

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—WINTER 2022-23

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It may not be very comforting to know that New York State is right in line with the rest of the planet when it comes to recording warmer temperatures as the years pass. During the winter of 2022-2023, every Region recorded average to well-above average temperatures for all three months covered in this seasonal report. Precipitation amounts were more varied, largely dependent on whether or not a major weather event brought significant snowfall or bypassed a specific area.

The warmer weather is reflected in the rapidly changing complexion of our wintering avifauna. Waterways that used to freeze over now remain open year-round and allow for overwintering waterfowl that would have been surprising to find even a decade ago. The absence of deep freezes or deep snow cover encourages half-hardy landbirds to linger well beyond that near-tropical oasis known as Region 10.

Even so, every once in a while, we can still get a taste of the “old days”, as occurred in Region 1 in late December, when a brutal late December blizzard blanketed the area in more than five feet of snow. Check out that report, where Joel Strong describes efforts to save gulls encased in ice over a several day period. This storm brought a “flash freeze” of intense cold and wind to Region 2, and in Region 6, an epic lake-effect snowfall with depths from 49"-70" recorded.

More often, though, these Regional reports are dominated by accounts of species taking advantage of unseasonably warm weather. In Region 5, all of the regularly occurring dabbling ducks were recorded, and of all expected waterfowl species, only King Eider was missed. Most Regional editors made positive comments regarding waterfowl, with especially impressive totals for Snow Goose, with lots of counts in the four digits and Montezuma NWR in Region 3 topping out at 100,000. Nine Regions recorded Tundra Swan, and eight reported Trumpeter! Among the species we’ve recently considered “rare”, Tufted Duck turned up in five Regions, Cackling Goose in all ten and Barrow’s Goldeneye in six, with probably six different Barrow’s in Region 6 and at least five in Region 10.

Among the rarities, we find Pink-footed Geese reported from Region 5 and possibly six different birds reported from several locations in Region 10. A Barnacle Goose returned to the same Chenango County (Region 4) field as last year. Among the array of waterfowl hybrids is the report of a Barnacle X Cackling Goose from Region 3. We could only guess how those two parent species might have hooked up during the breeding season!

As usual, Wild Turkey seems to be the outlier among the chickens—the only one that seems to be doing well. Ruffed Grouse were widely reported, but in pretty low numbers. It was a pretty unspectacular season for vagrant hummingbirds, with just three reported state-wide, all Rufous.

A Common Gallinule found at the Batavia Wastewater Treatment Plant in Region 1 was a great find in December and was apparently still hanging on in February. American Coots seemed to linger in higher-than-normal numbers, with

a max of 300 tallied in Region 3 in early December. Sandhill Cranes were found in four Regions—perhaps not as impressive as recent showings, but maximum counts of 220 and 360 at Montezuma NWR in Regions 2 and 3 are pretty spectacular.

Twenty-two species of shorebirds were recorded throughout the state, with the best being a Pectoral Sandpiper photographed 3 December in Region 8. In Region 10, five Marbled Godwits lingered into mid-December at Jones Beach, where a Least Sandpiper photographed on 10 December was also surprisingly late. A Red Phalarope in mid-December on the north shore of Long Island was also a great find.

All six expected species of alcids were found in Region 10, with the best being Atlantic Puffins recorded on several offshore pelagic trips. Razorbills were also recorded from Regions 1 and 9, nice rarities in both locations. There were some good gull records during this winter season. Among the fifteen species recorded statewide were four Common/ Short-billed type, of which two upstate birds—one each in Regions 1 and 7—were identified as Common, one Region 10 bird as Short-billed, and another in Region 10 that apparently was not identified to species. A Slaty-backed Gull photographed in Region 7 provided a first Regional record there, while a California Gull visited two locations in Region 3. Five Regions recorded Little Gull, with a great maximum count of 12 birds at one location in Region 1. An inland Laughing Gull in February in Region 2 was also a nice find. In what was probably a return appearance from last winter, an apparent European Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus argentatus*, turned up in mid-January at Old Field Point, Suffolk, and continued through the period.

Loons were well represented statewide, with impressive high counts of 350 Red-throated and 335 Commons, both in Region 10. That downstate Region also recorded three different Pacific Loons.

Tubenoses are generally not a part of the winter report, but two reports of Northern Fulmar from shore in Region 10 is a remarkable tally. Additionally, a dead Great Shearwater was recovered at Smith's Point Park in Region 10.

Seven Regions reported Northern Goshawk—does that qualify as a flight year? Similarly, Rough-legged Hawk reports were widespread across the state. By far the best among the raptors, though, was the long-staying Swainson's Hawk, first found on Staten Island and later relocated in Brooklyn (Region 10). With dates spanning from early January through February, this represents one of the very few winter records for this bird in eastern North America away from Florida and the Gulf Coast. This bird's "lure" was greatly enhanced by the presence of a Western Meadowlark just a short distance away, allowing a "double-twitch" for those lucky enough to connect with both. A Crested Caracara present since the fall on Gardiner's Island in Region 10 was less accessible, but still a great bird.

Although Snowy Owls were found in six Regions, they were in such low numbers everywhere that they were considered to be almost absent from the scene. A Boreal Owl in Region 2 located during an owl survey must have been a very exciting find.

Moving on to passerines, quite a few half-hardy species lingered thanks to the unseasonably warm weather. Among the classic half-hardy species, eight Regions recorded Gray Catbird and Hermit Thrush and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, nine reported Chipping Sparrow and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Common

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Yellowthroats were found in five Regions while Orange-crowned Warblers were recorded in four. Overall, 18 species of warblers lingered into the winter season, with highlights being Yellow-throated Warblers in Regions 2 and 9, Yellow Warbler and Northern Parula in Regions 3 and 10, and a Townsend's Warbler, which spent three weeks in Brooklyn in Region 10. Further east on Long Island, a Summer Tanager at a feeder stayed through the season, providing one of very few winter records for the state.

Open country ground birds were well-represented, with Horned Larks seemingly widespread. A high-count of 1000 birds in Region 3 is impressive, as is a count of 1400 Snow Buntings from the same Region. Every Region reported Lapland Longspur.

Other surprising records among the landbirds include an apparent invasion of Tufted Titmouse into Central Park in Region 10, with a max count of 180! Birders in Region 6 were treated to a visit by a very obliging Boreal Chickadee. Jeff Bolsinger mentions that this bird could be enticed to feed from the hand! A Gambell's White-crowned Sparrow and an Oregon Junco were nice finds in Region 1, and a Loggerhead Shrike in Region 9 was one of just a few modern-day records for the state. A Baltimore Oriole lingered through most of December in Region 1, and an Indigo Bunting overwintered at the Lenoir Nature Preserve in Region 9. Painted Bunting is now almost annual in Region 10, and this winter three different birds turned up on Long Island. One of the few true rarities found this winter was a Hammond's Flycatcher seen and audio recorded at Bashakill in Region 9. This bird represents the fourth record for New York State.

Among the winter finches, only Evening Grosbeak put in impressive, widespread appearances with flocks of 50-200 birds in many locations. Most of the other species were widely distributed, but in low numbers. White-winged Crossbills were barely recorded, with one report of two birds in Region 8. Most interesting was the report from Region 4 that Evening Grosbeaks were fitted with transmitters as part of a study being conducted by the Finch Research Network. It would be fascinating to hear follow-up regarding the movements of these birds.

There were no "mega" rarities found during this winter season, and no obvious choices for Bird of the Season. Among the more unusual records, though, we would have to consider the gulls mentioned above, Slaty-backed, California, and the "Mew" types. The winter Swainson's Hawk and nearby Western Meadowlark also deserve a look. But I think that the BOTS should be the fourth state record Hammond's Flycatcher in Region 9, found by John Haas and confirmed through photos and audio recordings. This record serves as a testament to our expanding knowledge of this difficult group and highlights the importance of careful observation and documentation.

