

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2007-08

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THE WEATHER

After a cold start, the winter was generally mild but with frequent fluctuations in temperature, with overall mean temperatures about or slightly above normal in most areas of the state. Early December's cold weather broke by mid-month and average to warm conditions persisted throughout the rest of the season, albeit with frequent short cold spells. Precipitation also changed through the season, with about average rain or snowfall in December, dry conditions in January, and well above average precipitation in February, much of it falling as snow in northern regions. One result of the season's weather in northern New York where I live was that the St. Lawrence River and other large bodies of water nearly froze over completely during December, but were open by Christmas and remained open later into the season than is typical.

WATERFOWL/WATERBIRDS

Rare geese on Long Island were the waterfowl highlight of the season. The fall's Pink-footed Goose continued in Montauk through 20 February, and another one showed up in Suffolk County in early February and stayed through the end of the period. Similarly, a Barnacle Goose present in Montauk continued from the fall, with a second bird appearing on Long Island in January. The former is not on the official New York State checklist and no recent reports of the latter have been accepted by NYSARC as naturally occurring, because of the difficulty in determining whether any unbanded individual is of wild origin or an escapee. Although the debate about the origin of these individuals will likely continue for some time, a growing body of evidence indicates that both of these species can and do make it to northeast North America on their own. Adding to the goose bonanza in Region 10 were at least 16 Greater White-fronted Geese and six "Richardson's" Cackling Geese. Cackling Goose is being reported more frequently as birders become more familiar with this relatively "new" species, and additional reports came from Regions 1, 2, 5, and 8.

Accounts of duck abundance and diversity varied widely among regions, with comments ranging from "scarce and unimpressive" in Region 8 to "high until late January freeze up" in Region 6. Several Regional editors felt that dabbling ducks were present in generally low numbers. Among the rarer species were 6 reports each of Eurasian Green-winged Teal and Eurasian Wigeon in

Region 10, with three more Eurasian Wigeon in Region 9. Diving ducks were reported in better numbers, including high Redhead counts of 5352 in Region 2 and 8500 along the St. Lawrence River in Region 6, the latter far exceeding typical regional numbers. Also unprecedented in Region 6 were two reports totaling five King Eider, including a Regional record four along the Lake Ontario shoreline. King Eider made a good showing statewide, with additional reports from Regions 1, 2, 5, and 10 ("many"), although the three individuals seen in Region 5 may have been part of the same group reported in Region 6; the locations of these sightings were within a couple of miles of each other. Scoters and scaup were abundant and widespread along the coast; Harlequin Ducks were found in five locations in Region 10, with the only other report coming from Oswego in Region 5; and Barrow's Goldeneye were found in Regions 2, 6, 7, and 10.

Red-throated Loons were reported in four Regions including a Region 1 record February count of eight and a high total of 32 in Region 2 during January. A possible Pacific Loon was reported on the Southern Orange Christmas Bird Count, but details were said to be marginal. Pied-billed Grebe was well-reported, with over-wintering birds noted in Regions 5 and 10 and additional reports from Regions 4, 6, and 7 where this species is unusual in winter. Rarities included Eared Grebe in Regions 1 and 10, and a Western Grebe near Greece that was the 11th record for Region 2.

Pelagic trips out of Freeport, Nassau Co. on 2 December and 3 February yielded a nice diversity of alcids and a few other seabirds. The December trip tallied 12 Northern Fulmar, 250 Northern Gannet, one Pomarine Jaeger, 316 Dovekie, two Razorbill, and 22 Atlantic Puffin. The Freeport Pomarine was the only jaeger reported statewide. Participants on the February trip saw all six species of regularly occurring alcids, highlighted by 49 Common Murre, a total that far exceeds previously documented records for New York. Northern Gannet was observed in two locations away from the coast, including one that was observed passing by Fort Niagara State Park and Four Mile Creek State Park in Region 1 on 2 December.

HAWKS AND OWLS

Rough-legged and Red-tailed hawks were far less abundant in traditional wintering areas than during the previous year, particularly in northern New York. The exception was Region 10, where Rough-legged Hawk was present in relatively good numbers. Red-shouldered Hawk was reported in Regions 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10, with 23 total reports. A Golden Eagle that was radio-tagged in Canada spent the winter along the border of Regions 4 and 8; additional Golden Eagle reports came from Regions 1 and 6. Both Merlin and Peregrine Falcon were observed in every Region. The only Gyrfalcon report came from Region 7, but regrettably no NYSARC report was submitted.

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Northern owls put in a poor showing. Very few Snowy Owls were reported, and most were seen for only one-two days. Short-eared Owls were scarce in most of the state, although the presence of Short-ears in seven locations within Region 10 was described as a good showing. Of particular interest in that Region were four Short-eared Owls that wintered at Grumman grasslands, a site under threat of development. Long-eared Owls were reported from four regions and Northern Saw-whet Owls from six. In several regions Barred Owl was observed in yards, often hunting feeders, or in other unusual locations such as cornfields, giving rise to speculation that there was a large movement of owls out of Canada and these birds were having difficulty finding food. There were no reports of Great Gray or Boreal owls or Northern Hawk-Owl.

GULLS AND SHOREBIRDS

An adult Ross's Gull was the highlight of the winter season along the Niagara River. The Ross's Gull was found on 27 January and remained for several days, but was last seen on the Friday before a weekend during which many birders traveled to see the gull. See Willie D'Anna's article elsewhere in this issue for a full account. Other gull highlights from Niagara Falls included several reports of Black-headed Gull, all presumed to be of the same individual, and an adult Black-legged Kittiwake. An impressive streak of 15 consecutive years of California Gull sightings ended after none were reported along the river this winter. Niagara wasn't the only location in Region 1 with rare gulls, as an adult Sabine's Gull and a juvenile Franklin's Gull were at Dunkirk Harbor from 23 December to 2 January. Both species were first Regional records for January, and the Sabine's Gull was only the third or fourth adult for the Region.

White-winged gulls were widely reported, with perhaps the most spectacular showing coming from the Oswego River in Region 5, where high water resulted in numerous fish washing over the dams which in turn attracted large numbers of gulls. Among the gulls observed along the river were regional record counts of 30 Iceland Gulls on 26 January and five Lesser Black-backed Gulls during December and January; a Nelson's Gull (Herring X Glaucous Gull hybrid); and a Herring X Lesser Black-backed Gull hybrid. Another Nelson's Gull was reported on the 3 February pelagic trip out of Freeport.

All but one of New York's handful of Slaty-backed Gull records have come since 2000, and this winter saw three more reports, including a third cycle bird seen one afternoon at Irondequoit Bay for a second Region 2 record, an adult observed on several dates in Sullivan County, and a well-observed third cycle bird in Region 3 (unfortunately no Region 3 NYSARC report was received). A Little Gull at Derby Hill constituted a first winter record for Region 5, with additional reports coming from Regions 1, 2, and 10. A Laughing Gull at a Thruway rest area in New Baltimore was a rare winter find in Region 8. Rounding out the rarids were Forster's Tern in three Regions, including a third

winter record for Region 1, a first winter record for Region 2, and a very late date of 30 December in Region 10.

Fifteen species of shorebirds were reported in Region 10, including multiple Semipalmated Plover, normally a winter rarity. Away from the coast the only shorebirds were Killdeer and Wilson's Snipe in Region 1 and Purple Sandpiper in Regions 1, 6, and 9. Purple Sandpiper is rarely reported during any season in Region 6, and a winter sighting is especially unusual.

WINTER FINCHES AND OTHER IRRUPTIVES

For many the defining avian event of the winter was the irruption of Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, and Common Redpoll that was observed throughout New York. Bohemian Waxwing was reported from every region except Region 4, including Region 10 where this species is very rare. The largest numbers of Bohemians were reported in Regions 6 and 7, with numerous daily tallies of 200-300 and flocks of up to 700+ documented. Elsewhere most reports were of small groups, although a Region 2 record 105 was reported. Pine Grosbeak also occurred widely, with every Region seeing good numbers except for Region 10, where none were documented. It was generally a very good year for Common Redpoll statewide, although descriptions of redpoll numbers ranged from "average" to "the best this decade". Attentive observers found "Greater" Common Redpoll in Regions 4 and 7, and Hoary Redpoll in every Region but 10. Red Crossbill was widespread with reports from every Region, although most Regions had just one or two reports, and White-winged Crossbill was even scarcer, although it was found in every Region except 6. Evening Grosbeak was much less common than in the fall, but was widely scattered in low numbers, with the best numbers coming from higher elevations. Most Regional editors remarked on the rarity of Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finch, Pine Siskin, and American Goldfinch following large fall movements, although the latter two species were locally common in some parts of the state. Northern Shrike was present in good numbers statewide, prompting some Regional editors to make comments such as "good numbers", "a big year", and a "strong showing".

HALF-HARDIES

A good diversity of half-hardies was reported, but at least some Regional editors felt that numbers were down compared to recent years. Perhaps the cold start to the season pushed many individuals out of inland areas, but mild weather throughout the majority of the winter gave those birds that remained a good chance to survive. Species that were fairly widespread included Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Gray Catbird, Eastern Towhee, and Fox Sparrow. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was unusually numerous, with reports from six Regions including Regions 4 and 6, where this species is rarely observed in winter. Red-headed Woodpecker was restricted to Regions 1, 2, and 9, with no Region

reporting more than two individuals. Northern Flicker numbers were about average, but a Red-bellied Woodpecker found at Willsboro Point in Region 7 was a “good find”, reflecting the continued northward expansion of this species.

Some of the more unusual half-hardies or lingering individuals were a first winter record for Tree Swallow in Region 4; Brown Thrasher in Regions 2 and 8 (and also Region 10, where they normally winter in small numbers); and Indigo Bunting in Regions 2, 9, and 10. Eleven species of warbler were reported, including a Common Yellowthroat in Region 2, an Ovenbird in Region 8, and late reports of Nashville and Prairie warblers and Northern Waterthrush in Region 10.

RARITIES

Birders searching Region 10's Deep Hollow Ranch and nearby areas of Montauk for the Pink-footed and Barnacle geese turned up several additional rarities, including a long-staying Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and a Least Flycatcher on the Montauk CBC. Region 10 tallied four Ash-throated Flycatchers during December, including two birds that continued from the fall. The Deep Hollow Ranch Western Kingbird also carried over from fall, another was found on the Brooklyn CBC, and a third in Stanfordville was the ninth record for Dutchess County in Region 9. At the west end of Region 10, an oriole wintering in a small Manhattan park was initially identified as an Orchard Oriole but eventually proved to be an immature male Scott's Oriole. If accepted by NYSARC, this will be a first record for New York State. Other Region 10 rarities included a locally rare Ruffed Grouse flushed by hunters; a Yellow Rail found on the Captree CBC for the second consecutive year; a *Selasphorus* hummingbird in Nassau County; and a Townsend's Solitaire in Suffolk County that remained for at least two months and was observed by many.

Elsewhere, Sandhill Crane was observed in Regions 2 and 8. The Rufous Hummingbird present at West Walroth in Region 2 since 10 October barely persisted into the winter season, with the last sighting occurring on 1 December. A Townsend's Solitaire in Albany County was seen by three observers for 10 minutes on 20 February and not again. A Yellow-throated Warbler at Four Mile Creek State Park in Region 1 was a second Regional winter record. An “Oregon” Junco was reported in Region 1. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were found in Regions 1 and 9. A “probable Brewer's Blackbird” was reported from Region 9, but apparently no report was submitted to NYSARC.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

Good candidates for Bird of the Season include the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and Townsend's Solitaire in Region 10, and Ross's Gull in Region 1. Also deserving mention as a statewide runner-up is Bohemian Waxwing, given the uniquely early, huge, and widespread nature of the winter's invasion. However, my vote

for Bird of the Season goes to the Manhattan Scott's Oriole, which, if accepted by NYSARC, will be a first record for New York State, always a good criterion for naming a BOTS. Scott's Oriole also appeared in Pennsylvania in 2007 and North Carolina in 2008, perhaps suggesting an increasing likelihood of vagrancy to the eastern United States, and providing some context by which to judge the probability that the New York bird arrived on its own.

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