

Changing Seasons

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Seasons do change. Ask anyone in the Northeast to compare this last winter season to the one that preceded it. One of the harshest winters on record was followed by one that was exceptionally mild, and birds clearly responded to this change in a variety of obvious ways.

It was a mild winter almost everywhere, and many bird records reflected this.

For birders (and birds) who survived the Hell-freezes-over winter of 1993–1994 in the Northeast, even an average winter would have seemed like a vast improvement. But winter 1994–1995 was not average: it was distinctly warmer than that in most areas. Comments on weather referred to “the winter that almost was not” in Wisconsin, “winter (or what little there was of it)” in New England, “half-hardy heaven” in the Adirondacks, and even “near-tropical by comparison to last year” in Ontario.

In fact, the trend to milder temperatures was remarkably widespread across the continent. There were a few exceptions: Alaska was unusually cold and snowy, for example, and eastern Quebec had many wintry storms. But for most areas from New England to Texas to British Columbia, mild conditions were a marked feature of the season.

Just as marked was the response of many birds to these easy conditions. Most regions mentioned a wide variety of birds lingering through the season north of their usual limits. There were far too many such examples for me to even begin to summarize them here. Consider, however, the 25 Turkey Vultures that wintered in Wisconsin, or the three that remained in British Columbia. Consider the White-eyed Vireo in Missouri in January. Consider the no fewer than 28 species of waterfowl recorded in the Prairie Provinces during the season, or the Fox Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow that established first wintering records for the Yukon Territory. As discussed later in this column, hummingbirds (who can recognize tropical conditions when they encounter them) also provided some good examples.

Some large-scale shifts in range during this winter may have reflected more than just weather conditions.

In what seems like a neat correlation, Florida reported notably low numbers of American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and American Goldfinches, while several regions farther north reported that these species were present in above-average numbers. In parts of the Maritime Provinces,

Cedar Waxwings actually outnumbered Bohemians in the early part of the winter, and other northern areas reported large numbers as well.

American Goldfinches were well distributed to the north. They remained in unusual numbers in New England, Ontario, and around the Great Lakes. On the northern Great Plains, they wintered in the best numbers in 12 years. Gordon Berkey points out that in the winter of 1982–1983, the last time goldfinches stayed in big numbers in the Dakotas, redpolls were nearly absent there—as they were again this winter. Are the two trends related?

Of course, birds like waxwings and finches probably respond more to food supplies than to temperature. Most areas that reported lots of Cedar Waxwings also reported lots of berries. Finch food supplies are harder to assess, because weed seeds are usually less conspicuous than berries, but after the good rains of last summer there should have been abundant wild seed crops on the northern prairies.

American Robins tend to be patchy in winter, common in some places and rare in others. This season they were uncommon in Florida and very scarce in most of southern Texas (although a large concentration was found locally on the central coast). Big flocks remained in the Northeast, south as far as the Carolinas, and good numbers were found in parts of the West. At first glance the reports seemed to suggest an increase in total population, but in reality we probably can never monitor total robin numbers with winter counts. The birds are too localized, and chance plays too large a role in birders happening to encounter the big flocks. For example, this winter Chuck LaRue happened upon a huge concentration of robins in northern Arizona. It was probably the biggest ever for the state, but without his report we never would have known of it.

Following last winter's massive invasions of multiple species in the east, this was a definite non-invasion winter.

The memorable winter of 1993–1994 produced big flights of various birds into the northeast and east—some clearly weather-related, some not. Red-necked Grebes, alcids, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Bohemian Waxwings, and redpolls all made headlines. The grebes were clearly driven out of the Great Lakes by freeze-up, and weather could have affected the alcids as well, but the role of weather in driving the other invaders is hard to establish or shaky at best.

Whatever the reason, this year saw far fewer invaders. There was no echo flight

of Red-necked Grebes. Alcids were close to normal in their occurrences, although good numbers of Dovekies were found off the Hudson-Delaware region. Redpolls were universally scarce south of the boreal zones.

Red-breasted Nuthatches drew comments mostly in the negative, as they were scarce or absent in most areas. Evidently they stayed in the north or in the mountains: They were very common in some areas where wild food was abundant, such as the Adirondacks in upstate New York, and parts of the Colorado Rockies. In Alaska, where a big northward invasion of these nuthatches occurred during the fall, they remained common through the winter. Many survived even far north in the interior, despite the fact that this was an unusually cold season there, suggesting again that temperature is not a major factor in flights by this species.

After last year's record-setting eastward push by Bohemian Waxwings, the species was conspicuously humdrum or below average in most areas. Curiously, Bohemians were locally very common in western Newfoundland in December, and a scattered few were on Sable Island, far off the coast of Nova Scotia, and on outer Cape Cod, Massachusetts, later in the winter. However, these birds were more or less on their own, not the outriders of a big invasion.

Bucking the trend, Northern Shrikes staged a much bigger flight this year than last.

The huge invasion winter of 1993-1994 was not particularly huge for Northern Shrikes; most regions reported unremarkable numbers. This season, however, the shrikes were on the move in many areas. They were fairly common in the Maritime Provinces, present in above-average num-

bers in southern Quebec, and widespread in northern New England. In the Hudson-Delaware Region they were common mainly in upstate New York; but much farther south, a Northern Shrike on the Outer Banks was the first in North Carolina in more than 30 years! The species was present in high numbers around the Great Lakes, and no fewer than 29 were found in Illinois. In the Southwest, northern Arizona reported more than usual, and about 30 in New Mexico made nearly a record total. Of course, the species routinely goes farther south in the west than in the east, since the western high country produces more appropriately wintry conditions.

There were some notable instances of owls on the move, but not involving the species that usually make such news.

There was no sign of an invasion this year by Northern Hawk Owls or Great Grays, and even Snowy Owls were scarce in most areas south of the Arctic. The one "northern" owl that did show up widely in good numbers was the Short-eared Owl. This is especially noteworthy because just last winter, several regional editors commented on a scarcity of this species. This year, Short-eareds were found in excellent numbers in many regions. Some of the specific areas reporting high totals were Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri, Texas, southern British Columbia, and northern California. Their numbers dropped sharply in the Dakotas following a good breeding season there, so perhaps some of their birds contributed to the numbers seen farther south in the center of the continent.

It was also a good season for Long-eared Owls in a number of areas. Because of differences in habitat, they are not so readily detected as Short-eareds; however,

record numbers were found in Minnesota (at least 45, against an average of three or fewer), and high numbers in Illinois and Missouri. Farther south, in areas where they are scarce, scattered records in North Carolina, Georgia, and Texas seemed like further evidence of a strong southward flight in the east.

The most surprising owl movement involved a species that is normally not nomadic at all: Northern Pygmy-Owl. Unprecedented numbers moved into southeastern Alaska, where the species is usually rare. Multiples were found in lowland areas over much of British Columbia, both along the coast and far into the interior. Although the flight seems not to have extended farther than this, the area involved is huge, the equivalent of several reporting regions in the Lower 48!

In this mild season, the numbers of hummingbirds wintering in the Southeast were particularly impressive.

The winter hummingbird extravaganza in the Southeast is by now firmly established as an annual phenomenon. This year it was even better and more widespread than usual, undoubtedly because the weather allowed more of the birds to survive. In Louisiana, where the craze began, hummingbird guru Nancy Newfield points out that Rufous and Black-chinned hummers now occur in such numbers that they are almost impossible to count, and many individuals are probably no longer even reported. More noteworthy in Louisiana this season were a Broad-billed Hummingbird, at least four Calliopes, and Buff-bellieds in at least five different parishes.

Farther east in the Central Southern region, notable records included first Anna's Hummingbirds for both Missis-



A small invasion of Mountain Bluebirds reached the northeast during this season. The easternmost bird, a first for Newfoundland, stayed most of the winter in St. John's, where it was photographed on the snow January 1, 1995. Photograph/Bruce Mactavish.

issippi and Tennessee, and Alabama's first Broad-tailed Hummingbird and second Magnificent Hummingbird. Many of these birds in the eastern part of the Region are banded and confirmed by Bob and Martha Sargent, who deserve a lot of credit for keeping these records on a sound scientific level. Florida had lots of wintering hummers, and so did all three of the Southern Atlantic Coast states, with no fewer than 49 *Selasphorus* in Georgia alone. Most parts of Texas had record numbers of hummingbirds.

The mildness of the season allowed the phenomenon to extend farther north than usual. Missouri had three species of hummers during December. Tennessee had at least four *Selasphorus* during the season, but these were hardly the northernmost; at least three lingered in December in Massachusetts. Perhaps most impressively, Minnesota had single Ruby-throated and Calliope hummingbirds into early December.

Our knowledge of winter gull distribution continues to develop.

Every time I read a season's worth of Regional Reports, I find myself saying, over and over, "Wow, I wish I'd been there for that." For the winter season under discussion, the number one wish-I'd-been-there situation would have to be the gull scene that developed at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The tip of the iceberg is indicated by the fact that observers there found four California Gulls (generally an accidental visitor on the Atlantic Coast) and at least 39 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, plus Thayer's, Iceland, and Glaucous gulls. The real fun involved various evident hybrids, and some yellow-legged Herring Gull types that may have been hybrids, variants, or true Yellow-legged Gulls (*Larus cachinnans*), a European species only recently recognized in the Americas. To cap it off, there were also a couple of possible Slaty-backed Gulls. As Ricky Davis describes the scene, it must have been an amazing and confusing spectacle.

Elsewhere, a definite Yellow-legged Gull spent two months at St. John's, Newfoundland. In the same area, Bruce Mactavish is now regularly finding Herring Gulls that are evidently of the west European race *argenteus*.

Slaty-backed Gulls were not reported as widely this season as in some recent winters, but it is now becoming evident that they occur in small numbers in southeastern Alaska in winter. Singles were also noted in British Columbia, Oregon, and probably Washington; and a lone bird photographed in southern Cali-

fornia will provide a first record for that state, if confirmed. As recently as the early 1980s, we considered this species to be mainly a rare visitor to western Alaska. It is worth keeping in mind that one of the first Slaty-backed detected well away from Alaska was in the St. Louis area, a reminder that great discoveries can happen anywhere, not just in border regions or other outposts.

This winter brought record numbers of Glaucous Gulls to northern California, and numbers were up in Washington as well, but the invasion seems to have been fairly localized. Only one Glaucous reached southern California, and few other areas reported any unusual numbers.

A small but definite invasion of Mountain Bluebirds reached the Northeast.

It might have been termed a micro-invasion, with only a few birds found, but something clearly happened with Mountain Bluebirds arriving in the Northeast. No fewer than three reached Ontario during the season. Quebec had its fourth record, a bird present most of February. The first one ever for Newfoundland stayed in St. John's most of the winter, and two reached Sable Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia. Heavily birded New England had had only three Mountain Bluebirds in recorded history, but five appeared this season, two at separate sites in Connecticut and three together in Massachusetts.

Records of Mountain Bluebirds in the East seem to be on the increase, with multiple records recently as far east as Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It was perhaps surprising that the species had not been recorded before in Newfoundland, where so many other western birds have appeared. Whatever other factors may have been involved in this winter's eastward incursion, the mildness of the season may have played a part in allowing the bluebirds to appear so far north as well as east.

Something was going on with rosy-finches, but it's not entirely clear just what that was.

Birders are probably paying more attention to rosy-finches these days, now that the birds have been re-split into three species instead of one. But this is not enough to explain the number of mentions that the group garnered this season.

Breeding above treeline in western and northwestern mountains, moving downslope and sometimes southward in winter, rosy-finches do not often move far enough afield to merit specific mention in these pages. This winter, however, they drew comments all over the map. To the east,

two reached Ontario, and Quebec had its first record ever; as expected so far north, these were all Gray-crowns. Singles and flocks were found at several points on the Great Plains, and large flocks drew mention at various places in the Mountain West. In Alaska, one of the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches wintering at Kodiak appeared to be a stray from the interior, rather than the expected local form. Flocks of Gray-crowns on the coast of British Columbia and in the coastal ranges of Oregon were noteworthy. Farther south, New Mexico had good numbers of all three species, Arizona had its largest flock ever of Black Rosy-Finches, and southern California had its first Black in nearly twenty years.

If all these rosy-finch records were connected in some way, and not just coincidental, it's not easy to discern a cause that would have touched off movement over such a huge area. The best idea I can suggest is that exceptionally heavy snowfall at high elevations could have caused the birds to disperse more widely than usual, as I write this, however, I lack sufficient information on snowfall amounts in the western mountains this season.

Eurasian Collared-Doves are, as expected, continuing to advance.

No one should be surprised to hear that the Eurasian Collared-Dove, first identified only a decade ago in Florida, is continuing to advance across the southeast. The species is still increasing in Florida (the Christmas Bird Count at Pensacola, far northwest in the Florida panhandle, recorded 150 this year). New colonies were discovered this season in Georgia, and the South Carolina outpost was gaining in numbers. Farther west, they are expanding their range in Alabama and Louisiana. Many of the outlying populations are coastal, but certainly not all; the species reached Chattanooga, Tennessee, in November, and up to five stayed through the winter.

Many birders have a tendency to turn up their noses at exotic or introduced birds such as this. Obviously, watching a non-native population of suburban doves does not have nearly the spiritual pizzazz of, say, finding a stray shorebird from another continent; but in this case, I would argue that the doves have more scientific significance. We have a unique opportunity to monitor the spread of a known champion invader (a bird that spread all the way across Europe in less than 60 years), and to learn much about invasion processes. The great Dutch biogeographer R. Hengeveld has given us

some good advice on what to watch for as this species advances (Journal of Field Ornithology 64 (4): 477-489). I would urge every serious observer in the Eurasian Collared-Dove's path to read Hengeveld's paper, and to take detailed notes on the doves' progress.

Long-staying vagrants added spice to winter birding and brought many traveling birders to the Southwest.

In recent years, Rufous-backed Robin has been almost an annual winter visitor from Mexico to our southwestern states; but the stray individuals that turn up are often elusive, or present only briefly, so many birders from other regions have tried for and missed them. This was the season that many travelers caught up with the robin—as an afterthought, as part of a trip in pursuit of two bigger rarities. The Rufous-backed Robin that stayed all season at an arboretum in central Arizona was outclassed by a Gray Silky-flycatcher in El Paso and a Blue Mockingbird in Portal, Arizona, each representing a second well-documented North American record.

When the first Blue Mockingbird showed up three winters ago in Patagonia, Arizona, questions were raised about its origins: could it have come from a cage in Nogales? In this connection, it's worth noting that the bird in Portal occurred with almost exactly the same timing: showing up around the first of the year, remaining well into the spring. This would seem to reinforce the pattern. More important insight comes from Steve Russell and Gale Monson, whose book on the birds of Sonora will be published soon. Russell and Monson have found that the Blue Mockingbirds at the northern end of the species' range in Sonora are not totally sedentary (even if some farther south may be), with some regular movement between summer and winter habitats. Since birds that migrate are more likely to stray out of range, this information strengthens the case for the Arizona birds being natural wild vagrants.

Unfinished business: Corrections of things past.

In this column in the Winter 1994 issue (*Field Notes* 48 (5): 916), in a discussion that started with the hyper-rare Light-mantled Sooty Albatross off California, I wrote:

Seabirds seen far out of normal range in recent decades have been tarred with suspicion: Could the birds have been transported thither by humans? Such questions have involved not only birds off California—such as the

Swallow-tailed Gull nine years ago, which is still being kicked around—but also such oddities as White-chinned Petrel in Texas, Gray Gull in Louisiana, *et cetera*. The usual argument against such birds is that there is no pattern of records for the area between the normal range and this outlying occurrence. No intervening records implies no pattern of vagrancy, hence no way the bird could have arrived naturally.

After this was published, both Paul Lehman and Matt Heindel wrote to me independently, pointing out the same basic flaw in my statements: No one is actually saying that there is "no way" such rarities could have occurred naturally. That kind of extreme position is seldom or never taken on these controversial birds. Such records are controversial precisely because they are borderline cases, with a reasonably good chance that they could have arrived naturally, and the debate centers on degrees of doubt or certainty.

Of course, Paul and Matt are both correct. I did misstate the case, unintentionally; and this was especially unfortunate, given the fact that many people already have misconceptions about how records committees work.

The California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) is a good example to use for discussion. It is the best-organized, longest-established, and finest such group on this continent, with a level of expertise that most states and provinces can only envy; it is closely watched, because it often sets the standards that other such committees follow. The CBRC has had to deal with a great many difficult records involving questions of origin. The Swallow-tailed Gull that I mentioned was one example. The fact that this record was still being "kicked around" (bad choice of words) several years after the fact actually speaks well for the CBRC's thorough approach.

In the case of the Swallow-tailed Gull, as I understand it, most members of the CBRC felt that there was at least a 50% chance that the gull had arrived on its own, perhaps a much higher percentage. Those committee members who argued against the record were not saying that the bird was assisted by humans in its arrival at Pacific Grove, just that such assistance was possible, and that the lack of other records well to the north of this species' normal range raised such suspicions. The debate, then, focussed on levels of certainty, and on how much doubt was acceptable in the case of a first North

American record.

Lehman made the further point that "... a discussion of ocean birds occurring way out of range should bring up the subject of oceanic 'barriers'—improper sea surface temperatures, depths, salinities, food, etc., for a good number of species with specific requirements. Sure, most of these species CAN cross such barriers, and certainly do on occasion, but people shouldn't think there's nothing to prevent a southern ocean bird from crossing the equatorial waters and ending up off the West Coast. The open ocean does indeed contain hurdles to cross that are not obvious to the human eye."

At any rate, I erred in implying that records committees are handing down absolute statements as to what is and is not possible. At least in the case of the CBRC, they are often wrestling with shades of gray, and doing so very successfully, helping to legitimize sight records and keeping our knowledge of rare bird occurrences on a sound basis.

Now it's your turn: Find your own trend in the reports.

One of the great things about the *Field Notes* regional reports is that they allow field observers to explore the avian events of a season twice. We can explore events on a local level while the season is in progress, and then afterwards we can go back and explore again, on a continent-wide level.

Like other Changing Seasons columnists, I try to point out as many events and trends of the season as I can. Without a doubt, however, I must miss some major patterns, and there are others that simply do not make it into the column. Which means that there are lots of insights left for you to discover as you read the regional reports.

For example, following the scattered dispersal of Harris Hawks last fall, which three states had first records of the species this winter? Is it just my imagination, or did a remarkable variety of regions mention numbers of Greater Scaup? What do you make of the fact that both Minnesota and northern California had exceptional numbers of Varied Thrushes? What other phenomena have I missed altogether? I encourage you to read all of the reports in the following pages, to get the really big picture of the continent's birdlife. ▽