

REGION 5—ONEIDA LAKE BASIN

Bill Purcell

281 Baum Road, Hastings, New York, 13076

wpurcell@twcny.rr.com

There was much talk about an “old-fashioned winter” and the statistics bear that out to some degree. The December snowfall was the third highest on record, and January had nearly as much snow and was extremely cold. Much of the Region had some snow cover for the entire season. Oneida Lake froze on 31 December. In the Adirondacks, Old Forge had a low of -27° F on 16 January, with 37 days when the low was below zero. In December the average temperature was 28.9° F, 0.3° above normal, with 3.89" of precipitation, 0.77" above normal, and 57.3" of snow. In January the average temperature was 18.2° F, 4.5° below normal, with 1.86" of precipitation, 0.74" below normal, and 49.8" of snow. The averages for February were 26.3° F, 1.8° above normal, and 1.3" of precipitation, 0.82" below normal, with 24.2" of snow.

The fall migration of Snow Goose peaked in December, and they returned in February. Tundra Swan stayed until the 31 December freeze-up and only one wintered in Brewerton after larger numbers had wintered the past two years. The cold weather concentrated large numbers of scaup in Oswego Harbor, but extensive shoreline ice formed early along Lake Ontario, limiting diving duck numbers. Two King Eiders and a Harlequin Duck were found along Lake Ontario, with the eiders remaining for a few

days. Ruddy Duck, an uncommon winter species, was reported from six locations, although that may have been only two or three individuals in all. Small numbers of American Wigeon and Northern Pintail had returned by the middle of February.

Loons were quite scarce after December, with only a few sightings each of Common and Red-throated. Grebe numbers were fairly typical with one Red-necked Grebe visible in the Oswego area periodically through the season. Not many Double-crested Cormorants attempted to winter this year, possible evidence that control programs are having an effect on the population. In December there was a large group of Great Blue Herons in a Rome wetland, but by February they were scarce away from the Onondaga Lake and Seneca River area.

It was a good winter for Rough-legged Hawk in traditional areas such as Fairfield, Verona, Schroepel, and Richland, as sightings had an early peak in December and another peak in February. It now seems that a small falcon encountered in open country in winter is nearly as likely to be a Merlin as an American Kestrel, as sightings of the former species increase. Local birders have known that Bald Eagles frequent Onondaga Lake in the winter, and this year a small concentration there became a newsworthy item for the Syracuse media. Bald Eagles can be seen along many open waterways in winter and at deer carcasses in rural areas. Two Golden Eagles towards the end of February were early migrants. Turkey Vultures have been wintering for a while now but 14 soaring together on a mid-February thermal was notable.

Winter shorebirds are always a good find in the Region. This year there was Purple Sandpiper and Wilson's Snipe. A big gull influx started on 21 December, as thousands of Herring Gulls could be found in the areas around the locks and dams of the Seneca and Oswego Rivers. There were up to 13 Iceland Gulls, three Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and three Glaucous Gull in the large numbers. A first-cycle Thayer's Gull was photographed in Phoenix. Many of the gulls had moved on by 15 January.

Snowy Owls irrupted in large numbers and were widespread at traditional locations. Long-eared Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl were seen at Beaver Lake Nature Center, and the Saw-whet delighted many birders on a somewhat irregular basis. At least one Short-eared Owl was found in the degrading habitat in Verona, but most of the Region's potential habitat for Short-eared Owl is rarely visited by birders.

There was a lingering Red-headed Woodpecker in early January, plus fair numbers of Northern Flickers and several Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers through the season. A Black-backed Woodpecker was seen for several days around Big Moose. This was a very good season for Regional half-hardies, with sightings of Gray Catbird, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Eastern Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, and Baltimore Oriole. In such a good year it was a little surprising that Hermit Thrush and Rusty Blackbird

were not seen. It was a fair year for Northern Shrike but they were present and even persistent in areas that were checked frequently. Despite some recent milder winters the Carolina Wren population does not seem to be expanding.

Warm weather from 7-13 February was followed by four days that were only one degree below normal, and that was enough to bring American Robins, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Common Grackles filtering into area by the middle of the month. Subsequent cold weather stopped migration until a brief upswing on 26-27 February. Bohemian Waxwing is much more common in the northern tier of counties in New York, but some are usually sighted here in irruption years. This year there was only one report from the Adirondack foothills.

After the big winter invasion of 2007-8 Pine Grosbeak was not really expected, so the few that did make it here in January were a treat. A trickle of Pine Siskins increased in late December and turned into a flood by the middle of January, when many feeders were reporting flocks of 50 and more. Siskins even showed up in the suburbs. Some Common Redpolls were in the area in December, and small numbers showed up at feeders towards the end of January. The White-winged Crossbill invasion that began in the summer of 2008 lessened somewhat by the beginning of February as birds seemed to be departing the area.

For the season 131 species were reported, five above the average for the past 10 years. Highlights included King Eider, Harlequin Duck, Ruddy Duck, Golden Eagle, Purple Sandpiper, Wilson's Snipe, Thayer's Gull, Snowy Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Bohemian Waxwing, Field Sparrow, and Pine Grosbeak.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ginny Alfano, Betty Armbruster, Dave Baldrini, Brenda Best, Sue Boettger, Lynn Braband, Joseph Brin, Ken Burdick, Rose Burdick, Bruce Carpenter (BrC), Bernie Carr (BeC), Gerald Case, Jared Caster, Rosanne Costello, Dorothy Crumb, Mary Dreiling, Natalia Garcia, Bill Gruenbaum, Larry Hall, Steve Hall, Jody Hildreth, Gene Huggins, Matt Kauffman, Chris Lajewski, Gary Lee, Dan Leete, Kevin McGann, Matt Medler, Yvonne Merriam, David Nash, Kevin Pace, Matt Perry, Bill Purcell, Paul Richardson, Margaret Rusk, Tom Salo, Linda Salter, Cheri Sassman, Mickey Scilingo, Tony Shrimpton, Gerald Smith, Chris Spagnoli (CSp), Maureen Staloff, Andrew Van Norstrand, David Wheeler, Brian White, Tim Whitens, Judy Wright, Matt Young, Ken Zoller.

ABBREVIATIONS

BLNC – Beaver Lake Nature Center; Bvllc – Baldwinsville; CM – Clay Marsh; FH – Fair Haven, Little Sodus Bay and vicinity; Geo – Georgetown; GLSP – Green Lakes SP; HI – Howland Island WMA; LOL – Lake Ontario Littoral; HERK; OnonL – Onondaga

Lake; SFNS – Spring Farm Nature Sanctuary, Kirkland; Skan – Skaneateles; SVB – Sylvan and Verona Beach; Syr – Syracuse; VB – Van Buren.

WHISTLING-DUCKS - VULTURES

Snow Goose: max 1000 Cazenovia 19 Dec; arr 400 Skan L 18 Feb.
Mute Swan: max 16 FH 14 Feb.
Tundra Swan: max 95 OnonL 20 Dec; single Brewerton after 28 Jan.
Wood Duck: last Bvll 1-10 Feb.
Gadwall: max 15 OnonL 17 Jan.
Am. Wigeon: last 2 OnonL 20 Dec; arr 3 FH & 6 OnonL 14 Feb.
Am. Black Duck: max 85 Sherrill 18 Jan.
N. Pintail: max 2 GLSP 8 Feb; 4 other singles.
Green-winged Teal: Dewitt to 13 Jan; 2 W Eaton thru.
Canvasback: max 31 OnonL 15 Feb.
Redhead: max 451 Shore Oaks 18 Jan.
Ring-necked Duck: max 57 Otisco L 18 Dec.
Greater Scaup: max 1300 Oswego 29 Jan.
Lesser Scaup: max 148 OnonL 20 Dec.
King Eider: 2 Sunset Bay 2-3 Jan (KM, BP).
Harlequin Duck: Sunset Bay 2 Jan (KM, BP).
Surf Scoter: 3 reports LOL; Brewerton 2 Feb (MR).
White-winged Scoter: max 157 Oswego 6 Jan.
Black Scoter: last Sunset Bay 2 Jan.
Long-tailed Duck: max 316 Oswego 18 Jan.
Bufflehead: max 97 Oswego 29 Jan.
Com. Goldeneye: max 550 FH 18 Jan.
Hooded Merganser: max 281 Otisco L 5 Dec.
Com. Merganser: max 2945 OnonL 20 Dec.
Red-breasted Merganser: max 270 e. LOL 10 Feb.
Ruddy Duck: max 2 Fulton 14 Dec; 3 Jan singles; Bville 11-19 Feb.
Red-throated Loon: 2 Oswego 6 Jan; last Oswego 24 Jan.
Com. Loon: 2 Jan reports & 1 in Feb.
Pied-billed Grebe: max 9 OnonL 20 Dec.
Horned Grebe: max 5 Sunset Bay 2 Jan.
Red-necked Grebe: max 4 LOL 2 Jan; 5 other reports.
Double-cr. Cormorant: max 15 Oswego 6 Jan.
Great Blue Heron: max 30 Rome 28 Dec, high number (BrC); to 5 Seneca R thru.

HAWKS - ALCIDS

Turkey Vulture: max 14 GLSP 15 Feb (MD).
Bald Eagle: max 15 OnonL after 15 Jan.
N. Harrier: last SVB 30 Dec; arr Syr Airport 15 Feb.
N. Goshawk: 3 reports.
Red-shouldered Hawk: Clinton 31 Jan; Elbridge 22 Feb.

Rough-legged Hawk: max 13 Mexico-Richland 18 Dec; 10 Fairfield 6 Feb.

Golden Eagle: Pulaski 15 Feb (KM); Erieville 28 Feb (KP).

Merlin: 15+ reports from 8 locations.

Peregrine Falcon: Oswego 6 Dec; Syr & Utica thru.

Am. Coot: max 5 OnonL thru.

Purple Sandpiper: Oswego 9 Dec (DN).

Wilson's Snipe: Erieville 4 Jan (KP, ph).

Bonaparte's Gull: 4 Oneida L 8 Dec, last.

Thayer's Gull: Phoenix 24 Dec, first-cycle (JC, ph).

Iceland Gull: up to 13 Oswego R after 22 Dec.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: 2 per day Oswego R 21 Dec to 18 Jan.

Glaucous Gull: max 3 Bville-Phoenix 13 Jan.

PIGEONS - WOODPECKERS

Snowy Owl: numerous reports of at least 17 individuals; max 4 Fairfield in Feb.

Long-eared Owl: BLNC 16 Feb.

Short-eared Owl: SVB to 1 Jan, Oriskany 20 Dec.

N. Saw-whet Owl: BLNC after 24 Jan.

Red-headed Woodpecker: Fabius 4 Jan (BeC, CSP).

Red-bellied Woodpecker: Old Forge 11 Feb, unusual.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: max 2 Kirkland 20 Dec; 4 Jan reports; Marcellus 21 Feb.

Black-backed Woodpecker: Big Moose L 4-20 Feb (GL).

N. Flicker: max 7 CM 16 Feb.

FLYCATCHERS - WAXWINGS

N. Shrike: reports from over 20 locations, persistent in well monitored areas.

Fish Crow: 2-6 per day OnonL thru.

Com. Raven: SFNS 9 Dec & 2 Green Lakes SP 31 Jan, edging into populated areas.

Horned Lark: max 38 DeRuyter 10 Jan.

Red-breasted Nuthatch: 12 Green Lakes SP 31 Jan, good count.

Winter Wren: 4 Jan reports; last CM 2 Feb.

E. Bluebird: max 18 Marcellus 3 Jan.

Am. Robin: widespread in southern areas and along Lake Ontario.

Gray Catbird: SFNS 1 Dec (MP); Dewitt 19-24 Jan (GH).

Bohemian Waxwing: 100 Fairfield 6 Feb (TS).

WARBLERS

Yellow-rumped Warbler: 3 HI 11 Jan (BP).

TANAGERS - WEAVERS

E. Towhee: Spafford 21 Jan (NG).

Am. Tree Sparrow: max 77 Clay 20 Dec.

Chipping Sparrow: Syr 3-5 Jan (MK).

Field Sparrow: 2 Volney 14 Dec (BP, DB, MD).

Fox Sparrow: Geo to 4 Jan, Utica 28 Feb.

Song Sparrow: max 6 Marcellus 3 Jan.

Swamp Sparrow: OnonL 20 Dec; last HI 11 Jan.

White-throated Sparrow: max 26 Dewitt 13 Jan.

White-crowned Sparrow: Elbridge 1 Feb (KB).

Dark-eyed Junco: max 22 StMC 29 Dec.

Lapland Longspur: max 4 Stockbridge 19 Jan; 6 other individuals, all Jan.

Snow Bunting: max 2000 Stockbridge 19 Jan.

N. Cardinal: Old Forge after 11 Jan.

Red-winged Blackbird: last 2 Pompey 6 Jan; arr Elbridge 17 Feb.

E. Meadowlark: Ira 12 Jan (TW).

Com. Grackle: arr 8 VB 16 Feb.

Brown-headed Cowbird: max 100 9 Dec, 20 Feb.

Baltimore Oriole: VB 6 Dec (JB).

Pine Grosbeak: max 17 Orwell 19 Jan; 6 other reports.

Purple Finch: max 30 Salisbury 4 Dec.

Red Crossbill: max 9 Geo 4 Jan; small numbers higher elevations.

White-winged Crossbill: max 150 Kirkland 18 Dec; flocks widespread, decreasing in Feb.

Com. Redpoll: arr 3 Oswego 12 Dec; max 180 Parish 6 Feb.

Hoary Redpoll: Erieville 24 Jan; DeRuyter 9 Feb.

Pine Siskin: max 200 Canastota 22 Jan & 200 Salisbury 14 Feb; widespread by early Jan.

Evening Grosbeak: max 5 Deruyter 4 Jan, scarce.