

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – WINTER 2006-07

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A theme constantly repeated through the Regional Reports and in conversations among birders was the disparity between early and late winter. Whereas December 2006 and early January 2007 were very warm throughout the state, the latter part of January and February were colder than average. The mild early winter weather contributed to many unusual bird records. For instance, geese (seven species in all!) and blackbirds lingered later and in much larger numbers than is usual in many upstate areas, as did nine Sandhill Cranes and an impressive variety of ducks, loons, grebes, and cormorants—all availing themselves of the generally unfrozen landscape. The list of half-hardies recorded in Region 2 was reminiscent of places much farther south-and coast-ward: Blue-headed Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Pine Warbler, Ovenbird, three Common Yellowthroats, and Clay-colored Sparrow! A single CBC in Putnam County recorded Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, and Lincoln's Sparrow. In Region 10, where long species lists have been the norm for generations of CBC enthusiasts, compilers were still surprised by the sheer numbers of half-hardies they recorded (Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Winter and Marsh wrens come to mind as especially good examples).

Those with a skeptical mindset might suggest that these trends tell only half the story—the mild first half—and that the harsh conclusion to winter 2006-07 surely set the record straight for many marginal species: “Sure, there were lingering phoebe, Marsh Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, catbird, yellowthroat, and towhee in Catskill-Coxsackie in balmy mid December, but could anybody find them in February?” In fact, nobody did. But this hardly constitutes a refutation of the notion that our winter bird communities are changing radically, and right before our eyes. I would challenge my hypothetical skeptics to formulate and test their hypotheses more rigorously: “Was that CBC catbird actually less likely to survive to winter's end than a particular individual junco (of which 623 were recorded on the CBC)?” The data needed to answer this question can be obtained with a little effort, as they have been on Block Island for more than a decade; there, at least, we've found that the mid February densities of Gray Catbird have averaged 43% of the mid December values—quite comparable to the 53% rate for ‘Slate-colored’ Junco over the same interval. To be even more precise, it is worth noting that the variable in question is actually *persistence*, not survival. A catbird that vanishes from Catskill during December might have perished, or it might have moved. Evidence that post-migratory dispersal is a potentially important part of the equation is, again, not very difficult to obtain: the density of Gray Catbird on Block Island typically

increases between early November and mid December by about 20%, and that of Eastern Towhee by 56% over the same interval. These early winter influxes occur two or more months after stereotyped migration has ceased in these species, and suggest that the individuals pioneering ever more northerly wintering sites are more flexible than previously suspected (*North American Birds* 55: 499-503).

New York is a large and varied state, and it is fascinating not only to compare the numbers of various species across the state's diverse Regions, but to contrast how people's attitudes and reactions to a shared experience are shaped by local circumstances and history. In studying the CBC data in detail, I was somewhat surprised at how consistently numerous Cooper's Hawk was compared to Sharp-shinned Hawk, but I was more surprised by how few compilers bold-faced their Cooper's Hawk numbers. Clearly, this is one population expansion that people have already incorporated into their views of the world. Conversely, three other burgeoning winter populations, those of Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, and Common Raven, were accorded *unusual species* or *high count* status in count after count, across the state. Perhaps we will eventually settle into a "new normal" for these species as well.

For reasons discussed in greater detail in *Kingbird* 55: 107-109, print publication of Christmas Bird Count data is not only a matter of convenience, but also provides a stable, long-term archive—a function that the online database performs very imperfectly at present. Compilers of New York CBCs are encouraged to contact me directly if they are interested in tailoring their count results for publication in *The Kingbird*. For instance, there is a growing trend among CBC participants to forego the \$5 fee, payable to the National Audubon Society. This trend is reflected in the many instances, among the counts published in the present issue, in which the number of named participants is smaller than the number of observers specified in the online summary. *The Kingbird* welcomes full lists of participants.

The data in this volume provide a lot to think about, and the commentaries of the Regional Editors suggests that winter 2006-07 will be remembered by many as a season that defied a static conception of winter bird communities and blurred the boundaries among the various processes—e.g., southbound migration, northbound migration, and facultative dispersal—that shape avian communities in general.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

As is usually the case, some spectacular observations were recorded throughout the state. A brief list of highlights that caught my eye includes the almost incomprehensible numbers and diversity of geese statewide, Ken and Sue Feustel's repeat encounter (eleven years later!) with a Yellow Rail at Oak Beach Marsh, Slaty-backed Gulls in Regions 1 and 9, the Pomarine Jaegers recorded from several sites on Lake Ontario, the Razorbill at the mouth of the Niagara River, hundreds of Short-eared Owls in Region 6, yet another Rufous

Hummingbird at Lenoir Preserve in Region 9, a much admired Rufous Hummingbird in Region 10, Varied Thrushes in Regions 1 and 9, Yellow Warblers in Regions 3 and 10, the Yellow-throated Warbler at Ausable Pt. in Region 7, a gorgeous and obliging Western Tanager on Long Island, a Harris's Sparrow in Region 2, the state's second documented Smith's Longspur on the barrier beach, and a stunning Bullock's Oriole in Region 9. Even against the backdrop of these extraordinary birds, I have little difficulty selecting the adult Ivory Gull at Piermont for the BOTS award. With well over a dozen records in the state, this species could be regarded as much less rare than some of the species just listed, but I fear that the changing fortunes of Ivory Gulls will, in the future, stand in unhappy contrast to the positive trends discussed above. Whether it was by reminding us of this deeper level in our interest in birds, or simply by virtue of its beauty, this bird made a singular impression on all who saw it.

