

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON – WINTER 2012-13

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The winter of 2012-2013 was cooler than the previous winter but it was still warmer than average, ranking it as the 20th warmest winter on record. Temperatures in December were above average throughout the State until the week of 22 December. January temperatures were about average until a cold spell from January 21 to 27 brought frigid conditions throughout the State. February temperatures were average overall but below average on the coast. Precipitation in the State was average to below average in the western part of the State and average in the eastern. The southwest experienced higher than average precipitation. Snowfall in the central and western parts of the State was about 80% of normal compared with last winter's 50% of normal. A nor'easter brought heavy snowfall to New York City on 8 February.

STATE OVERVIEW

When we look at the overall winter trends in the bird populations within the State, we can glean the following trends. Rare and unusual waterfowl were encountered throughout the State with some unusual records and a few high numbers. For the expected winter waterfowl, the western portion of the State recorded average results whereas the far eastern portion of the State experienced below average expected waterfowl. Black Vultures continue to increase in winter, distributed around the Niagara and Hudson Rivers. Bald Eagles were seen in most of the State and in very high numbers. Arctic gulls were surprisingly plentiful this winter but Little Gull seemed unusually scarce. Wintering Merlins and Peregrines are continuing to be more widespread and increasing in numbers. Owls were found in expected numbers. Three Rufous Hummingbirds were found this winter, which was unusual and follows the trend of the past few years. There is some evidence that the eastern Monk Parakeet population might be expanding. This winter most of the half-hardy species were gone by the winter season except in the warmer coastal Regions, very unlike last year. Winter provided an excellent season for Bohemian Waxwings, Pine Grosbeaks, Evening Grosbeaks, and winter finches including redpolls, siskins, and crossbills.

Noteworthy in David Nicosia's report from Region 4 is the program of the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society (DOAS) to use camera trapping activities to monitor the movement and habits of Golden and Bald Eagles. These cameras started operating in mid December at eight sites in Delaware and Otsego Counties. Based on experience since 2010, there were remarkable numbers of

both Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles at these sites this winter, commensurate with reduced numbers in West Virginia and Tennessee, the usual Golden Eagle winter stronghold.

THE WINTER SUMMARY

For those seven Regions of the State that have significant water boundaries, it was a remarkable year for unusual waterfowl. Cackling Geese continue to increase in numbers annually with reports from six Regions: three Regions reported numbers greater than 15, and Region 2 tallied a maximum of 49. Likewise, Greater White-Fronted Geese are also increasing with, perhaps, a State record year. There were reports from five Regions with a maximum of about 16 from Region 10. Barnacle Geese were recorded in Regions 9 and 10, and Ross's Geese were recorded in Regions 2 and 10. A maximum count of 100,000 Snow Geese occurred at Waterville in Region 5. Region 10 reported the only Black Brant. The most unusual sighting was a Pink-footed Goose that was seen only on two days at Warren Sod Farm in Region 9. Trumpeter Swans were being seen throughout the winter on the Great Lakes Plains, in the Finger Lakes areas, and on the east coast. The peak numbers of 20 were recorded in the Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area. A Smew on the St. Lawrence River in February did not linger for those searching for this extremely rare duck. There were only three reports of Harlequin Duck, one a third record for Clinton County, and one report of King Eider away from the coastal area. Eider reports of vagrants were definitely down. An extraordinary number of Eurasian Wigeon was reported in Region 10, with 19 in all.

Birders are becoming more analytical in dealing with some of the more difficult identification challenges of waterfowl. Regions 1, 5, and 10 all reported Tufted Duck and two of these cases were females. More female Barrow's Goldeneyes are also being reported. Finally, there were two duck and four goose hybrids documented this winter.

An Eared Grebe was found at Ogdensburg in Region 6 in December, and another spent January on Aurora Bay in Region 3. A total of three Western Grebes was seen, two in Region 10 and one in Region 2. There were four reports of Pacific Loon: one in Region 1 on Lake Ontario, one that lingered for some time in Region 6 at Black River Bay, and two on Long Island.

A subadult (third calendar year) gray morph Gyrfalcon delighted large numbers of birders along the Long Island barrier beach from 17 February into March. One or two Northern Goshawks were reported in almost all Regions and a maximum of four was seen on the Southern Nassau CBC. Golden Eagles were also widely distributed in low numbers but with a maximum of eight in both Regions 4 and 9. High counts of 44 Bald Eagles were tallied in both Regions 4 and 9. Most Regional editors reported that Rough-legged Hawks were scarce throughout the winter. An unusual raptor migration was the passage of 46 Red-

tailed Hawks at Derby Hill on 26 February. A late raptor was a Broad-winged Hawk on 15 December in Region 10.

Region 10 recorded a Black Rail on the Captree CBC on 16 December, for the second year in a row. Sandhill Cranes were reported from three Regions in January and late February indicating a presence throughout the winter season. American Woodcock were reported from five Regions between 3 December and 29 February, indicating both late departure and early arrival or possibly birds overwintering. Among the unusual shorebird reports were a Spotted Sandpiper in Region 1 on 12 January, a White-rumped Sandpiper in Region 2 on 8 December, Red Phalarope in Region 5 on 13 January, Wilson Snipe from Region 9 on 28 January, and an American Golden Plover at Heckscher State Park in Region 10 on 12 December. It was a banner winter for Arctic gulls. High counts of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were widespread with the Niagara River yielding maximum numbers of 44 Iceland Gulls and 35 Glaucous Gulls. Thayer's Gull was reported in three Regions. There were four reports of Slaty-backed Gull from Region 1 that most likely represented two separate individuals and another Slaty-backed Gull from Oswego Harbor on 28 February. A record late Sabine's Gull on 27 January was seen at the Buffalo Harbor. There was only one report of Little Gull from Region 1 with a maximum of three. Region 10 recorded five reports of Black-headed Gull ranging in dates from 1 December to 26 February.

A very unusual report of a Dovekie was a first record for Ulster County on 21 December. Razorbills were present in Region 8 from December until 17 January. A burst of strong easterlies in mid-December produced numerous alcid reports in Region 10. Alcids were reported in good numbers offshore with unusually high totals of Common Murre, Dovekies, and Atlantic Puffins.

A Eurasian Collared-Dove was found on 5 January at Hamlin in Region 2. Between four and six Monk Parakeets in Greece, present in fall and winter, might be signaling that the eastern population is spreading. So far, attempts to pin down their origin have been inconclusive. Snowy Owl numbers were about average with reports from four Regions with a maximum of nine that wintered in northwest Jefferson County in Region 6. Short-eared Owls were more widespread than usual with high counts of 10 to 11 from Regions 1, 2, and 9. A Great-gray Owl was photographed in January at Robert Moses State Park in Region 6. A Northern Hawk-Owl on 19 January from Region 8 was the only report. Northern Saw-whet Owls are becoming more common in winter in the Great Lakes Plain and the southeastern parts of the State. We received reports from five Regions with the highest totals on Long Island. Three Rufous Hummingbirds was a new State high for winter. They were seen as singles in Regions 5, 9, and 10 and ranged in dates from 5 December to 6 January.

Fish Crows were present in winter in all the Great Lakes Plain Regions and in the coastal areas. Six Regional editors reported them, with Region 1 reporting six on 21 February, a maximum of nine on 27 February in Region 5, and significant numbers "moving north" in Region 10. Two winter Cave Swallows

were seen, one at Derby Hill on 4 December and the other at Montauk on 9 December. In addition, five Northern Rough-winged Swallows lingered at Niagara Falls State Park into December. The only Varied Thrush was at Fulton on 18 January. A Townsend's Solitaire spent the entire winter at Sampson State Park in Region 3 and was seen by many. Bohemian Waxwings were also reported in most Regions in small numbers, except in Region 5 where a maximum count of 350 occurred at Spring Farm Nature Sanctuary on 27 Feb and in Region 7 where two flocks totaled 825.

Half-hardies were mostly gone by December, unlike last winter. Most lingering warblers were found in the eastern part of the State, with Regions 9 and 10 dominant in numbers and variety, consistent with their milder climate. However, a Yellow-throated and a Wilson's Warbler were exceptions in Albany the second week of December. Region 9 recorded nine warbler species including Magnolia and Blackpoll, both quite late. Region 10 reached a total of 16 warbler species, mostly the result of the Christmas Count efforts. Most unusual was the State's first verified Virginia's Warbler found in fall and remaining through 3 December. Also, an "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler was found in late November and remained until 27 December.

A LeConte's Sparrow at Edgemere Landfill on 16 December in Region 10 was the most unusual *Emberizidae*. Two Yellow-headed Blackbirds were seen, one from Region 2 and the other from Region 10. A Dickcissel was seen 19-21 December in the Town of Parma in Region 2. Pine Grosbeaks were reported from six Regions, 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8, with a high count of 48 in Region 6. Red and White-winged Crossbills were reported from all Regions and Common Redpolls were judged to be numerous. Many reports of single Hoary Redpolls accompanied the redpoll invasion. They were seen in seven Regions with a maximum of 11 reports in Region 5 and a total of eight on the Saranac Lake CBC on 22 December. Evening Grosbeaks were the least encountered winter specialty but the numbers were encouraging based on past observations of their scarcity in the recent years. Reports of this species came from five Regions.

BIRD OF THE SEASON

When we view this past winter season from the standpoint of birders, there were three noteworthy groupings that competed for their attention: a large diversity of swans, geese, and ducks (*Anseriformes*), both a large diversity and significant numbers of wintering gulls (*Laridae*), and a significant incursion of wintering grosbeaks and finches (*Fringillidae*). All three produced some wonderful birds to watch, gave great incentives to get out during the winter months and produced many thrills for those who were rewarded with entertaining views. Of these three groups, I would choose the *Fringillidae* as the most fun and interesting. These include the Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Grosbeaks, Red Crossbills, White-winged crossbills, Common Redpolls and the ever-so-difficult-to-identify Hoary Redpolls.