

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2021-22

**Michael F. Cooper**  
mikec02@optonline.net

Perhaps more than any other season, weather is really a driver of birds present and birds reported through a winter season. Mild temperatures can allow species to linger that normally flee in advance of the turning calendar pages, while unseasonable cold can drive birds into areas where they can be viewed more easily. High or low water levels or deep snow affects where birds can feed—waterfowl far out of sight on large lakes or sparrows along roadsides picking through exposed seed heads or searching for grit.

Last winter had all of this. Despite New York's sprawling latitudes and diverse habitats, the weather during the winter of 2021-2022 was remarkably uniform. December was four to seven degrees above normal in every Region, January two to eight degrees below average across the board, and was followed by a more or less average February nearly everywhere. Mild December temperatures lured many half-hardy species to delay their southward movements and encouraged waterfowl to remain on open water. Snowstorms in mid-January and February drove up sightings of Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs and pushed birds in to feeders and out to roadsides.

Waterfowl remained into December in numbers and variety in most Regions, with lingering ducks mentioned especially in northern and western Regions even into mid-January. Highlights included good numbers of Wood Ducks in Region 1, Green-winged Teal in Regions 3 and 10, and American Wigeon in Region 5. Among the more unusual species, Harlequin Ducks seemed to be especially widespread, with six Regions reporting them, including two different birds each

in Region 6 and 7, where rare. Four Regions reported Tufted Duck, and scoters were pretty widely scattered around. However, in Region 10, where observers have been spoiled in recent years with flocks of Common Eider in the four digits, the high count this season was just 78 birds. Scoter numbers were far below normal there as well.

While the news is filled with stories of declining populations of birds, geese have generally been exempted from that fate. Geese again were well-represented here, both in numbers and in variety. Among the species generally considered rare here, Ross's was recorded from six Regions, Greater White-fronted from seven, and Pink-footed from two, including from five different locations in Region 10. Barnacle Goose seems to have escaped the scrutiny of the annual wild goose chase.

For those down-staters not paying close attention, it is a bit surprising that there are parts of the state where Mute Swans are seldom encountered. Region 7 had its first since 2008, this one near Essex Ferry. Trumpeter Swans were recorded from five Regions, with a max of 42 at Wilson Hill WMA in Region 6. I find it to be an interesting dichotomy that while the expansion of Mute Swan—originating from escapes over 100 years ago—is lamented, the expansion of Trumpeter Swans—originating from escapes 30 years ago—is welcomed. Neither are native breeders in New York.

Among the “duckaloids”, an impressive count of 108 Horned Grebes at Floyd Bennett Field in Region 10 was the exception—most other reports were of disappointingly low numbers. Red-necked Grebes were well represented at the opposite end of the state, in Region 2 at Hamlin Beach SP, with a high count of 826. An Eared Grebe there on 26 December and another on Seneca Lake in Region 3 on 13 February were good finds, and the only ones reported state-wide. Great Cormorants were nice rarities at Buffalo in Region 1 and on the Rochester CBC in Region 2. They also made a very impressive showing in Region 9, with a high count of 15 at Fleischmann's Pier in Westchester County. A Pacific Loon was photographed in Oakdale, Suffolk County in Region 10.

Although the Razorbill flight in Region 10 was generally unimpressive, they were recorded from four other Regions around the state. These were mostly birds lingering from the widespread fall incursion, but impressive sights, nonetheless. Other than that, only Region 10 recorded alcids, with Dovekie and Thick-billed Murre being easier to find than usual.

Impressive counts of Bonaparte's Gulls in Region 1 included several tallies of over 10,000 birds. Associating with these huge flocks were double digit numbers of Little Gulls, with a max of 19 seen on the Niagara River from the Ontario side. Region 1 hosted a rare-in-winter Laughing Gull, while a Franklin's in Region 9 was far from its normal winter range. Iceland, Glaucous, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were widespread and well-represented. Getting down to the “really good gulls”, Slaty-backed was, amazingly, recorded from three Regions—including a “celebrity” bird that showed itself to many at the reservoir in Central Park, Region 10. The others were in Region 5 and, less surprisingly, in Region 1

at Niagara Falls. A bird found on the north shore of Long Island by Patrice Domeischel seemed to check all the boxes for a European Herring Gull. The bird was an adult, well seen and photographed, and was present for weeks.

Shorebird reports were probably about normal overall, with mild December conditions encouraging Killdeer to remain into the winter period in at least eight Regions. Not surprisingly, Region 10 had a nice variety of shorebird species, including Least and Western Sandpipers, Piping Plover, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Easily the highlight, though, was the Northern Lapwing found by Mike Vedder on 18 December. Seen by many that day, it could not be relocated the following day for inclusion on the Captree CBC. Elsewhere in the state, Regions 2 and 3 reported Red Phalarope, and a Spotted Sandpiper was found at Dorchester Park in Region 4.

Sandhill Cranes continue to establish themselves as part of the New York avifauna scene, with reports from five Regions. Regions 2 and 3 recorded high counts of 300-400 birds. Checking on other birds with long legs, Great Blue Herons showed their normally widespread distribution, while Regions 1 and 2 recorded late lingering Great Egrets. Tricolored and Green Herons in Region 10 were also good finds.

Somewhat surprisingly, no hummingbirds were reported from any locations this winter. Taking a serious jump up in size, nine Regions reported Golden Eagles. Surely this is a sign of a real increase in this species' population. Not long ago Golden Eagle could only be found at a few very specific sites. One at Oceanside in Region 10 was most surprising but even there the species is becoming almost annual in occurrence.

Black Vulture now occurs routinely in small numbers throughout the state in the winter months. They were reported from eight Regions this winter. There was no discernable flight of Northern Goshawk, but they were recorded from seven Regions. Northern Harrier presented a mixed bag, with high counts noted in several Regions while in Region 6 Jeff Bolsinger considered them to be "especially down, with maximum counts of no more than three on Point Peninsula and Cape Vincent, where as many as 22 were seen daily last winter." A similar situation was noted for Rough-legged Hawk, with widespread reports and good counts in several areas, but again lower than expected tallies in Region 6. Bob Spahn made the following comment about using eBird reports of Rough-legged as a guide to abundance. "This year, a few individuals hung out in the general Braddock Bay area much of the season generating many reports for the few birds." I'd guess that this statement could be extrapolated to any open-ground, charismatic raptor. A Broad-winged Hawk at Prospect Park in Brooklyn was a rare find for any location in North America north of southern Florida.

Short-eared Owl is another species that could be included in the above eBird comment, but there did actually seem to be decent numbers recorded, with single site counts peaking at 10 birds at Nations Road in Region 2. David Wheeler in Region 5 talks about the possibility of an industrial park impacting a Short-eared Owl location there. The planned Micron plant has received positive national news

coverage, but hopefully the negative effects it would have on the local habitat can be mitigated? Snowy Owls put on a bit of an incursion, with reports from every Region. Again, Regional editors were diligent about trying to reconcile numbers of eBird reports to numbers of individuals present. Lance Verderame in Region 4 describes a series of maladies endured by one Snowy, while another in Newburgh in Region 9 apparently worked out a method to conserve migration energy by riding the ferry. A Long-eared Owl in Region 7 represented the first winter record in over 20 years.

While there was no widespread irruption of winter finches, the Adirondacks in Region 7 experienced a bonanza of both Red and White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins, all in notable numbers, and with courtship behavior noted. See the Notes and Observations piece above, where Matt Young describes 2022 as “the best overall crossbill year” in his 20+ years of studying them in the state, and “the second best year for white-wings” that he’s seen....”. Regions 1 and 4 also got a taste of the Red Crossbill irruption, with some indication of courtship behavior in both. Otherwise, the expected species were scattered around in low numbers. Bohemian Waxwings and Pine Grosbeaks were each reported from only two Regions.

As mentioned up top, there were lots of “half-hardy” species lingering at least into December. “Traditional” half-hardies include species like Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Gray Catbird. All of these and many more were widespread and reported in good numbers. Another, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, was reported from eight Regions and was specifically called out as occurring in high numbers in several of those. American Pipit—not normally grouped as a half hardy—was also widespread and present in good numbers. Multiples were found in Regions 1 and 2, where considered rare, and in Region 8 its occurrence through all three months was termed “unprecedented”. A flock in Region 10 of 100 birds was exceptional.

Beyond the normal half-hardies, there were many records of real surprises among the late lingering species. A few of the highlights were a Summer Tanager at a feeder in Region 1, a Black-throated Green Warbler in Region 6, Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks in Region 7, Nashville and Cape May Warblers in Region 8, Yellow and Tennessee Warblers and an Indigo Bunting in Region 9, and Veery, Wood Thrush and 15 species of warblers in Region 10.

And then there are those species whose normal ranges do not include New York State—perhaps the spiciest of the rarities. Among those not already mentioned, highlights include the Region 2 Painted Bunting, in this case a male that spent a few days at a feeder and was enjoyed by many. Region 9 hosted several out-of-range rarities, including Ash-throated Flycatcher, Mountain Bluebird, Black-headed Grosbeak, Western Tanager, and two LeConte’s Sparrows. In Region 10, highlights included two Western Tanagers in Manhattan, a Gray Kingbird on Staten Island, and Ash-throated Flycatcher and Western Kingbirds. A Henslow’s Sparrow is a great find anytime in Region 10, and one in Brooklyn was good winter record.

In a season with so many rarities, selecting one as Bird of the Season is not an easy or clear-cut decision. But, for its status as a continent-wide rarity and the fact that it cooperated, albeit for only one day, I'd have to go with the Northern Lapwing in Region 10. I can only imagine the shock of finding that bird at a routine birding site and the relief of hearing that it was later relocated a short distance away!

So that wraps up an exciting winter season. I look forward to seeing what you all turn up next time around.

Much of the data in the Regional reports is sourced from eBird:  
eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD\_relFeb-2022. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Feb 2022.