

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2008-09

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THE WEATHER

Temperatures were average throughout the state for December and January and very slightly above average for February. This reversed the trend of the last three winters which recorded above average temperatures for the first two winter months. Although monthly conditions looked average, the state experienced very cyclic weather in early winter, with snowfall concentrated in periodic heavy downfalls, a warming period in mid January, a severe ice storm in the eastern part of the state, days with windstorms, and some icy conditions. Total precipitation was above average for December and January, then below average in February. Total snowfall in upstate New York was average but concentrated in the earlier parts of the winter except for the Adirondack region. The larger lakes remained open throughout the winter but the warm conditions in mid January left small lakes and ponds open as well for part of the season. It was an old fashioned winter!

WATERFOWL AND WATERBIRDS

In spite of the colder conditions, waterfowl reports were about normal, both as reported by the Regional editors and when compared with duck counts for the past five years (Swift 2008, *Kingbird* 58: 220-229). At Hamlin Beach, there were fewer waterfowl observed in late fall, but numbers picked up in early winter. Waterfowl were about normal for the Niagara Region. For the second year, there were good numbers reported for Long Island.

Trumpeter Swans continue to increase in numbers, with high counts of 17 from Sodus Bay on 28 December and 26 at the Village of Cayuga on 16 January. Two were reported in Region 6 and five in Region 1, with one bird bearing an Ontario tag. Cackling Geese were certainly above average in numbers, with a total of 26 reports from six Regions with a high count of 10 at Hamlin Beach on 1 January. They were reported throughout the winter in Regions 2 and 10. A single Barnacle Goose was seen on numerous occasions in Suffolk County, Region 10, and likely wintered. A second report was received from Montgomery County, Region 9, on 27 February. There were 12 reports of Greater White-fronted Geese from Region 10, an exceptionally high number with a high count of six. They were also reported from Regions 2, 3, and 4, with high counts of eight at Savannah on 1 December and seven from Cortland County. There were a few reports of Ross's Goose from Regions 2 and 10. A high count of 31,739 Brant was logged on Long Island, including one Black

Brant on 6 December. The 45,000 Snow Geese at Union Springs on 27 February were slightly early but expected.

Abundance of ducks throughout the state was about average for recent years, but there were noteworthy accounts of the rarer species. Regions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10 all reported Barrow's Goldeneye, with more than 12 in Region 10, five from Region 2, four from Region 6, and one to three in the remaining Regions, with some reports of females or pairs. Only two Harlequin Ducks were seen upstate, an adult male well-seen and photographed off Braddock Bay, Monroe County in early January and one bird recorded at Sunset Bay, Region 5 on 2 January. The species was reported from five locations on Long Island, with a high count of four at Pt. Lookout, Nassau Co. King Eider reports were down from previous years, with four reports for Region 10, two from Regions 2 and 5, and one each from Regions 1 and 9. Two different male Tufted Ducks were seen at Port Kent, Essex Co., one in December and the second in February. There were four reports of Eurasian Wigeon totaling eight birds and one report of a single "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal, all from Region 10.

There were two reports of Western Grebe from Long Island from 20 December to 10 January. Black-crowned Night-Herons reported upstate included four from Region 1 with a latest date of February 16, three from Region 3 with the latest on 21 December, and one from Region 2 seen on 17 January. A Great Cormorant, extremely rare in upstate New York, was seen on the Lake Ontario shoreline on 7-8 February in Region 2. A high count of 92 Red-throated Loons was tallied at Hamlin Beach on 3 December. An unusual inland occurrence was an injured Red-throated Loon brought to a rehabilitation center in Endwell, Region 4. Alcids are rarely seen on Lake Ontario and many sightings are too poorly observed to identify them, but this was not the case on the Rochester CBC when a Razorbill was found off Irondequoit Bay and seen by many on 14 December. Alcids seen from shore on Long Island included four reports for Thick-billed Murre, Razorbills, Black Guillemot, and a very unusual Atlantic Puffin on 8 February from Montauk Point.

HAWKS AND OWLS

The only Gyrfalcon for the winter was seen on 10 January, on Cayuga Lake at Long Point State Park. Red-shouldered Hawks were reported in small numbers throughout the state, with the latest on 15 February from Keaney Swamp WMA in Region 1. Peregrine Falcons and Merlins were also reported in almost all Regions, but only a few Goshawks were seen. Region 5 had 15 Merlin reports from eight locations, thus reflecting the increased abundance of this formerly rare species. Golden Eagles made a good showing, with winter reports from all Regions except 7 and 10; the latest reported date was 28 February from Erieville in Region 5, and a total of 24 was seen in December at the Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch. A high count of 50 Bald Eagles was tallied between Croton and Verplank in Region 9. Previous editors and observers have stated that wintering Cooper's Hawks outnumber Sharp-shinned Hawks. Matt Young, Region 4

editor, estimated that the wintering ratio of Cooper's to Sharp-shinned is now three to one.

This winter witnessed one of the highest influxes of Snowy Owls, with most Regions reporting multiple sightings and a total of at least 50 seen in the state. They were recorded in all Regions except 9. Two Northern Hawk Owls were found in Region 7, Clinton County, at different locations, one on 14 December and the other on 15 February. Both birds lingered for some time. Another Hawk Owl in Region 6 was present for a month near a Wal-mart. Short-eared Owls were seen in the expected numbers and reported throughout the state, with a single high count of 21 on Cape Vincent on 9 December in Region 6.

GULLS AND SHOREBIRDS

The buildup of gulls in their preferred locations was delayed this winter. Thousands of Herring Gulls arrived at the Seneca and Oswego Rivers on 21 December. A total of 15 Iceland Gulls was present. Glaucous and Iceland gulls were reported in their usual locations, with the one reservation discussed below. A high count of 14 Little Gulls at Lewiston, Region 1, on 28 February was an encouraging total, but just one other report was received, in Region 10. Thayer's Gull was reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5. The discovery of three likely different Mew Gulls in Region 1 was the highlight of the unusual winter gulls. The first was found and witnessed by many on the Niagara River on 6 December. Then another was found at Olcott on 15 February, and a second, different bird was discovered there on 22 February. Slaty-backed Gull was again reported from Region 3. The adult that wintered last year reappeared at the compost pile on Stevenson Rd. in Dryden and was seen and photographed by many. A second Slaty-backed Gull was present on the Niagara River on 13 December but never ventured within the NYS boundary. California Gull sightings are also increasing, with multiple reports this past fall and winter. As has been the case for the past few years, one was present on the Niagara River at its usual location. Two were seen in Region 2, a third cycle bird in Greece in December and a first cycle at Hamlin Beach in January. Another third cycle individual was seen by many observers on Cayuga Lake in November, and, finally, an adult was in Suffolk County on 10 February. The only report of a Franklin's Gull was on the Niagara River on 21 December, consistent with the later influx of small gulls.

Perhaps the most noteworthy item relating to gulls occurred in Perinton, Monroe County, at Waste Management's High Acres Landfill. This large landfill is located in an industrial complex and is a magnet for gulls year round, but numbers swell in winter to 10,000 to 20,000 per day. Observations over the years have indicated that the gulls use the location in a cyclic fashion, with adults or immatures predominating at different times and regular seasonal changes in numbers. By occasionally seeing uniquely marked birds, it has been established that the majority of these birds stage on Irondequoit Bay about fifteen miles away on their way to roost on Lake Ontario. Individual birds will continue to appear for a few days to up to a month in fall and winter. Naturally,

with so many birds, this location attracts rarer gulls. It is a favorite bird watching site because many of the gulls sit on nearby Lake Edwards before leaving for the bay in the afternoon. The large concentration of gulls has been a problem for Waste Management because it hinders their operations and because they get so many complaints from the other businesses in the industrial complex. Over the years, they have tried various methods of discouraging the gulls, but nothing has worked until this winter. This winter they employed a company that brought in seven captive-bred large falcons, mostly hybrids of Gyrfalcon. These birds are trained to chase gulls. A single falcon is released several times a day to make a single flight. It picks out a gull and harasses it, then returns to the cage, a process that only takes a few minutes. The gulls apparently learn fast and remember that there are falcons at this location, because the highest number of gulls I counted this winter on any day was 2,000. But on most days I found fewer than a few hundred. This method has essentially eliminated the landfill as a feeding location for gulls. That disappoints local birders, because they miss the opportunity to see gulls at a location where they are quite visible and can be studied for long periods of time. But landfills as feeding sites are not part of the natural environment and have contributed to the proliferation of gulls beyond what nature might otherwise allow.

Purple Sandpipers appeared in their expected locations, with single immatures at selected locations on Lake Ontario and the Niagara River and adults on a few Long Island jetties. Four shorebird species were found in Region 1 including a first for the winter season, an Avocet seen by many from 7 to 16 December. The expected lingering shorebirds were found in the coastal regions.

WINTER FINCHES

The Pine Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings that were so prevalent in the winter of 2007-08 were almost unreported this winter. Only in the northern reaches of the state, in Region 6, were Pine Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings reported in any numbers. But they were replaced by the highest influx of White-winged Crossbills seen in several decades. Many White-winged Crossbills remained throughout the state following the unprecedented numbers that moved through in the fall. Flocks of 20 to 100 were frequently reported, some remaining in specific locations for quite some time allowing many people to get out and enjoy them. The winter food supply could have been a factor in this influx. Matt Young, Region 4 editor, who did a study of the cone crop, said this winter food was fair to locally good in forest plantations but very good in residential areas. A number of CBCs reported counts of over 100. Although Red Crossbills were rather scarce, Pine Siskins were also abundant. Among the hordes of Pine Siskin in Region 7, a total of 17 of the rare green morph were seen and 16 of these were banded. Four green morph were seen in Region 4. Common Redpolls were widespread throughout the state, and Hoary Redpolls were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7. Among the unusual redpolls were two "Greater" Redpolls (*C.f. rostrata*) banded at Inlet in Region 7, one in January and the other in February.

HALF-HARDIES AND RARITIES

Northern Shrikes were found in higher than average numbers at least through mid January, then the number of reports decreased through the rest of the winter. Thanks to Christmas Bird Counts some half-hardies were found, although fewer than last winter, probably due to the more severe weather. An immature Red-headed Woodpecker was present until the end of January at Garrettsville in Otsego County. Baltimore Oriole from 7-9 December and Bullock's Oriole from 12-28 January were among the rarities in Regions 8. Also reported there were Palm Warbler and Lincoln's Sparrow. Brown Thrasher was found in Regions 8 and 10. Dickcissel was recorded at three locations in Region 10, another was reported on 27 January in Region 1. A Yellow-headed Blackbird spent nine days at a feeder in Region 2 in January and was seen by many. A Gray Jay was found outside of its normal range on the Bolton Landing CBC in Region 8. An Orange-crowned Warbler was seen a number of times in Region 2 between 4-12 January. Three Nashville Warblers were each found with one or more Orange-crowned Warblers in Region 10. A Cape May Warbler was in Rye on December 6. A Townsend's Solitaire in the town of Keene in late January was the second on record for Region 7. Fox Sparrow, Gray Catbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Pine Warbler, and other less hardy birds were also reported. Varied Thrush in the end of January, Western Tanager on Fisher's Island, and "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler in Nassau County were highlights from Region 10.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

The colder than usual winter brought fewer reports of half hardies than usual, but the Yellow-headed Blackbird upstate and the Townsend's Solitaire in the Adirondack Region were particularly noteworthy. Ducks and geese were as expected, but the winter did see a higher number of Barrow's Goldeneyes than in the past. The Razorbill found on the Rochester CBC on Lake Ontario was certainly the most unusual bird in the upstate region. The three Mew Gulls, all in Region 1, were unprecedented for this winter season. Among the more expected winter birds, we saw significant influx of Snowy Owls, Pine Siskins, and White-winged Crossbills. My choice for the bird-of-the-season is the White-winged Crossbills, simply because we have not seen an eruption of this magnitude in many years and many people in the state, even non-birders, were able to observe and enjoy this remarkably adapted finch. It was a pleasure to just watch them feed in a plantation of short spruces and listen to their chattering. Eaton (1914: *Birds of New York State*, Vol. 2, University of the State of New York. p. 266) showed that irruptive influxes of this species occur about every five years on average, but with considerable temporal variation. The huge number of birds observed in the lower part of the state would indicate that crossbills from distant northern regions are the main source of this influx. Finally, although it was not a bird of the season, the event of the season was Scott Whittle's NYS Big Year in which he found 350 species and photographed all but two of these.