

JUST OUTSIDE MON-treal, a Common Moorhen lingered as November turned to December in 1990. Quebec in December is not a traditional milieu for moorhens, but this individual was not relying on the vagaries of wild food in the marsh: It frequented a shopping center at Dorval, feasting on popcorn

tossed to it by movie-goers. In a way, this enterprising bird set the tone for a winter that was dominated by the unexpected.

Sometimes we flatter ourselves with the idea that we can analyze bird occurrences and explain their causes. Winter 1990-1991 brought plenty of occurrences to analyze, but the explanation department took a serious beating; all the major avian events seemed to involve surprises and contradictions.

The Big Freeze on the West Coast: On the Pacific Coast, where winters are "always" moderate, a major cold system broke records during the third week of December. From British Columbia to California and inland to the Prairie Provinces and the Rockies, observers reported effects of the freeze on birdlife. Expected results included departure of waterfowl and sudden disappearance of many half-hardy lingerers. Scores of Red-breasted Sapsuckers moved out of the mountains in British Columbia and Washington. Varied Thrushes and Fox Sparrows apparently suffered heavy mortality in Oregon. Wintering Ruby-crowned Kinglets may have dropped by 90% in coastal northern California. Even in southern California, the usual wintering warblers, orioles, and the like were in short supply after the freeze. In Alaska, by contrast,

THE CHANGING SEASONS

Winter 1990-1991

By Kenn Kaufman

December was cold but not record-breakingly so; the state had its first overwintering Townsend's Warblers—even while that species was suffering major losses much farther south, in California!

Mild winter in the Snow Belt: While the West was in the deep freeze, many areas from the midwest to the Atlantic were enjoying an unusually warm winter. Reports from these regions were filled with notes on species that lingered or wintered north of usual limits. There were many late warblers (or as Blair Nikula put it, "a potpourri of procrastinating parulids"), herons, ducks, shorebirds, phoebes, catbirds, and others. Evidently more gulls than usual wintered inland, including wimpy ones like Ring-billed and Bonaparte's that generally move out.

Northern invaders in a warm winter: It seems logical to expect "northern invader" birds to come down from the Arctic only in the coldest winters. But logic has nothing to do with it. While most areas east of the Rockies and north of the Mason-Dixon line were enjoying an exceptionally mild season, those same areas were visited by a plethora of northern birds. Black-capped Chickadees pushed south in the Appalachians and elsewhere. Northern Shrikes staged an invasion that was, in some

regions, one of the largest ever. It was a remarkable Gyrfalcon winter in many (but not all) areas. The Atlantic Coast saw its biggest southward surge of alcids in at least half a century. Many northern owls moved southward, although not in the predictable patterns.

Owls that broke the rules: This season's flight of northern owls was excellent, but strange. Northern Hawk Owl—that antisocial backwoods bird, the one member of the bunch that seems least likely to invade—was the main headliner of this movement. Record or near-record numbers were found in Quebec, Ontario, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. There were many in the Prairie Provinces except, curiously, in Manitoba, where Great Gray Owls were numerous. One was in Montana and two in upstate New York, while hundreds of birders enjoyed one in Vermont and another in Pennsylvania, the latter furnishing a first state record in over a century.

While this was going on, Snowy Owls (the most frequent of invaders) appeared in mediocre numbers at best, and Boreal Owls were little noted. Great Gray Owls were widespread from the prairies to Quebec, with Manitoba and Minnesota tallying their most ever. In some previous incursions the Great Grays were clearly suffering the effects of hunger, but this time prey was abundant and the owls were well-fed. For some reason, Short-eared Owls were unusually common in many regions.

Gyrfalcons everywhere, except where expected: If total area of coverage counts for anything, this was one of the biggest Gyrfalcon winters ever, with noteworthy numbers from Idaho east to Newfoundland. Ontario and the western Great Lakes had their largest numbers ever, enviable numbers were in Saskatchewan, Montana, the Dakotas, and Quebec, and hordes of

birders went to see outriding Gyrs that made it to Illinois and Colorado. However, in some areas where these northern falcons appear more regularly, such as British Columbia, Washington state, and coastal New England, their numbers were unimpressive; amazingly, not one was found in the Hudson-Delaware region.

Only the usual suspects failed to show up: In a season marked by movements of so many other northern birds—owls, Gyrfalcons, Northern Shrikes, Black-capped Chickadees, eastern alcids—one group was strikingly conspicuous in its absence. The “winter finches” failed to make any showing at all south of the boreal forest. Even Pine Siskin, generally the most widespread and humdrum of winter finches, apparently was not numerous anywhere south of Canada.

Pushes to the east and west: Reports from western regions indicated that many White-throated Sparrows infiltrated that side of the continent, from Idaho to British Columbia to southern California to New Mexico. Moving the opposite direction, single Rosy Finches made it east to Ontario and Michigan, following the Illinois bird in November. In the trans-oceanic category of east-west movements, Bramblings reached western North America from Asia in a big way, with an amazing eighteen on Kodiak Island, three or four in British Columbia, two in Washington (after another in fall), one in California, and one east to Ontario. November had produced others, including singles in Manitoba, Montana, and Oregon. Tufted Duck, curiously, invaded both the West Coast (including a remarkable seven in southern California) and the northeast (with four in Nova Scotia, the first ever for the province). Why did they come from both sides in the same season?



An invasion of Gyrfalcons was one of the highlights of the winter in Ontario (and elsewhere). This immature was one of four birds wintering in the Thunder Bay area, photographed February 3, 1991. Photograph/N.G. Escott.

Species of universal disagreement: Everyone seemed to have comments about Rough-legged Hawk. The comments were all different. The general picture was of high numbers in the interior and low numbers toward either coast; but the Prairie Provinces, at the center of the continent, had the lowest numbers in four years. Many were in Ontario, where Ron Weir reasoned that light snow cover allowed them to stay north; but there were also notable southerly records in Virginia, Louisiana, and Texas.

Similarly, plenty of regions commented on American Tree Sparrows, but the comments varied. In the Appalachians, an ongoing decline in winter numbers was suddenly worse this winter, and numbers were also low in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Wisconsin. In Michigan they were scarce, but wintered farther north than usual. So did Tree Sparrows simply stay in the far north? No: More than usual pushed *south* into Tennessee, and there were high numbers in Washington state and Colorado.

Springs are made to stretch: How early can spring migration begin? The answer creeps up the calendar as we learn more. In this “winter”

season, most Regional Editors mentioned distinct northward movements in February: grebes, pelicans, many waterfowl, Turkey Vultures, cranes, Killdeer and other shorebirds, phoebes, Horned Larks, blackbirds, and others, and many were moving in *early* February. Geese were northbound in Illinois in January; the Texas editors struggled to find *any* gap between the last fall migrants and first spring migrants among the swallows.

These are all traditional early birds. But this season, Ogden raised a less familiar theme: the possibility that warblers, catbirds, buntings, and others may be moving north into Florida—making substantial overwater flights—in February. As our view of migration changes, it begins to seem that birds may spend more time en route, at intermediate stops, than they do at either end of their journeys. Their southmost extreme, their “wintering grounds,” may represent merely a longer pause in a series of stopovers.

Waterthrush wisdom: Since we opened this summary with a moorhen in Quebec, it might be wise to close with a tip from another lingerer, a Northern Waterthrush in Ontario. A thousand miles north of normal limits, this bird spent the entire winter foraging around the Snowy Owl enclosures at the Toronto zoo! The message of the waterthrush might be that, if you're going to tread on unusual and dangerous ground, it's better to scoot on through without stopping to ask too many questions! With that in mind, I invite you to peruse the Regional Reports that follow. If you want to *explain* the many contradictions of the season, I can only wish you luck; it may be safer just to *enjoy* the accounts of what was undeniably an unusual winter. ■