

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2020-21

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The mild weather of the fall continued into December and January. Every Region in the state enjoyed above average temperatures, and winter didn't really move into most areas until February. Early February saw a couple of significant snowfalls in scattered parts of the state.

The mild temperatures again favored "half-hardy" landbirds, and there were many individuals who lingered on from the autumn season. Additionally, open water provided feeding and sheltering locations for waterfowl and snow-free fields provided grazing areas for geese.

Region 1 reported a high count of 74 Cackling Geese at one location in Orleans County, mentioned as being a record high for the Region, but I would be surprised if there were many (or any) higher counts statewide. This species did put in a good showing elsewhere, with birds reported from seven Regions, and there were many other good counts. Greater White-fronted Goose was also widespread, with a high count of eight in Region 3. In Region 9, a Barnacle Goose with four hybrid young were continuing birds from the fall season, while a bird photographed in Region 3 was identified as a Barnacle X Cackling Goose hybrid. Where do the breeding ranges of these species overlap outside of captivity? Two

Regions hosted Pink-footed Geese this winter, one in Suffolk in Region 10, where almost regular now, and one in Region 5 which provided a first Hamilton County record.

Trumpeter and Tundra Swans were widely reported from all five westernmost Regions. A count of 75,000 Snow Geese in Region 7 far outnumbered tallies anywhere else. Comments about duck numbers ran from “typical” to “excellent”, but Region 2 editor Robert Spahn noted that 3/4s of their high waterfowl count consisted of Canada Goose and Redhead! Both Wood Ducks and Blue-winged Teal lingered in multiple upstate Regions. Regions 3 and 7 both recorded Tufted Duck. King Eiders were surprisingly well-represented this winter, with reports from five Regions and as many as 20 individuals from Region 10 alone. Barrow’s Goldeneye was also conspicuous this season, with reports from six Regions. Five in Region 6, nine at one location in Region 7, and at least 10 scattered across Region 10 were great counts.

Two reports of Spruce Grouse from Massawepie Mire in Region 6 were the only reports for the state. Three *selasphorous* hummingbirds seems like a pretty typical statewide number these days, and a White-winged Dove in Chautauqua provided a fourth record for Region 1.

Sandhill Cranes were found in five Regions, with a max count of 275 in the Region 3 section of the Montezuma NWR. Among the shorebirds, Killdeer was mentioned favorably by several Regional editors—for being present in good numbers, for overwintering birds, and for early return dates. Surprises included Spotted Sandpiper in Region 6 on 11 December and a Short-billed Dowitcher photographed in Region 10 on 5 December. Greater Yellowlegs lingered to early December in Region 3.

Two Razorbills at the Edith G. Read Sanctuary in Region 9 were surprising, especially for a year with an unremarkable coastal flight. Both murres were recorded in small numbers, but it was Dovekies that entertained many Region 10 birders this winter, putting on a better show than they have for some years. A decent variety of gulls was reported statewide, with the best being a Slaty-backed which drifted back and forth across the Canadian border with Region 1 through December and January. Region 1 also hosted a Sabine’s—a holdover from the fall. Nine Regions reported Iceland Gull, while eight reported Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed. Three different Mew Gulls (as of this writing, now recognized as two full species, Common, *Larus canus*, and Short-billed, *Larus brachyrhynchus*), were scattered around Region 10. Black Skimmers lingering at two Region 10 locations into January were extremely late.

A Great Cormorant was quite a rarity in Region 6, but a first record for Anhinga in Region 2 was even more shocking, especially for the date—mid-December. A Brown Pelican seen along the Hudson River in northern Manhattan (Region 10) was probably the same one seen on the same date at Yonkers in Region 9. Tricolored and Green Heron were both recorded in Region 10 into January.

Golden Eagles were reported from seven Regions, with John Haas in Region 9 noting “widespread reports”. A number of irruptive species seem to have decided that this fall and winter would be the year to put on a show, and Rough-legged Hawk and Snowy Owls both joined the party. They were widely reported and generally in good numbers. A western race *calurus* Red-tailed Hawk was photographed in Region 2, and the always exciting Gyrfalcon was reported in two Regions. By far the most spectacular raptor record statewide was the wonderful Ferruginous Hawk which lingered for more than a month in the Black Dirt farmland of Region 9. This first state record was enjoyed by many birders (is it safe to say many hundreds?) during its stay.

Back to owls for a minute, Barred, Short-eared, and Eastern Screech-Owls were all mentioned by several Regional editors as being present in decent numbers, with high counts of Short-eared at 25 and 24 in Regions 6 and 8, respectively, 62 Screech-Owls on the Rochester CBC in Region 2, and Barred Owl in Region 9 (“widespread reports throughout”) and Region 4 (“many reports”).

A Say’s Phoebe in Region 7 was an excellent find, but a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher banded at Braddock Bay in Region 2 is a record late date for the state. Also in Region 2, a Swainson’s Thrush was reported on 20 December—a Regional late record. Downstate, Region 10 logged Wood Thrush, Veery and Varied Thrush, the latter being the least surprising of the three.

Some open ground birds were recorded in excellent numbers. Horned Lark flocks were large and widespread, with maximum counts in Region 8 (700 at Copake) and Region 10 (500 at Bridgehampton). Likewise, Snow Buntings were plentiful after several down years. Counts of around 1,000 were reported from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 8, with many in the 100s elsewhere.

Bob Yunick in Region 8 reported that a large Black-capped Chickadee irruption, which started back in late summer, continued to build through December and into January, and was accompanied by a smaller influx of Red-breasted Nuthatches and Tufted Titmice. Bob’s observations, supported by banding data and seed consumption figures, are always interesting and worth a look.

As mentioned up top, the continuing mild weather encouraged many half-hardy landbirds to linger throughout the state. Some of those not previously mentioned included widespread Marsh Wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, a variety of sparrows and Eastern Towhee. Four Regions reported Rose-breasted Grosbeak, including some multiples! Other rarities worth mentioning include the Summer Tanager photographed at a feeder in Region 2, male Painted Buntings in Regions 9 and 10, record late Blackburnian and Tennessee Warblers in Region 1, and a Blue-winged Warbler photographed in Region 3. A flock of 60 Rusty Blackbirds in mid-January in Region 8 and another count of 49 in Region 10 are probably related to mild fall and winter weather.

Other great sparrow finds included LeConte's in Regions 9 and 10, two "Gambel's" White-crowned Sparrows photographed in Region 2, and two "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrows in Region 9. Ipswich is a bird that is seldom found more than a few hundred yards from the coast.

By far the best of this lot, though, was the Spotted Towhee found on the Southern Nassau CBC in Region 10 by Pat Lindsay and Shai Mitra. This bird lingered through the end of February, and although it stayed within the confines of a relatively small brushy patch, it remained incredibly difficult to find! Doug Futuyma's comments regarding this towhee and especially his story of his earlier Spotted Towhee sighting (in 1957!) provide a fascinating comparison of how birding was done then and now, although it may not be a tale for the faint hearted (p. 126; ph. p. 156)!

The finch irruption of the fall season continued into winter, albeit with smaller numbers for some species like Pine Siskin. That being said, siskins were recorded in all ten Regions, as were both crossbills and Common Redpoll. In fact, in most Regions the winter finch flight turned into The Redpoll Show, with flocks in the hundreds throughout the state and a couple of reports of flocks in the thousands in Regions 3 and 7. Incredibly, Hoaries were recorded in nine Regions, with multiple reports everywhere. Region 7 reports an "astonishing season" and "tremendous numbers" of Common Redpolls as well as *rostrata* Commons and *hornemanni* Hoaries. As Regional Editor Bill Krueger comments, "To put it in technical terms redpolls of all types were all over the place."

This winter season and the fall before it have really been exceptional for irruptive, or out of season, or just rare, birds. Once again, there were several real contenders for Bird of the Season. However, I think the clear choice for this season is the Ferruginous Hawk, a large, showy, spectacular bird that stayed for a prolonged period and provided great views to many admiring birders. On top of that, the Ferruginous Hawk has since been accepted as a first state record, one of just a handful of records for eastern North America (Willie D'Anna, pers. comm.).

Thanks for reading and be sure to have a look at the Regional reports. There's much more there that didn't get covered here, so please go and check out the details.

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REGIONAL REPORTS—WINTER 2020-21

Much of the data in these Regional reports was sourced from eBird:
eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relFeb-2021. Cornell Lab of Ornithology,
Ithaca, New York. Feb 2021.

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