

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2009-10

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THE WEATHER

Temperatures were mostly seasonable to slightly above average across most of New York State in December and January and about average in February. Cold temperatures in early January brought ice cover to most upstate ponds. Overall, most of the state experienced a milder winter than that of 2008-09. Upstate experienced its characteristic cyclic weather patterns with normal and sporadic lake effect snow. Long Island was the exception, where mean monthly temperatures were below average throughout the winter. Region 10 experienced a severe winter, with frequent snow and windstorms, frozen ponds, and above average snow cover. A severe snowstorm on 23-26 February blanketed the entire state, dropping one to two feet of snow everywhere except the Catskills, where seven-foot totals were recorded. Over the winter period, the overall precipitation was average throughout the state except for the Long Island Region where precipitation was above average. New York State has such a diversity of topographical environments, including coastal areas, mountains, and the Great Lakes plains, that it is difficult to generalize on the season's weather. Readers are encouraged to consult the Regional Reports for more detailed summaries of local weather.

GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON WINTER REPORTS

Hugh McGuinness, in his summary for Region 10, gives a perspective on how birding trends have changed over the past few years on Long Island. Reviewing *Kingbird* summaries for past years' winter seasons, I was not able to come to any general conclusions on how the avifauna has changed during the winter period. The *Kingbird* reports and summaries for winter tend to focus on rare species, half hardies, and the influx of wintering birds such as waterfowl, gulls, and finches. Winter surveys include the Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) and the waterfowl count. To get a sense of how the winter season has changed over the past 30 years, I reviewed CBC data across the state at eight selected locations, from Buffalo to Montauk Point, looking for possible trends. The one obvious trend is that, in the western and interior portion of the state, the avian diversity has increased over the past 30 years, meaning that more species are found annually on the CBCs over this time period, but that the number of species found coastally has remained about constant. There are three factors that may have a bearing on these conclusions. Annually, weather is cyclic and there are certainly colder and warmer years which could influence CBCs from year to year, but the probability of this effect is low concerning this trend. Second, effort can be highly variable and at some locations

has increased over time. I have not factored this into my own overview with any statistical analysis. Finally, the long-term changes in weather, notably temperature, can be influencing the increase in certain species. Hugh, in his summary, points out that the coastal diversity remains about constant but that the species mix has changed and that the abundance of certain rarer species has also changed.

Regional editors do not always report the total number of seasonal species, but Bill Purcell reported 125 species for this winter from Region 5 and Hugh McGuiness reported 197 from Region 10. Looking over the various Regions, it is clear that most of upstate would be close in numbers to the Region 5 total, except for the northern areas such as Region 7, which reported 104 species. These values for coastal and upstate areas show the large diversity differences between the warmer marine environment and the generally harsher upstate climate.

WATERFOWL AND WATERBIRDS

The Regional editors for Regions 2 and 10 commented on the decrease in abundance of wintering puddle ducks and divers. Geese and swan numbers appeared to be about normal. There were three reports for Ross's Goose, one each from Seneca and Cayuga Lakes and the last on 25 January from Savannah. Cackling Geese continue to increase in numbers. They were reported from five Regions with approximately 20 individuals seen on Long Island and thirteen reports from Region 2. As was the case last year, they were found throughout the winter in Regions 2 and 10. Regions 9 and 10 reported Barnacle Goose one day apart, and a Pink-footed Goose continued from fall in northwestern Suffolk Co., remaining through 25 December. Trumpeter Swans were reported in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 10, with a high count of 57 in Savannah on 25 January. Greater White-fronted Geese arrived in mid December in Region 10, where there were seven reports with a maximum of seven, and the last report for the state was from Region 3 on 21 February. Finally, on a note of interest, three neck-banded Snow Geese were seen at Point au Roche in Region 7. Two of these birds were banded near Quebec, but the third was banded on Baylot Island, about 2500 miles north of our border and 500 miles west of central Greenland.

Among the more unusual ducks, there were four reports of Eurasian Wigeon, with a maximum of two, and a "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal from Long Island. A drake Tufted Duck was seen several times during February from Ausable Point in Region 7. King Eiders were reported upstate from three locations, with a maximum of seven at Rainbow Shores in Region 5. Common Eider numbers were encouraging on the coast, with a high count of 896 at Shinnecock Bay on 30 December. Barrow's Goldeneye is never common, but the number recorded this winter dropped considerably from last winter. There were seven reports from four Regions, with a maximum count of five at Wickham Marsh in Region 7. Harlequin Duck was not reported from upstate this winter. Red-throated Loons remained much later than normal and in higher numbers than normal on Lake Ontario. Eared Grebes were seen at Aurora Bay in Region 3 and at Dunkirk Harbor in Region 1 from 18-28 February. A Red-

necked Grebe, which is unusual inland, was found on the Binghamton CBC. Finally, Coney Island hosted a Western Grebe in January and February.

Black Vultures were reported from only two Regions last winter. This winter, there were reports from Regions 2, 8, 9, and 10. They were seen throughout the winter in the eastern Regions, with high counts of eight along the Hudson River. Upstate, one bird spent most of January in Rochester, until it expired on 27 January.

HAWKS THROUGH OWLS

Goshawks were scarce, as usual, and reported from five Regions, all as singles. The trend of higher numbers of sightings of Merlins continued from last winter except on the coast in Region 10. Rough-legged Hawks were very scarce with fewer found than normally; only Regions 8 and 9 reported them as well represented. This past winter very few Rough-legs were wintering in the western part of the state; they were certainly common in the past. Wintering Bald Eagles continue to increase throughout the State with an unprecedented 110 counted on the St. Lawrence in Region 6. Golden Eagles are also becoming more common in winter; see the discussion in the Region 4 report.

Glaucous, Iceland, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwake were all found in their usual locations. Kittiwakes are rare inland but one was reported from the Niagara River on 5 December. The only report of a California Gull—a third cycle bird—came from that same location. Thayer's Gulls were reported as singles in Regions 2 and 3, and a few were seen on the Niagara River. The only reports of Black-headed Gull came from Long Island, with four sightings, and from the Niagara River, with two sightings, the last on 10 January. Two Mew Gulls were seen on the Niagara River and one was found at Gravesend Bay, Brooklyn in Region 10. Amazingly, the two birds on the Niagara River were present at the same time and were well studied and photographed. It was believed by many that they were one each of the two subspecies, *L. c. canus* and *L. c. brachyrhynchus*. The identification and subspecies of the two are discussed in the Region 1 report. A Laughing Gull was found in Coxsackie, Region 8, a good distance north of its expected range, even during summer. Finally, an Ivory Gull visited Rouses Point on Lake Champlain in Region 7, discovered 19 February and present to 2 March (see pp. 95-96).

For the second winter, an American Avocet lingered for almost a month, beginning in mid-December, at Dunkirk Harbor. As expected, alcids were confined to the coastal Region. Noteworthy were two Atlantic Puffins and a Common Murre discovered on a pelagic trip on 17 January. Two severe storms swept many Dovekies inland on Long Island and many had to be rescued and sent to rehabilitators.

Snowy Owl numbers dropped considerably from last year's large influx. At most nine birds were reported from five Regions. A single Northern Hawk Owl was present from 30 November to 27 February in Champlain, Clinton Co.

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Two Barn Owls apparently tried to winter in Springfield, Region 4; sadly, they expired in mid-winter. This was the second year of the NYSDEC's wintering raptor project. One goal is to survey Short-eared Owl numbers and wintering sites. Short-eared Owls were found in five Regions this past winter, with maximum numbers totaling 9 to 14 except in Region 10 where one to two birds were found. See the discussion in the Region 8 summary for some background into the DEC program.

PASSERINES, HALF-HARDIES, AND RARITIES

The large incursion of finches seen last winter was absent this winter. In fact, the diversity and abundance of winter finches was below average, based on the reports. There are very few highlights among rare and half-hardy species. This year, they were generally lacking throughout the state. Northern Shrike sightings were an exception to this rule, with higher numbers than in most winters; there were 16 reports from Region 2 and 20 individuals were tallied in Region 5.

Most rarities occurred in December, generally as part of the CBCs. A Veery was found on the Chatham CBC on 19 December. In Region 1 a Brewer's Blackbird was found on the Oak Orchard CBC. Two Summer Tanagers spent weeks at opposite ends of the state: one at a feeder in Ogden, Monroe Co., the other on Staten Island. Fox Sparrows were found in three Regions in December, with a latest date of 8 January in New Voorheesville, Region 8. A Lark Sparrow was at a feeder in Peru, Clinton Co. from 30 December to 2 January. A Rufous Hummingbird at Grymes Hill, Richmond Co., through 24 December, and an Ash-throated Flycatcher at South Ozone Park, Queens Co., through 18 December, were highlights for Region 10.

January highlights were fewer in number with several still associated with CBCs. An Ovenbird and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak were found on 1 January on the Ithaca CBC. A Common Grackle was at a feeder in Region 6 on 18 January. A Yellow-throated Warbler was present from 11-31 January in Region 5. And finally, a Yellow-headed Blackbird was at Kitchawan Preserve, Region 9, from 2 January to 25 February. Ten species of warblers were recorded from Region 10 including 15 reports of Orange-crowned Warbler, some of which wintered; two reports of Black-throated Green in December; and four reports of Yellow-breasted Chat, the last seen on 26 January.

In considering the bird-of-the-season, it was not a winter laced with rare birds to ponder. Many Regional editors commented on this lack of unusual species, but the overall diversity and the expected winter birds were found, albeit in lower numbers or in fewer locations than usual. It was a good year for gulls, with Ivory Gull and the three Mew Gulls generating a great deal of interest. This provided an incentive for many birders to get out and see them for themselves. I would have to select these two gull species as the birds of the season. I see little reason to choose between them. Both species were present for some time. It was also quite unusual to have Mew Gulls on both extremes of the State in the same winter.