

The Changing Seasons

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I AM ALWAYS STRUCK BY THE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS RAISED by the Regional Reports in each issue of *American Birds*. There is a great deal we do not know about birds, perhaps more than we do know. This report, after the obligatory discussion of the weather, will deal mostly with questions. There may be people with the answers to a few of them somewhere. If so, please share them. Your thoughts, ideas, or even fragmentary data may help clear things up.

If you don't live in the northeast you probably can echo the sentiment of the regional editor from Northwestern Canada: this was "the winter that wasn't." Most of the continent experienced above normal temperatures and below average precipitation. A few comments from around the country give a picture of what it was like. It did not snow in Chicago in February. The reservoir at Ft. Peck, Montana did not "officially" freeze over for the first time in its history. Another mild winter in Alaska. Mild and dry on the Pacific Coast. In the southeast it was warmer than normal, but not dry. Only on the Atlantic Coast was there real winter weather. Storms moved on a southern track, bringing rain to the southeast, and snow to the northeast as they moved up the coast. Unusually, most coastal states had more snow along the ocean than inland. The heavy snow started in New Jersey, and peaked in the Northeastern Maritimes where they had near-record snow cover and frozen water. The bitter cold prevented most of the snow from melting, and according to the regional editor, "snow-shoveling replaced birding as the predominant weekend activity."

How did the weather affect bird distribution? Not surprisingly, most regions reported many lingerers, although there seems to be considerable confusion about the difference between a wintering bird and a lingering bird. That question, one of the most fascinating raised by this year's data, will be attacked in detail later on. First to the rarities, the oddities, and questions about Red Crossbills and exotics

Rarities

As always, there were rare birds, although it seems fewer than in most years. Maybe we are becoming jaded. Birds that used to get S.A.s no longer get boldfaced. The following sample, neither taxonomically nor geographically ordered, caught my eye. It certainly caused the adrenaline to flow for lucky and persistent local birdwatchers.

Missouri got its second Varied Thrush and one of its very few Mountain Bluebirds, but neither was boldfaced. Montana recorded its first Yellow-billed Loon, Illinois had one, and Colorado, two. Better identification criteria must be accounting for the spate of inland records. Alabama and New Mexico got their first Little Gulls. How many states and provinces do not have them yet? The Ross' Gull that stayed in Oregon so long and delighted so many was the first south of Canada on the Pacific Coast. Ditto for the Slaty-backed Gull in Washington. A Ross' Gull made a brief appearance for a single observer in New York. It is not on the state list, and the records committee there will have

to evaluate the report. There were two Lesser Black-backed Gulls at the Salton Sea. They must be breeding somewhere on this side of the Atlantic. More from the Thayer's/Iceland gull complex. North Carolina reported its third Thayer's, and California reports an adult Iceland of the *kumlieni* race. Despite the expertise of the regional editor, especially with gull problems, I personally strongly disagree with the decision to suggest that this bird was identified not only to species, but to subspecies. The Canadians have lumped Iceland and Thayer's, but have not yet published the research. In the meantime, rumors abound about intergrades, convergent evolution, and overlapping characters. Until a great deal more is known, I think it is rash to slap subspecific names on birds that often cannot be certainly identified in the hand. We will probably never know what it really was, since this bird was not collected.

British Columbia got its second Clark's Grebe. We are still sorting out the distribution of the two *Aechmophorus* grebes. Alabama's third Audubon's was one of five small shearwaters seen from shore on the same day, and the only one close enough to be identified. A banded Royal Tern was picked up in Rhode Island on January 27, but the report does not indicate where it was banded. A Bridled Tern in western Virginia following a storm on December 3 is the first for the Appalachian Region, and unseasonal to boot. How tough are jaegers to identify? One found February 22 in Kentucky was hotly debated, with all three species having adamant champions. Photographs taken in March established it as the state's first Pomarine. Another seabird, or 351 of them to be improbably precise, made news off North Carolina. That many Wilson's Storm-Petrels established the first-ever continental CBC record! The Maritimes had two Arctic/Pacific Loons, not even boldfaced. They seem to be coming regularly there, but not farther south. Florida had an incredible alcid season. Three species were found beached in this tropical paradise. A Razorbill, the state's first Atlantic Puffin, and then incredibly, its first Marbled Murrelet. Examination of the specimen should determine if it was of the Siberian race, as most (all?) inland records have been.

Louisiana got its second Couch's Kingbird, Arizona its second Tropical Parula, Georgia its third Say's Phoebe, northeastern Florida its first Ash-throated Flycatcher, Illinois its sixth Green-tailed Towhee, Wisconsin its second Curve-billed Thrasher, and Washington its third Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Fredonia, New York had a Rock Wren, possibly a 1st for the area, although the regional editor does not say. Firsts include a White Wagtail in Barbados, a Lucy's Warbler in Washington, a Rustic Bunting wintering with juncos in Washington, and Brewer's Blackbirds, in Quebec and Vermont. *Empidonax* flycatchers made news and raised questions. The first winter record for Hammond's Flycatcher for Texas, and the first for the eastern half of the state, was overshadowed by the one collected in Delaware. With that in mind, what are we to make of the silent birds in North Carolina and Georgia identified as Least's? Based on specimen evidence, which is more likely at this season? A wood-pewee's voice was recorded in Monterey and identified as an Eastern, the first winter record north of Costa Rica.

That leaves four extraordinary records, each with a story and some instruction for birdwatchers. A Brown Shrike was found in California, although it was originally identified as a young Northern! Read the story, but be just a little skeptical about the subspecies debate. The avifauna of Asia has not been subjected to the same intense taxonomic scrutiny as other parts of the world, and again, we have no specimen to work with. Northern California also had an Oriental Greenfinch, the first for the contiguous

US. The same subspecific debate is underway. Is it the right race? Is it countable? What race was released in British Columbia? Which ones are kept in captivity in California? Since there is no specimen, no one will ever know for sure. The donnybrook in the California Records Committee about these two birds should keep the rest of us fascinated for some time.

The report, by a single observer, of a Xantus' Hummingbird near San Diego presents an interesting dilemma. The California Records Committee almost never accepts single observer sight records for first state records. This would be a first U.S. record. What do researchers do with this report?

A different problem attends the incredible Azure Gullinule found dead on Long Island (rumor says the cat is innocent). This South American bird is normally sedentary, but it is not usually kept in captivity. This promises to be one of those wonderful bird stories without a punch line.

Oddities

I suspect most readers of *American Birds* turn first to their own regions, and only later leaf through others, looking for boldfaced birds and S.A.s. Then, over the following weeks, they begin mining for nuggets about behavior, distribution and identification. These serve as the stimulus for conversations for months and years to come. They trigger research and articles in local journals. Gleaning through this winter's offerings I came across dozens that stimulated my imagination and raised questions. What follows is a random sample, but there are dozens more.

Start with the report from the Florida Region of the apparent total collapse of the long-legged wading bird population. John Ogden attributes it in part to the serious mismanagement of the remaining wetlands. If the trend continues, will we be any better off than at the turn of the century when plume hunters ravaged the populations? That situation was reversible, this may not be. It reminds us that saving habitat is more important than saving individual birds. Ontario recorded a big influx of Barrow's Goldeneyes. Does this represent a change in status or an increased sophistication about the identification of birds not in adult male plumage? A flamingo wintered on the coast of North Carolina. The regional editor did not speculate on its origin, and I don't blame him. Why aren't all captive birds color banded? The question of escapes was raised by the editor from the Niagara-Champlain Region commenting on the report of four Eurasian Wigeons. He points out that this species is an avicultural favorite, and Roger Clapp of the Smithsonian tells me it is one of the most commonly imported and captive-bred waterfowl in the U.S. Yet most birdwatchers and state records committees automatically accept all records, while rejecting Barnacle Goose reports. There is no way of telling the provenance of an individual bird, but we should not assume, at least with these two species, that all individuals are either wild or captive-bred.

Some birds are so secretive and retiring that it takes a concentrated effort to find one or two. Having spent many hours searching for small rails, I was not surprised that it took 28 person-hours to flush one Yellow in North Carolina. Can you imagine how much time it will take before we accurately understand the winter distribution of this species? Since the discovery of Boreal Owls breeding in the high mountains of Colorado almost twenty years ago, a great deal of time and effort has gone into finding out how widely distributed they are in the southern Rocky Mountains. This year another piece of the puzzle fell into place, but look what it took! A six hour nighttime snowmobile

run in temperatures that fell to 6°F. I'd like to try that run. Once.

Speaking of owls, there was a report from Martha's Vineyard of at least eight dead and dying Common Barn-Owls brought in this winter. The mortality was blamed on the heavy snow cover. Barn-owls are not highly tolerant of cold, and in other areas high mortality has been associated with deep snow cover. However, there may be other factors involved. Barn-owls already had a tenuous foothold on the island when a nestbox program was instituted. Nestbox programs aimed at helping declining or threatened species within their normal range can have a major impact. The Eastern Bluebird is the most famous example. The effort on Martha's Vineyard, and the results of this winter make one wonder about the wisdom of expanding a bird's range through an artificial nest program. Barn-owls are naturally rare that far north for a reason. Perhaps we should respect it.

Alabama's 10th report of a Great Cormorant caused the regional editor to express skepticism about all Gulf Coast reports. I admire skepticism, especially about sight records, but I am not surprised by the report. This bird has been expanding steadily in the East, and Florida has more than 60 reports. Another northeastern waterbird made news on the Gulf Coast this winter. In the South Texas Region the number of Northern Gannets was the "premier event on the Upper Texas Coast this winter." More than 350 were seen off Galveston January 31, making it the most common bird observed. They were also seen flying south into Mexican waters, where the species is still hypothetical. Is this big invasion related to the dearth of seabirds in New England this winter? The regional editor there notes the precipitous decline of sand lance, a prey species for many seabirds.

As always, hawks appealed to many observers. No other group of birds attracts so much attention from so many birdwatchers. Two Mississippi Kites wintered in southern Florida. Is there any other record of this species spending the entire winter season in North America? An immature *Buteo* near Brownsville was variously identified with "100% certainty" as a Broad-winged or a Roadside hawk. One can only commiserate with the regional editor. Despite being seen by many observers, no photographs were submitted. Surely they are out there somewhere. Many birdwatchers know that scouring local landfills at dusk is a good way to find owls. In St. John's, Newfoundland, however, a bonus was provided. Up to twelve Northern Goshawks were seen hunting the dump in the evenings. Has anyone else noted this behavior, or was it a one-time phenomenon caused by the heavy snow cover in the region? The Peregrine Falcon may well be the favorite bird of observers throughout the continent. It is not unusual for them to get coverage, but note the full paragraph in the Hawaiian Region. Peregrines are notorious marine migrants, but did this bird get to Hawaii on its own, or spend a lot of time ship riding? The diurnal raptor event of the winter was in Oklahoma. For three years observers have been censusing a roost of Northern Harriers there. In 1985 there were 311 birds, possibly the largest concentration of harriers ever reported. Last year there were only (!) 173 birds, still a staggering figure. So what words describe the 1045 (!!) counted this year. That would be a sight worth seeing. How were they counted? What other raptors were in the area? What were they feeding on? Has anyone, anywhere, ever heard of a concentration even approaching this number?

To quote the editor for the Northeastern Maritimes, "it was another flight year for Purple Gallinules!" The last time this happened was the winter of 1978-1979, and it caused a great deal of debate about why this happens, and

where the birds come from. There was no resolution of the problem then, and there isn't likely to be this year. The editor takes us through the issue, but concludes we don't have the answers. Note that at the same time two were found in the Hudson-Delaware Region. Why only in the northeast?

A Northern Shrike visited a suet feeder in Ontario. As it fed, it beat its wings against the feeder. The report speculated that it was trying to subdue the prey. I haven't heard of Northern Shrikes feeding on suet before, and I wonder if this was a young bird driven to this extreme by hunger and lack of experience, or a very opportunistic adult. Louisiana got its eighth Allen's Hummingbird; by this time all reports of Rufous Hummingbirds in the east that do not refer to adult males ought to be viewed with uncertainty. Only banding and specimens can resolve the issue in most cases.

How many other readers turn to the Alaska Region to note which birds are boldfaced and which are not? The comparison constantly reinforces the fact that Alaska is not entirely like the rest of the continent. This winter's boldfaced entries were Cattle Egret, Purple Finch, and Brewer's Blackbird! Birdwatchers across the country wouldn't walk across the street to see these birds in most cases. But look at the species that are not boldfaced. Many would be the bird of the year anywhere else. Next door to Alaska is what must be one of the toughest winter regions on the map. The Yukon is not hospitable to birds or birdwatchers in the long dark days of winter. Intrepid observers there turned up interesting tidbits about our two most ubiquitous aliens. For the first time European Starlings wintered in the Yukon (boo, hiss). House Sparrows also spent the winter, roosting at night in Cliff Swallow nests. Do they do this in other parts of the country?

A hot debate has raged for the last few years about the origin of Painted Buntings north of Florida in winter. One at a feeder in Iowa adds another chapter. The regional editor argues in favor of an escape, taking the line adopted by the California Records Committee. The situation in the east and the midwest may be different however. It would be nice to know exactly how many of these gaudy little fellows have shown up in the last decade or so. Are they really so common as caged birds? Do they really get loose that often? This debate is far from settled.

As always, there are one or two reports that raise eyebrows, not just because they are unusual, but because they suggest the possibility of misidentification. This season's most striking example comes from Tennessee, where eleven Baird's Sandpipers were reported on the improbable date of February 28. Birds can fly, and anything can happen, but this record needs good photographs at the very least. Less unlikely, but still eyebrow-raising was the report that Common Terns lingered into the CBC period on Lake Erie. *Sterna* terns and *calidris* sandpipers are notoriously difficult identification problems, and a slightly greater skepticism wouldn't hurt.

Pay close attention to Harry LeGrand's comments about the "Mystery Gull" in South Carolina. Speculation filled the air, and at least one species not previously known in North America was proposed and widely accepted. Thankfully the bird was collected, and the answer, although not as satisfactory to the listers, is just as intriguing. Kudos to those who exercised restraint.

We finish up with two finch reports from northern California that deserve mention and comment. A male Purple Finch was thought to be of the eastern race *purpureus*. This subspecies has never been recorded in California, although it occurs in western Canada. It may well occur along the west coast in small numbers, but that is speculation,

as is the tentative identification of this individual I don't fault the observer for attempting to make the distinction, although I doubt that it can be done in the field.

Two birds originally identified as Eurasian Siskins were also reported from northern California. They were attending a feeder, and were seen by many observers over an extended period. Banding eventually established that they were highly colored Pine Siskins. Had someone not made the effort to catch them would the record now be a fact, a part of the permanent ornithological literature?

Red Crossbills

The editors of the Quebec Region are to be applauded for raising a question others have shied away from. In an S.A. about Red Crossbills, they point out that several subspecies occur in the northeast, and urge investigation of their status. They note that European ornithologists recognize three species of "red" crossbill there; and while not advocating species status for any of the forms in North America, suggest observers could differentiate between subspecies groups. They point out that preservation of road-killed specimens is one way to do so. However there is new evidence on the horizon, and it threatens to muddle the question so thoroughly that we will have to start from scratch.

The taxonomy of Red Crossbills has confounded ornithologists from day one. Over the last century the data has trickled in, accumulating in specimen trays at widely scattered locations across the continent. Periodically some daring researcher reassesses the situation, attempting to explain the latest contradictions and inconsistencies (see Dickerman p. 188 this issue). But research now being conducted at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley using sound recordings of song and calls as well as specimens, suggests that there may be at least five sibling species (?) of Red Crossbill in North America. Continued work may elevate some or all of these to species status. Assuming it comes to pass, present knowledge does not permit the identification of many (most?) specimens to species. The only sure way to make the distinction is vocalization, and even then it requires a sonogram.

One advantage of splitting the Red Crossbill would be that it would turn loose a horde of dedicated birdwatchers/hsters to work on the problem. Over the last 25 years many "insoluble" field problems have been partially or wholly resolved by this semi-professional army. Not that long ago it was thought impossible to separate immature Laughing and Franklin's gulls, Long-toed Stints and Least Sandpipers, non-territorial *Empidonax*, and young *Oporornis* warblers. It may take a decade or two, but if there are ways of identifying the various Red Crossbills, this group will ferret them out. A few cautions however. There may not be a way. They may not be a split. This may be only one more tortured and incomplete step. In the meantime, the preservation of road-killed specimens is an excellent idea, as is the preservation of voice recordings where possible.

Lest anyone is clinging to the hope that distribution will resolve the problem (how many silent wood-pewees are identified this way every year?), the news is not good. Red Crossbills are known for their highly erratic wandering, probably in response to local, cyclical food conditions. Individual groups wander great distances (Alaska to New York for example), breed, and leave. The ongoing saga of the Red Crossbill promises to surpass even large white-headed gulls for taxonomic complexity, and to easily eclipse such simple problems as juvenile jaegers and silent empis

as a field challenge Stay tuned (See page 188, this issue, for a more complete discussion of the taxonomic difficulties of *Loxia curvirostra*.)

Exotics

Too few observers are conscientious about reporting introduced and exotic birds. There is a generally accepted snobbishness about these species. It is not merely okay to look down one's nose at avian aliens, it is required. Chasing exotics is the object of much derision, but it ought to be done. Read for example, the report from the Hawaiian Region. Almost two-thirds of the landbird species cited are introduced. The situation is not as dramatic in southern Texas and Florida, but the segment of those reports dealing with non-native species continues to grow.

We need to monitor the status and spread of introduced birds. Successfully established species often compete with native birds. The decline of a local bird may be attributable in part to competition with an introduced one, but to make that determination, we need hard data, preferably before the situation is beyond control. Additionally, the more information we have, the better our chances of determining the origin of the species. Some species originally thought to be of natural origin are now thought not to be ([Eurasian] Jackdaws in Quebec), and some thought to be escapes may have gotten here on their own (Barnacle Geese in the northeast).

An individual observer, seeing a parrot in a local park, or a duck popular with aviculturists at the local sewage lagoon (and yes, the appropriateness of the locale was intentional), cannot determine the broader significance of the record. Only by assessing *all* of the records, over a number of years, can we determine what is happening. Remember, *American Birds* is not an ongoing history of American birds. It is about the status of birds in the Americas. All birds.

Many birdwatchers indulge in the harmless self-congratulation on lists that have No Introduced Birds (NIB) But let us distinguish between personal endeavor and bird distribution. It is shortsighted to let personal distaste rob us of needed information. Every issue of this magazine represents a massive volunteer effort, and it is the single best and most important attempt to monitor the status of birds on our continent. I may be the only reader (other than Richard Ryan in New Jersey) who notes with pleasure the growing number of regions that have an exotic category at the end of the regular report.

Finally, constrained by time (why are so many reports always late?) and space, I will tackle the problem of lingerers/winterers. This was the perfect season for it, with mild dry weather over most of the continent, and many birds staying beyond their appointed times. What does this mean? Two theories are contending for prominence, and I don't have an answer. I will not be stunned to find that both have merit, however.

Most regional editors have become careful about labelling birds seen in late December or early January as "wintering," though a few still do. For observers who still treat such records casually, remember that a wintering bird is one that spends the entire season. We know that many waterbirds move in response to local weather conditions, and there can be a considerable migration well after the first of year if northern waters stay open that long. The tendency, however, is to treat any warbler or flycatcher that stays north as a bird that "forgot" to migrate. Many people assume that such birds succumb to the first blast of really

cold weather, since they are rarely seen after that. The same thing goes for semi-hardy species like mimic thrushes. In the east it is common to record numbers of Gray Catbirds and Brown Thrashers on Christmas Bird Counts well north. Yet, except along the coast, few if any are found in January or February. Were they killed off by cold weather? If so, why hasn't the lingering gene disappeared? Surely this is not a successful strategy.

Another possibility is that these birds are late migrants, moving on when weather dictates. Paul Lehman points to the Gray Catbirds he used to record every year in the same marsh edge on Long Island. Yet they were not present later in the year. If they were killed off, new catbirds had to be finding this same spot attractive every year. He prefers the idea that they are the same birds, lingering every year as late as possible.

Why would they do this? We know that gulls do. The older the bird, the farther north it winters, giving it a head start in getting back to the breeding area, and an advantage over others in choosing a prime breeding location. Why shouldn't passerines do the same thing? We do not have enough data to resolve the question entirely, but there are ways of collecting it.

The first thing to do is check on lingering birds throughout the winter. If you find a Brown Thrasher in central Pennsylvania in late December, go back to see if it is still there every week. Go back even if it doesn't pop up on one or two trips. Try to determine when it leaves (or dies). Tracking individual birds will help fill in a lot of blanks.

Tracking populations can help, too. In Maryland there has been an ongoing Winter Atlas effort. Field work has been conducted from late January to mid-February. As expected, no semi-hardy lingerers have been recorded, despite broad overlap with CBC areas that always turn them up. No matter what the field guides tell you (*mea culpa*), those birds are not wintering here. Surprising was the big drop off in many species thought to be largely resident. In terms of birds/party hour, we noted a big drop off in Song Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows, and juncos. Are they dying off? Migrating? Some may succumb, but the majority are still moving. Similar discrepancies are noted for many hawks.

What we need is more work on the common birds, as well as close tracking of individuals. We also need a greater awareness of the distinction between winterer and lingerer, at least in some parts of the country. Let's work with data, not assumptions.

So there it is, another season of questions. There are many more than were raised here. You are passing up a wonderful opportunity if you don't sample every region. You never know which piece of information will start a line of thought or inquiry that will change your understanding of bird distribution and behavior. Read!

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Abbreviations Frequently Used in Regional Reports

ad.: adult, Am.: American, c.: central, C: Celsius, CBC: Christmas Bird Count, Cr.: Creek, Com.: Common, Co.: County, Cos.: Counties, *et al.*: and others, E.: Eastern (bird name), Eur.: European, Eurasian, F: Fahrenheit, *fide*: reported by, F.&W.S.: Fish & Wildlife Service, Ft.: Fort, imm.: immature, I.: Island, Is.: Islands, Isles, Jct.: Junction, juv.: juvenile, L.: Lake, m.ob.: many observers, Mt.: Mountain, Mts.: Mountains, N.F.: National Forest, N.M.: National Monument, N.P.: National Park, N.W.R.: Nat'l Wildlife Refuge, N.: Northern (bird name), Par.: Parish, Pen.: Peninsula, P.P.: Provincial Park, Pt.: Point, not Port, Ref.: Ref-

uge, Res.: Reservoir, not Reservation, R.: River, S.P.: State Park, sp.: species, spp.: species plural, ssp.: subspecies, Twp.: Township, W.: Western (bird name), W.M.A.: Wildlife Management Area, v.o.: various observers, N,S,W,E,: direction of motion, n., s., w., e.,: direction of location, >: more than, <: fewer than, ±: approximately, or estimated number, ♂: male, ♀: female, ∅: imm. or female, *: specimen, ph.: photographed, †: documented, ft: feet, mi: miles, m: meters, km: kilometers, date with a + (e.g., Mar. 4+): recorded beyond that date. Editors may also abbreviate often-cited locations or organizations.