

Changing Seasons

KENN KAUFMAN

Winter weather 1995–1996: Going, uneasily, to extremes

As I write this, the winter season is several months past and the summer Olympics of 1996 are approaching. These two events might seem utterly unrelated, but there is a connection, albeit a slim one: Both bring up discussion of records being broken.

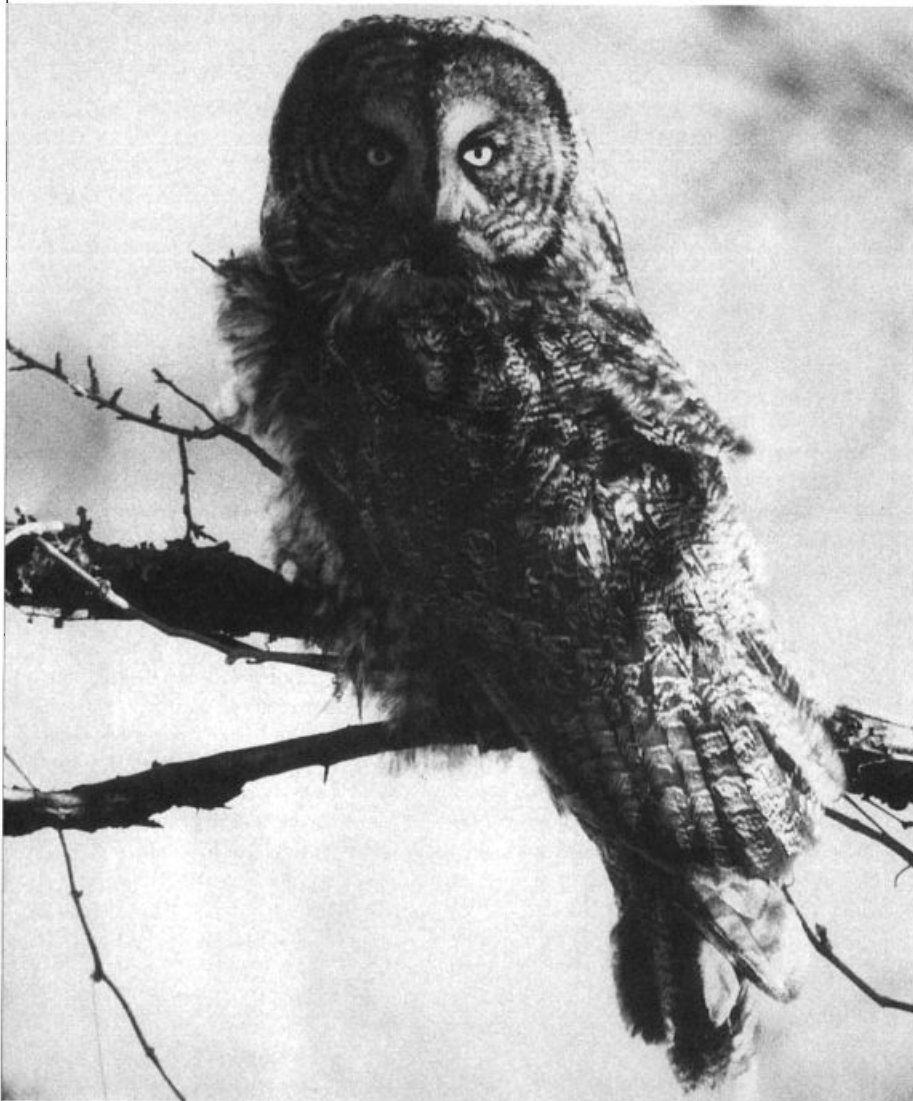
In athletics, new world records continue to be set. Although some have expressed surprise at this (suggesting that practical limits of physical ability should have been reached by now), reasons are not hard to find. Science has led to many improvements in training. With better childhood nutrition in many nations, the height of the average adult has been gradually increasing for decades, producing longer-limbed athletes with greater reach. And the human population continues to rise, increasing the pool of possible contestants; the fastest sprinter out of five billion is sta-

tistically likely to outrun the fastest out of two billion. In the short term, at least, we can expect physical-feat records to go on breaking.

But weather records are something else. If climates were stable, we should see records broken less and less often as time went on—past extremes of temperature and precipitation should become ever less likely to be exceeded. In reality, this is not happening. It appears that weather extremes are becoming more pronounced and more frequent. Some climatologists have proposed that this result, increasing instability in weather, is precisely what we should expect in the early stages of greenhouse-effect global warming.

The winter of 1995–1996 was, like several of its recent predecessors, a season of extremes. It was the snowiest winter on record in parts of New York, New Jersey, and southern New England, with more than eight *feet* of snow falling in Boston. A reading of -60° F. below

Over much of the Northeast, the snowy winter of 1995–1996 was not very eventful from an ornithological viewpoint, but movements of some northern owls added interest. This Great Gray Owl in Rowley, Massachusetts, present throughout February 1996, was enjoyed by thousands of observers. Photograph/John C. Fuller.



zero established the coldest temperature ever recorded in the history of famous Minnesota winters. The southern Yukon Territory experienced its longest and deepest cold spell ever, and rainy Seattle had its wettest winter on record. In describing the season, superlatives abounded. From Manitoba, Rufolf Koes and Peter Taylor called it "the mother of all prairie winters." From the Appalachians, George Hall summed it up: "What a winter!".

Even in regions that set no records, a major theme of the winter was the strong alternation between extremes of warm and cold, wet and dry. Such fluctuation was highlighted in areas as diverse as the Maritime Provinces, the northern Appalachians, Texas, Idaho, British Columbia, and others. In early February in Pueblo, Colorado, in the space of two days, the temperature dropped by more than 100° Fahrenheit! In several regions, sudden thaws following cold and snowy conditions led to major floods. Dan Svingen points out that such floods had severe impacts on streamside growth (already an endangered habitat) in Idaho and western Montana.

Pacific seabirds were shaken up and shifted around by winter storms

Beginning in November, stormy weather offshore had visible effects on several seabird species along the west coast. Perhaps most notable were the "wrecks" of Red Phalaropes driven ashore by major wind storms in December. In the Oregon-Washington region this influx was deemed unprecedented, with hundreds found along the immediate coast, but it was also noted south to southern California. In British Columbia, three Red Phalaropes picked up on the outer coast of Vancouver Island and one on the Queen Charlotte Islands undoubtedly reflected this same phenomenon.

Northern Fulmars also were affected. From late November to mid-December, many were found washed up dead on Oregon beaches. At the same time, many were found inshore in Washington, in the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Admiralty Inlet. Large numbers were present along the California coast all season. Some of the biggest tallies were in early December, such as the 1025 counted flying past Pillar Point in northern California December 2. An ongoing southward movement of birds was suggested by the fact that the proportion of light-morph fulmars increased toward the latter part of the season.

Other Pacific seabirds also were out of

place this year. Leach's Storm-Petrels were driven to the coast by the December wind storms, with numbers in Puget Sound and one found three miles upriver in northern California. A big shift in Ancient Murrelets evidently occurred: unusual numbers were recorded all the way to southern California, while in the northern part of their range, they were scarce off the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia. High numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes also moved south. We have to wonder if there were any connection between these birds and the two Red-legged Kittiwakes found: one off Oregon, and an amazing one onshore in southern California, providing a first record for that state.

A few other records suggested that birds from farther offshore may have been affected. Numbers of Flesh-footed Shearwaters seen off California were higher than usual. A Cook's Petrel found dead on the beach in Washington established a first state record. Another petrel thought to be a Cook's was seen from shore at Santa Cruz, California. Three Mottled Petrels seen off the Washington coast, and one found dead on the beach in Oregon, were very rare for that region.

Damn the torpedoes: Despite the weather, the winter hummingbird parade in the Southeast continued unabated

Last year in this column, writing of a big winter for western hummingbirds in the east, I suggested that the mildness of the 1994-1995 season had a lot to do with it. Harry LeGrand, Jr., former regional editor for the Southern Atlantic Coast, wrote to me to propose that it was not so simple: that the phenomenon, whatever its varied causes, was not merely a function of mild conditions. The ensuing season of 1995-1996, with its return to true winter weather, promptly proved that LeGrand was right. In spite of the cold and the southward penetration of snow, eastern hummingbird feeders again hosted a dizzying variety of western visitors.

Discussing the situation along the Gulf Coast, Stephen Stedman writes: "It sounds improbable, but hummingbird numbers and species once again exceeded those of any previous winter, by a substantial margin." The numbers back up this statement. Calliope Hummingbird was formerly considered an extreme rarity in the east, but this winter *nine* were banded in Louisiana, Florida had its first through fifth records, one was in Mississippi, and North Carolina had had

its first in late fall. Anna's Hummingbird established a probable first record for South Carolina, and a second and third for Mississippi, and five were banded in Louisiana. A couple of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds and numbers of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds along the Gulf were overshadowed by two outrageous southwestern visitors, White-eared Hummingbird in Mississippi and Magnificent Hummingbird in Florida. Substantial numbers of Black-chinned Hummingbirds and lesser numbers of Ruby-throateds were documented. Tallies of Rufous Hummingbirds reached absurd levels: 48 banded in coastal Mississippi, 134 banded in Louisiana, with many more elsewhere that the hard-pressed banders simply could not fit into their crowded schedules.

Along with the hordes of Rufous, banders found a handful of Allen's Hummingbirds, documenting the presence of this cryptic species that is so difficult to identify in the field: three in Louisiana, one in Mississippi, two in Alabama, two in Georgia. This trickle of Allen's underlines the point that *Selasphorus* hummers in the east cannot be assumed to be Rufous.

In some parts of the east, birds are still being identified by assumption, by people eager to put a (listable?) name on any such rarity. We know that Rufous Hummingbird is far more frequent in the east than Allen's Hummingbird, and Black-chinned outnumbers the Ruby-throated in some quarters here in winter. However, probabilities are not the same as definite identifications. With these difficult species pairs, absolute certainty is possible only with good views of adult males, or with birds identified in-hand by competent banders. Regional editors need to continue to list all such reports simply as "*Selasphorus*" or "*Archilochus*," even if contributors have applied specific names to the birds, unless the observers can specify how their birds were identified.

Every winter tells a different owl story

As we have come to understand, southward movements by northern owls are among the most predictable and unpredictable events of winter. They are predictable to the extent that many winters (perhaps a majority) will produce a southward surge of some kind of northern owl, somewhere. But beyond that, unpredictability reigns. No one, to my knowledge, has been able to forecast which kinds of owls will invade when, or where.

The season just past produced its own odd mix of owl occurrences. Snowy Owls, those quintessential northerners, might have seemed like appropriate visitors in the prevailing cold and snow, but they were strikingly scarce in most places south of the Arctic, except locally around the western Great Lakes. Most other northern owls did put in major appearances somewhere. Northern Saw-whet Owls, after their huge migration noted in the fall 1995 season, continued to be noticed in the east this winter. They were mentioned in several regions, but most amazing to me was the season's total of 82 picked up as road kills just on the southern part of the Garden State Parkway in New Jersey. We can only guess at the numbers that wintered in that area undetected. Also notable was the report of saw-whets on the move in North Carolina during December and late February; their migrations must extend later and recommence earlier than most of us realize.

Boreal Owls were far less widespread than their saw-whet cousins, but exceptional numbers were found in southern Ontario and around the western Great Lakes. Fifteen-plus set a new record for Wisconsin. Minnesota reported 100, but 60 of these were found dead as road kills or starved. Short-eared Owls were unusually numerous over much of the east, apparently with record numbers in the Appalachian region, and Long-eareds were also notably common in some areas. A small invasion of Northern Hawk Owls was observed, mainly around the Great Lakes and southern Prairie Provinces.

The headline owls of the season, however, were the Great Grays. They moved on an unusually broad front, making news from Alberta east to the Atlantic. About 50 were reported in Quebec. Fifteen in New England (the biggest flight there since 1978–1979) included a very rare Connecticut sighting and a bird near Rowley, Massachusetts, that was enjoyed by thousands. Southern Ontario also had its biggest incursion since that record season of 1978–1979. The western Great Lakes region saw record or near-record numbers in Minnesota (>200) and Wisconsin (>40), with some coming quite far south in these states, and one made it all the way to Iowa. Great Grays were also numerous in all three Prairie Provinces, especially in southeastern Manitoba. (Intriguing was the report that, of 44 banded in the latter area, all but two were adult females.)

As exciting as these owl events can be for birders, they are likely to be less thrilling for the owls themselves. At least in the case of the Great Gray Owls, the force driving the invasions can be a simple lack of food. This season, many of those found around the western Great Lakes were specifically reported to be emaciated or starving. As Ron Ridout observed in Ontario, the extreme accumulations of snow in the north may have simply put the owls' usual rodent prey out of reach.

Other winter invaders: a big season for shrikes, but not for finches

Of course, owls are not the only northern predators to stage winter invasions. This season, Rough-legged Hawks were shifted south of usual areas: They were noted as scarce in the Atlantic Provinces and Prairie Provinces, but unusually numerous in the Middle Atlantic Coast, Appalachian, and Middlewestern Prairie regions. The northern Great Plains saw numbers passing through in December, on their way south, and then northward migrants in February. A southward scatter of Gyrfalcons brought excitement to several areas as far south as Ohio and Colorado.

Bigger news involved a smaller bird of prey, the Northern Shrike. In the east, this species moved south in record numbers. Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces saw more than usual, but the superlatives picked up farther south. In New England, Blair Nikula reported that there were far too many for an accurate tally, but that the regional total was well over 300. It was termed the heaviest modern invasion in the Hudson-Delaware and Appalachian regions. Some Christmas Bird Counts in Ontario had record numbers. Excellent numbers appeared around the western Great Lakes, and the Middlewestern Prairies counted well over 60, even without a figure for Iowa, which would have added more. Farther west, where the normal winter range extends farther south, Northern Shrike numbers drew notice mainly in Arizona and New Mexico.

A couple of readers have complained in the past that I pay too much attention to the fortunes of the "winter finches." I admit that, to some people, the comings and goings of these birds might be considered almost as meaningless as the rise and fall of the stock market, or the shifting fortunes of political parties. At any rate, anyone bored with finches will be pleased to hear that these birds did hardly anything interesting this year.

Pine Grosbeaks put in appearances in a few areas south of normal limits, and many redpolls came across the Canadian border on the prairies and around the Great Lakes, but beyond that the finches provided little material for discussion.

Checking in with some ongoing trends: Ross' Goose, Bald Eagle, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and others

As Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich pointed out in their book *New World, New Mind* (Doubleday, 1989), human beings are far more attuned to sudden change than to gradual change in their surroundings—even though the gradual changes may be far more important. This applies equally to changes in bird distribution and numbers. We need to remind ourselves occasionally not to ignore ongoing changes, nor to take them for granted.

One trend that has been going on for more than two decades is the gradual increase in numbers of Ross' Geese in areas east of their traditional range. South Carolina had its first definite record this season, but farther north on the Atlantic Coast the species no longer merits boldface treatment and sometimes goes unmentioned. Two dozen at one site in Mississippi now represent only a "good number" there, and the species is "now expected" in Alabama. Most notable to me was the fact that Ross' Geese were found in every state of the Middlewestern Prairie Region, with well over 30 reported from Illinois alone. Clearly this goose is no longer the localized specialty that it was considered to be only a generation ago.

A definite good-news story is the ongoing increase in Bald Eagle numbers. In the post-DDT era, this bird has been making a strong comeback. Wintering areas in the heartland reported big numbers, such as nearly 400 in Nebraska and "hundreds" in Wisconsin. A statewide survey in Missouri found nearly three-thousand!

In case anyone is in doubt, numbers of wintering Lesser Black-backed Gulls on this continent apparently are still increasing. This is hard to judge from Atlantic Coast accounts, because many seen there are simply not reported any more; but farther west, numbers continue to climb. This season, for example, there were 26 in Ontario, at least 32 in the Middlewestern Prairies, records in all three states of the southern Great Plains, and at least four found in California. Eventually, this species should be recorded in every state and province

north of Mexico.

Other trends continue as well. The Eurasian Collared-Doves in the south-east show no intention of retreating. They are doing well from the Carolinas to Louisiana (where they are now in Cameron Parish, on the doorstep of Texas). The one found in Muskogee, Oklahoma, during the fall survived the winter. Elsewhere, we note that the Barred Owl, spreading gradually into the Pacific Northwest in recent decades, now seems to be established on Vancouver Island.

Mixed signals on swans, Purple Finches, and two kinds of tree sparrows

There are still people alive today who remember when the Canada Goose was a symbol of wilderness, not the flying hog that overruns city parks and golf courses today. Maybe someday we will say the same thing about the Trumpeter Swan. Attempts to introduce this swan into areas of the northern plains and Great Lakes seem to be succeeding very well. As a result, outlying records are increasing; Trumpeters were reported this season from areas as diverse as Maryland and Texas, and 160 wintered in one county in Minnesota. Because the Trumpeter Swan was an endangered species not too long ago, we might be tempted to view any such increase as a good thing. But I wonder. The Mute Swan, a bird of similar size, is now considered a pest in parts of the east. Some people will see a fundamental difference, because the Mute Swan was introduced from Europe, while the Trumpeter is a North American native. But both species are big enough to have a major impact on aquatic habitats. Both have now been released in areas where natural predators are totally absent, and where there is little to check their spread. What is to prevent the Trumpeter Swan from becoming as much of a nuisance as its European cousin?

The autumn of 1995 saw a fair southward migration of Purple Finches in some areas, but they seem to have disappeared from sight after this fall push. Purple Finch is one of those birds that seems to draw little attention, but it deserves more; its numbers in the east have dropped seriously in recent years. As veteran observer Blair Nikula reports from Massachusetts, "Purple Finches once again were almost absent; the dramatic decline of this species in New England remains a puzzle."

Another species that has declined as a wintering bird in the northeast is the

American Tree Sparrow. This year it drew comment because it was, for the first time in years, fairly numerous in several regions. Both Marshall Iloff in Maryland and George Hall in West Virginia likened this year's flight to the numbers seen many years ago. Perhaps the species moves only as far south as it must, driven by heavy snowfall, and the many mild winters of recent times have contributed to its apparent decline south of the Canadian border.

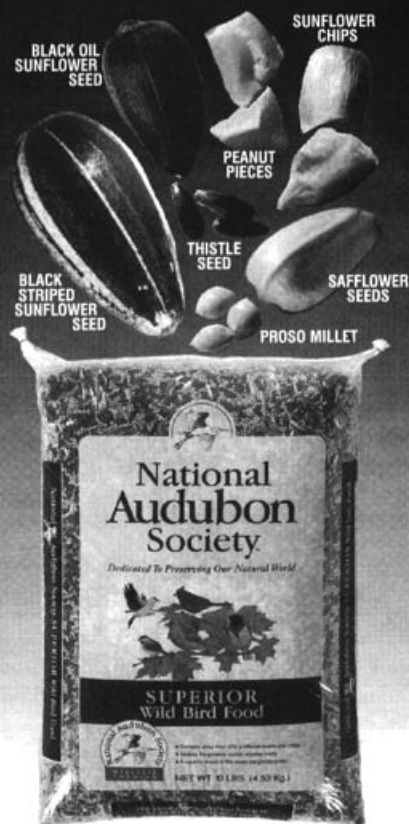
Finally, the unrelated Eurasian Tree Sparrow drew more comment this season than usual. After more than a century of being more or less limited to the St. Louis area, this cousin of the House Sparrow has been expanding its range recently. This winter, singles were found west to central Missouri and east to eastern Illinois, with one going even farther east to establish a first record for Indiana.

Postscript: Worthwhile Coots

I have always wanted to end this column by writing about coots, mainly because so many birders take these birds for granted. This season, I have an excellent excuse for doing so. One of the most notable records of the season, but one which mostly escaped the attention of the birding community until much later, involved the Eurasian Coot picked up in a weakened condition in Quebec during December. This is the first record for eastern Canada since 1927, when a December storm dropped at least three Eurasian Coots in Labrador and Newfoundland. (Probably the storm brought far more than that: Three were actually discovered, remarkable in these sparsely populated regions.) The only North American record since then involved a single bird in Alaska in 1962.

With this record of extreme rarity, I know of hardly anyone (besides me) who consciously looks at coots to see which species they are. But would this not be worth doing? If Eurasian Coots can make it to Newfoundland and Alaska and Quebec, couldn't one show up elsewhere in North America? Of course it could. But would it be overlooked elsewhere? Probably. But not if *you* see it, because you're going to take a second look at every coot now, right? And every other bird. There's a lot going on out there, and we're just learning about it. You can read about some more of the past winter's innumerable highlights in the pages that follow. ♣

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