

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2014-15

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Weather for the winter period was remarkably consistent throughout the state. December and the first few days of January were mild, with above average temperatures; snowfall in this period was below average for most of the state, with a few Regions reporting average snowfall. The next eight week period produced record cold for New York State. In the upstate Regions, average temperatures in January were running about 10° F lower than normal, with snowfall ranging from below average to average amounts. February was the coldest month ever recorded in these Regions, with average temperatures 20° to 30° below average, at least 10 days with lows below zero, and snowfall above average. New York City mirrored the conditions upstate, with temperatures in December above average and January and February significantly below average, giving the city its third coldest winter on record. These very cold conditions were set up by a stationary high pressure over the Pacific Northwest which channeled cold air down from the arctic into the Northeastern states. This is in sharp contrast with the nation as a whole, wherein ten of the western states had the warmest winter on record and national average temperatures were above average.

The conditions of this past winter were similar to those of 2013-14, when we had four consecutive weeks of cold fronts passing through the state, all bringing snow, but interlaced with warming periods. This year was worse for the wintering bird population because of the prolonged cold and deep snow. The conditions caused a repeat of the die-off of wintering ducks on the two Great Lakes, and the high snow accumulations beginning in mid January left fields completely covered with no intervals of melting. Several upstate Regions reported well above average numbers of stranded ducks that were emaciated or dying on fields and highways. The wintering hawks and owls that came in December were forced out of the upstate Regions by the end of January. The severe winter conditions of 2013-14 most likely had an effect on the summering populations of less hardy species like Carolina Wrens, and the die-off of ducks in that winter led to lower numbers of ducks in spring. This winter should be expected to further exacerbate those declines.

Although we experienced a very severe winter, weather conditions were generally very favorable for both the CBCs and the State Waterfowl Count. Numbers of half-hardy species were generally near- to below average depending on the Region for the CBCs. Some Regions reported a few migrant species beyond their normal departure dates, but numbers declined by late January. This was not a finch invasion year, probably due to low winter food resources;

Common Redpoll numbers were modest. However, reports of overwintering field birds—Snow Buntings, longspurs, and Horned Larks—were about average.

Cackling Geese were reported in eight Regions, with the highest concentrations in the western part of the state. A maximum of 1- 2 Ross's Geese was seen in four Regions, White-fronted Geese were reported in five Regions and Pink-footed Goose was recorded again this winter, in Region 10. A high count of 22 Trumpeter Swans was from the Montezuma area. Brant were seen in Region 5, Harlequin Ducks were reported from three Regions, and Barrow's Goldeneyes from five Regions, including a few reports of females. From Region 5 came a single report of Tufted Duck, which lingered for over a month. Two reports of Eurasian Wigeon were unique to Region 9. Especially notable among the ducks were four hybrids identified to species and one leucistic Redhead, all reported from Region 5. Hybrid ducks have been seen in the state previously but are rarely mentioned by Regional editors. The only report of a Northern Gannet was from Region 9 on 28 December. Black Vultures were present on the Niagara River and in the eastern part of the state.

Golden Eagles were reported as singles from five Regions, but they were seen throughout the winter in Region 9, with a maximum of 2 to 3. There were single reports from four Regions of N. Goshawks. Rough-legged Hawks were present in about average numbers but showed a decreasing trend through February. The high count for Little Gull was three on the Niagara River, and they were reported in only two Regions. A Laughing Gull was in Dunkirk Harbor in late December. Thayer's Gulls were reported in four Regions, all in the western part of the state. Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were in their usual numbers. Very noteworthy for coastal New York were two western North American Mew Gulls (subspecies *brachyrhynchus*), the first for Region 10.

Eurasian Collared-Doves were seen in Regions 1, 2, and 10. Barn Owls in Regions 9 and 10, and a Boreal Owl in Region 8 on 7 February were the only reports of these species. Snowy Owls were present in good numbers throughout the state but fewer than last year's extreme highs. Short-eared Owls were reported from all Regions, with a maximum of 19 south of Rochester. Three Regions reported a single Gyrfalcon; based on descriptions and date overlaps, the reports strongly support two separate birds, one in Regions 2 and 3 and the other in Region 9.

No doubt one of the most unusual reports this winter was of a Crested Caracara first seen in Region 9 at Bear Mountain State Park on 5 January. This bird probably lingered, since it was recorded in nearby Orange County in the spring where it was seen by many. In addition, two other Caracara reports from Region 10 were communicated to the birding community after the fact. A member of South Shore Audubon Society sent photos to Steve Schellenger of a bird seen on 10 January in Seaford, Nassau County, and a homeowner in West Babylon, Suffolk County chatting with birders at Venetian Shores Park months later, told of a Crested Caracara perched in her backyard in January or February, which they had photographed!

The most unusual songbird rarities of the winter were two flycatchers found in Region 10. While a Cassin's Kingbird continued on from fall in Brooklyn, a Couch's Kingbird in Manhattan came to birders' attention on Christmas day. Both lingered for many birders to chase. Blue-headed Vireo was seen on 1 January in Region 3, Townsend's Solitaire appeared for a week in Region 5, and Wood Thrush and Varied Thrush were both reported in Region 8, the latter on 14 February. Warblers were scarce for CBCs except in Regions 9 and 10. A late Yellow Warbler in Region 3 was seen on 3 December, and Orange-crowned Warblers were recorded in three Regions. Among the sparrows, Savannah was seen upstate, where unusual, in Regions 1, 3 and 7. Lark Sparrow was found in Region 8, and one also lingered through most of the winter in Region 2. Fox Sparrows were reported in Region 8 and in Region 5 through February. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks made winter appearances in Regions 3 and 6. Additionally, an immature *Pheucticus* grosbeak in Region 5 was seen at a feeder through 11 January but not identified to species. A Baltimore Oriole in Region 1 seen through 20 December was exceptional, and another occurred in Region 8. Only one Yellow-headed Blackbird was reported this winter, at the same feeder location in Region 2 where they have appeared in previous years. A few later Rusty Blackbirds were also reported, one each from Regions 2, 6, and 8.

This winter produced three exceptionally rare birds, two of them potentially new to New York State, if accepted by NYSARC as first state records. The two kingbirds were certainly exceptional, and many people were able to see them. A few lucky birders saw both in one day. I have to give some recognition to Jacob Drucker and others for identifying the Couch's Kingbird, because this species is not easy to separate from Tropical Kingbird. But I think the truly remarkable and most unique winter find was the Crested Caracara. Kingbirds have long been known to wander, but vagrancy among caracaras is much less familiar.



Iceland Gull with Ring-billed Gulls, Gravesend Bay, Kings 24 Jan 2015, © S. S. Mitra.