

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – WINTER 2003/2004

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The Weather

There was no doubt that the weather during the 2003-04 winter season had an impact on birds and birders. Many areas across the state experienced heavy snow in December, followed by severe cold in January, when average temperatures were in the range of 5-10 degrees below normal. In many areas, deep, lingering snow led to a scarcity of field birds, especially raptors, and most likely lowered passerine numbers. The severe cold in January resulted in little open water in most of the state, and, subsequently, lower than normal waterfowl totals. February provided some moderation as temperatures and precipitation trended closer to historical averages.

Christmas Bird Counts

The annual National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts are a focal point of early winter birding for many. Since the count dates are fixed beforehand and are relatively inflexible, the weather can make or break a count. This year proved somewhat of a mixed bag – most counts were not directly hampered by the weather on count day, but in some areas heavy snow before the count period had an impact on both the birds and the ability of birders to get full coverage. No trend applied statewide – Region 1 enjoyed good weather and more open water than usual, while nearby Region 2 suffered due to heavy snow and lack of open water. Region 4 reported good numbers of “half-hardies”, while early December snowfall in Region 9 suppressed passerine totals. As always, the intense coverage of the counts led to many good finds; see the Regional reports for details.

Waterfowl/Waterbirds

Perhaps the most apparent impact of the January freeze was on waterfowl. The deep cold froze most standing water statewide, resulting in much lower than normal numbers of waterfowl. As examples, totals on the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation waterfowl counts (FWC) were down 40-50% in Regions 4 and 6, and the counts in Region 8 were described as “nearly a bust due to high winds and frozen water”. Despite the harsh conditions, “good” birds did turn up in some areas. The first winter record of Ross’s Goose for Region 1 was before the cold temperatures hit; single Ross’s Geese were also found in Region 3 and Region 10. Greater White-fronted Goose was scarce on Long Island, the normal winter stronghold, but elsewhere in Region 10 two somewhat out-of-place birds of this species frequented a golf course and nearby ball field on Staten Island. Other Greater White-fronted Geese were found in Regions 1, 3 and 9. A Barnacle Goose on Long Island raised, as usual,

unanswerable questions of origin. Of more easily placed provenance were the Trumpeter Swans found in Regions 2 and 5, their wing tags showing them as "introduced." The fall season's Tundra Swan at Croton Point continued well into the winter season, and was briefly joined by up to nine others in late January. A Tufted Duck present in Region 2 for a month beginning in mid-January may have been the same bird found further east on Lake Ontario in Region 5 both before and after those dates. Other unusual ducks this winter were an immature male King Eider in Region 2, Barrow's Goldeneyes in Regions 3 and 10, multiple Eurasian Wigeons in Regions 9 and 10 and the Eurasian form of Green-winged Teal in Region 10. Another bird in Region 10 was originally also thought to be the Eurasian form, which is known on some current lists as Common Teal, but careful scrutiny showed that the bird shared features of the Eurasian nominate species and the North American subspecies, indicating it was a hybrid between the two. The tell-tale field marks, including hints of the local subspecies' vertical white breast line and details of the face pattern and tertials, were subtle; observers should be on guard for evidence of interbreeding when identifying Common Teal.

Winter Finches

A big story this winter was the occurrence of winter finches, particularly redpolls. Common Redpoll was reported in all ten Regions, occasionally in good numbers – including a maximum count of 1019 on the Saranac Lake CBC in Region 7 – although the overall impression was that numbers were lower than in a major invasion year. Somewhat surprising, therefore, was the widespread appearance of Hoary Redpolls, reported in eight of ten Regions. A number of photographs were circulated on the internet, and hopefully reports of this review list species will be sent to NYSARC. There were fair numbers of Purple Finches and Pine Siskins overall. Evening Grosbeak made the best showing in Region 7 in many years, with flocks of up to 150, and were also found in each of the other nine Regions, in varying numbers. Appearing in smaller numbers, and less widespread, were White-winged Crossbill, Red Crossbill, and Pine Grosbeak. In Region 4, the invasion led to breeding evidence for Red Crossbill and Pine Siskin.

Other Winter Irruptions

Besides finches, a few other irruptive passerines made notable incursions into the state this winter. Foremost among these was the widespread appearance of Bohemian Waxwing, which, remarkably, was recorded in each of the ten Regions, albeit generally in low numbers away from traditional northerly strongholds. The highest concentrations were in Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8, with flocks ranging from 70 to 200 birds; the remainder of the reports being in single digits. The southward incursion in NY was part of a more widespread event that saw Bohemians recorded as far south as Cape May, NJ and Maryland. Northern Shrikes are more regular in their visits to New York; this year represented somewhat of an uptick in numbers over recent years, especially in Regions 6, 7 and 8. The absence of a major invasion made the state-record single day count of

22 Northern Shrikes on 17 Feb in Region 1 all the more unexpected. Even more remarkably, the same observer tallied the same number a week later to the east in Region 2. On a less dramatic scale, Red-breasted Nuthatches turned up in higher numbers downstate after last winter's virtual absence.

Gulls

Winter gulls, especially the “white-winged” gulls, Iceland and Glaucous, are a welcome corollary to cold weather and short days. These two species made a decent showing around the state, joined by reports of the enigmatic Thayer's Gull in Regions 1 and 2. Surprises along the Niagara River in Region 1, where the “gull season” in recent years seems to have extended later than in the past, included a continuing Black-headed Gull and 1-2 California Gulls and the Region's fourth record of Mew Gull, an adult bird initially found on the Canadian side of the river on 6 Dec, and relocated on the NY side a week later. Other unexpected finds upstate were an adult Laughing Gull in a Region 1 mall parking lot in January, perhaps the same individual seen in December on the river, and an immature Black-legged Kittiwake in Region 2. The severe weather may have impacted the movement of Bonaparte's Gulls, which arrived on the Niagara River about two weeks late and stayed less time than normal; downstate, Bonaparte's Gulls were virtually absent from usual coastal haunts in Region 10. Low counts and the short stay of the bulk of the Bonaparte's led to few reports of Little Gull, which are usually found in flocks of Bonaparte's, with only a handful in Region 1, and none at all in Region 2 or Region 10. Black-headed Gulls were also scarce in Region 10. Anecdotally, Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers around New York City and Long Island seem lower since the closing of the Great Kills landfill on Staten Island, although it is difficult to know with certainty since they are apparently still thought of as common enough not to warrant reporting on the same level as, for example, Iceland Gull; these two species were reported on the NYC Rare Bird Alert in the same numbers this season. Many of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the area seem to be wintering individuals, such as the adult which has returned to the Shinnecock Inlet fishing boat docks for several years, or the confiding first-year bird at Jones Beach which allowed for a nice study of plumage changes from its discovery on the Southern Nassau CBC in early January through the end of the period. Another notable returnee was the extremely white-wing-tipped adult Iceland Gull at Shinnecock Inlet, which has frequented the same location in winter for many years.

Raptors, etc.

Birders hoping that the severe weather would result in an incursion of northern raptors and owls were for the most part disappointed. Snowy Owls were scarce statewide, and the rarer northern owls – Northern Hawk Owl, Great Gray Owl, and Boreal Owl – were unreported. Short-eared Owl numbers varied statewide; the highest numbers being reported from Regions 1, 2 and 9, but were down in Regions 3, 4 and 5. Day-flying Long-eared Owls in Region 5 were likely forced by deep snow to extend their hunting time; good numbers were also

reported in Regions 9 and 10. Rough-legged Hawks were reported as above normal only in Region 3 and in agricultural areas of Region 6; in locations with low totals, such as Regions 2 and 5, they may have been forced out by high snows or low rodent numbers. Bald Eagles continue to occur in good numbers; especially notable were the wintering concentrations along the lower Hudson River, where over 100 birds were counted on occasion. Golden Eagles wintered in small numbers in several locations; the tail end of the fall migration also passed by Franklin Mt. in Region 4 in early December. A number of Regional editors also commented on higher than expected numbers of Red-shouldered Hawks. Up to seven Merlins wintered at the communal roost on the SUNY Buffalo campus in Region 1, while the birds which frequented the Onondaga Park roost in Region 5 seemed to have moved from that location. Gyrfalcons made two appearances in the state this winter: a briefly seen but well-photographed bird at Point Peninsula on 1 Dec was less accommodating but also less controversial than an individual at Sodus Bay. This latter bird, seen by many during its 10-day stay, was found to have been banded by the USFWS, under still mysterious circumstances. Superficially similar but not technically raptors, both species of vulture continued an increasing trend in the state this winter. Black Vulture was only recorded in three Regions, but birds in outlying Region 8 and on eastern Long Island in Region 10 may be evidence of range expansion, while Region 9 high counts of 63 on the Putman CBC and 101 on the South Orange CBC represent the species' stronghold in the state. Turkey Vulture was recorded in eight of ten Regions, the exceptions being only northerly Regions 6 and 7.

Lingerers

Each year a number of lingering summer visitors or fall migrants squeak into the winter season, generally disappearing as the colder temperatures set in, whether by late migration (hopefully) or expiration. Some of these are classic "half-hardies" a term governed somewhat by the local climate – Yellow-rumped Warblers and icterids, common winterers downstate, fit the bill in more northerly Regions, while less hardy stock such as Eastern Phoebe and Baltimore Oriole often last long enough to be counted on Long Island Christmas Counts. Others are unexpected surprises, presumably birds not fit enough to migrate south on schedule, or true rarities hanging on from their initial appearance in late fall. Examples this season include Common Yellowthroat in Regions 1 and 2; Virginia Rail in Regions 2 and 9; last season's *Tyrannus* flycatcher hybrid and Indigo Bunting in Region 2; Brown Thrasher, Eastern Towhee and Chipping Sparrow in Region 3; Gray Catbirds in Regions 3 and 5; Osprey in Regions 4 and 9; Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Red-winged Blackbird, Rusty Blackbird and Common Grackle in Region 5; Great Blue Heron in Region 7; American Bittern, Wilson's Snipe, and a surprisingly high number of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in Region 8; Green Heron, Eastern Phoebe, House Wren, Pine Warbler, and Baltimore Orioles in Region 9; and Black Rail, Common Tern and Forster's Tern in Region 10. Lingering shorebirds included a rare-at-any-season Willet in Region 1, at the same location one was present in September; Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin and Red Phalarope in Region 5; and in Region 10, Spotted Sandpiper and two Willets at an

odd, slightly inland location, both recorded on the Southern Nassau CBC. The snowy weather helped concentrate late sparrows on the Jones Beach strip in Region 10, where single Clay-colored, Grasshopper and Lincoln's sparrows were found in early December, while good numbers of late warblers in the Region, including Pine Warbler and Palm Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat and the state's second post-December record of Cape May Warbler, were more surprising considering the harsh conditions.

Rarities

Although the season seemed to lack any "stand-out" rarities, a number of "good" birds did appear around the state. The second Region 1 record of Townsend's Solitaire spent two days on Grand Island in early December. Two Northern Gannets, rarer in winter than in fall, included an especially unusual sighting on the Niagara River. A well-described "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow in Region 2 was unfortunately elusive and only seen by the original finders on consecutive days. Late Dickcissels made appearances at feeders in Regions 3, 4 and 10. Region 3 also hosted a trio of unusual waterbirds on Cayuga Lake, including Pacific Loon, Eared Grebe, and Northern Gannet, the first two also including follow-up. Yellow-throated Warblers turned up in odd locations in Region 3 – roosting on an old Cliff Swallow nest, and in Region 4 – frequenting a diner where the staff put out scraps of bread for it. Region 7 hosted a couple of short-staying waterbirds, Western Grebe and Black Guillemot, and a Brewer's Blackbird there was found at a Wild Turkey feeding area. In Region 8, a Varied Thrush that spent five days at a feeder in mid-January was a second Albany County record. Region 10 highlights included the continuing presence of two *Selasphorus* hummingbirds first found in the fall, both now believed to be immature female Rufous Hummingbirds. Following the hybrid flycatcher debate discussed in the previous issue (KB 54:1-17), a *Tyrannus* flycatcher on Staten Island in early January was cautiously identified as a Western Kingbird. Good CBC records from Region 10 were an immature Brown Pelican found at Shinnecock Inlet on 19 Dec that not only continued at that location long enough to be counted on the Quogue CBC the following day, but was gracious enough to fly east through the Sagaponack CBC circle on 21 Dec, and a Harris's Sparrow on limited-access Gardiner's Island, on the Montauk CBC.

Miscellaneous

A couple of Regional editors commented on the numbers of corvids in light of their susceptibility to the West Nile Virus. In Region 3, American Crow and Common Raven numbers were both up, although Blue Jay numbers were down. In Region 5, point counts of American Crows at roost locations and the Syracuse CBC showed numbers down from the previous year, perhaps indicating the continuing impact of the virus. Region 8 editor Will Yandik commented on the populations of a couple of "half-hardy" wintering species, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Carolina Wren. Carolina Wren, at the limits of its range in New York, is known for having periodic population crashes as a result of harsh winter

weather, and the cumulative effects of the last two winters resulted in lower numbers this year. It will be interesting to see how the species fares in the near future. Yandik theorizes that Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, on the other hand, may be undercounted by traditional methods such as Christmas Counts, since, at least in Region 8, they seem to favor specific microhabitats in winter. Better directed searching may prove the species to be a more common wintering bird than previously thought. Finally, Region 1 editor Mike Morgante describes an incident along the Niagara River, where birders at a traditional stop along the river (a public park, no less) were interrogated at gunpoint by the Buffalo Police and other authorities, apparently due to a phoned-in tip describing suspicious activities in which the birders' telescopes were mistaken for cameras directed at the nearby Peace Bridge to Canada. This unfortunate incident serves as a reminder that, especially in this age of heightened security concerns, birders should be aware that routine activities of our hobby may be met with suspicion and questioning. Each of us is potentially an unofficial ambassador to the non-birding public and to the authorities – the admirably measured response of the Buffalo birders most likely smoothed the way for future birders in the area.

Bird of the Season

Without a standout rarity – a first state record, or a crowd-pleasing vagrant – the Bird of the Season is a difficult choice. Many of the rarities listed above would make a decent choice, but none of them, in my mind, occurred under the particularly compelling circumstances that would warrant the BOTS. My choice, therefore, is to award the BOTS, as a group, to the Bohemian Waxwings that scattered south in an almost certainly unprecedented foray into all ten Kingbird Regions.

