

Highlights of the Winter Season 2001-2002

Willie D'Anna

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension,
Niagara Falls, NY 14304

Weather Effects

Unseasonable? You bet it was! It was hardly winter at all. Average temperatures for December were about seven degrees above normal. The average for January varied from seven degrees above (Region 1) to over ten degrees above (Regions 5 & 6). Has *any* month ever deviated by ten degrees from the norm before? It was the warmest winter in 70 years in Regions 1 & 2 (incredibly, there were two winters that were actually warmer) and the warmest on record in Regions 5 & 9. Birders were able to take advantage of the mild conditions as it was also very dry, especially in Regions 7, 9, 10 and parts of Region 3. Except for parts of Regions 1 & 6, snow cover was minimal. Once again, the Great Lakes illustrated how locally intense their effect upon the weather can be. Buffalo was on the way to the least snow for December ever. That all changed on Christmas eve when the first of over **81** inches of snow fell in only five days, changing December from the least to the most snowiest month ever! Not to be outdone, the Tug Hill Plateau, at the east end of Lake Ontario in Region 6, received **127** inches of snow in the final week of the month. While these lake-effect snow events sound devastating, their effect upon the birds was very localized and certainly lessened by the frequently above-freezing temperatures of January.

The mild season was a boon to winter listers. Many species of waterbirds lingered and half-hardies were especially numerous. Several species lingered exceptionally late, into January in many cases – Forster's Tern and Northern Rough-winged Swallow in Region 1; Common Moorhen, American Woodcock, Parasitic Jaeger, and American Pipit in Region 2; Common Moorhen, *both* yellowlegs, Dunlin, American Pipit, and Tennessee Warbler in Region 3; Osprey, Dunlin, and American Woodcock in Region 5; Pine Warbler in Region 6; Savannah Sparrow in Region 7; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Region 8; Osprey and Wood Thrush in Region 9; and 15 species of warblers in Region 10. And then, to top it off, north-bound migration started earlier in February with several sightings and in some cases, large flocks of geese, Killdeer, robins, grackles, blackbirds, and cowbirds. It may have even started in January for Turkey Vultures in Region 1 and Common Grackles in Region 8. Add in a nice selection of rarities and it was one of the finest winters ever to be afield in New York.

Vultures

Black Vultures in Region 9 continue to increase – a record 182 were on the Southern Orange County CBC, plus 76 on the Putnam County CBC. Reports

in southeastern New York are increasing at a much faster pace than elsewhere. The species remains very rare in Region 1 and reports in Regions 2 & 5 are still pretty much restricted to the Lake Ontario hawkwatches. The much commoner Turkey Vulture is also increasing and this has been noticed in every Region. The species has wintered in Regions 2 & 9 for several years but now winter reports are popping up elsewhere including Regions 1, 3, 4, 5 and a Region 7 report from 14 February, the latter particularly interesting for this northerly Region. Region 1 Editor Morgante suggested that some January sightings there were early migrants, since they were seen along the traditional lakeplain migration routes, where they had not been reported earlier. We do not often think of January birds of many species as early migrants (Horned Lark comes to mind). Perhaps the vultures are adjusting to the warmer climate of the past decade. If they can survive this far north, it gives them the advantage of arriving on the breeding grounds earlier than potential competitors.

Diversity

If we counted the total number of species in each Region this winter and then added up all of the Regions, I would bet that this sum would be a winter season record. There are always uncommon and rare winter visitors that turn up in one or two Regions. This season, however, saw a plethora of birds with every Region getting into the act. For years now I have wondered what would turn up if at least one birder in each Region did a Big January (that is, try to see as many species as possible in January). Although my musing will still have to wait for an answer, a glimpse into that world was provided this winter.

The following discussion refers to birds reported in January or February. Horned Grebes were found in seven Regions with high counts of 73 in Region 1 and 44 in each of Regions 5 & 7. Great Blue Herons wintered in every Region with a concentration of 51 in Region 1 and 16 in Region 9. Tundra Swans are much more uncommon in eastern New York so recording them in seven Regions was unusual as were the high counts of 228 in Region 1, 155 in Region 2, and 50+ in Region 6. Away from the coast, Brant are rare in winter but this season they were found in four Regions. The number of Ring-necked Ducks was impressive – at least six Regions had double-digit counts led by 68 in Region 7. Red-shouldered Hawks are a tough find in winter – I suspect that the reports from every Region this season is unprecedented for the species. Killdeer in seven Regions and American Woodcocks in five are quite a lot with January reports of the latter in Regions 2 & 9 most unusual. It has been the thinking for many years, occasionally expressed in this column, that Northern Saw-whet Owls are more numerous than reports indicated. Finally, more birders are putting an effort into proving the hypothesis. This little owl was located in six Regions with multiple reports in three and a count of 12 on the Little Lakes CBC. in Region 2. Despite its secretive habits, Hermit Thrushes were found in six Regions. Unprecedented would probably describe the American Pipits found in *six* Regions. This is only

the tip of the iceberg. There were many more winter discoveries sprinkled throughout the state.

Region 2 birders, who have made a tradition out of Big Januarys, demonstrated that most of the species just listed occur every winter in their Region. In the past, many of the same birds have been labeled “half-hardies” with the presumption that they occur in winter irregularly and normally cannot survive through to spring. However, that assumption was largely based upon December sightings not being followed up with January or February reports. What the Region 2 birders have shown is that the lack of later winter sightings may be due to a lack of birder effort. Perhaps these birds are not so much foolhardy as they are “full-hardies”!

Traditional Winter Species

Unlike the many uncommon species sighted this season, some of the traditional winter species were less in evidence. Winter “raptors”, like Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes, were relatively scarce and after a fine late fall showing, Snowy Owls really thinned out. Short-eared Owl sightings were also reduced but Long-eared Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls were up. Mild open conditions usually means fewer field birds (Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs). That was the case this year though there were still a couple of good counts – flocks of 500 Snow Buntings in Region 1 and over 1000 in Region 7. Winter finches are so irregular that it is difficult to classify them as “traditional”. They bucked the trend of our other winter residents and put in a moderately good showing. Small to relatively large flocks of Pine Grosbeaks continued in most of the Regions that recorded them in the fall. Likewise, Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks were found in most Regions (200 max for the latter in Region 5). Sightings of the crossbills were far fewer though both species did occur in over half the Regions with White-wingeds slightly outnumbering Reds. After a strong fall showing, Common Redpolls became much more localized during the winter. Still, all but the southernmost Regions 9 & 10 had flocks of at least 70 birds roaming around. Regions 5, 6, 7 & 8 reported flocks of 500 to 1000 or more. Not surprisingly, several Hoary Redpolls were reported.

Rarities

There were some outstanding rarities to chase around the state this season. The usual California Gull on the Niagara River stayed later than ever recorded before. So did a group of 12 Sandhill Cranes in January, a record count for Region 1. The Niagara Frontier Region added a first January Northern Gannet, a Laughing Gull, and a first record and long-staying Townsend’s Solitaire. Region 2 had their own January Gannet, an adult male Common Eider (an exceptionally rare plumage inland in New York), a first January Parasitic Jaeger, and a Western Kingbird. Their rarest, however, was a Western Grebe at venerable Hamlin Beach

SP. Region 3's Northern Gannet was even more exceptional since it was away from the Great Lakes, and a flock of 18 Sandhill Cranes is a Regional record and likely a state record as well. A Cattle Egret in Region 5 was their latest ever and a Pomarine Jaeger only their second in January with a Black-headed Gull rounding out the list. Most interesting in Region 6 was a reported Barrow's x Common Goldeneye hybrid. While Gray Jay is not unusual for this Region, one in the St. Lawrence Valley is exceptional, and Great Gray Owl was entirely unexpected in a non-invasion year for the species. The first Region 7 record of Say's Phoebe on 24 Feb would be the latest ever in New York, if accepted by NYSARC. this species is very rare past January. The second Region 7 record of Eared Grebe, a very late Red Phalarope, and a raptor-lover's raptor, Gyrfalcon, were other highlights in Region 7. Moving southward into the balmy climes of Regions 9 & 10, hummingbirds were some of the highlights. Region 9's Rufous continued into January and an *Archilochus* hummingbird (Ruby-throated or Black-chinned) lingered to 23 Dec. The date would be record-late for the former and the species would be a state first if the latter. While very similar, the two species can sometimes be separated with a good view and a heavy dose of caution. Black-chinneds have increased markedly in the southeastern U.S. in winter and should not be totally unexpected in New York. Region 10's two Calliope Hummingbirds continued from fall until 26 Dec with one staying a day later. Region 9's February Black-throated Blue Warbler represents only the second ever in New York for that month. A hybrid gull, Black-headed x ?, is an exceptional and fascinating discovery. Region 10's White-winged Dove and Ash-throated Flycatcher continue a remarkable number of reports of these species in recent years. A record late *Empidonax* flycatcher, tentatively identified as a Least, was studied by Kenn Kaufman who has a greater depth of knowledge of the genus than most. A February Tennessee Warbler was only the second winter record for the Region and the first in the state for that month. A Pacific Loon lingered for over two weeks to the delight of many birders, and what is going on with "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal? Sightings have increased in the Region but this season up to six individuals were found! Region 10 also had a hybrid – believed to be Tufted Duck x scaup.

A tentatively identified Slaty-backed Gull lingered for two weeks in Region 9. Unfortunately, it was not until the last day it was seen that it was confirmed (see article this issue). Three days later, what may have been the same bird was identified at a landfill in Region 3. Word spread rapidly after both sightings and birders scoured the two Regions in the ensuing days but to no avail. There is only one previous record in New York, a bird seen on the Niagara River in 1992.

My choice for Bird-of-the-Season (BOTS) goes to the Long-billed Murrelet found in Region 3. This bird was much more cooperative than the gull(s), staying for four days and allowing numerous birders to add this Asian species to their lifelists. If accepted by NYSARC, it will be only the second ever in New York. The first was in October 1993 on the St. Lawrence River reservoir above the Moses-Saunders Dam.