

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON WINTER 2004

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The Weather

Weather discussions in many of the regional reports shared common themes. December started out mild. Many areas then experienced a brief, sharp cold spell around the third week, at the beginning of the Christmas Count period. Precipitation in most areas was near normal, although a couple of regions were above average. January was a month of contrasts; statewide, the first two weeks were very mild, with a number of record highs experienced. This changed dramatically for the second half of the month, when cold arctic air swept into the state and remained the rest of the month. During this period many areas experienced record lows. The range of temperatures recorded during the month was exceptional. February echoed the mild first half and harsh second half of the prior month, though to a lesser degree. Several Regional editors commented that near average overall monthly temperatures were deceptive given the daily variation throughout the period.

Christmas Bird Counts

As usual, the extensive scouting and count coverage associated with the annual Christmas Bird Counts spiced the regional reports with rarities and lingering migrants. Among the highlights located this winter were Boreal Owl in Region 1; Eastern Phoebe in Region 4; House Wren and Dickcissel in Region 8; Lark Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler and Ovenbird in Region 9; and a remarkable mix of vagrants and exceptional lingerers in Region 10 including Cackling Goose, Pacific Loon, Broad-winged Hawk, Semipalmated Plover, two Willets, Boreal Owl, Townsend's Solitaire, Western Tanager, Yellow Warbler, Canada Warbler, Harris's Sparrow and Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow. Please refer to the special detailed Christmas Count coverage in this issue and to the regional reports for details on these and many more interesting records and analyses.

Waterfowl/Waterbirds

Waterfowl reports reflected the dual nature of the season's temperatures. In some locations, the warm start to December led to greater numbers of lingering waterfowl; Regions 7 and 8 in particular commented on this phenomenon. Other areas saw more impact in the severe cold temperatures later in the season, which drove out species that might otherwise spend the winter, or delayed the return of early northbound migrants. Some regional editors commented that the cold temperatures also contributed to greater concentrations of ducks in remaining

areas of open water; especially notable were a concentration of 70,000 ducks, mainly Greater Scaup and Canvasback, in the Niagara River in Region 1, and large numbers of diving ducks in Oswego Harbor in Region 5. Unusually high numbers of Black and Surf Scoters continued off of the eastern end of Long Island, with estimates of at least 40,000 and 75,000, respectively, in late December.

Notable waterfowl reports included Cackling Geese in Regions 2, 3, 4 and 10 and Greater White-fronted Geese in Regions 3, 9 and 10. The second winter Ross s Goose in Region 1 was carefully studied to eliminate the possibility of a Ross s x Snow Goose hybrid. King Eiders were reported in good numbers upstate, with multiple birds in Regions 1 and 2, and a cooperative female in Region 5 s Oswego Harbor. Unusual ducks elsewhere included Harlequin Ducks in Regions 1 and 2 and at regular wintering locations in Region 10; Barrow s Goldeneyes in Regions 2, 3, 6, 7 and 10; Eurasian Wigeon in Region 9; and Eurasian Green-winged Teal in Region 10. Trumpeter Swans were reported from Regions 2, 3 and 5; the Region 2 birds were noted as originating from the Province of Ontario release program. Tundra Swans were present in decent numbers in traditional wintering areas upstate. Downstate New York seems to have lost its most reliable location, as Hook Pond in eastern Long Island, long a traditional wintering spot for a small number of Tundra Swans and other waterfowl, no longer hosts good numbers of waterfowl. This is apparently at least in part due to changes to the water quality initiated by adjacent homeowners to actively discourage large numbers of waterfowl, especially geese, from congregating. Additional waterfowl highlights included Great Cormorant in Region 2 and in Region 3, an Eared Grebe at Aurora Bay on Cayuga Lake, the sixth consecutive year one has been at that location.

It was an above-average alcid year downstate. Good numbers of Razorbills were present off of Long Island in Region 10, and one to two were present in mid-January in western Long Island Sound in Region 9, where they rarely occur. A rare inshore Common Murre was found on the Southern Nassau CBC in Region 10. Black Guillemot was noted on several dates at Montauk Point, where the species is rare but regular; the species is considerably less frequent farther west, so one at Fort Tilden in Queens was a surprise. Dovekies were represented by nine on a December 31 pelagic trip from New Jersey that entered New York waters. The biggest story this season, alcid-wise, was a major inshore incursion of Thick-billed Murres all along the eastern seaboard. Numbers were greatest in New England, and small numbers were found as far south as the Carolinas. Numbers in Region 10 were perhaps the largest in nearly 30 years. Initial reports of 1-2 Thick-billed Murres from Shinnecock Inlet in early January were followed by a scattering of additional sightings ranging from Montauk Point to Breezy Point in Queens. Many of these birds lingered for several days; the discovery of several dead or dying Murres during this period indicates that these birds were likely stressed in some way.

Gulls

Continuing a trend over the last few years, the peak overall numbers of gulls on the Niagara River was felt to have been in the second week of December, later than the traditional mid to late November peak. Although Bonaparte's Gulls departed after early January, good numbers of large gulls continued into mid-January. Highlights on the river included California Gull continuing from the fall season and counts of up to 25 Iceland Gulls. Also in Region 1, two Sabine's Gulls near Dunkirk Harbor were notable both for the unusual winter date and in that one bird was an adult, an age rarely seen in the state. The gulls across the rest of the state outside Region 1 were relatively mundane. Thayer's Gulls were reported from Regions 1, 2 and 3; only the Region 3 report of this hard-to-identify species indicated documentation was sent to NYSARC. Little Gull numbers were low with only a few reported from each of Regions 1, 2 and 10, and Black-headed Gull was also only reported in low numbers from Region 10. The usual assortment of wintering Lesser Black-backed, Iceland, and Glaucous Gulls were reported in fairly standard numbers around the state.

Hawks and Owls

The continuing resurgence of Bald Eagles in the New York area was evidenced by nest-building activity of two pairs on the Niagara River in Region 1. It has been more than 50 years since eagles have nested on the Niagara River. Several other regions also commented on good numbers of wintering Bald Eagles. Also in Region 1, the traditional winter Merlin roost on the SUNY Buffalo campus held up to 6 birds; good numbers of wintering Merlins were also reported from a number of other regions. This is in sharp contrast to American Kestrel, which continues its decline; indeed, in many areas Merlin is becoming the more expected small falcon in winter. Golden Eagles were well-represented, with reports from Regions 3, 4, 8, 9 and 10. Lingered raptors included a December Osprey in Region 2 and widespread reports of Red-shouldered Hawks; last season's late-staying Broad-winged Hawk in Central Park remained long enough to be counted on the Lower Hudson Christmas Bird Count on 19 December. Gyrfalcons appeared in Region 3, along both sides of Cayuga Lake, and in Region 7; unfortunately neither bird lingered for very long.

The Northeast's invasion of winter owls continued throughout the winter season as Great Gray Owls congregated in amazing numbers in nearby Ontario and Quebec. Although reports were coming closer and closer to the New York border, it seemed for a while that none would actually enter the state. Finally, one was found on 23 February on Cape Vincent in Region 6. This confiding bird remained at this location well into the next porting season, allowing scores of birders to see it. Another Great Gray on Cape Vincent was taken to a rehabilitator for a short stay after flying into a truck on 25 February, and a third probable report was received from the region. Boreal Owls, another feature species of the owl invasion, made a good showing in state. There were two found in Region 1, one a Christmas count

find that remained only one day and the second a bird on private property that remained from late January through mid-March. Region 2 also hosted two Boreals, one at Braddock Bay Wildlife Management Area in late December and another photographed in late January after it flew into a window. The most remarkable record, though, was a bird in Central Park in Region 10, first found on the Lower Hudson CBC. This bird remained for nearly a month and was seen by hundreds of people as it frequently roosted in relatively exposed spots in the few conifers in the vicinity of the Tavern on the Green restaurant, at times in the decorative plantings immediately surrounding the restaurant itself. See the lead article in this issue for more on this exciting event.

There were two reports of Northern Hawk-Owl, one each from Region 4 and Region 6; unfortunately, both of these were seen only once. Although reports of Snowy Owls came from seven of the ten reporting regions, it was not a big year with only 14 reports in total. Good numbers of Short-eared Owls were reported in Regions 1, 2, 3 and 9.

Other Winter Irruptives

Winter finches were generally scarce this season. Aside from an influx of Purple Finches in central Regions 4 and 5, there were mainly scattered reports of low numbers of the various species. Notable reports included Hoary Redpolls in Region 2 and Region 7. Red Crossbill was reported from five regions; the Region 4 report contains an interesting comment on the different types being seen, as noted from morphological, vocal and habitat differences.

Northern Shrikes made a good show upstate with many regions reporting better than average numbers. This event did not extend to the southernmost regions; there were only three reported in Region 9 and one in Region 10. Bohemian Waxwing were neither as widespread or numerous as last winter; outside of flocks of 60, 76 and 150 in Region 7 there were only single digit reports from four other regions. Central regions reported good numbers of Snow Buntings and Horned Larks, the observations aided by snow cover which helped concentrate the feeding flocks.

Lingerers

In addition to the previously mentioned lingering birds located during the Christmas count season, a number of other birds more typically associated with warmer seasons turned up this winter. In Region 1, Black-crowned Night Herons were again found roosting in Buffalo and another frequented Dunkirk Harbor. Also in Region 1 Brown Thrasher and two separate American Pipits were found, and three Chipping Sparrows at a Wilson feeder were a new seasonal high for the Region. A bit of Patagonia Picnic Table effect occurred at Hamlin Beach in early to mid-December. Birders searching for the regional first Ash-throated Flycatcher (see below) turned up first a regional record-late White-eyed Vireo, which remained for 10 days, and then a state record-late Blue-winged Warbler on 9 December. This was followed by a Regional record-late Lincoln's Sparrow on 16 December. Other half-hardy reports from

Region 2 included Virginia Rail; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Eastern Towhee; Chipping, Field and Savannah Sparrows; Yellow-rumped Warbler; and Common Yellowthroat. In Region 3, Christmas Counts turned up three Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Gray Catbird, Common Yellowthroat, and two Field Sparrows, and additional reports included American Pipit and Chipping and White-crowned Sparrows. An Eastern Phoebe was a good find on the Cortland CBC in Region 4, as was a Winter Wren on the Sherburne CBC, especially since most of that count is at elevations over 1400 ft. The Tioga area in Region 4 hosted a mimid trifacta with Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher all making appearances. Also in Tioga, feeder birds included White-crowned and Fox Sparrows and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. In Region 5, a host of uncommon half-hardies included Eastern Towhee, Field Sparrow and Rusty Blackbird at feeders, and Red-headed Woodpecker, Pine Warbler, Fox Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow elsewhere. Few lingerers were noted in Region 6, but Region 7 turned up five Great Blue Herons in December, two Belted Kingfishers still present as of mid-January, and a surprising Hermit Thrush in Tupper Lake on 18 December. Region 8 notables included a December Blue-headed Vireo in Washington County and a House Wren on the Johnstown-Gloversville CBC, as well as good numbers of American Pipits in early winter and a handful of lingering Gray Catbirds. Conversely, warblers were scarce; the single Yellow-rumped Warbler reported is apparently the lowest winter total in a decade. A good list of late birds in Region 9 included Great Egret, two House Wrens, Wilson's Warbler, Pine Warbler, two Common Yellowthroats, and four White-crowned Sparrows. Region 10 editor S. S. Mitra noted that in many cases it's difficult to distinguish half-hardy winter residents capable of short-distance moves in response to changing weather or food resources from early-returning northbound migrants. In Region 10, species that may fall into the former group include many of the common wintering half-hardies, such as American Robin and Northern Flicker; classic examples of the latter group are the blackbirds, particularly Common Grackle and Red-winged Blackbirds, species whose wintering numbers are typically augmented in early to mid February by northbound migrants. Also in Region 10, there seemed to be a noticeable decline in species vulnerable to severe weather, such as Clapper Rail, Hermit Thrush, and Fox Sparrow; it's difficult to know how much of the decrease in reports was a real reduction in the number of birds, or a function of lesser effort by birders in seeking them out. Please see the Region 10 report for more discussion of the extraordinary Christmas Count records of Yellow Warbler and Canada Warbler mentioned above. Additional unusual winter records from the Region not mentioned previously include two December Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, an Ovenbird at the Bronx Zoo on 26 December, and two Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows on the Central Suffolk CBC.

Rarities

Additional rarities around the state included a lingering Lark Sparrow at a feeder in Porter, in Region 1; the first mid-winter record for the Region and the fifth

overall, the bird cooperatively remained for the local Christmas Count and then through the rest of the season, allowing numerous birders the good fortune to observe it. Even more exciting, but much less cooperative, was a Black-throated Gray Warbler present for two days in the town of Niagara Falls. See the Region 1 report for the full story on the discovery and identification of this bird. Highlight rarities in Region 2 included a Regional first record of Razorbill studied for 45 minutes at Hamlin Beach on 2 December. The wait until the next Regional first was a short one, ending when an Ash-throated Flycatcher was found the following day. This well-studied and photographed bird represents the first upstate record as well. Other notables from Hamlin Beach during the season were a brief Harris s Sparrow in January and reports of both Brewer s and Rusty Blackbirds. Purple Sandpiper was a good in Region 5. In Region 8, a Dickcissel lingered from mid-December to early January at the feeders at the Five Rivers Educational Center in Delmar. Region 9's best rarity of the season was unfortunately not seen live; a freshly deceased Cave Swallow, a Regional first, was found under the Route 1-95 overpass at the Rye train station on 16 December. The bird had apparently roosted under the overpass and succumbed during the night. Also in Region 9 was a Lark Sparrow in Peekskill; a one-day only Tufted Duck in Rye; up to two Razorbills in Long Island sound off of Rye from 10-17 January; and a first Dutchess county winter record of Orange-crowned Warbler coming to a feeder in Smithfield. Rarities in Region 10 included several lingerers from the fall season, including the immature Golden Eagle in Southampton through at least 4 December; an Ash-throated Flycatcher in Prospect Park, which was remarkably joined briefly by a second on 4 December; and continuing *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, a Rufous Hummingbird in Central Park to at least 6 December and a Rufous/Allen s in Orient to at least 5 December. A flyby Pacific Loon seen at Montauk Point during scouting for the Montauk CBC unfortunately did not linger for the count the following day. A Western Tanager on the Smithtown CBC was somewhat more cooperative; found on count day, it remained for a number of lucky observers who were able to search for it that day, but subsequently disappeared. Better luck was had with the Townsend s Solitaire discovered at Maidstone Park in Easthampton during the Sagaponack CBC on 19 December. This bird remained until at least 9 January, although its secretive habits made it difficult to locate on occasion. Rare *Zonotrichia* sparrows were flock-mates at Baldwin Harbor Park, Nassau Co., on the Southern Nassau CBC. A group of White-throated Sparrows there contained both an immature Harris s Sparrow and an immature Gambel s White-crowned Sparrow. Both birds were seen regularly (the Harris s more frequently) with the roving flock through at least the morning of 23 January.

Miscellaneous

A number of regions commented on corvid numbers, in particular the continued increase in Common Ravens. American Crow appears to be back on the rise in

Region 5, and Region 8 editor Will Yandik discusses the ongoing efforts there to disrupt the sizeable roosts in Albany, Troy and elsewhere. A number of central and northern Regions commented on the continuing increase of southern species, including Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, and Carolina Wren. Conversely, another season with no Gray Partridge reports in Region 6 lends weight to the suspicion that the species may be extirpated in the Region, and, therefore, possibly in the state. Double-crested Cormorant numbers and control remain a hot topic in the state. Region 7 editor John M. C. Peterson discusses a new two-year study on the affects of breeding cormorants on colonial waterbirds on Four Brothers Island in Lake Champlain.

Bird of the Season

There were a number of good candidate for the Bird of the Season. Highlights included a number of Regional firsts, remarkable wintering records, and statewide rarities. I opt for a joint winter owl selection — the Great Gray Owl on Cape Vincent in Region 6 and the Boreal Owl in Central Park, Manhattan, in Region 10. Neither bird is a state, or even Regional first, but these two individuals allowed probably hundreds of New York birders to share in the excitement of the owl invasion of the winter of 2004/05 on our home turf.

Corrigenda

Cayuga Lake was incorrectly described as being in Region 2 rather than the correct Region 3 in two locations in the Fall 2004 highlights column (pages 37 and 39). Thanks to Matt Medler for bringing this to my attention.

