

WHAT KIND OF winter was this? It all depended on where you were. In southern California, where things are usually exciting, Guy McCaskie called this "one of the most uneventful winters in memory." In the Middlewestern Prairie region, where uneventful winters might be the norm, Ken Brock reports that there were enough rarities "to satiate all but the most greedy frost-belt birders." Most regions were somewhere between these extremes.

In terms of weather, much of the continent could have been described generally as moist and mild. (The "mild" part will come as a surprise to those in several regions, stretching from Idaho eastward along the U.S.-Canadian border toward Newfoundland, that had exceptional cold during the season.) It was fairly mild in most areas south of Canada, and it was very wet in many areas of the west. California's six-year drought was broken, and Arizona had flooding in January.

The mild weather allowed many lingering birds to survive into, or through, the season. In most of the regions that did not experience major cold weather, the Regional Editors commented on surprising fair-weather lingerers. Pine Warblers were scattered all over the upper Midwest, and a couple even wintered in Colorado. Birds that made it past mid-winter included Yellow-throated and Palm warblers in Ohio, and Prairie Warbler in Kentucky. Ovenbirds attempted to winter at feeders in several states, including New York, but individuals in Pennsylvania and Colorado were taken out by local cats. In discussing the "successful" lingerers,

THE CHANGING SEASONS

Winter 1992-1993
By Kenn Kaufman

of course, we should recall that the so-called "blizzard of the century" came up through the eastern states after this winter season was officially over, in March.

Western Birds in Eastern Places

Some eastern birds are found in western North America every winter. The Red-bellied Woodpecker furnished an example of that phenomenon this season, getting west to New Mexico, Colorado, and even Idaho, the latter a first state record. A Blue-winged Warbler wintered in northern California, and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher wintered in Arizona, both birds certainly meriting the boldface type in which they were reported. But these were isolated records, not adding up to any strong pattern.

This past January, I got to go out birding with keen members of the Louisiana Ornithological Society. In a fine weekend of Louisiana birding, this visiting westerner was treated to a number of rarities: Golden Eagle, Vermilion Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, and Mountain Bluebird, all strays from the west! But no, I'm not complaining, not in the slightest. It was great to see, in the microcosm of one weekend, what turned out to be one major theme of the season: This winter, a lot of western birds moved east.

Western Birds 1:

Seed-Crushers and Bug-Eaters

One of the major players in this eastward movement was a surprising species: Black-throated Sparrow. This bird of the desert southwest had been reported at several spots around the western Great Lakes during the fall (and one in Minnesota, the third for the state, remained to late December). The matter did not end there; more birds were reported during the winter. Most far-flung were the one in Quebec to late January, a first for the province, and New Jersey's third, present mid-December to mid-February. But enough others were reported east of range to indicate that this was a genuine invasion, not just a coincidence. One in Missouri was a first state record; one in eastern Kansas and one in Nebraska were quite surprising; new records were established in two easterly counties in Texas. Even in New Mexico, a few were reported north of usual limits

Other western sparrows got into the act. The Golden-crowned Sparrow, for example, is rare east of the Pacific slope. This season, Golden-crowns scattered eastward much as the Black-throateds did, but without getting quite as far. Arizona and New Mexico had more than usual; there were a couple in Colorado and a possible one in Kansas; Missouri had its second and third state records; and one was in Wisconsin all season. In addition, Clay-colored Sparrows were found in several areas near the Atlantic Coast during the winter. There were also a few Green-tailed Towhees east of range (eastern Kansas, Ohio, and New Hampshire). But my favorite report of a seed-eater east of range this season was of a Lesser Goldfinch in Maine. It represents one of very few ever east of the Great Plains... and I didn't know about this record when I wrote the text for the "Practiced Eye" column on goldfinches in the Spring 1993 issue, predicting that western goldfinches might turn up more often in the east!

In New Jersey, the third recorded Black-throated Sparrow was outdone by the state's first Rock Wren, present for some time at Cape May. This bird also might have been only the outlier of a larger movement. In the Midwest, just east of the species' usual range, Rock Wrens made news in northeastern Texas, eastern Oklahoma, and Illinois.

This was also an unusually good winter for southwestern flycatchers appearing north and east of their usual ranges. The record-setting tips of this iceberg were represented by a Vermilion Flycatcher in Virginia and an Ash-throated Flycatcher in Connecticut, each establishing a first state record, as well as Maryland's first Ash-throated in thirty years. On the topic of stray *Myiarchus*, it's worth noting that Louisiana recorded at least three (probably five) Brown-crested Flycatchers this season; some of these were thought to be Ash-throateds when first seen, but were then proven otherwise. Clearly, any eastern records of Ash-throated Flycatchers ought to rule out the other western/southern members of the genus.

**Western Birds 2:
Frugivores and Hummers**

Something happened, certainly, with a set of western frugivores that sometimes wander east: Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, and Varied Thrush. They did not go as far as they sometimes do, but in the center of the continent they pushed east of usual limits in exceptional numbers.

In western Texas, both Townsend's Solitaire and Mountain Bluebird were surprisingly scarce. But one Mountain Bluebird made it to eastern Texas, others to Louisiana, Missouri, Iowa, and Indiana, the latter furnishing a first state record. Indiana also had its overdue first Townsend's Solitaire. A solitaire movement was definitely under way: They were well above average in the Prairie Provinces, staged a minor invasion around

the western Great Lakes (including eleven in Minnesota), appeared at four sites in eastern Nebraska and two in Iowa, and there was one more in Nova Scotia in late November, to add to three others reported during the fall.

The Varied Thrush occurred in an odd pattern. None was reported in New England this winter, for the first time in more than twenty years. But there were a couple in Nova Scotia, more than usual in Ontario, the Prairie Provinces, and the western Great Lakes region, and one each found in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. At the other end of their range, more than the usual number wintered in southern Alaska, and one made it to Christmas in the deep-freeze surroundings of Fairbanks.

We're getting accustomed to big hummingbird numbers in the Central Southern region in winter, but as they keep on exceeding their previ-

ous highs, the superlatives get harder to find. This season, Steve Stedman called it a "blizzard of nectar-suckers," and the phrase seemed appropriate. The region had no fewer than nine species wintering. Most of these were in Louisiana, as usual. But Arkansas got into the act this time, too, with a number of wintering hummingbirds, including the state's first Buff-bellied and second Anna's Hummingbird. Mississippi had its second and third Calliope Hummingbirds, while well to the north, Indiana had its first fully confirmed Rufous.

Rains Over Eastern Mexico

Some events this season seemed linked to recent weather patterns in northeastern Mexico. While much of Texas has been waterlogged for the last couple of years, adjacent areas of Mexico also have received a good soaking. The apparent payoff came this winter, when an invasion of

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1 February-5 March

PHILIPPINES
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Palawan/Bohol/Cebu
4 March-4 April

TIBET/WEST CHINA
Sichuan (Szechwan)
6-30 May

MANCHURIA
INNER MONGOLIA
29 May-23 June

Masked Ducks moved into Texas. These secretive little stiff-tails seem to do well on temporary marshy ponds, and perhaps they have had exceptional breeding success in northeastern Mexico the last couple of years. Whatever the reason, six Texas localities produced a total of 45 Masked Ducks, and it is perhaps surprising that none was found farther afield.

Likely reflecting the same phenomenon, Least Grebes were abundant in southern Texas and were found well up the coast. Four Northern Jacanas, also originating in Mexican marshes, were present in Texas during the season.

A more difficult question is whether Pyrrhuloxias could have been affected by the same weather. Pyrrhuloxias were remarkably abundant over much of southern Texas this season, invaded up the Texas coast in much greater numbers than usual, were numerous in southern New Mexico, and straggled into northern Texas—one even got to southwestern Kansas. It's possible that several lush seasons in the brushlands of south Texas and adjacent regions may have contributed to excellent breeding success of Pyrrhuloxias, and more individuals available for wandering.

Slaty-backed Gulls

What, if anything, is going on with Slaty-backed Gulls? It's a question that lots of observers are asking. Only a decade ago, it was considered astounding when a single individual of this east Asian species turned up on the Mississippi River near St. Louis. It was not quite as astounding when one was in southern Texas last year; this season, Slaty-backed Gulls were scattered widely over North America. One (only one?) was in Ohio in December and February. Another (a different one?) was at Niagara in November and December. There was a probable one in Mississippi, and Oregon had at least two (possibly as many as six). Could this many indi-

viduals have been simply overlooked in the past? Have the global good fortunes of large gulls in general affected the Slaty-backed as well, to the extent that there is a larger population to produce these stray visitors to North America's interior? Easy answers may not be forthcoming, but the questions should be good for some arguments in the coming seasons.

Winter Finches

A reader who had tracked these columns over many years might feel that we have devoted an inordinate amount of ink to the "winter finches." But I would maintain that this attention is justified. These cardueline finches are arguably the most nomadic of North American birds, with huge numbers shifting large distances to the east and west, as well as north and south, in response to changing conditions. (A Pine Siskin netted in Oregon this winter had been banded in May 1990 in Minnesota, and while this half-a-continent shift was interesting, it was not surprising.) More than with most birds, observations of winter finches can really tell us about what some populations are doing.

And this season, what they were doing was: Not much. In the northeastern United States, the really big finch winters seem to be a phenomenon of the past. There are still some movements and concentrations in southeastern Canada, but not this season, when Newfoundland recorded the "worst finch year since the Vikings landed." Quebec deemed it "not an invasion year," while the New England states reported an "abysmal showing" by finches. This general lack was quite widespread; for example, North Dakota reported no Evening Grosbeaks, for the first time in almost twenty years, and only one was reported in the entire Middlewestern Prairie Region.

Away from the northeastern and north-central regions, there were some anomalous signs. Texas had its

third White-winged Crossbill ever, along with a few Red Crossbills and Evening Grosbeaks, and a good push of Pine Siskins. The pattern of occurrence elsewhere suggests that these birds probably came mostly from the Rockies, not from the north. And while Evening Grosbeaks failed to make much of a southward movement, some apparently went north instead; a flock was noted in the Yukon Territory, north of the normal range.

Pine Siskins were widespread and abundant along the entire Pacific slope from British Columbia southward, although a major salmonella outbreak killed thousands of them in a number of areas from Vancouver to northern California.

After Iniki

The memory of past storms is still very much alive in a couple of areas, Florida and Hawaii, that were hammered by hurricanes early last fall. Florida had more storms this winter, adding more disturbance to damaged beaches there. Hawaii was spared further destructive weather this season, but there was no good news about the endemic forest birds on Kauai, the island hit hard by hurricane Iniki in September. Surveys in the Alakai Swamp failed to turn up *any* positive records of any of the most critically endangered bird species there, and damage to the forest was worse than originally estimated. It is quite possible that four or more species were pushed over the verge into extinction by the effects of this one hurricane. We must remember, of course, that the birds were brought to this precarious position by human-induced changes to the environment; so if they are in fact extinct, this was not merely an act of God. Conservation biologists are becoming more and more aware of the need to build up populations to levels at which they can withstand hurricanes and other minor disasters.