

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 2000-2001

Willie D'Anna

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension, Niagara Falls, NY 14304

Weather Effects

December was exceptionally cold and snowy in much of New York. Temperatures were as much as 7 degrees below normal in Region 1 and a record 70.3" of snow fell in Region 5. As stressful as these weather conditions are for birds, it is the food supply that makes the most difference to them. Apparently that was pretty good as a fair number of half-hardies were found this winter. Especially interesting were the numerous February half-hardies found in Region 2 by birders doing a "big month." It has been often assumed that most of these birds do not last through the winter. It will be interesting to see these efforts repeated and if similar results are achieved in future Februarys. Some may argue that the mild January and February weather was the main factor for survival of these birds. While these months were mild in terms of temperature, as much as 4 degrees above normal in both, most Regions maintained a snow cover throughout which could greatly reduce foraging opportunities for some species.

Waterbirds

Waterbird diversity was good this season. While numbers were down in some Regions in part due to the early freeze-up, this can help to create impressive concentrations elsewhere. I am referring to Region 3 where counts of over 500 Tundra Swans, 4000 American Black Ducks, and over 13,000 Redheads were exceptional. Redheads were also up in Regions 1 & 5. Counts of Horned Grebes on Lake Ontario were quite high for mid January – 27 in Region 1, 20 in Region 5, and an amazing 283 in Region 2. Red-necked Grebes in five of seven Regions were also more than usual.

Half-Hardies

As mentioned, numerous half-hardies were found this winter, especially in Region 2. The species that are referred to as half-hardies are subjective and vary with the Region. For example, many species of regular winter occurrence in most Regions are very unusual in Regions 6 & 7. The following discussion of half-hardies this winter refers to birds found in January or early February, i.e., those birds trying to over-winter in the state and not individuals that are simply tardy or early migrants. Note that almost all of them are not unusual in Region 10 where milder weather permits more regular occurrence.

The following were found in January or early February in at least three reporting Regions, excluding Region 10: Turkey Vultures, Red-shouldered Hawks, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Winter Wrens (including Region 7), Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrushes, and Fox Sparrows (including Region 7). In two Regions were: Brant, Northern Shovelers, Killdeer, Common Snipes, Chipping Sparrows, and Rusty Blackbirds (including Region 7). In addition Region 3 had a Blue-winged Teal and Region 1 had a Black-crowned Night-Heron and three(!) Pine Warblers. Region 2 added Virginia Rails, Soras, Marsh Wrens, Gray Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, and Savannah Sparrows. The two rails and the wren are reported nearly every winter from Region 2 but only rarely from other Regions away from southeastern New York. I would urge birders from other Regions to search their marshes for these species in winter.

Northern Invaders

It was an outstanding season for northern owls (Northern Hawk Owl, Great Gray Owl, and Boreal Owl) – in Ontario and Quebec, that is. Remarkably, of these species only two No. Hawk Owls were located in New York, both in Region 7. These birds were not taken for granted as numerous birders trekked to see them. Those who did were rewarded with not only the owl but outstanding boreal birding as well. While it was generally poor for winter finches outside of Region 7, Purple Finches, White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins were numerous there. Many of the crossbills were breeding. I am always amazed that they will nest in mid- winter. Obviously, food and not weather is what drives their biological impulse to breed. By the end of the period, some of the winter finches were spreading out from the Adirondacks.

Miscellaneous

There were some unusually high counts of Northern Pintails in early February – 24 in Region 1 (3 Feb) and 30 in Region 3 (10 Feb). These may represent early migrants but the Regional Editors did not mention an early push of migrants this season. 41 Bald Eagles on the Thousand Islands CBC, Merlins in all reporting Regions, and Peregrine Falcons in all but one, are another indication of the complete recovery these birds have made in New York. Over 100 Lapland Longspurs in Region 2 and 600 Horned Larks in Region 3 are high counts but 500 Razorbills off Montauk Pt. in Region 10 and 500 Purple Finches in Region 7 are exceptional. Although White-crowned Sparrow is regular in winter in Regions 1 & 2, a count of 112 in Region 2 is amazing! 35 Yellow-rumped Warblers in Region 1 was a winter record there.

Unusually late passerines lingering into December included: Savannah Sparrow and Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Region 3, Eastern Phoebe and Savannah Sparrow in Region 5, Hermit Thrush, White-crowned Sparrow, and a very rare in winter House Wren in Region 7; Eastern Phoebe, Blue-headed Vireo,

Nashville Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, and Wilson's Warbler in Region 10.

Rarities

With only seven Regional reports available(Regions 4, 8 and 9 reports not received by deadline) the list of rarities is a little shorter than usual. Still, the multiple reports of some lesser rarities is noteworthy. Eared Grebes were found in Regions 1, 3, & 10 and Harlequin Ducks appeared in Regions 1, 5, 6 and 10, Barrow's Goldeneyes turned up in six of the seven Regions including two in each of Regions 3 & 5. King Eiders were represented by a single in Region 1, several fly-bys at Hamlin Beach State Park in Region 2, and an impressive flock of 15 in Region 5, as well as the usual birds at Montauk. "Oregon" Juncos in Regions 1, 2, 5, & 7 are the most in several years. This subspecies needs to be carefully identified to rule out an intergrade. Northern Gannets reported on Lake Ontario, 3 Dec, in both Regions 1 & 2 may be the same individual. A Greater White-fronted Goose in Region 3 and a group of four in Region 2 are more than usual for winter. Trumpeter Swans were found in Region 2 (three) and Region 5 (six) – no doubt these were the products of the various official and unofficial reintroduction programs in New York and Ontario.

As is often the case in Region 1, gulls were a highlight. A Black-headed Gull, and the now annual California Gull were found, and Sabine's Gulls lingered into December. An alcid species and a Varied Thrush were also located. The former is a great find on Lake Ontario and not at all diminished by the fact that the observer cautiously chose not to identify it to species. A Least Bittern heard calling in a marsh in Region 2, is an extreme rarity in winter. A Red Phalarope and a Dickcissel also appeared in Region 2. A Eurasian Wigeon was in Region 3 as was a Gyrfalcon and a Laughing Gull, neither of which stuck around. A Great Cormorant returned to Oswego in Region 5, but the highlights there were a second Regional Tufted Duck, a cooperative dark-morph Gyrfalcon, and an immature Ivory Gull, a potential first Regional record. The best in Region 6 was a Golden Eagle found on a CBC. With the increase in reports of this species during spring and fall, it is somewhat surprising that there have been no regular wintering areas found in the state. The bird of the season in Region 7 would have to be the much visited Northern Hawk Owl in Bloomingdale Bog. Region 7 also hosted a second No. Hawk Owl as well as a reported white-morph Gyrfalcon, seen briefly by a single observer. Golden Eagles were also found in Region 10 but gulls were the highlight there – Black-tailed, Mew and California, were all reported but only seen briefly. At least the Mew Gull was sighted on a second day and it is likely that this is the same individual returning from the previous two winters. Common Murre, Thick-billed Murre and Atlantic Puffin were the best of the alcids in Region 10. Two Ash-throated Flycatchers lingered from fall and a Chestnut-collared Longspur, found on a rescheduled So. Nassau CBC

would be only the sixth for New York, if accepted by NYSARC.

In terms of rarity, the alcid in Region 1, Ivory Gull in Region 5, and the three gulls and the Chestnut-collared Longspur in Region 10 all would vie for the Bird of the Season (BOTS) award. However, none of these birds was cooperative, being seen only briefly or by just a single observer. Birds seen by many observers over several days include Region 5's Tufted Duck and Gyrfalcon, Region 7's Northern Hawk Owl, and Region 10's Thick-billed Murre. However, these species have been recorded many times in the past in New York. So, nothing really stands out to me as the BOTS award winner. This season, you can pick your own favorite!

