appears to be one of it's natural foods.

The final month of the winter season brought a **Black-headed Gull** for most of the period. This bird first appeared on January 30 in the Niagara River near Lewiston NY and was sighted through the 21st of February. Swans seemed to be the bird of the period, as counts were reported in excess of 300 birds from various locations throughout Region 1. Of particular note were the six tagged Trumpeter Swans that were released in the Barcelona Harbor near Westfield NY. These birds were raised in Ontario as a part of the Trumpeter program currently in operation throughout the northeastern United States and Canada.

Barcelona Harbor also provided a female **Harlequin Duck**, sighted first by Gil Randall and observed by many from the last day of January

through 7 February. The winter of 1998-1999 also produced good counts of some winter species, such as the 42 Rough-legged Hawks observed by David Neveau in the South Dayton area of the Cattaraugus/Chautauqua border, a total which had local experts checking area maxima.

Finally, early migrant movements were evident in the latter part of the season, highlighted by *icterid* flights and Short-eared Owls frequenting the Dunkirk NY airport in late February and into March.

In concluding this report, I would like to offer a special thank you to Dick Rosche, an old birding friend and current reporter for the *Prothonotary*, the official publication of the Buffalo Ornithological Society for providing me with records and data from that organization.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ABBREVIATIONS

BuSP - Buckhorn Island State Park - Grand Island; FMSCP - Four Mile Creek State Park - NIAG; FNSP - Fort Niagara State Park- NIAG; Tiftt NP - Tiftt Nature Preserve, Buffalo.

LOONS - DUCKS

Red-Throated Loon: 2 T Porter NIAG 27 Dec (MM et al); arr 2 GHSP 27 Feb (WD).

NORTHERN GANNET: 1 FMSCP 27 Dec (WD).

Double-crested Cormorant: 45 primarily Niagara Falls CBC data, nine year high.

Black-crowned Night-Heron: arr 2 Buffalo 27 Feb (PY).

Turkey Vulture: arr 1 Hamburg ERIE 21 Feb (RA).

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE: 1 Tiftt NP 23 Dec (WB).

Canada Goose: 20517 Oak Orchard WMA GENE CBC data, nine year high.

TRUMPETER SWAN: 6 banded (wing

tag & leg) Barcelona Harbor CHAU birds observed and videotaped by several observers during month of January & early February. (Exotic)

Tundra Swan: 122 CBC data, nine year high.

Wood Duck: arr 4 T Pomfret CHAU 28 Feb (TeM).

Mallard: 7920 CBC data, nine year high.

N. Shoveler: 25 Jamestown area CBC data, nine year high.

N. Pintail: arr 4 T Pomfret CHAU 5 Feb (PY); 1620 mainly Oak Orchard WMA CBC data, nine year high.

Green-winged Teal: 17 CBC data, nine year high.

TUFTED DUCK: 1 Niagara River bird observed from both(MM!). sides of river by several observers

HARLEQUIN DUCK: 1 Barcelona Harbor CHAU 30 Jan - 7 Feb (GR).

Black Scoter: 1 Silver Creek CHAU 5 Feb (WW!).

Hooded Merganser: 1661 Jamestown primarily CBC data, nine year high..

Ruddy Duck: 1 Tonawanda ERIE 19 Feb (WW).

HAWKS - ALCIDS

N. Goshawk: 1 Wethersfield Springs WYOM 27 Dec (RR! et al); 1 T Porter NIAG 6 Feb (SO!).

Red-Shouldered Hawk: arr 1 Grand Island 26 Feb (R&DR), early.

Rough-legged Hawk: 42 South Dayton CATT/CHAU 18 Feb (DN).

Merlin: 1 Buffalo 21,29 Dec (DS!,BK!); 1 Buffalo 23 Jan (BK!); 1 T Yates ORLE 31 Jan (WD!,MM!); 1&2 birds observed on University of Buffalo Campus 1 Feb through 26 Feb (mob).

Peregrine Falcon: 1 Amherst ERIE 21 Jan (BB!); 1 Buffalo Harbor 31 Jan (FR!); nesting pair Statler Building Buffalo 1 - 26 Feb (BB!).

SANDHILL CRANE: 1 T Wilson NIAG 11 Dec (BC!).

Am. Coot: 1955 Niagara Falls primarily CBC data, nine year high.

Killdeer: arr Fredonia CHAU 20 Feb (TeM).

Purple Sandpiper: 1 Niagara Falls 7 Feb (PY,?S).

Parasitic Jaeger: 1 Dunkirk Harbor CHAU 1-4 Dec (mob).

Franklin's Gull: 1&2 birds observed in the Whirlpool area of the Niagara River from 5 Dec - 13 Dec (WD!,MM!,BK!).

BLACK-HEADED GULL: 1 Niagara Falls 5 Dec (PH!).

PIGEONS - WOODPECKERS

Short-Eared Owl: 6 Dunkirk Airport CHAU observed for several weeks Feb.

FLYCATCHERS - WAXWINGS

Ruby-Crowned Kinglet: 1 Grand Island 5 Dec (SO!).

Am. Robin: 2413 primarily Niagara Falls CBC data, nine year high.

VARIED THRUSH: 1 Alden ERIE 28,30 Jan (GS!,KF!); 1 Alden ERIE 1 Feb (GR!).

Am. Pipit: 1 Tift NP 18 Dec (BB!).

WARBLERS

Yellow-rumped Warbler: 49 primarily Buffalo CBC data, nine year high.

PRAIRIE WARBLER: 1 BuSP observed from 6 Dec -14 Dec (PY!,DS!,WD!), 1st Regional winter record.

TANAGERS - WEAVERS

Fox Sparrow: 1 BuSP 6,7 Dec (PY!,BC!); 1 Eden Valley (feeder) ERIE 18 Dec (RA!).

Red-winged Blackbird: 244 Oak Orchard WMA, nine year high.

House Finch: 1901 CBC summary, low.

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