

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 1999 - 2000

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WEATHER EFFECTS

The first half of the season was mild with relatively little snow in most areas. Larger water bodies remained open, allowing numbers of waterfowl to linger. Half-hardies were prevalent. By mid January when winter finally set in, some of these species "chose" to stick it out. Apparently, a number of them were successful in making it through the season. Conditions were not uniform across the state. Region 10 had very little snow and the temperature never dropped below 20°F. Region 7 had some major snowstorms, an avalanche, and temperatures near -30° F in several areas. Half-hardies attempting to stay there made a mistake. February ended on a mild note with Buffalo recording its warmest February temperature ever, 71° on the 26th. As with many winter seasons, this warm weather triggered a migration spurt of Tundra Swans, hawks, Killdeer, an Eastern Phoebe in Region 2, robins and blackbirds. Impressive for late February were counts of 500 Tundra Swans in Region 3 and 23 Northern Harriers in Region 2. Under these conditions, the arrival into the state of an American Woodcock or two is not unusual. However, this season Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & even northerly Region 6 reported the species during the last few days of February. A woodcock on 22 Jan in Region 9 was considered early as well, though it could have been attempting to overwinter.

WATERFOWL

Several Regional Editors mentioned that the mild open winter permitted numbers of waterfowl to stay, particularly dabblers. American Black Ducks and Mallards provide the best illustration. Single area counts of the former were 1600 in Region 1, 1308 in Region 3, and over 2000 in Region 6. In the same Regions, Mallards were tallied at 9100, 12732, and over 5000, respectively. With smaller numbers, Region 7 set Regional records on the Federation Waterfowl Count (FWC) for the same two species. When the hard freeze finally occurred in mid January, divers became concentrated in the remaining open water. The latter event triggered counts of 8000 Redheads in Region 3 and up to 400 Ring-necked

Ducks in Region 6. The latter species were also up in Regions 1, 2, 3, 8 & 9. Other ducks that were above average in multiple Regions this winter included Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal (100 on 1 Jan in Region 3), Common Goldeneye, and Hooded Merganser. Common Merganser was highlighted in two quite different Regions. Region 7 reported a near record number on the FWC while in Region 10, where the species is less common than elsewhere in the state, "unusually large concentrations" were in several places.

RAPTORS

Rough-legged Hawks were more numerous than recent winters with the numbers in Region 10 considered of near record proportion. Migrants of this species were especially notable. Counts of 128 at Braddock Bay in Region 2, and 121 at Derby Hill in Region 5, both on 27 Feb, were outstanding. It is no longer surprising when Bald Eagles are found in every Region reporting during the winter. What is interesting and important however, is that their numbers continue to grow. The eastern half of the state, excluding Region 10, is the stronghold of the species. Regional record numbers were reported from Regions 6 & 9. The other eagle has a very different natural history. Unlike Bald Eagles, which are attracted to large open water bodies and rivers, Golden Eagles, since they feed on winter-kills, prefer areas where deer are numerous, and they may also prefer some altitudinal variation. In the hills of Cattaraugus County in Region 1, they had both this season and the birders had a wintering area for at least three Golden Eagles. These birds were seen repeatedly and occasionally at close range (Tom LeBlanc, pers.comm.).

Few northern owls were located this year with Snowy Owls again being scarce, though up from last year. A roost of 10 Long-eared Owls in Region 5 was impressive. Short-eared Owls were in moderate numbers.

After a tremendous movement of Northern Shrikes in the fall, I speculated on the possibility of record numbers on the Christmas Bird Counts this winter. While the results are not yet in, several Regional Editors commented on their high numbers. Region 2 Editor Griffith noted high numbers early in the season followed by a drop-off. This matched my perception on the Lake Ontario plain in Region 1. Since the Lake Ontario plain from where most of Region 2's records are generated, this may have just been a local phenomenon.

FROM THE FIELDS

Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings were much more in evidence after the cold weather hit in mid January. Highest counts for the larks were 336 in Region 3 and 650 in Region 6. Snow Buntings had flocks of 300 or more in five Regions, topped by 2785 in Region 6 and 1000 in Region 7. Though much less common than the two former species, Lapland Longspurs put in the best showing, relatively speaking. Double-digit counts of the species were recorded in five Regions, led by 110 in Region 6 and 70 in Region 3.

WINTER FINCHES

By the standard of the last dozen years, it was an invasion year. However, numbers of these colorful northern invaders were lower than two winters ago. The most common species was Common Redpoll with counts over 100 in all but Region 10. Three "Greater" Redpolls, (*Carduelis flammea rostrata*), were reported in Region 7. Accompanying the Common Redpolls were Hoary Redpolls with some 28 reports of this NYSARC review species from Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, & 8. Red Crossbills were seen in only five Regions but that included a large group of "several dozen" in Region 10, with courtship behavior observed there in one instance. When found, usually only one or two White-winged Crossbills were seen, but they were located in seven Regions. Pine Grosbeaks were scarce but still found in six Regions. Modest numbers of Pine Siskins and Purple Finches were observed in all Regions. Evening Grosbeaks had a good season, with flocks in all Regions except Region 10.

LINGERERS AND HALF-HARDIES

It was another mild winter producing another long list of remarkable sightings. A late December Osprey in Region 8 and early January Whimbrel and Common Tern in Region 10 were the large birds of note. The tern is one of the latest ever in the state. An unidentified hummingbird and a swallow in Region 2 are noteworthy as was a remarkable 13 Hermit Thrushes in one location there on 2 Jan. A Sedge Wren was a great find in Region 9. Pine Warblers are pretty much annual in winter, but probably most sighted in winter do not stay through. This year, however, two *overwintered* at a feeding station in Region 1 and another provided the third winter record for northerly Region 7 on 15 Jan. Yellow-breasted Chats were found in Regions 2 & 9. Incredibly, two Cape May

Warblers were discovered, one inland in Region 5 and another in Region 10 establishing a state record late date of 6 Jan. A Palm Warbler lingered to 8 Jan in Region 8. A Northern Parula and a Magnolia Warbler on 12 Dec in Region 10 were two of the latest ever for those species. A 16 Jan Ovenbird in Region 2 is also one of the latest ever. Nashville Warbler and a Black-throated Blue Warbler in Region 10 have been recorded only a few times in winter before. A Tennessee Warbler 18 Dec (with details seen by Regional Editor) in Region 10, is only the second ever in winter. This bird, which can be difficult to id, certainly requires verification, but virtually all of the other sightings in this section are unusual enough to also warrant "writing up" for your Regional Editor. Unusual sparrow finds included an overwintering Fox in Region 4 and Savannahs on 23 Jan in Region 1 and 6 Feb in Region 3. A Clay-colored Sparrow on 18 Dec in Region 10 is the latest ever in the state. An Indigo Bunting overwintering in Region 10 is about the fifth ever in winter in New York. A Baltimore Oriole on 17 Jan in Region 9 was the latest sighting for that species.

MISCELLANEOUS

Erratic in number though of nearly annual occurrence in recent decades, Bohemian Waxwings staged a fine showing this season. They were found in all but Regions 3 & 9 with maximum counts of 500 in Region 6, 270 in Region 5, 150 in Region 7, and 44 in Region 8. Other notable counts were 45 Black Vultures in Region 9, perhaps a record winter count, and 3427 Black-legged Kittiwakes seen from a boat off Montauk, one of the highest counts ever in the state. Though larger winter concentrations have been found, two impressive flocks of White-crowned Sparrows, 52 from Region 3 and 27 from Region 2 were unusual. Not long ago Tufted Titmouse was a rare bird in Region 7. This season a total of 40 was reported there. Nine King Eiders in Region 2 was a good count while four Common Yellowthroats still in Region 3 on 1 Jan were very unusual. A White-rumped Sandpiper was very late in Region 2, and a Pectoral Sandpiper also in Region 2, was the earliest ever. An adult Franklin's Gull was a very rare mid-winter find in Region 1. Oddly, the Franklin's was still in its breeding plumage which had become very worn (pers. obs.).

RARITIES

Found in multiple Regions were Eared Grebes in Regions 2, 3, & 10 and Thayer's Gulls in Regions 2, 3, & 8. Two Great Cormorants returned to Region 5 and another was in Region 8. In Region 1 Black-headed and California gulls were highlights though both are practically annual. Region 2 had some stellar birds - Pacific Loon, Glossy Ibis, Ivory Gull, and Barn Owl. The rufous-morph Red-tailed Hawk returned to Region 3. Eurasian Wigeons were in Regions 4 & 9. Ross's Goose, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Dickcissel were highlights in Region 5. Region 6 found a Tufted Duck, Great Gray Owl, and a Three-toed Woodpecker. Region 10 had several great birds: another "Black" Brant, 3 to 4 Great Skuas when just one would be spectacular, a returning Mew Gull of the European race, now in its second-year, a fly-by Black Guillemot, "Gambel's" White-crowned Sparrow and a "Pink-sided" Dark-eyed Junco.

The BOTS award was a simple choice. It goes to the MacGillivray's Warbler in Region 10, a first for the state. And, as with many other recent state firsts, our editor has managed to get the full story in print before the rest of the season reports. Check out Veit and Taylor's account of this find in *The Kingbird*, Vol. 50, No.1, p. 2-6.

THANK YOU , LEE

Lee B. Chamberlaine, veteran Region 6 Editor has advised that he is unable to continue in that capacity. A check of the records reveals that Lee has written fifty (50) Region 6 reports, starting with his first in 1969, with his latest appearing in the March issue of 2000. It is the selfless dedication of individuals like Lee that makes it possible for the Federation and *The Kingbird* to keep the birding community of the state apprised of events and developments in New York State ornithology in a timely fashion. Thank you Lee, we wish you well, and hope that you will do more Regional Reports in the near future.

The Editor