

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON - SPRING 2014

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Spring 2014 began as a continuation of the cold, hard winter of 2013-14. Lower than average temperatures continued over much of the state during March, ice cover persisted longer than has been the norm in recent years, and Regions 1, 2, and 5 reported ongoing starvation of fish-eating waterfowl, attributed to ice cover. Many species were affected, especially Red-breasted Mergansers and scaup, but one well-watched Regional rarity also succumbed—a drake Harlequin Duck that had been frequenting the Oswego River in Region 5. Overall, the migration of waterfowl was delayed in much of the state, but when the birds arrived, there were widespread reports of arctic-nesting geese, as has been the trend in recent years. Greater White-fronted, Ross's and Cackling Geese were reported from multiple Regions and often in multi-individual contexts. Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese were noted in Region 10, as was a "Black" Brant in Region 9. Exceptional numbers of Red-necked Grebes were reported, and an article analyzing this event is in preparation.

Another reminder of winter was the continuing presence of very large numbers of Snowy Owls across the state, including reports from all nine of the Regions for which we have reports. As many as 12 were recorded at a single site in Region 1 in mid March, and at least 30 were found over 18 sites in Region 2. A bird persisted in the lowlands of Region 3 as late as 10 May, whereas one was noted in the far north of Region 6 as late as 25 May!

When spring arrived, however, it was welcomed in many places as a "normal" or "old-fashioned" spring, with the connotations that arrival dates were less strikingly early than they have been in many places in some recent years, and that the overall tempo and mode of migration was "better," with large, diverse flights enjoyed by many observers across the state. The long-running hawkwatches at Braddock Bay and Derby Hill produced prodigious counts of many species, with Turkey Vulture in particular smashing previous records at Derby Hill. The daily max of 4,318 birds on 2 April exceeded the previous daily max by almost 1,600, and the season's total of 22,438 vastly surpassed the previous seasonal high, set just last year, of 15,894. These dynamics were thought to be due to both the severe winter in general, causing more vultures to winter south of the Great Lakes region, and to March's poor weather, piling up the vultures to the south until conditions improved. The summary tables for these counts are presented this year in this section, along with the arrival dates tables.

As usual, many Regionally notable species were recorded, such as Tufted Duck, Blue Grosbeak, and Brewer's Blackbird in Region 1; Swainson's Hawk, Gyrfalcon, and Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 2; Gyrfalcon, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Laughing Gull in Region 3; Swallow-tailed Kite, Henslow's Sparrow, and Painted Bunting in Region 5; Great Cormorant and Evening Grosbeak in Region 6; Tufted Duck, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and Orchard Oriole from Region 7; Sandhill Crane, Gyrfalcon, and Yellow-throated Warbler in Region 8; Mississippi Kite and Boat-tailed Grackle in Region 9; and White-faced Ibis, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Wilson's Plover in Region 10.

The most astonishing of the above-mentioned birds to me is probably the Black-legged Kittiwake inland in spring. Similarly, a Western Grebe in Region 1, just the second Regional record since 1958 and the first chaseable one in modern times, represents a very significant record. Region 10's Western x Eastern Kingbird hybrid provided a frenzy of excitement during the period, prior to critical examination of photos, when it was suspected as New York's second Cassin's Kingbird. But ultimately, consideration for Bird of the Season really falls to just one bird, the **Willow Ptarmigan** found at Point Peninsula by Eugene Nichols on 24 April. Jeff Bolsinger's rapid confirmation of the identification (Rock Ptarmigan lacks Willow's pattern of southward vagrancy and would be much more difficult to defend as naturally occurring) and timely reporting allowed hundreds of observers to see this amazing bird.