

Prairie Provinces Region

RUDOLF F. KOES AND PETER TAYLOR

It was another long, cold, snowy prairie winter. Only southern Alberta had any real respite, with a mild February that brought back some of the usual early migrants at the end of Calgary's third coldest and second snowiest winter on record. In Saskatchewan, Robert Kreba gave the 1995-1996 winter the edge for misery, but by the narrowest of margins. Manitoba escaped the prolonged extreme cold of last winter, yet still set a record with 108 days of continuous sub-freezing temperatures between November and February. Only western and northern Manitoba recorded near- or below-average snowfall.

As a consequence, most birders spent January in a state of near-hibernation, and reports after the Christmas Bird Counts were sparse. Winter-induced lack of motivation aside, it was a rather uninteresting season, with the exception of some fine numbers of northern owls. With a few exceptions, winter finches did not leave the boreal forest in numbers, and half-hardy stragglers fared poorly.

Loons to Falcons

No loons were reported, and the only grebes were the three Red-necked and five Western grebes on the Wabamun L., AB CBC. Late stragglers included an injured Am. White Pelican at Gardiner Dam, SK, until about Christmas (TH, BL), a Double-crested Cormorant at Round L., Qu'Appelle Valley, SK Dec. 7 (JP), and a Great Blue Heron well into December at La Rivière, MB (*vide* AS).

Two Tundra Swans survived at Katepwa L., SK, until at least mid-February (BL, *vide* TR). Snow-covered stubble fields forced >2000 Mallards at Gardiner Dam Jan. 8 to dabble for a living (m.ob.). As usual, the greatest diversity of lingering (or early returning) waterfowl was in s. Alberta, including a Green-winged Teal near Taber Feb. 3 (LB), and the following Calgary highlights: an Am. Wigeon Feb. 25 (FK), three N. Pintails Feb. 1 (BW), a Canvasback to Jan. 31 (m.ob.), and eight Buffleheads and two Hooded Mergansers Jan. 29 (J&RD). A Hooded Merganser was at Crooked L., SK Dec. 21 (JP, BMz).

Rarely reported in winter were one Turkey Vulture near Yorkton, SK Jan. 3 (KW), and two in Medicine Hat, AB Dec. 15 (BV). Nineteen ad. Bald Eagles congregated at a Whitemouth, MB, chicken farm Dec. 15 (DF, RKO, PT), but had left by mid-January. At least eight Bald Eagles were at Gardiner Dam Jan. 8 (DV, PSa, BL), and several were reported in Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley (*vide* RKR). In the Magrath-Cardston area of s. Alberta, 24 Bald Eagles within 100 km were feeding on early-emerging Richardson's Ground Squirrels Feb. 23 (T&DD).



Northern Hawk Owl was considered the bird of the winter in the Prairie Provinces, with a major incursion, especially in Manitoba. This one was near Elma, Manitoba, December 15, 1996. Photograph/Dennis Fast.

There were five Sharp-shinned Hawk sightings in the Calgary area (*vide* TK; SM), and one near Craven, SK Dec. 21 (RKR, RM). Single Cooper's Hawks were noted at Weyburn, SK Dec. 21 (RB) and Calgary Jan. 14 & 16 (IH, RW). Northern Goshawk numbers ranged from very low in s. Manitoba to fair in both Saskatchewan and s. Alberta. A Wintering Red-tailed Hawk was noted at Taber P.P., Dec. 19 and Jan. 3 (LB), and a "Harlan's" Red-tailed Hawk was in Calgary Jan. 29 (JR, RW, LV). Rough-legged Hawks were scarce Regionwide, no doubt because of deep snowcover. Feeding like the Bald Eagles (above) on ground squirrels were 30 Golden Eagles in 50 km between Milk R. and Aden, AB Feb. 19 (AC), and 16 more in the Del Bonito-Cardston area Feb. 23 (T&DD). Twelve Prairie Falcon reports in Alberta included three at Taber Jan. 2 (LB). About 23 Gyrfalcon reports in Alberta were considered below normal; as usual, there were much fewer in the other 2 provinces.

Partridges to Woodpeckers

Gray Partridges showed some increases; the 2 consecutive harsh winters may have hindered their recovery from the cool, wet summers of a few years ago. Forty-eight Spruce Grouse provided an excellent count on the long drive from Thompson, MB, to Winnipeg Dec. 7 (BC); the same day eight were seen e. of Seddon's Corner, MB (PT). A Blue Grouse fed in a window-box at Waterton Lakes N.P., AB Dec. 28-Jan. 5 (T&DD). Willow Ptarmigan moved S to the La Ronge, SK, area in good numbers (*vide* RKR). Sharp-tailed Grouse numbers were notably low in s. Alberta and s.e. Manitoba; how far do these strong fliers go in adverse winters?

Early migrants in Alberta included two Am. Coots at Frank L., Feb. 17 (LV, JR), a Killdeer in Calgary Feb. 17 (RL, VH), and



a Com. Snipe at Calgary Feb. 23 (KB). A Glaucous Gull was at Gardiner Dam Dec. 3 (*vide* RJ), and Calgary's first-ever January gull was a probable Glaucous Jan. 10 (JS). A first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake graced Gardiner Dam Dec. 7 (DV, PSa) for Saskatchewan's 3rd record.

An E. Screech-Owl was heard again at Medicine Hat from Feb. 8 (DBa). Snowy Owl numbers were above average in s.e. Manitoba, and near average elsewhere, with no large concentrations. Northern Hawk Owls irrupted in s.e. Manitoba, where one-day counts of >20 birds were recorded in February in the region between Elma and Ft. Alexander. Fair numbers occurred also in Saskatchewan and Alberta, including about 15 December reports in the Edmonton area (*vide* RD) and two well s. at Calgary (MP, RW *et al.*). A N. Pygmy-Owl spent much of the period in a Calgary park (MM *et al.*). Great Gray Owls were locally concentrated in all 3 provinces, with an amazing 123 banded in the Opal-Rochester area, AB, from Nov. 21 (RC), and high counts of 24 in the Libau-Lac du Bonnet-Silver Falls area, MB Feb. 9 (RN *et al.*), and eight near Choiceland, SK Jan. 28 (*vide* CD). A rare winter sighting was a Long-eared Owl near Marquette, MB Feb. 22 (GWN). Boreal Owls evidently left the Manitoba forest in substantial numbers, with >10 reported, including ≥six dead birds turned in (*vide* JD, DH). Smaller numbers were noted in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

A Belted Kingfisher at Mt. Lorette, AB Feb. 13+ (PSh) had likely overwintered. A Red-bellied Woodpecker visited a feeder near Altona, MB until mid-January (K&JS, m.ob.). Out of place were a Three-toed Woodpecker in Medicine Hat Feb. 15 (CM) and a Black-backed Woodpecker in Calgary for much of the period (BE, BMy *et al.*). Above-average numbers of N. Flickers in Winnipeg in December had dwindled to a few by February, while seven migrants reached Taber by Feb. 18 (LB).

Passerines

Blue Jay numbers continued to increase in Alberta and s. Saskatchewan. Two Mt. Chickadees, present since November, were still in Cypress Hills P.P., SK Jan. 2 (*vide* RKr). Three Chestnut-backed Chickadees mobbed a N. Pygmy-Owl at Waterton Lakes N.P., Feb. 10 (LB). American Dippers showed a significant dip in numbers on Alberta mountain rivers. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet was extremely late in Calgary Dec. 6 (J&MM). There were 3 reports of Townsend's Solitaires in both Alberta and Saskatchewan, plus one on the Winnipeg CBC. The only Varied Thrush report was at N. Battleford, SK Dec. 1 (*vide* RJ). American



Robins were locally numerous in Saskatchewan, including 33 near Round L., Dec. 21 (JP) and 114 on the Saskatoon CBC Jan. 4 (*vide* GWp), but scarce elsewhere; two survived to Feb. 16 at Minnedosa, MB, and one to Feb. 28 at Kenton, MB (all DBr), while several overwintered in Winnipeg.

The largest post-Christmas count of Bohemian Waxwings was 3000 in Calgary Jan. 21 (MP). Cedar Waxwings were generally scarce, but 120 were counted with Bohemians at Yorkton, SK Jan. 3 (JP). Northern Shrikes, always sparsely distributed, were especially hard to find in most of the Region. The usual half-hardy sparrow species lingered in low numbers, and many apparently perished in January; scattered small flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos fared much better. Overwintering successes included an Am. Tree Sparrow at Minnedosa (CC) and two Fox Sparrows at Jasper, AB (*vide* PSh). Blackbirds were likewise scarce, especially after December. Oxygen-starved minnows in a Regina spillway furnished emergency rations for four Rusty Blackbirds, among other birds, until late January (RKr). Also in Regina, seven Com. Grackles frequented a feeder for much of the winter (H&FK).

Beyond their normal winter range were at least one Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch near Saskatoon Jan. 25–26 (*vide* RJ), and another at Ft. McMurray in late December (*vide* PSh). Pine Grosbeaks were widely reported in high numbers in Alberta, but were thinly scattered in Saskatchewan, and few left the forested regions in Manitoba. A few small flocks of Red Crossbills were noted in s. Alberta and at Riding Mountain N.P., MB. White-winged Crossbill numbers gradually thinned out in s.e. Manitoba,

The most surreptitious of the winter-invading owls, this Boreal Owl was at Kleefeld, Manitoba, January 11, 1997. Photograph/Dennis Fast.

and few were noted elsewhere. Common Redpolls were widespread in Alberta, mainly in the north and the foothills; their numbers increased in the Alberta prairies and the forests of s.e. Manitoba in January. Pine Siskins were much scarcer than of late in Manitoba, and very few Evening Grosbeaks were found outside the southern boreal forest of Manitoba.

Observers (subregional compilers in boldface): Dennis Baresco (DBa), Ray Belanger, Lloyd Bennett, Kyle Briton, Dick Brugger (DBr), Bonnie Chartier, Arlene Contarto, Ray Cromie, Calvin Cuthbert, Ross Dickson, Carmen Dodge, Theresa & Doug Dolman, Jim Duncan, Jean & Rodger Dunn, Brian Elder, Dennis Fast, Ken Gardner, Ian Halladay, Valerie Hanas, David Hatch, Trevor Herriot, Roy John, Hal & Fay Kathol, Fran Kitchingham, Rudolf Koes (RKO), Terry Korolyk, **Robert Kreba (RKr)**, Ross Lein, Bob Luterbach, Blake Maybank (BMy), Joan & Malcolm McDonald, Shonna McLeod, Boyd Metzler (BMz), Molly Mills, Cynthia Mutch, Ron Myers, Robert Nero, John Pollock, Mike Preston, John Riddell, Tom Riffel, Pat Sargent (PSa), K. & J. Sawatzky, Al Schritt, **Peter Sherrington (PSh)**, Wayne Smith, John Steeves, Ben Velner, Dan Vetter, Lynn Vogt, Glen Walwyn (GWN), Guy Wapple (GWp), Ray Wershler, Bill Wilson, Ken Woods

—Rudolf F. Koes, 135 Rossmere Cres., Winnipeg, MB R2K 0G1 and Peter Taylor, Box 597, Pinawa, MB ROE 1L0.