

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WINTER SEASON 2002-2003

Joseph DiCostanzo

600 West 218th St., 4-D, New York, NY 10034

jdicost@nyc.rr.com

It was a winter to inspire song; that is if you like songs with lyrics such as "Baby, it's cold outside!" or "Let it snow! Let it snow! Let it snow!" No part of the state was spared the deep freeze. December was cool, generally one to two degrees below normal, except in Region 5 which was a tenth of a degree above average, but by late in the month temperatures and snow were falling. January and February were best described as brutal, with most Regions reporting average temperatures between four and ten degrees below normal. Some areas saw stretches of two to three weeks with temperatures never reaching the freezing mark. As usual it was coldest in the Adirondacks, with temperatures reaching 35 below zero in some spots and Lake Champlain freezing over completely for the first time in two years. Lakes Erie, Huron, and Superior also froze over completely, with Lakes Michigan and Ontario half frozen by the end of the season. In Region 8 the Hudson River froze over for the first time in several years. Last year, when Regions 5 and 6 had average temperatures over ten degrees above normal, Willie D'Anna wondered if any month had ever deviated more than ten degrees from normal. This year February in Region 3 was 10.9 below normal.

A Christmas Day storm dropped snow across the state, with some areas receiving two to three feet. The snow continued throughout the season in most areas, with another holiday storm on President's Day dropping two to three feet in the lower portions of the state. Parts of the Tug Hill area in Region 6 had over 350 inches of snow. Albany in Region 8 had a total of 96 inches, approaching its all time record of 112 inches. Overall the extreme cold and heavy snow, which often made travel and outside activities difficult, made for a very long winter. Despite the weather birders managed to get out and find a fair number of lingering birds and some rarities.

Finches and Other Winter Irruptives

Let's just get these out of the way immediately. Despite a winter that might have made you think you were spending it in the far north, there were virtually no winter finches or other traditional winter irruptives to speak of. Though Northern Shrikes appeared in seven Regions, the reports were scattered with not very many individuals. Even Red-breasted Nuthatch was scarce. Single Bohemian Waxwings were reported in Regions 2 and 3 with the latter the second county record for Chemung Co. Even Region 7 had almost no finches with the exception of a record high count of 1115 American Goldfinches on the Saranac Lake CBC. The only crossbills were two reports of individual White-winged Crossbills in Region 7. Snow Buntings were scattered in generally small numbers; even the maximum count of 1000 reported in Region 3 is only about a tenth of the record inland maximum.

Waterfowl

Most Regions reported good numbers and variety of waterfowl early before the severe cold froze them out of inland waters. Pacific Loons have been reported with increasing regularity in recent years. This winter found one in Region 10 and a possible in Region 3. The freeze-up of inland waters produced a large flight of Red-necked Grebes in the last days of the season and on into the spring season. Scattered Eared Grebe sightings in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 10 were about normal for recent winters. Greater White-fronted Goose was found in Regions 3, 9, and 10, the last Region having a total of seven on three CBCs. Barrow's Goldeneyes were widely reported, with individuals reported from all Regions except Regions 4, 8 and 9. Other highlights included high numbers of Tundra Swans in Region 1, which also hosted a drake Harlequin Duck on the Niagara River for the second winter in a row. On 30 Dec, Region 7 had its first ever Tufted Duck, surprisingly followed quickly by additional records in that Region; another Tufted was in Region 10, where the species is almost annual. Other duck and goose highlights included a "Richardson's" Canada Goose in Region 1; a Ross's Goose in Region 5; the almost annual, and almost always of questionable origin, Barnacle Geese in Region 10; King Eiders in Regions 1 and 2; and a female Common Eider in Region 6. Late December-early January saw a major Razorbill flight on the coast. Westchester's second ever Razorbill on 21 Dec was eclipsed the following day when an amazing 116 were reported on the Bronx-Westchester CBC. Over a thousand Razorbills were reported on Region 10's CBCs. Five of the six Atlantic alcids were recorded in Region 10; perhaps even more amazing, three species, Dovekie, Thick-billed Murre, and Razorbill were reported in New York City waters. The flight, however, did not last and most birds were gone by mid-winter.

Raptors

It was hard to find any statewide effect of the severe winter on raptors with the exception of Bald Eagles. Several Regions report widespread and increasing numbers of wintering Bald Eagles, but the late season freeze-up pushed many to the open waters of the Hudson River in Region 9, where triple digit one day counts were reported; some rode the river ice floes into Region 10. An Osprey on a CBC in Region 10 is an event, but one in mid-January in Columbia Co., Region 8, when nearly most nearby waters were frozen, is truly remarkable. Red-shouldered Hawks, unusual in the interior in winter, were found in Regions 1, 2, and 3. Golden Eagles wintered in some now traditional locations in Regions 1 and 9. Two Gyrfalcons were found in Region 7 and others kept birders near Cayuga Lake in Region 3 wondering how many were present and where they would show up next. Switching to the smaller falcons, American Kestrels appear to be continuing their decline, while Merlins, traditionally a rare winter bird, continue to increase, with a record nine wintering on the SUNY Buffalo campus in Region 1 and even outnumbering kestrels on Region 10 CBCs. Among the owls the sole standout was the very cooperative Northern Hawk Owl in Montgomery Co., Region 8 that delighted hundreds of birders from mid-January through the end of the season.

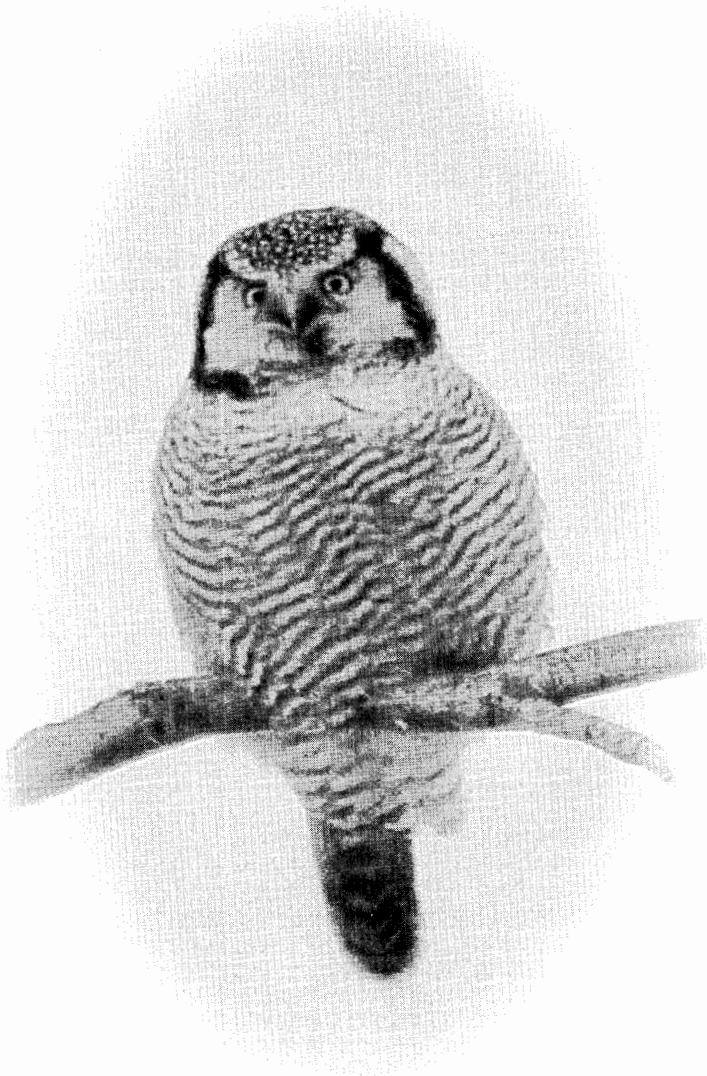
Shorebirds and Gulls

Okay, shorebirds do not jump to mind when you think of New York winters, and especially not winters like this one, but a few shorebirds did brighten an otherwise long hard winter in some places. In Region 2, a congregation of one each Killdeer, Sanderling, Purple Sandpipers and Dunlin on the Lake Ontario shore in January was described as a "once in a lifetime event." Beside their normal locations in Regions 1 & 10, Purple Sandpiper also turned up in Regions 2, 3 and 5; in the latter Region it provided a first January record. Two Red Phalaropes at Oswego in Region 5 until 26 December is one of few winter records inland. Naturally Region 10 had the greatest variety of shorebirds, including a rare December Semipalmated Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs and Willets until early January, wintering American Oystercatchers and Long-billed Dowitchers, and an offshore Red Phalarope. A January report of Hudsonian Godwit, if NYSARC details are submitted and accepted, would be unprecedented.

Great Skua is rarely seen from land in New York, so one seen from Montauk Point in Region 10 and possibly the same individual sitting on a nearby beach the next day was a major delight for the lucky observers. As usual Region 1, with its collection of winter gulls in the Niagara area, had the greatest variety of gulls. California Gull has become almost annual there, but a "one day wonder" adult Ross's Gull was the second Regional record. Another Ross's Gull, a first winter bird, was much more cooperative in Region 2 spending five days in Irondequoit Bay. An odd gull in Sullivan Co., Region 9 was thought to be a "Nelson's Gull", a hybrid Glaucous x Herring Gull. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were found in six of the ten Regions, but were scarcer than in recent winters in Region 10.

Half-Hardies

Considering the severity of the winter there was a surprising variety and number of half-hardies and lingering birds reported. Traditionally, Carolina Wren numbers build up during a succession of mild winters and are then hit hard by severe winters. Perhaps the species is finally adapting in our area; virtually all Regions reported good numbers throughout the winter. Other traditionally "southern" resident species that seemed to be doing well in inland Regions were Tufted Titmouse and Northern Cardinal. Regions 5, 6 and 7 all reported good to bumper crops of wild fruits with good numbers of American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds and other birds feeding on them. Widespread Eastern Phoebe in Region 10 are perhaps not surprising there, but the species was also reported from five other Regions with the bird in Region 5 being only the fourth winter record there; one perhaps wintered in Region 9. Also reported from a surprising number of Regions were Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Marsh Wrens. Six Tree Swallows in 60 F temperature on 3 Dec were thought unlikely to survive the night, but given the individual seen in Region 7 on 16 Feb following overnight temperatures of -20° F, their demise should perhaps not be assumed. A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher on the Sagaponack CBC in Region 10 was only the sixth winter record for the state.



A BOTS (Bird-of-the-Season) Northern Hawk Owl
Region 8 – Root, Montgomery County
18 Jan thru period (Ellen and Chuck Kieweg)
© Carena Pooth

The “neotropics” of Region 10 reported nine warblers including a probable record number 15 Orange-crowned Warblers on nine CBCs, Nashville Warbler on four CBCs, “exceptional numbers” of Pine Warblers, two Ovenbirds, a Northern Waterthrush, seven Yellow-breasted Chats on five CBCs, and the Hermit or Hermit x Townsend’s Warbler from the fall making it into the winter period by one day. A Northern Waterthrush in Region 2 was only the second January Regional record. Though rare in winter, there are a good number of December records of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks so individuals in mid-December in Regions 2 and 10 were good finds, but nowhere near as unusual as the individual on 6 Feb in Bronx Co., Region 10. Finally, two species from Region 10 that do not normally come to mind when the term “half- hardy” is mentioned: a Greater Shearwater at Montauk 28 December is a record late date and a Least Bittern “hit and run” victim 25 Feb is one of only a handful of winter records for the state.

Rarities

There were not a lot of rarities reported this winter and many of those that were found have already been mentioned. Some species such as Eared Grebe, Ross’s Goose, California Gull, and Ross’s Gull, which in years past would have been significant ornithological events, are now virtually annual. Many of the other species highlighted by Regional editors are noteworthy in the winter season primarily because of their out of normal season occurrence. Among the highlighted birds not already mentioned is a Clay-colored Sparrow that wintered in Region 9; another Clay-colored was in Region 10. As usual in the winter season, Region 10 has the lion’s share of rarities. Two that are out of place there, but that are regular inland were Black Vulture and Common Raven. Both species have shown great expansion in range and numbers in the southern portion of the state in recent years. Two out of range rarities were at feeders in Region 10, a Varied Thrush in mid-February in Ridge and a Painted Bunting that wintered in East Shoreham. The latter was not reported until after it left the area.

Finally, we come to the choice of the Bird of the Season or BOTS Award. In reading and rereading the ten Regional reports while preparing this highlights column, no one bird jumped off the page and said to me: “Here I am! The obvious BOTS winner!” Two birds, however, stuck in my mind as the leading candidates, not necessarily because they were the “rarest” birds reported this season, but because in addition to being rare birds they were cooperative and allowed many birders to enjoy them and add them to their life lists. First, there was Region 2’s Ross’s Gull (I know Region 1 had one also, but for only one day) and second, Region 8’s Northern Hawk Owl. Of the two, the Ross’s Gull is clearly the rarer, but I am going to give the BOTS to the Northern Hawk Owl for delighting hundreds of birders over a nearly two month stay.