

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – Winter 2005-06

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THE WEATHER

The most compelling aspect of this winter's weather was the extraordinary warm weather that persisted throughout the state from the last week of December through January. The first three weeks of December were colder than normal, leading to below average temperatures for the month, but this changed dramatically with the influx of warm air that followed. Statewide, January 2006 recorded the fifth warmest average temperature since 1895. The warm weather had a profound impact on avian observations. In particular, a remarkable number of "half-hardies" persisted through the early December cold snap and lingered to the Christmas Count season, and beyond into January.

WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS

As usual, warm winter weather proved a mixed blessing for waterfowl observers. Open water and mild conditions allowed a number of species to remain further north than usual, but there were fewer birds concentrated at the usual open water locations. Winter holdovers were augmented by northbound migrants in February, in many cases arriving earlier than normal. A large concentration of Snow Geese was found in early February at the Savannah Mucklands on the border between Region 2 and Region 3, with up to 64,000 counted. Greater White-fronted and Ross's Geese were noted among the migrant Snows in Regions 2 and 3. Multiple Greater White-fronted Geese were also noted in Region 10, including an individual that spent about two months frequenting the same urban park pond in Queens as an even more unexpected Barnacle Goose. Another Barnacle Goose was found farther east on Long Island at Calverton. Cackling Geese were reported from five Kingbird regions during the season. Brant were reported upstate from Regions 2 and 5, and downstate flocks in Region 10 were spiced with several "Black" Brant and an "intermediate"-type. Trumpeter Swans were found in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5, with a maximum of 5 in Region 3. Harlequin Ducks were reported from inland Regions 1 and 2 and coastal Region 10. Barrow's Goldeneyes were found in Regions 2, 3, 7, and 10, and Eurasian Wigeon in Regions 2, 3, 9, and 10. Common Eider were noteworthy at opposite ends of the state, as last season's Region 2 female Common Eider continued at Irondequoit Bay, while large numbers of Common Eiders were found in Region 10, with up to nearly 3000 counted on the Montauk CBC. Unfortunately, these high numbers may have been due to ecological problems to our north, as a late-winter die-off of Common Eiders turned up indications that birds were underfed and suffering from high parasite loads. Wood Ducks took advantage of the mild conditions and wintered in small numbers across the state. There

were reports from 8 of the 10 Kingbird regions. The Regional reports contain more details about waterfowl numbers and locally unusual ducks.

Several Red-throated Loons were deposited in interior Regions 3 and 4 in early December, following a cold front. Noteworthy loon reports this season included a Pacific Loon present on Cayuga Lake in Region 3 from late January through the end of the reporting season, and a fly-by Yellow-billed Loon in Region 2. The latter would be a first Regional and third State record, if submitted to and accepted by NYSARC. Red-necked Grebes were reported in low numbers across the state, appearing in 9 of the 10 Kingbird Regions. Eared Grebes made appearances in Region 1, at the Batavia Waste Water Treatment plant, an unprecedented January sighting at a traditional late summer and fall location, and in Region 3 at Aurora Bay on Cayuga Lake, the ninth consecutive winter one has been found there.

Two jaegers were reported this season, a Pomarine Jaeger in Region 2 and a Parasitic Jaeger seen at Montauk Point the day before the Montauk CBC. A pelagic trip out of Freeport, Nassau County in Region 10 on 11 February provided a rare opportunity to spend a winter's day offshore entirely in New York waters. The lucky participants were rewarded with a remarkable tally of winter alcids, including an offshore high count of 1,675 Dovekies; a Thick-billed Murre; 20 Razorbills; an Atlantic Puffin; and at least 20 Common Murres, a single-day high count for the state. Many if not most of the nine unidentified murres and 53 unidentified large alcids were likely Common Murres as well. The historical context of these alcid sightings is discussed in detail in the Region 10 report. The sixth Atlantic Ocean alcid, Black Guillemot, was well represented in Region 10 this winter, with three reports, including one unusually far west at Jones Beach and a cooperative individual which spent two and a half weeks at Culloden Point in Montauk. The 11 February pelagic trip also recorded a good count of 2000 Northern Gannets, although no Northern Fulmar or other tubenoses were seen.

RAPTORS

Bald Eagles continued their upward trend across the state as many regions noted increased wintering numbers; the comment from Region 7 was "virtually ubiquitous". Golden Eagles are less common in winter, but this season were reported in small numbers from Regions 3, 8 and 9. Rough-legged Hawk numbers varied across the state as typical patterns seemed somewhat disrupted by warm weather and atypical snow coverage. Several regions noted an above-normal number of Red-shouldered Hawks. Merlins have become more expected in winter than in past years and this season were found in six reporting Regions. Notable was a maximum of seven at the SUNY-Buffalo roost site in Region 1. Sadly, and no longer surprising, American Kestrel numbers continue to be down; this winter the species was only mentioned in six Regional reports and the comments were peppered with statements such as "low" and "scarce". Gyrfalcons were reported from Region 2, Region 7, and Region 10. The latter bird may have been present along the Jones Beach strip for up to a month before being discovered on the Captree CBC on 18 December. Sporadic sightings

occurred throughout its stay, during which unconfirmed rumors surfaced that a falconer's Gyrfalcon or Gyrfalcon x Peregrine Falcon hybrid may have escaped in the vicinity.

Snowy Owl counts were generally low, although good numbers were found in Regions 5 and 6, and Region 10 experienced a decent showing. Short-eared, Long-eared, and Saw-whet Owls were reported only in low numbers, perhaps because mild conditions allowed them to disperse more than normal. Three Long-eared Owls at the Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar, Albany County in Region 8 were likely killed by a resident Northern Goshawk. Northern Hawk-Owls highlighted the seasonal reports in Regions 1 and Region 6. The latter was unfortunately seen only by the original observer, but the individual at Yates, Orleans County in Region 1 lingered for two months following its discovery in early January. This was the fourth Regional record and the first documented since 1963.

SHOREBIRDS

Usually shorebirds don't warrant a separate section in the winter report, but this year, perhaps due to the mild weather, numbers and variety were higher than normal. Species reported inland included Killdeer in higher than usual numbers; Purple Sandpiper; Dunlin; Wilson's Snipe; and American Woodcock. Three American Oystercatchers lingered in Region 9 long enough to be counted on the Bronx-Westchester CBC on 26 December. Unusual winter shorebirds in Region 10 included Semipalmated Plovers at Jones Beach (two) and Dune Road; a Marbled Godwit with roosting shorebird flocks on Jones Beach during December and early January; two Willets at Point Lookout for the second consecutive winter; and wintering Red Knot, Western Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher.

GULLS

January's unseasonably mild weather apparently prompted Ring-billed Gulls to move north earlier than usual. Large flocks were seen in Region 1 beginning in early February, about a month earlier than usual. Notable sightings from Region 1 included up to three Little Gulls, two reports of Black-headed Gull and the continuing California Gull at the Adam Beck Overlook, seen again in December after a month's absence. Region 2 reports were highlighted by a Regional-first Slaty-backed Gull, this coming during a winter season in which Slaty-backed Gulls were more widespread than usual across the continent. Hopefully a report will be submitted to NYSARC to ensure this record is documented for posterity. Other highlights from Region 2 were good numbers of the enigmatic Thayer's Gull, 1-2 Little Gulls, and a Black-headed Gull. Good numbers of Lesser Black-backed, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were reported from a number of Regions. The Region 10 account contains an interesting note regarding Lesser Black-backed Gull reports, listing 30 reports felt to pertain to 20+ individual birds. Black-legged Kittiwakes were reported inland from Regions 2 and Region 6, and from coastal Region 10, where reports included 100 counted

at Montauk Point on 16 December and a surprising low count of 12 on the 11 February Freeport pelagic, as well as scattered reports from various coastal locations.

WINTER FINCHES AND OTHER IRRUPTIVES

Overall it was a disappointing winter finch season. Low numbers and sporadic sightings were the rule, although all expected species were reported. Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls were generally found in low numbers, but several Regions reported larger flocks lingering at feeders. Hoary Redpolls were reported with flocks of Commons at Hamlin Beach in Region 2 and at feeders in Region 6. Crossbill numbers were lower than recent years with low numbers of each species reported from a handful of Regions. Evidence of Red Crossbill nesting was found in Region 6. One highlight was a slight increase in the numbers of Evening Grosbeaks in Regions 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9, although several Regional editors commented that numbers still pale in comparison to those found 20 years ago. Pine Grosbeaks were found in small numbers in several Regions; the most regular birds seemed to be those frequenting Webster Park in Region 2.

Northern Shrike numbers fluctuated by Region and over the season. The best numbers were found in Regions 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7; in the latter Region, numbers were deemed "exceptional". Bohemian Waxwings were found in several Regions, including a major invasion into Region 7, where flocks numbered into the hundreds, and two seen on the Montauk CBC in Region 10, where the species is truly rare.

LINGERERS

As mentioned above, a common theme in the Regional reports this season was the presence of large numbers of lingering birds, helped by the exceptionally warm mid-season weather. The effects were seen throughout the state, as species normally found downstate occurred in greater than usual numbers there, and persisted upstate in small numbers as well. Most commonly mentioned were the typical "half-hardies" such as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, Winter Wren, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Hermit Thrush, Eastern Towhee, Fox Sparrow, and Field Sparrow. Other more unusual wintering birds included an *Empidonax* flycatcher in Region 7; Veery in Region 2; Wood Thrush in Region 7; Rose-breasted Grosbeaks in Regions 7 and 9; and Ovenbird, Nashville Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, and Clay-colored Sparrow in Region 10. Many species sometimes found on December Christmas Bird Counts, but rarely later in the season, persisted this year into January and February. The Region 10 report contains a nice discussion regarding the historical changes in frequency of some of these species, and all of the Regional reports contain many more details on species of local interest.

RARITIES

In addition to previously mentioned highlights, additional rarities seen across the state included Varied Thrush in Regions 1 and 2, the latter a long-staying individual at Webster Park in Webster. A "Patagonia picnic table" phenomenon occurred there, as observers searching for the Varied Thrush turned up a number of interesting records and lingering passerines. The lingering *Selasphorus* hummingbird in Region 1 was the only report of the season. A dead adult Purple Gallinule was recovered in Webster Park in January and delivered to the Cornell Lab as a salvage specimen. Boreal Chickadees were out of range at Webster Park (again!) in Region 2 and at a Palenville, Greene County feeder in Region 8. In Region 9, the season's highlight was a Yellow-headed Blackbird found on 1 January in a roosting blackbird flock at Thompson Pond in Dutchess County, the fifth county record overall and first since 1989. Additional rarities in Region 10 included Black Rail, White-winged Dove, and Sedge Wren. Also in Region 10, what was perhaps the most remarkable bird of the winter was found on the productive 11 February pelagic trip out of Freeport. A dark-mantled gull thought to be a Lesser Black-backed Gull when seen resting on the water dispelled that notion when it lifted off and revealed bright pink feet, relatively broad white trailing edges to the wing, and, on closer inspection, a clean white head and heavy bill. As even casual birders know, identification of large gulls can be extremely tricky, and the exercise is further complicated by plumage oddities that can crop up in common species and by the specter of regular hybridization among large gulls. Even with these caveats, careful field notes, extensive photographs, and research and analysis, including comments from gull aficionados from the west coast and around the world, support the identification of the bird as Western Gull, a truly remarkable record for eastern North America. See the Region 10 report for more discussion about the circumstances of the sighting and follow-up.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

In a winter season of wide variety, there wasn't a large number of exceptional rarities. Particular highlights included Pacific and Yellow-billed Loons, two each of Northern Hawk-Owl and Varied Thrush, and Slaty-backed Gull. I choose (perhaps somewhat selfishly, as I saw it!) the presumed Western Gull from Region 10. Reminiscent of the presumed hybrid *Tyrannus* flycatcher from Geneseo in November, 2003, this bird generated significant discussion on the online "ID-Frontiers" listserve. If the identification is supported by NYSARC, and by expert review of a detailed published report (in preparation), this would constitute a unique and very important record of a species barely known to wander from coastal western North America.