

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – WINTER 2011-12

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In the winter of 2010-11, New York State experienced a cold snowy winter, typical of the seventies and eighties and colder than the more recent past. This year's winter of 2011-12 was remarkably warm, with temperatures running higher than normal. This was a La Niña year and higher temperatures are expected in the eastern US under this condition, but the temperature increases exceeded past experience. New York City saw a November and December without snow for the first time since 1877 and western NY experienced about half the normal annual snowfall through February. December, January, and February temperatures averaged 5.0° F above average throughout the state and New York City experienced its warmest February ever. Although snow levels were low, precipitation totals were normal to slightly below normal through most of the state except Long Island, which was unusually dry. Most lakes, ponds, and streams experienced periodic freezing but were ice free throughout most of the season.

The warmer weather conditions prompted a number of trends. Casual observations noted early migration of waterfowl, lingering warblers, early nesting of some species, and a lack of winter finch movements. It is apparent to even casual observers that birds adapt their lives to changing conditions. February brought larger than normal concentrations of ducks, geese, and swans including some of the less hardy ducks, and several Regional editors noted indications of earlier than normal spring waterfowl migration based on the early arrival of Snow Geese. But open water in Region 5 led to lower waterfowl totals for that area. Turkey Vultures overwintered or were reported as early arrivals throughout the state and we continue to receive reports of ever-increasing sightings of Black Vulture. Bonaparte's Gulls remained on the Niagara River long past their normal departure dates. It was another winter with higher than normal sightings of Snowy Owls and Northern Shrikes. During December, there was a higher incidence of warblers lingering in the state; most of these disappeared in January but a few remained. Five species of warblers were found in Niagara County and most remarkable was a total of 16 species of warblers in Region 10, many of these in multiple numbers, and some wintering over successfully. Generally, the usual half-hardies such as Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Gray Catbird, etc. were found in the expected numbers in most Regions but about half of the Regional editors noted above average numbers of these birds. During winter, early nesting of some species was reported. Ring-necked Pheasants were breeding and Tom Turkeys displaying in January; Pine Siskins were breeding in February. It was a normal winter for wintering finches with no significant movements to the south and west, suggesting that the warmer weather and, no doubt, food supply provided less incentive for winter dispersal. Winter finches were recorded in normal numbers in the northern reaches of the

state. Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, and Lapland Longspurs were not as concentrated and were more difficult to locate than in normal snowy winters.

Greater White-Fronted Geese were reported in every Region except one, with a maximum of eight in one group in Region 10. Eight Regions reported Cackling Geese, with the highest concentrations in the eastern-most part of the state (Regions 1, 2 & 3). Late Brant were found away from their usual coastal wintering areas in three Regions in December and a fourth was at Buffalo Harbor on 28 Feb. There were a total of six reports for Ross's Geese, all singles, with four of these coming from Region 3 and one each from Regions 1 and 10. King Eiders were more numerous than usual with six Regions accepting a total of 17 reports including a maximum of three birds in Region 2, and slightly less than half of the reports coming from Region 10. There were eight reports for Barrow's Goldeneye in three Regions, with a maximum of three from Region 6. Unusual waterfowl from Region 10 included a Pink-footed Goose, a single Barnacle Goose and a Eurasian Green-winged Teal.

The only Pacific Loon reported was from Hamlin Beach on 9 Feb. Three *Aechmophorus* grebes were on Cayuga Lake, one identified as a Western Grebe. Eared Grebes were reported from Region 10 and from Cayuga Lake as late as 5 Feb. An American White Pelican was well described from the NYS Barge Canal in Fairport on 3 Dec after likely the same bird was seen up to 1 Dec in Lewiston. We received 22 reports of Golden Eagles from seven of the ten state Regions but the majority of these reports are concentrated in the center of the state (Regions 3, 4, 5, & 6). Two gray morph Gyrfalcons were seen this winter, one at Oswego Harbor on 18 Jan and the other at Jones Beach on 14 Jan. A dark morph Gyrfalcon was seen at Montario Point in Ellensburg on 2 Feb. Merlins were reported in good numbers, some throughout the winter. A high count of 19 Bald Eagles came from the lower Hudson in Region 9.

American Woodcock were reported every month of the winter and early breeding was suspected since displaying was observed on Long Island in February. All the southeastern Regions reported them by February (Regions 4, 8, 9 & 10) and one was found at Point Peninsula on 10 Feb. A small flock of nine Purple Sandpipers at Sodus Bay in mid December was unusual for Upstate. Parasitic Jaegers were recorded off Long Island on 9 Dec and two were sighted in Rochester on 18 Dec and 2 Jan. An unidentified jaeger was at Lewiston on 4 Dec and one Pomarine Jaeger was seen at Derby Hill on 16 Dec. Black-legged Kittiwakes were well reported in five Regions with the last report on 19 Feb from the Niagara River. Slaty-backed Gulls were seen on the Niagara River on 13 Dec and in Beacon on the Hudson on 21 Jan. The only Franklin's Gull in the state had continued from the past fall on the Niagara River until early December. The only alcid away from the coastal regions was a Razorbill that was eventually found dead 3 Dec at Fort Niagara. Alcids were as expected off Rye, Long Island, and on pelagic trips. Dovekie, Common Murre, and Razorbills were all reported in multiples. Singles included a Black Guillemot from Montauk and an Atlantic Puffin from the 30 Dec pelagic trip.

A total of 85 reports of Snowy Owls, numbering likely more than 100 birds, was received from throughout the state. This is among the largest incursion ever;

six were banded in Region 2. Every Region reported Short-eared Owls but most in very low numbers. The only exception was a total of 16 in Region 6 in mid January. A calling Barn Owl in Williamstown in Region 5 was the only one reported away from Long Island. There were no records of the other three boreal owl species.

Northern Shrikes were also recorded in numbers above average, although they were more concentrated in the western and northern parts of the state and absent from only one Region. Fish Crow continues to expand into the state with record numbers listed by some Regions; seven Regions reported them this winter. As mentioned, it was not a big year for finches in areas normally frequented during winter. Also, Evening Grosbeak sightings continue to be low with the exception of those reported in Region 7; they were recorded in three other Regions but in very small numbers.

No doubt that the warblers lingering into December and January were winter highlights throughout the state and provided many opportunities to get out and chase rarities. Readers should consult the Regional reports for details on the rarer species since this summary cannot cover all of them. Other more unusual birds reported included: Lark Sparrows from Regions 1 & 2; a Baltimore Oriole in Region 4 on 17 Dec; an extremely late Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Brighton, Region 2, on 19 Dec; Yellow-headed Blackbird on 8 Dec, Baltimore Oriole on 9 Jan, and a **Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch** on 23 Dec, all reported from Region 8; a Rufous Hummingbird present in Region 9 until 18 Dec; and Black Rail, Mountain Bluebird, Sedge Wren and three Rufous Hummingbirds, one of which successfully overwintered, from Region 10.

The warm winter conditions produced an above average number of species in most Regions for the winter months and the warblers were a definite highlight. The most unusual among these was the **Grace's Warbler**, New York's first report for this species. It was discovered by Andrew Baksh and Doug Gochfeld at Point Lookout during the Southern Nassau CBC on 1 Jan. Word spread quickly and more than 100 people observed the bird within a few hours of its discovery. The other very unusual find this winter was the **Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch** discovered by David Rankin on Blackhead Mountain Trail in Green County when he was at 3800 ft. elevation near the top of Black Dome Mountain. If accepted by NYSARC, both of these would be first state records. From my viewpoint, I am going to have to select both of these unusual sightings to share the "Bird of the Season" honors.

