

THE CLEVELAND BIRD CALENDAR

Winter Number

Published by

The Cleveland Museum of Natural History

and

The Kirtland Bird Club

Editor

Donald L. Newman

Associate Editor

Bertram C. Raynes

CONTRIBUTORS

L. P. Barbour
Kay F. Booth
Joseph E. Bush
Vera Carrothers
Genevieve Chambers
Jerry Czech
Leo Deininger
Ralph W. Dexter
David A. English
Annette B. Flanigan

Adele Gaede
Arthur C. Glover
Neil Henderson
Perry F. Johnson
William & Nancy Klamm
Charles H. Knight
Charles W. Lawrence
Hilda Lebold
Donald L. Newman
Marjorie Ramisch

Richard Rickard
Paul H. Savage
William E. Scheele
Robert P. Schwab
Margaret H. Sherwin
M. B. Skaggs
Frieda E. Smith
Susan Storer
Louis Sturm
Richard Troha

SUMMARY OF WEATHER CONDITIONS

From U. S. Weather Bureau Reports (Cleveland Hopkins Airport)

December - Average monthly temperature of 22.9° was 8 degrees below normal; there were sub-zero readings on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd. Snowfall was 3.14 inches above normal, and snow covered the ground from the 12th to the end of the month.

January - With an average temperature of 21.6°, a 6.9° departure from normal, this month together with December was the coldest December-January since 1917-18. Snowfall was light, totaling only six inches.

February - Both average temperature (31.6°) and total precipitation (3.23 inches) were above normal. Snowfall, however, was below normal, and the ground was largely open during the last half of the month.

All records, observations, and comments should be sent to
Donald L. Newman, 14174 Superior Road, Cleveland 18, Ohio.

COMMENT ON THE SEASON

Highlights. The winter of 1960-61 was distinguished by three phenomena: (1) the incursion of the Snowy Owl; (2) the extraordinary number of Brown-headed Cowbirds that remained through most of the season; (3) the almost total absence of the northern finches. These phenomena as well as other species occurrence data will be reviewed in the appropriate order in the discussion which follows.

Diving Ducks. A careful and regular observer of the birdlife on the Cleveland lakefront comments that "the wintering waterfowl population was at a very low level this season" (W. Klamm). Among the factors responsible for this situation were the severe weather in December and the consequent early formation of ice on Lake Erie and the opening in late December of the second portion of the bunting season.

No large rafts of Scaup ducks were reported from either Cleveland or Lorain. The greatest number of Scaup (both Greater and Lesser) recorded was some 1,800 at Cleveland on January 8, when a stiff north wind apparently caused them to seek the shelter of the breakwall at Edgewater Park and in the Cuyahoga River mouth below the Coast Guard Station (Klamm). Common Goldeneye occurred in fair numbers at Cleveland and Lorain, but the other diving ducks were notably scarce. For the Ruddy Duck, which was counted in the thousands in December 1955 but whose numbers have been steadily declining since then, the high count this winter was a mere 51 birds at Cleveland on December 11.

Yet one brief exception to this rule of scarcity among the diving ducks were the mergansers, both Common and Red-breasted. On December 15, there were an estimated 800 Common Mergansers at Lorain and some 500 there on December 18 (Johnson), while about 650 were observed along the lakefront at Cleveland on December 25 (Klamm). Thereafter only a few were recorded. A raft of 1,200 or more Red-breasted Mergansers occurred at Cleveland on December 3 (Klamm), and an estimated 1,000 at Lorain on December 18 (Johnson). In January and February, however, only a scattered few were reported.

During the third week of December the Oldsquaw appeared on the lakefront at Cleveland in unusually large numbers for this species, which is classed as an "uncommon winter visitor". At least ten birds were loosely congregated off White City on December 18 and 20 (Klamm and Schwab).

Gulls. Great Black-backed Gulls were present in considerable number on Lake Erie. At Lorain they "could be seen most of the time from December 8 to February 13 in variable numbers" (Lebold): from 20 on December 15 to two on February 16, the last date of record (Johnson). At Cleveland and Eastlake the numbers were not quite so large, and the birds were reported in two periods only: from December 25 to January 8, and from February 4 to February 12. Greatest number observed was 14 at Eastlake on February 8 (Storer).

Along the lakefront at Cleveland, the Herring, Ring-billed, and Bonaparte's Gull were fairly abundant to about the third week in December when ice formation on Lake Erie caused the population to decline sharply. Almost 1,000 Bonaparte's Gulls were recorded. on December 17, Yet on December 24, 26, and 31, only a single bird could be found; and the species was not reported from the Cleveland lakefront for the rest of the winter. During January and February the Herring and Ring-billed population was quite variable according to the weather and ice conditions. Sometimes only a few hundred birds were observed. But on February 4, when the lake was ice covered except for small openings at the two light plants and the Easterly Sewage Disposal Plant, more than 2,000 Herring and almost 5,000 Ring-billed Gulls were reported (Klamm).

At Lorain there was a massive gathering of gulls during the latter half of December -- an estimated 10,000 Herring, 20,000 Ring-billed, and 10,000 Bonaparte's being recorded there on December 15 (Johnson). By January 2, the number of Herring Gulls had risen to an estimated 20,000 and the Ring-billed Gull to 30,000. But, as at Cleveland, the population of Bonaparte's Gulls had diminished precipitately, dropping to about 500 birds on December 18, and to just two birds on January 2 (Johnson), This gull was not recorded thereafter. Immediately following January 2, the number of Herring and of Ring-billed Gulls declined to but a few hundred birds for the rest of January and 500 or so, chiefly Herring Gulls, in February.

Snowy Owl. (Since the Snowy Owl can scarcely be confused with any other bird, we have departed from our established practice of accepting only those species occurrence records which are submitted in writing, and we have accepted telephoned records of this species as well as hearsay reports, - Ed.)

After the initial report of a Snowy Owl at White city on November 13 and 14, 1960, none were recorded in the Greater Cleveland area until December 4, when one bird was discovered at Perkins Beach. From then to the end of December, nine birds in all were reported from eight separate localities, all but three of which were on or close by the Lake Erie shoreline. Of the three inland birds, the moat southerly occurrence was reported from Broadview Heights where one was seen for several days during the third week in December. This community, which lies on the Cuyahoga-Medina County boundary, is only about 15 miles from Lake Erie. Another inland bird occurred on December 29 at Waite Hill, which is some seven miles from the lake. (A Summit County observer has now reported, however, that in November 1960 a Snowy Owl did penetrate as far south as Akron, one bird being observed at Goodyear Heights Metropolitan Park from November 15 to the 17th (Bert Sabo fide Henderson).

In January there were just four records of single birds, all of which were on the east side of Cleveland -- either on the lakefront or a short distance away. But in February at least three, possibly four, different birds (as evidenced by their plumage) occurred at various places on the lakefront for much of the month.

In addition, on February 8₀ a quite dark bird was seen "on the ice near the open water at Eastlake" (Storer).

The invasion of the Snowy Owl this winter unquestionably involved far more birds than the weak invasion of the winter of 1954-55, though it was seemingly not as multitudinous as the incursion in the winter of 1949-50, when it was estimated that 100 birds occurred here in January and February. Surprisingly enough, no Snowy Owls were reported from east of Eastlake (at Mentor or Fairport Harbor, for example) or from west of Avon Lake (at Lorain or Vermilion, for instance).

Cowbird. In other winters the Brown-headed Cowbird has occasionally been reported, particularly during December and -- more rarely -- in January and February. These records have almost invariably been of a solitary bird frequenting a feeding station. Such strays were also reported this winter. What was truly phenomenal, however, was the occurrence -- for the first time in the recorded history of the region -- of small flocks of Brown-headed Cowbirds over a large part of the winter season and at a number of widely-separated localities.

In the vicinity of Elyria at least four flocks were observed regularly at feeding stations. One of these flocks, on January 19, consisted of 25 birds, mostly males; another flock which visited a feeder much of the winter comprised 20 birds of both sexes (Johnson). The Elyria Audubon Society Christmas Count, held on January 1, produced a total of 58 Brown-headed Cowbirds, of which 48 birds were seen in a compact flock in a field. At Lorain two Brown-headed Cowbirds came to a backyard feeder on December 27 and were daily visitors thereafter, "increasing in numbers until there were 20 of them on January 15. This number continued to come daily until February 19, when they were last seen" (Lebold). In Shaker Heights a flock of 15 birds, principally males, appeared at a feeding station in mid-December and they were almost daily visitors from then until the end of February, though their numbers declined as the winter wore on (Lawrence). Still another flock was reported from Parma, where a dozen birds frequented a feeder in January and February.

Thus it can be seen that the occurrence of flocks of Brown-headed Cowbirds this winter were quite widespread, indicating that -- whatever the cause more than a few isolated individuals were involved in this singular phenomenon.

Northern Finches. The appearance of two flocks of Red Crossbills in the region in November 1960 raised the hope that this winter might be an invasion year for some of the northern finches. Yet just the opposite was true. No additional flocks of Red Crossbills were discovered, though the one flock remained through December (see Noteworthy Records section). For the first time in at least 12 years, not a single Evening Grosbeak was reported. There were no records of the Purple Finch after December 3. And there was just a single record of a single Redpoll: a feeding station bird

tallied on the Elyria Audubon Society Christmas Count on January 1. The Lapland Longspur, which is always a rare visitor, was reported only in December, when three birds were observed on the Cleveland lakefront on the 17th and 24th (Klamm). One exception to the scarcity of northern finches was the Snow Bunting, which was quite abundant along and near the Lake Erie shoreline.

Towhee. Many Rufous-sided Towhees -- far more than usual -- wintered in the region, but they were apparently confined almost entirely to the Grand River and the Chagrin River watersheds, The sole exception to this rule were three birds which occurred regularly at a feeding station in Broadview Heights (Smith). On the Cleveland East Side Christmas Count held on December 31, thirty-seven Towhees were recorded, which is almost three times as many as had been recorded on this count in any of the last 20 years. At North Chagrin Reservation a flock of six to eight birds was commonly seen throughout the winter. Another flock of six frequented tangles of wild grapevines in a woods at Lake Lucerne where they fed together with a group of Cardinals (English). In Stebbin's Gulch on January 28, when snow in the area was eight to ten inches deep, two flocks were observed: one of six or eight birds and the other of ten or more. Both flocks occupied the lower branches of Canada hemlocks growing on the cliff side (Sturm). In addition, feeding station birds were reported from Painesville, Waite Hill, and Willoughby Hills.

Early Spring Migrants. Beginning on February 13 and continuing for four of the next five days, the prevailing direction of the wind was from the southern quarter or from due south, as on the 17th and 18th. These favorable winds brought with them the first of the early spring migrants. Five Canada Geese were observed at Eastlake on February 16 (Schwab), and in the late afternoon of the with a flock of a dozen or more flew north over Shaker Heights (Lawrence). At Wildwood Park, Cleveland, two Killdeer on February 19 were the earliest arrivals reported. A few Robins also appeared at that time.

An impressive eastward flight of Icterids occurred on February 18, when, at about 4:15 p.m., flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and of Brown-headed Cowbirds were seen passing over the Rocky River Reservation about one half mile south of Lake Erie. A short while later large bands of Red-winged Blackbirds and of Common Grackles -- sometimes separately, sometimes in mixed groups -- followed the flight line of the earlier flocks. This movement of Icterids was studied until almost 5:00 p.m. and was observed again at Clague Park one hour later. In all, an estimated 3,000 birds were seen, the Redwings and Grackles comprising a good 75% of that number (Klamm).

A second warm spell, accompanied by southerly winds, in the period from February 22 to the 26th brought a second influx of migrants. Song Sparrows made their appearance in considerable number at that period, and a few Eastern Meadowlarks arrived. In the vicinity of Willoughby Hills, "Robins, Redwings, and Grackles came in flocks on February 24 and 25" (Skaggs).

NOTEWORTHY RECORDS

Red-throated Loon - On December 4 at Perkins Beach, a single bird dived repeatedly in the waters of the small bay, but after a while, by swimming and short flights, it moved out into the lake (Klamm).

Common Eider - Three birds occurred on the Cleveland lakefront on December 3, when one was seen on the east side (at White City) and two on the west side. Then a single bird was present at White City on December 4, 10, and 17. Finally, on December 18, there were two birds at White City and one at Clifton Beach, after which this *species* was not recorded (Klamm). The three Eiders on the 3rd and on the 18th represent the largest number ever reported in the region; all four previous records of this rare visitor are of single birds.

Surf Scoter - From December 3 through the 11th, three birds were recorded at White City, usually in association with the Common Eider noted above. Two were observed at Edgewater Park on December 17 (Klamm).

Common Scoter - While a single bird was diving and preening at ton Beach on December 10, a flight of 11 Scoters alighted on the water momentarily and then flew on to the west (Klamm). Only once before has such a large number been reported.

Bald Eagle - At Lorain on January 2, an adult bird was studied by telescope for some 30 minutes as it stood on the ice on Lake Erie about half a mile off shore. Occasionally it made a short flight but always alighted near *open* water (Lebold). It *was seen* again in the same locality on January 4.

Peregrine Falcon - While a captive Peregrine Falcon was undergoing training on a wide lawn on the Baldwin-Wallace College campus on January 13, a wild, immature Peregrine suddenly appeared and with a "sizzling swoosh" made a pass at the captive bird, coming within a foot or so *of* her. The wild Falcon then "shot almost vertically up the aide of the Art Building and made a large circle taking it very high and passing on toward the east" (Czech).

Glaucous Gull - This winter produced more records of this species than any winter since 1947-48. At least two adults and one or more immatures were seen along the Cleveland lakefront between January 15 and February 12 (Klamm). Elsewhere, single birds were observed at Eastlake on February 12 (Carrothers) and at Fairport Harbor on February 17 (Booth).

Iceland Gull - During the Elyria Audubon Society Christmas Count on January 1, two birds were discovered among a vast host of gulls at Lorain Municipal Pier. One bird was in flight, the other was on the water not more than 20 feet distant from the observers (Jack Smith, David Stock, Rick Brekelbaum fide Johnson). In the same locality on February 9, a single bird was studied at length both in flight and while it was standing in the company of a group of

Ring-billed Gulls (Johnson). This species had not been reported since November 1952, and the record of two birds on January 1, is the first record of more than a single bird.

Long-eared Owl - In the leafless woods adjoining the Cuyahoga County Airport, this usually secretive owl was standing right out in the open on a horizontal limb of a tree and did not fly off even when the observers who discovered it there on December 29, walked about directly below (Rickard).

Saw-whet Owl - The East Side Christmas Count conducted on December 31, produced a record of this species when one bird was found in the shelter of an evergreen tree in Gates Mills (Ramisch).

Mockingbird - On February 7, this bird appeared on the grounds of a residence just east of Painesville (Booth).

Northern Shrike - During the Audubon Society Christmas Count on January 1, one bird was observed in a semi-rural area in the northeast corner of Elyria (Ruth Amato, Jane Davies fide Johnson).

Red Crossbill - The flock which was first seen in North Chagrin Reservation on November 27, 1960, was observed there twice in December: on the 4th a group of 14 (Klamm), and on the 30th about seven birds (Deininger).

Oregon Junco - (1) A well-marked bird appeared at a window feeding station in Broadview Heights on-December 1, and remained in the neighborhood throughout the winter. In 1959 this (or another) Oregon Junco first appeared at the feeder on November 29 (Smith). (2) At a backyard feeding station at Lake Lucerne, one bird - in association with Slate-colored Juncos and Tree Sparrows -- spent most of the day on December 10, but was not recorded thereafter (English).

From a Neighboring Locality:

King Eider - At Walnut Beach, Ashtabula, on December 11, Jon Ahlquist found this bird partly frozen in the ice, from which it was weakly trying to free itself. "By placing my hands on the ends of the wings and tail, I thawed it out and took it to the nearby pumping station of the water works. It appeared emaciated and soon expired" (Savage). This is the first record for the Ashtabula area.

FIELD NOTES

Failure of Barn Owls to Nest Successfully. Observations and banding of Barn Owls nesting in a silo near Hartville, Ohio, have been reported for the years 1952-57 (Cleveland Bird Calendar Vol. 51, No. 4:11-12, 1956,, and Cleveland Audubon Society Bulletin Vol, No. 1:6. 1959). These notes described fall nesting for two years as well as the usual spring brood.

No eggs were laid in the spring of 1958, either at the bottom of the silo or on the roosting platform at the top of the silo. At least one adult, however, continued to live on this platform and was frequently seen about the Gilcrest Farm. Owl pellets collected on May 11 from the bottom of the silo were not as numerous as formerly. According to Mrs. Virginia Gilcrest Gamble, there was no attempt at fall nesting that year, as there had been in the fall of 1955 and 1956,

In the last week of April 1959, Mr. Gilcrest found six eggs of the Barn Owl at the bottom of his silo. On May 2 the writer observed five eggs at the same place. Fifteen days later, when he returned expecting to find nestlings, neither eggs nor nestlings were present. At the time of the visit one adult was roosting on the shelf high in the silo. It is possible that the eggs or nestlings may have been devoured by rats. The once productive source of Barn Owls for this area has failed to produce nestlings since the spring of 1957, - RALPH W. DEXTER, Department of Biology, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.