

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2019-20

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Possibly the most remarkable thing about winter 2019-2020 throughout the state was how consistently warm it was. December temperatures were reported as average in three Regions, but above average everywhere else. January was absurd, ranging from 6-8° F above, while February temps were “only” 1.5° to 5° above normal in every Region reporting this data. Region 6 reported oscillations of unusual cold and warm temps throughout the period, particularly noting a low-temperature swing of 53° in 24 hours on 9 and 10 February.

For the short term, at least, the effect on the birds was positive, with “half hardies” widely reported everywhere. Many species that sometimes linger into early winter were still being found in January or even February. Waterfowl tended to be well represented, as many locations had less than icing on waterways, encouraging waterfowl and other aquatic species to remain north. In Region 5, David Wheeler mentioned “Oswego yielded good numbers of Long-tailed Duck and White-winged Scoter with the lack of widespread freezing making an easy winter for waterfowl.” Not so in Region 6, where duck numbers were mostly, surprisingly, unimpressive.

Early returns were noted for species like Snow Goose, Killdeer, Woodcock and blackbirds. Even some of the disappointing numbers in mid-winter were probably due to birds being able to forage in areas not visible to observers. Region 2 coordinator Robert Spahn commented “The open field birds, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting, were generally scarce, likely partly due to open fields so they were not pushed to road edges much of the season.”

High Snow Goose counts were recorded in Region 3, with 25,000 found in December and again in late February. Canada Goose numbers maxed out at over 20,000 in Region 2. Tundra and Trumpeter Swans were widespread and, in some locations, large counts were made, such as 105 of the latter in Montezuma Wildlife Management Area (MWMA) in Region 2 and 3,500 of the former on Cayuga Lake in Region 3. Impressive max duck counts included 11,604 Redhead during the waterfowl count in Region 2, 350 Pintail in Region 5, 6,200 Canvasbacks in Region 1 and 2,500 Common Goldeneye in Region 1. Redhead in particular made a good showing in several Regions, apart from the very high number mentioned above. Spahn in Region 2 noted that Canada Goose and Redhead accounted for 2/3 of the individuals noted on the waterfowl count in that Region. Non-coastal Regions recorded nice numbers of scoters, with White-winged being by far the most abundant; the opposite situation was seen in Region 10, where counts of all three species were relatively low.

Many Regions recorded notable species among the waterfowl. Regions 3, 5 and 7 hosted Tufted Ducks, and King Eiders and Harlequin Ducks were found in four Regions, including a third record for Cattaraugus County. Barrow's

Goldeneye was found in six Regions. A Brant found in a Canada Goose flock in Cape Vincent in Region 6 was a rare find; at least one Cackling Goose was also among this flock. A Black Brant was found in Brooklyn in Region 10, and further east on Long Island, a Pink-footed Goose was shot by a hunter.

Eared Grebes were recorded in Regions 1, 2 and 3, and Region 2 also turned up their twelfth record of Western Grebe. Another was present on New Year's Day in Region 10. Sandhill Cranes were apparently less widespread than in previous seasons, with reports from "only" four Regions, including a flock of 42 reported both in Regions 2 and 3 on 16 December at MNWA.

Shorebirds were rather scarce considering the warm weather and open water, with highlights being Purple Sandpipers in Regions 1 and 2, and Lesser Yellowlegs and Semipalmated and Piping Plover in Region 10. An American Avocet at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge on 8 December was probably the best of the lot. Two Atlantic Puffins at Montauk on 16 December were the best finds among the alcids, but a Common Murre and a handful of Thick-billeds and Dovekies were also noteworthy in Region 10.

Large numbers of gulls were recorded in Regions 1 and 2, with counts of 2,700 Ring-bills and 4,800 Herrings in Region 2. The top gull of the season by far was the adult Slaty-backed photographed at Niagara Falls on 18 December. A Black-headed Gull on Cayuga Lake provided a first winter record for Region 3. Iceland, Glaucous and Lesser Black-backs seemed to be scattered around in decent numbers. A first winter Glaucous Gull on Dune Rd. in Region 10 had been banded as a chick at Coats Island in Nunavut at the north end of Hudson Bay. Glaucous Gull band returns are pretty scarce, and this may be the first for New York State. Surprisingly, there were no terns reported anywhere in the state, but a handful of Black Skimmers lingered into early December in Region 10. A Great Cormorant was a continuing rarity in Region 7, and White and Brown Pelicans were noteworthy in Region 10.

Seven Regions recorded Golden Eagles, including one in Region 10 where still quite rare. An immature Gyrfalcon was a one-day wonder at the Shawangunk Grasslands WMA on 22 January, and Region 6 received unsubstantiated reports of two birds on Point Peninsula in January and February, which may have referred to sightings from nearby Ontario.

Turning to landbirds, our boreal specialties seem to be just barely hanging on, with reports of small numbers of Canada Jay, Black-backed Woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee from Regions 6 and 7 only, and only one report of Spruce Grouse, from Massawepie Mire in Region 6 on 8 December. That honorary winter finch, the Bohemian Waxwing, was represented by a single report of 25 birds at Saranac Lake, and our actual winter finches were likewise almost non-existent. Open ground species seemed to be present in good numbers, although conditions may have allowed them to forage away from easy observation. Even at that, though, Lapland Longspurs were recorded from every Region. Snow Bunting flocks in the thousands were recorded, with a max count of 5,000 in Region 3. Horned Larks were also widespread and numerous.

As mentioned up top, half-hardies and other lingering passerines brightened up the season for many observers. Among the species that lingered in higher than normal numbers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets were found in all but two Regions, and Eastern Towhees and Gray Catbirds were found in all but one, while Hermit Thrush and Chipping Sparrow were reported from all Regions. In Region 9, John Haas commented that the “season produced an unprecedented incursion of wintering Chipping Sparrows.”

In addition, there were many records of species that don’t normally occur in winter at all—the reader should scan through the Regional reports to see the many exceptional records. A few that stand out include, in Region 1, two wintering Phoebe’s and a second winter record for White-eyed Vireo; an Orange-crowned Warbler in Region 2; Baltimore Oriole, House Wren and Black and White Warbler in Region 3; Field Sparrow and Ovenbird in Region 5; Brown Thrasher and Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Region 6; Black-throated Blue Warbler in Region 8 and Summer Tanagers in Regions 9 and 10.

There also seemed to be a better than usual scattering of other rarities—those which may have occurred not as a consequence of the warm winter. Western vagrants included Yellow-headed Blackbirds in Regions 2, 3, and 10; two Ash-throated Flycatchers and a Townsend’s Solitaire in Region 10; Varied Thrushes in Regions 4 and 10; Lark Sparrows in Regions 5 and 8; and a Dickcissel in Region 5. In Region 10, a Sedge Wren played hide and seek with birders throughout the period, and an amazing tally of seven Painted Buntings was spread out over four counties.

With so many extraordinary records this winter, I’m sure I’ve missed some that should have been mentioned, so I encourage you to scour the Regional reports to find your favorites. Finally, many of these exceptional records were notable for being out of season or for occurring in much higher than normal numbers, but one bird does stand out as genuine “rare at any time” record—for me that is the adult Slaty-backed Gull photographed at Niagara Falls SP. A really great bird for New York and my pick for Bird of the Season.

Once again, thanks for reading and bird responsibly!

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Much of the data in the Regional reports is sourced from eBird:
eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relFeb-2020. Cornell Lab of Ornithology,
Ithaca, New York. Feb 2020.

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