

THE JANUARY WATERFOWL COUNT, 2004

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Abstract—The New York State Ornithological Association (formerly Federation of New York State Bird Clubs) annual January Waterfowl Count (JWC), was held during January 10-19, 2004 with approximately 230 participants. Harsh winter weather prior to and during the count resulted in many areas being frozen over and difficult viewing conditions. Nonetheless, a total of 347,661 birds (47 species) were observed, 8% more than in 2003 and 24% above the long-term (1973-2003) average. Total counts of ducks and other water birds (loons, grebes, cormorants and coot) were slightly below average, while total numbers of geese and swans were well above average. The top 10 species, accounting for 88% of the total, were: Canada Goose, Mallard, Greater Scaup, Redhead, Surf Scoter, American Black Duck, Brant, Common Merganser, Common Goldeneye, and Bufflehead. Several notable regional highlights were reported.

The New York State Ornithological Association (formerly Federation of New York State Bird Clubs) has conducted an annual midwinter waterfowl count (FWC) almost every year since 1955 (Rising 1955), except for a brief hiatus in 1968-1972 (Jones 1980). Each January, participants visit lakes, rivers and shorelines throughout New York State to count waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) and associated water birds (e.g., loons, grebes, cormorants and coot). Whenever possible, counts are conducted during a 9-day count period beginning on the second Saturday after New Year's Day, with a target date of the first Sunday in that period. Most counts are conducted during the first 3 days of the period, but in some cases additional time is needed to complete the counts.

Official weather data for January 2004 were not obtained, but regional compilers reported severe winter weather conditions just prior to and during the count all across the state. As reported by Guthrie (2004): "There was no doubt that the weather during 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. The severe cold in January resulted in little open water in most of the state, and, subsequently, lower than normal waterfowl totals..." (except for geese and swans).

Regional compilers all reported that such conditions prevailed during the count period, with temperatures well below freezing, occasional snow fall, strong winds on many days, and extensive ice cover, making waterfowl viewing difficult. As a result of this weather pattern, most small inland waters and

some larger bays and lakes were completely frozen. Many larger lakes, rivers, and coastal bays had significant shoreline ice that limited waterfowl use.

Results

A total of 347,661, comprising 47 species, were counted in 2004 (Table 1). The 2003 total was 8% above 2003 and 24% above the long-term (1973-2003) average of 280,376 birds (Table 2). Unfortunately, several important areas on Long Island, accounting for approximately 13% of the total count, were surveyed after the scheduled survey period, due to difficulties finding volunteers to replace past observers who were unable to do the counts this year.

Comparison of the 2004 counts with long-term (1973-2003) averages shows 10 of 21 major species or taxa at least 10% above average, and nine species or taxa more than 10% below average (Table 2). Canada Geese (156,960) climbed to the 3rd highest count ever, while most ducks, except Common Eider and scoters, declined from a year ago. Counts of most other water birds declined also, except for Double-crested Cormorant. A new high count was established for Black Scoter (3,185).

Total waterfowl numbers in the Atlantic Flyway (Maine to Florida) were up 2% from 2003, but were 7% below the 10-year (1994-2003) average (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, unpublished data). Flyway counts of dabbling ducks were up 9% from a year ago, diving ducks increased 22%, and sea ducks decreased 21%. Flyway counts of Canada Geese and Brant declined 18% and 21%, respectively, whereas Snow Geese and Brant were up 37% from a year ago. It appears that some of the decline in duck numbers in New York were compensated for by increases in more southern states. Annual changes in relative abundance in New York often do not mirror flyway trends because state counts reflect effects of weather as well as population changes.

Highlights of regional reports included a Northern Shoveler on the Niagara River and a record number of Tundra Swans in Region 1, a Tufted Duck on Lake Ontario (Region 2), two Barrow's Goldeneye on Lake Champlain (Region 7), White-fronted Geese in Dutchess County (Region 9), a Tundra Swan on the lower Hudson River (Region 9), and a King Eider and 11 Harlequin Ducks at Long Beach Island, contributing to a new high of 14 Harlequins in Region 10 (Table 1). Numbers of Long-tailed Ducks in Region 1 increased slightly from 2003 but were still below the numbers seen in recent years. This decline may be due to the recent outbreak of Type E botulism in that region, which has killed thousands of this species every fall since 2001.

Future Counts

The FWC is a valuable long-term population monitoring program for waterfowl and other water birds wintering in New York State. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has discontinued aerial surveys of waterfowl wintering in New York, so they now rely on the FWC as the standard survey. It is

Table 1. Regional totals for 2004 January Waterfowl Count.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Goose, Gr. White-fr.									2	2	4
Snow			16				9	1	6	112	144
Canada	4,228	2,087	43,234	869	15,459	3,224	1	7,961	21,925	57,972	156,960
Brant									32	10,521	10,553
Swan, Mute	1	156	16	1	7			1	415	1,070	1,667
Trumpeter		2	1		1						4
Tundra	402		245		13				1		661
Wood Duck	6	3		1	2				5	6	23
Gadwall	12	26	61		9				65	1,214	1,387
Wigeon, Eurasian										3	3
American	24		4	9					78	845	960
Am. Black Duck	287	299	1,561	42	209	131	145	320	1,132	7,638	11,764
Mallard	8,558	4,294	6,543	532	2,928	557	1,891	1,815	3,534	9,396	40,048
Mallard X Black	3	5	4		2		1		5	40	60
Blue-winged Teal										2	2
Northern Shoveler	3									451	454
Northern Pintail	5		2						4	61	72
Green-winged Teal	2		1						6	186	195
Canvasback	5,917		183		4				3	804	6,911
Redhead	229	191	13,299	5	14				2	18	13,758
Ring-necked Duck	41	6	241		53	1			171	437	950
Tufted Duck		1									1
Scaup, Greater	8,066	317	158		624	10	2		941	21,755	31,873
Lesser	8	108	359		10		2		2	112	601
not to species		175	154					3	5	56	393

Table 1. Regional totals for 2004 January Waterfowl Count. (cont.)

Eider, King										1	1
Common										1,504	1,504
Harlequin Duck										14	14
Scoter, Surf										12,622	12,622
White-winged	338	58	1							3,139	3,536
Black			1							3,184	3,185
not to species							1			3,874	3,875
Long-tailed Duck	868	842	1		190	86			38	741	2,766
Bufflehead	4,304	192	285		173	36	85		320	3,083	8,478
Goldeneye, Common	1,683	1,986	1,275	2	951	1,265	840	193	98	1,269	9,562
Barrow's							2				2
Merganser, Hooded	98	10	41	14	23	4	22	10	102	766	1,090
Common	3,784	757	660	282	2,141	1,448	629	223	473	11	10,408
Red-breasted	200	202	298	1	19	3	1		136	3,840	4,700
Ruddy Duck	1	3							57	1,529	1,590
Loon, Red-throated	1	1								41	43
Common	2	2	10							62	76
Grebe, Pied-billed	9		13		4					5	31
Horned	1	8	10		2			4	1	171	197
Red-necked	1		4								5
Eared			1							2	3
Cormorant, D.-crested	72	2	19		6				1	173	273
Great									21	68	89
American Coot	37	101	961	30	5				41	201	1,376
Unidentified		56						30		2,701	2,787
TOTAL OF ABOVE	39,191	11,890	69,663	1,787	22,849	6,765	3,635	10,557	29,622	151,702	347,661

important that member clubs and individuals maintain complete and consistent coverage of areas surveyed in the past to ensure that results are comparable from year-to-year and over the long-term.

Future counts are scheduled as follows:

2006 - January 14-22 (target date - Sunday, January 15)

2007 - January 13-21 (target date - Sunday, January 14)

For more information about the JWC, visit the NYSOA web site at:

<http://www.nybirds.org/ProjWaterfowl.htm>

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Table 2. Comparison of January 2004 waterfowl counts with 2003, long-term (1973-2003, "LT") and most recent 10-year (1994-2003) averages for all species averaging over 1,000 individuals during either period.

Species	2004	2003	10-yr Avg	LT Avg	% Change vz 2003	% Change vs 10-yr	% Change vs LT
Canada Goose	156,960	111,988	120,960	77,105	40%	30%	104%
Brant	10,553	15,304	16,962	14,984	-31%	-38%	-30%
Mute Swan	1,667	1,749	1,647	1,276	-5%	1%	31%
Gadwall	1,387	1,113	1,508	995	25%	-8%	39%
American Wigeon	960	1,719	1,534	1,666	-44%	-37%	-42%
American Black Duck	11,764	12,415	17,871	19,456	-5%	-34%	-40%
Mallard	40,048	42,825	44,897	33,680	-6%	-11%	19%
Canvasback	6,911	11,862	11,899	11,131	-42%	-42%	-38%
Redhead	13,758	20,615	12,554	8,490	-33%	10%	62%
Ring-necked Duck	950	1,415	1,042	522	-33%	-9%	82%
scaup (both species)	32,867	39,003	37,176	49,374	-16%	-12%	-33%
Common Eider	1,504	236	2,868	979	537%	-48%	54%
scoters (all species)	23,218	6,191	13,960	13,367	275%	66%	74%
Long-tailed Duck	2,766	2,033	5,103	4,469	36%	-46%	-38%
Bufflehead	8,478	9,179	8,367	6,400	-8%	1%	32%
Common Goldeneye	9,562	14,214	13,637	12,579	-33%	-30%	-24%
Hooded Merganser	1,090	1,845	1,300	677	-41%	-16%	61%
Common Merganser	10,408	10,118	8,407	11,262	3%	24%	-8%
Red-breasted Merganser	4,700	5,707	5,529	4,460	-18%	-15%	5%
Ruddy Duck	1,590	4,999	4,496	2,082	-68%	-65%	-24%
American Coot	1,376	1,961	3,066	2,047	-30%	-55%	-33%
Total DUCKS	172,788	186,838	193,190	182,453	-8%	-11%	-5%
Total GEESE and SWANS	169,993	129,330	140,425	93,751	31%	21%	81%
Total OTHER WATER BIRDS	2,093	2,965	4,378	3,057	-29%	-52%	-32%
TOTAL of ALL SPECIES	347,661	320,665	339,380	280,376	8%	2%	24%