

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2018-19

Michael F. Cooper

mikec02@optonline.net

The weather this season was surprisingly consistent statewide, with everybody reporting average to warmer than average December and February temperatures, dipping below normal only in the second half of January and the very beginning of February. Precipitation overall was generally around average, with expected fluctuations within Regions.

Waterfowl numbers and diversity were generally rated as below normal in most upstate and western Regions, while downstate things seemed a little closer to average. A comment from Region 5, “numbers of wintering dabbling ducks were especially low, and no rarities were reported,” was echoed in one form or another in many Regions, with slightly more positive comments about diving ducks. Regions 2 and 3 reported decent counts of Redhead. Canvasback is still doing well in the westernmost Regions, but elsewhere it seems to be disappearing from the avifauna. Meanwhile, the wintering Greater Scaup flock in Great South Bay, Region 10, reached a peak estimate of around 25,000 birds.

Tufted Ducks were scattered across four upstate Regions, but otherwise, duck rarities went almost unreported. Barrow’s Goldeneye was reported from only four Regions, and was completely missed in Region 6 for the first time in 12 years. Common Eiders were widespread along Long Island’s south shore, with highest numbers occurring at Shinnecock, where up to 5000 birds set up mainly in the bay. For this species and Black Scoter, Shinnecock has recently become the favored wintering grounds rather than the more traditional location at Montauk Pt. An adult male King Eider at Oswego Harbor delighted birders in Region 5 from early February through the period.

White-fronted Geese seem to be solidifying their foothold in the state. High counts in several Regions were led by a maximum counts of 45 at Point Breeze in Region 1, 43 at Hammondsport in Region 3 and 31 at Green Lakes SP in Region 5. As noted in the fall reports, southbound Snow Goose numbers were far below normal in areas where they are expected, topping out at 1040 in Oswego, Region 5, on 16 December. Ross’s Geese in three Regions seemed about normal, while Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese were reported only from Region 10. Cackling Goose was reported from almost every Region—probably a result both of increased awareness and higher populations of geese in general.

Loons barely warranted a mention, except for late birds in Region 7—one each of Red-throated and Common lingering into February, and two Pacifics in Region 10, including one incredibly cooperative bird that spent three weeks in Oyster Bay, Nassau County. Observers in Region 2 are witnessing a change in the pattern of wintering Red-necked Grebe. Counts of 804 and 1123 at two Lake Ontario locations on 1 December are very impressive. On the Region 1 section of the Lake, counts peaked at 269 in mid-December. A Magnificent Frigatebird

photographed in Region 10 must have been quite a shocking sight, especially for late December. Only slightly more normal were a Brown Pelican at Moriches Inlet and a White Pelican at Mecox, also in Region 10. A count of 100 Sandhill Cranes at Montezuma in Region 3 in early December seems remarkable for a bird that so recently became a regular part of our avifauna. Thirty were still present at month's end.

Shorebirds were pretty much non-existent away from the coast. Region 2 editor Robert Spahn commented that this was the first year in memory that no shorebirds were reported in winter in his Region. Milder temperatures downstate allowed for some unusual lingering species to be found, including Spotted Sandpiper, Marbled Godwit and Willet, all in Region 10. Good numbers of Wilson's Snipe and Woodcock were noted there as well, while a Woodcock in Region 8 was more unusual.

With few exceptions, gull numbers and diversity were considered to be very disappointing. A large collection of gulls on 21 January at the Moses-Saunders Dam in Region 6 included 41 Glaucous and 9 Iceland, but it is noted that no large flocks were found afterwards. Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed Gull numbers were all below normal in Region 10. An adult Mew Gull was photographed in Brooklyn, and Iceland, Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed occurred in decent numbers elsewhere in the same Region. A Black-legged Kittiwake in the Long Island Sound was unusual for a north shore location. A late Common Tern was found at Montauk on 13 December.

Staying with Region 10 for a minute, alcids put on quite a show this winter, with record-shattering numbers of Razorbills leading the way. Single day counts in the thousands were recorded at many south shore locations, topping out at 9,000 and 10,000 at Montauk in December and late January. Stragglers made it well into Long Island Sound, with one even recorded on the Bronx-Westchester CBC. Scattered Dovekies and Black Guillemots, as well as Thick-billed and Common Murres, provided near constant entertainment for Region 10 birders through the season.

Black Vultures further strengthened their foothold in the state, with birds wintering in Region 1 for the eighth consecutive year. Wintering roosts were noted in Region 8, and a single bird was noted in Rochester in Region 2. Up to 99 Bald Eagles were counted along the shoreline of Onondaga Lake in Region 5, consistent with the expansion noted generally throughout the state. Northern Harrier numbers were considered to be good in Region 8 and at Pt. Peninsula in Region 6. Otherwise, Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks received positive mentions in Regions 1 and 7, respectively. Single Gyrfalcons in Regions 6 and 7 provided the spice among the diurnal raptors.

Regions 1, 2 and 10 reported good numbers of Saw-whet Owls. With owls in general, it's difficult to interpret what that means. In Region 10, for example, a couple of enthusiastic searchers undoubtedly made a difference, although Saw-whet populations probably were better than average as well. On the flip side many observers are more reluctant to report sensitive species as more of us

witness harassment, mostly by photographers, of owls and other charismatic birds of prey. See notes regarding Long-eared Owl in Region 5 and Snowies in Region 10 for a couple of examples. I personally witnessed a photographer walk out into a private farm field and flush an adult Bald Eagle off a deer carcass.

Overall mild temperatures in December encouraged some passerines to linger. Many Regions reported half-hardy landbirds reluctant to move on. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were mentioned in Regions 2, 5 and 10, and most Regions had Eastern Phoebe's lingering into December. Marsh Wrens and Ruby-crowned Kinglets were well represented and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was a great find in Ithaca in Region 3. A Varied Thrush on Staten Island was a nice find, but even better were the very cooperative Townsend's Solitaire at Taconic SP in Region 8 and the Say's Phoebe at the Wallkill River NWR in Region 9. A Wood Thrush spent a week at the Quogue Wildlife Refuge in Region 10, providing one of the few well documented winter records for the state.

As Fish Crows continue to expand away from the coast and Ravens continue to march towards it, it's interesting to read the discussion in the Region 10 report about the likely role of West Nile Virus in relation to population changes among the three large corvids of our area. Matt Perry and David Wheeler in Region 5 discuss a Starling eradication program carried out by the USDA and the collateral damage such a program is likely to have on non-targeted species, including crows.

A Bohemian Waxwing in Fredonia, in Region 1, provided the first record for Chautauqua County. In areas where they are more expected, numbers were low. A Prothonotary Warbler apparently lingered into the winter season in Region 8, although the actual date of occurrence is uncertain. Other warblers away from the coast were pretty sparse, and included Nashville, Common Yellowthroat and Orange-crowned and a Yellow-breasted Chat in Region 9. In Region 10, Orange-crowned and Palm numbers were quite good, while Yellow-rumped Warblers were scarcer than normal.

Chipping, Vesper and Field Sparrows were found in several non-coastal Regions. A Harris' Sparrow lingered at a feeder in Earlville in Region 5—a great bird anywhere in the state. Something apparently went on with White-crowned Sparrows this winter. They were widely reported from many Regions, including a max single count of 62 at East Hampton in Region 10.

Every year we hear the prediction "Winter finches are coming!", and most winters the reality doesn't live up to our expectations. This year was kind of a mixed bag, with Evening Grosbeaks providing most of the excitement, even if that meant just a few large localized flocks and modest numbers elsewhere. For most of us, it's been such a long time since we've had any at all that scattered flocks and singles still provided plenty of entertainment. Kyle Arvin in Region 8 provided a running tally of grosbeaks at his feeder, recording a max of 201 on 2 December. One "celebrity" bird lingered at a small Manhattan park from mid-December into April. Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls were also widely reported, although in less impressive numbers. A scattering of Pine Grosbeaks

appeared in several upstate locations, along with a few Red Crossbills and even fewer White-winged.

There were some really good birds around the state this season—Magnificent Frigatebird and white-phase Gyrfalcon would certainly be hard to top on any New York birder's year list. The same could be said for Townsend's Solitaire or Harris' Sparrow or Mew Gull. But considering the most impact on the most birders—and non-birders as well—I think I'd say that the Bird of the Season was Evening Grosbeak as a species. Some of us remember flocks of them irrupting into the area decades ago, and after such a long drought, it was great to have them around again, whether in a flocks of 200 at a feeder in Summit or a lone bird delighting hundreds at Riverside Park in the middle of New York City.

Thanks for reading and keep the reports coming in!