



Red Crossbill at Farmington, New Mexico, January 28, 1997. The species appeared widely in the southwestern lowlands this season. Photograph/Tim Reeves.

locales, setting local records, and appearing in unusual situations, including shopping centers at Corrales, bottomlands in the lower Gila Valley, and cacti at Columbus (m.ob.); scattered reports of "Purple Finches" (and even "Redpolls") invariably proved to be Cassin's. Except in the southeast, the season was characterized for many observers by roving flocks of Red Crossbills. Notable included one at Farmington Dec. 15 (ph. TR), plus others there later; 36 near Clayton Dec. 27 (CR, LH), plus others at additional *Union* sites (WC); 50 at Zuni Dec. 14, plus 150 there Feb. 1 (DC); and 15 at Virden Dec. 28 (JO), plus two there Jan. 31 (JEP). Crossbills were particularly conspicuous in the R.G.V. from Albuquerque south, with a high of 106 at Las Cruces Dec. 21 (GE). At Percha (DE) and Las Cruces (C. Benkman) they were found eating pecans.

North for the season were 11 Lesser Goldfinches at Albuquerque Dec. 21 (HS); abundant Am. Goldfinches furnished records of 119 at Santa Fe Dec. 28 (PI) and 597 at Zuni Dec. 21 (JT). The unprecedented **Lawrence's Goldfinch** event continued in the 5 southwesternmost counties, with local highs including 15–17 at Virden Dec. 28 (ph. JO) and Jan. 31 (JEP), 14–15 at Cliff Jan. 4 (RF) & 21 (EL), 13 at Silver City Dec. 27 (RF), 83 in the Peloncillo Mts. area Dec. 29 (AC), and 36 at Dripping Springs Dec. 21 (GE). Among the last to be reported were six n. to E.B.L. Dam Feb. 16 (DC), two at Mangas Feb. 18 (NMC), and 10 at Caballo Riverside Feb. 15 (PB). In n. Mexico, 14 Lawrence's near Janos Jan. 5 (CM) and three near Ascension Jan. 6 (WH, SOW) may represent the first Chihuahuas reports. Evening Grosbeaks added substantially to the cardueline winter, with record numbers (often many hundreds) from Farmington,

Zuni, and Santa Fe e. to Clayton, Logan, and Clovis, and s. to the Peloncillo Mts., Tyrone, Las Cruces, and Carlsbad (m.ob.).

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Alaska Region

T. G. TOBISH, JR.

By late November, weather conditions—including the Aleutian low—were setting up for a return to a "classic" old-style Alaska winter. Regular cold-based low pressure systems were escorting heavy dry snows across the Region, and between each storm below-average cold temperatures prevailed. Freeze-up was early and hard, and few late or lingering migrants turned up. Indeed, Christmas Bird Count plans and most of the counts themselves were disappointments, and accentuated what became a very long and slow winter. Conditions drastically changed and moderated by late January, when the Aleutian low faded and drifted into a less dominant position, and milder, storm-free conditions finished out the season. Late February snowpack conditions were at or, more often, below average, and several areas were closer to about 75% of long-term averages. The season ended with a long string of above-average temperatures and insignificant precipitation events. Most of the Interior, for instance was more than 16° F. above average after mid-January. As is always the case, however, it is almost exclusively the early season weather conditions that exert any substantive impact on winter bird distribution. In general, it was a decent winter for waterbirds, especially extralimital waterfowl pioneering areas



with artificial waterbodies to make it through otherwise inhospitable conditions. Even with the cold and snowy early season, there was an interesting mix of semi-hardy species that managed at several sites all season.

Alaska has lost another one of its birder pioneers, this time to greener pastures. Peter Walsh has left Petersburg after over a dozen years of tireless exploration of previously unchecked habitats and migrant traps from the Stikine River to Blind Slough on Mitkof Island. Readers of this column will certainly recognize attributions of virtually all of the Stikine River and Mitkof Island rarities to the ubiquitous PJW. Peter was responsible for elevating our knowledge of and the stature and importance of the Wrangell Narrows to migrant and winter waterbird populations, and for finding numerous first Alaska records during his travels. His contribution to Alaska's ornithology has been extensive.

Abbreviations: North Gulf (*North Gulf of Alaska*); SE (*Southeast Alaska*); SC (*South-coastal Alaska*); SW (*Southwest Alaska*); UCI (*Upper Cook Inlet*); † (*details*), * (*specimen*), and tape (*tape recording*) all on file at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Museum.

Loons to Raptors

This winter's peak Pacific Loon concentrations included a strong northerly count of >77 around Juneau's Auke Bay Dec. 13 (PS) and a notable >420 from the Ketchikan road system, particularly in Clover Passage, Jan. 20 (SCH). Yellow-billed Loons appeared above average and well represented from all coastal sites s. and/or e. of Kodiak I. (m.ob.). With Walsh gone from the Petersburg area, W. Grebe winter counts will likely be limited to the Ketchikan area, where a 5-year low >200 was counted for the season (SCH). A single ad. alternate-plumage **Brandt's Cormorant** was picked out of a winter cormorant concentration in Nichols Passage near Ketchikan Feb. 9 (TH, †SCH), in the same area where the species has been found 3 times previously in the 2nd half of the winter season. Up to three Great Blue Herons wintered w. to Kodiak all season (RAM), where a few manage each winter, while the single reported from an Anchorage area spring-fed drainage ditch after a particularly mild front January 11 (*fide* RLS) was noteworthy. There are a few previous winter records from UCI.

Perhaps additional examples of the Region's expanding population were four

Trumpeter Swans Feb. 1+ from Sitka (MLW, MET), where they are casual, and the Region's most northerly ever winter group, an adult with four juveniles along an open stretch of the upper Kenai R. at Cooper Landing Jan. 17–Feb. 1+ (RLS, TGT). Two adults moving N past Ketchikan Feb. 27 (MH, *fide* SCH) had to be migrants, since local freshwater sites had been frozen since January. Still casual in winter in SE, another Greater White-fronted Goose spent the season at Stika (MLW, MET). Casual away from traditional winter sites around Izembek Lagoon, a late (?) Brant was noted in Kodiak's Womens Bay Dec. 25–28 (DWS). Other waterfowl highlights included another impressive winter tally of >45 Green-winged Teal around Kodiak, mostly on salt water, all season (RAM); a single at Anchorage through mid-February provided the 8th UCI winter record (*fide* RLS). Only one N. Shoveler report came in, a single female at Sitka Jan. 14 (MLW, MET). An immature ♂ Eur. Wigeon, casual in the Region in winter and accidental on the Mainland, was found on the Seward CBC Dec. 28 (RLS, TGT), but was not located thereafter. A nice array of *Aythya* included a ♂ Redhead at Sitka's Swan L., Dec. 6–Feb. 28 (MLW, MET), the only SE site where this Interior species has been repeatedly found in winter. Single Ring-necked Ducks were at Anchorage though the season (= 5th UCI winter record, *fide* RLS), at Sitka Dec. 1–24+ (MLW, MET) and from Ketchikan's Ward L. all winter, a first local winter record (SCH). A /-type Tufted Duck was taken by a hunter at Kodiak Dec. 1 (RAM), and an unusually local high count of 15 Lesser Scaup was noted in Ketchikan all season (SCH). Exceptional eider reports e. of traditional winter sites included ≥three ♀ Kings around Juneau Jan. 5–Feb. 8 (PS, GVV), possibly a new SE high count, and a ♀ Spectacled described from the *Kodiak* waterfront Dec. 28–Feb. 2 (RAM), about the 3rd local report. Two Bufflehead that spent the winter on Anchorage's productive fish hatchery ponds (*fide* RLS) represented UCI's 3rd winter record. Hooded Merganser numbers were below average for traditional SE winter sites; *maxima* was three around Ketchikan all season (JP, SCH). The now habituated pair at Seward again spent the winter on fresh water (WS), where they have been since 1992.

Apart from the average handful of Sharp-shinned Hawks from scattered coastal sites—including one around Anchorage to Feb. 5 (GB)—the season's only noteworthy raptors included a high CBC tally of 12 Bald Eagles around Delta

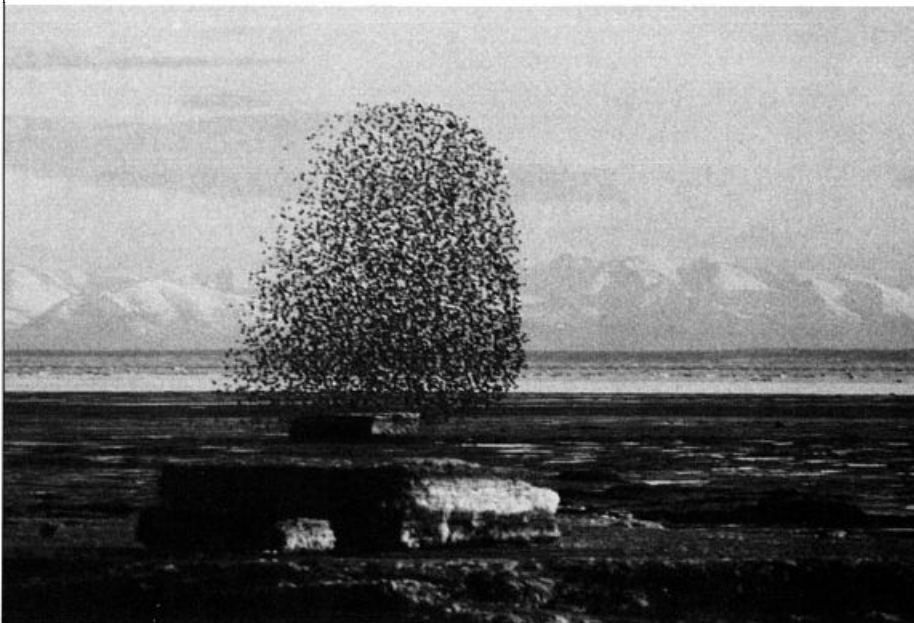
Junction Dec. 28 (SD) at the n. extreme of this scavenger's winter range, two Red-tailed Hawks (probably resident *alascensis*) in the Ketchikan area Jan. 15 and Feb. 13 (TG, SCH), a Golden Eagle in alpine sites near Eagle R. n. of Anchorage, where casual, Dec. 29 (RLS) and another at Kodiak Dec. 28 (PC), and an **American Kestrel**, first noted Nov. 14 and then written off as a late migrant, that successfully wintered on the Mainland for the first time ever, at Portage s. of Anchorage. It was seen again Feb. 23 (DM, *fide* TGT).

Ptarmigan to Shorebirds

Scher's continued winter exploration of the Chugach front n. of Anchorage again produced Rock Ptarmigan, this year a new local record count of 17 at Arctic Valley? Dec. 29 (RLS) in the area where recent breeding evidence had been produced. Rock Ptarmigan distribution in the w Chugach Mts. remains poorly delineated. The season's shorebird highlights were typically light and included above-average Dunlin representation from North Gulf sites: about 30 for the season at Kodiak (RAM), another >20 around Juneau to Jan. 19 (PS), five at Seward Dec. 28 (WS), and three from Homer Dec. 22+ (*fide* DE). Also noteworthy was a Com. Snipe from Sitka Feb. 5 (MLW, MET) and a peak lower Cook Inlet count of 735 Rock Sandpipers at Homer Dec. 22 (*fide* DE).

Rock Sandpiper

The adage that one's own backyard is often the least known in the neighborhood was highlighted this season with the discovery of a massive concentration of Rock Sandpipers in UCI, wintering around the mouth of the Beluga R., only 35 mi due w. of Anchorage. Previous sightings from the air—dating back over 15 years—of small sandpiper flocks in this general area in October/November and again in March/April indicated the species used the area. It had been assumed that these were migrants and certainly not individuals that intended to reside in a portion of Cook Inlet whose nearshore marine waters and intertidal mudflats regularly freeze for most of the November–March period. When first seen in March 1995 (WDE), aerial counts produced estimates of 3000–5000. Subsequent monthly aerial surveys and ground-truthing counts during winter 1996–1997 revealed a winter season peak of about 20,000 birds between late January and early February (REG, TLT, PLE, WDE, CPD, TGT). Not only is this one of the largest concentrations of Rock Sandpipers ever reported, but the majority of the birds (>80%) were nominate *ptilocnemis* (*REG, *fide* DDG). This is probably the least numerous



A cloud of Rock Sandpipers flies over the flats near the mouth of the Beluga River, upper Cook Inlet, Alaska, in February 1997. The wintering of large numbers here (apparently including the majority of the population of the nominate race) was a new discovery. Photograph/R. E. Gill.

of the 4 recognized subspecies—it breeds on Bering Sea Islands (Pribilofs, St. Mathew, and Hall Is.) and its winter range has heretofore gone undescribed. Frequent autumn observations over the past decade of fair numbers of nominate birds at several Alaska Pen. estuaries suggested the taxa at least left its insular breeding grounds for the Mainland. Here they have been seen among large flocks of the Aleutian/local Alaska Pen. and Mainland form *couesi*, but winter observations of these areas only produced *couesi* records. So, not only was the Cook Inlet find exciting in and of itself, but knowledge of how these birds were making a living in these seemingly harsh conditions was equally significant. During periods from late December 1996 into early January 1997, and again in early February, when temperatures barely rose above 0° F. and shorefast and floating ice covered most of the UCI, birds were seen feeding on the mudflats in long shallow scours left by room-sized icebergs that were being dragged about by receding tides. In these disturbed but still unfrozen areas, sandpipers fed on small clams (*Macoma balthica*) (*vide* REG) and, judging by the extreme amount of fat found on several specimens, they were clearly obtaining sufficient energy to sustain them through the harshest conditions. Because of the extreme tidal conditions in UCI, with a 33+’ range, and the minimal mid-season available daylight, these birds had to have foraged regularly in darkness and roosted on floating ice masses during high tides.

Logical questions from this find are: 1) Is this a recent occurrence, or has it simply gone unnoticed? and 2) Why do birds

seemingly prefer the harsher UCI and not the c. or s. inlet in areas that rarely ice-over? At this stage speculation is plentiful, but answers are few. To the first question, it appears that Rock Sandpipers have been using Cook Inlet historically. For example, during an oil spill response action in the central inlet in January 1994, a flock of “a few thousand sandpipers” was seen from the air on a mid-channel shoal (DEE). Although this group was not identified to species, at that time and in that number they could only have been Rock Sandpipers. There have been other similar coincidental observations of winter sandpipers, including mid-season reports of smaller numbers of Rocks from the Beluga R. area dating back to the late 1980s. A report of a record high count of Rock Sandpipers from the Kachemak Bay CBC, in lower Cook Inlet, prompted Gill to look at older photographs of the species taken in that area. In these photos are several examples of the nominate race among the more common and noticeably darker and smaller *couesi* or *tschuktschorum*. The question of why the majority of birds appear to prefer the upper inlet, where winter conditions are markedly harsher, remains unclear. At present, the attraction appears to be an abundant and available benthic food source in the area related to sediment type and year-round freshwater inflow from the Beluga R. The availability of bivalves to birds appears to be a function of very dynamic tidal/ice interactions that allow birds to profit from feeding on intertidal areas whose surface would otherwise be frozen for much of the low-

water cycle. The fact that at least this winter, the UCI supported what had to have been the majority of the world population of nominate *ptilocnemis*, will certainly change land management and oil spill response strategies for this part of Alaska. The Minerals Management Service has recently funded a study of shorebird use of Cook Inlet, which should allow biologists to study this phenomenon.

—Contributed by R.E. Gill

Gulls to Alcids

Gull concentrations were down this season at all of the standard winter sites, and extralimital reports suffered accordingly, especially from Kodiak, where Slaty-backed Gull was unreported for the first time in many years. Probably the same ad. Ring-billed Gull from last winter was again noted near Juneau Feb. 5 into March (GVV). Thayer’s Gulls wintered to the north in exceptional numbers, with a peak of >35 n. of Juneau Jan. 19 (=new local winter high count; GVV, PS), and singles were located n. and w. to Kodiak Dec. 28, Jan. 19, and Feb. 9 (DWS, RAM). A very dark-mantled ad. gull with gray streaks on the head, neck, and upper breast was the season’s only Glaucous-winged x Western Gull report, at Ketchikan Feb. 17 (†SCH), where most of the Region’s hybrids (and pure Westerns) have been described.

The Ketchikan area’s protected passes and coves produce another exceptional count of >2000 Marbled Murrelets Jan. 4 (SCH). These birds were centered in the now well-known Clover Pass sites, where Heintz first discovered record winter concentrations in the winter of 1991–1992 and periodically since. Unusual inshore in winter, a Cassin’s Auklet was described from Sitka Feb. 12 (MLW, MET). The winter’s only inshore Crested Auklet report came in from Kodiak, with a single there on the Dec. 28 CBC (IM, PB)

Owls to Starling

Although Snowy Owls are indicated as resident and local within their mostly tundra range in Alaska in most publications, winter reports are irregular, especially after December. So a single in Sitka found near tidewater Dec. 11–18 and later on interior muskeg Jan. 1 (MLW, MET), as well as another from Juneau in “mid-February” (*vide* GVV), were significant and representative of most sporadic winter reports from coastal sites. Northern Saw-whet Owls lingered (or wintered) in above-average numbers, including singles in Anchorage to Dec. 9+ (GJT, TGT), Eagle R. to Dec. 29+ (RK, *vide* RLS), and from Homer Dec. 22 (*vide* DE). This secretive

Aegolus is presumed to be migratory from at least the n. extremes of its range from UCI, since there are few records there after December. Following a good fall tally of >ten from the Juneau area, one attempted to overwinter near Auke Bay to Jan. 10+ (GVV), the only report. The season's only Anna's Hummingbird was a lingering male at Juneau to Dec. 18 (GVV), a below average showing for this late fall/winter visitor. The ad. Red-breasted Sapsucker described from Ketchikan woods Dec. 25 (HS) was likely a late migrant—there were no other reports. *Picoides* woodpecker numbers continue to expand in UCI near the n. end of coniferous forests recently ravaged by the now epidemic spruce bark beetle outbreak. The Anchorage CBC tallied a remarkable 94 Downy, 68 Hairy, and 26 Three-toed woodpeckers, all record counts. Even a few Black-backed were reported through the season. The northernmost N. Flicker for the season was a "yellow-shafted" in Anchorage all season (DFD), about the 6th UCI winter report, while an exceptional *seven* "red-shafteds" wintered in the Ketchikan area (SCH). Black-billed Magpies ventured offshore in the Alexander Archipelago in good numbers, including >three around Ketchikan all season (SCH) and another three offshore at Sitka all season (MLW, MET), where they are not annual.

American Robins staged an average showing, with singles or small groups exploiting berry trees at a few coastal communities between Kodiak and SE. Exceptional, however, was a near-record count of 16, including a flock of 14, at Anchorage Dec. 21 (TGT, DFD), and another impressive group of 25 at Seward Dec. 28 (WS). Twenty years ago Am. Robins were red banner CBC finds, and few were ever noted after December anywhere in the Region. Also taking advantage of increased berry-producing landscape exotics are Bohemian Waxwings, especially in the Anchorage area, where certainly a major portion of the Alaska population stages annually in late fall. Numbers of Bohemians were late to materialize in Anchorage, and it was not until December that large feeding flocks were easily located. The season's high count at Anchorage was a cautious 6393 birds Dec. 21 (m.ob.), and for the first time ever the mild season and the proliferating berry supplies supported well over 1000 birds through the period. Up until winter 1994–1995, Bohemian Waxwings were casual—mostly as singles—anywhere in the Region and certainly away from SE. The Palmer area farms' Eur. Starling stronghold held hundreds of birds through the season; the only

extralimital report came from Seward Dec. 1–28+ (WS).

Emberizids to Fringillids

As always in winter, sparrows made up the bulk of unusual passerine reports, although the regular semihardy types were poorly represented, especially White-crowned Sparrows, with only four total found on SC CBCs, and Dark-eyed Juncos, with a low 99 as high count from Seward Dec. 28 (WS). Other sparrow highlights included: four Am. Tree Sparrows at Portage to Dec. 26 (TGT) and another six from Seward Dec. 28 into January (RLS, WS, TGT), where for some reason each winter's high count usually comes from; a rare **Savannah Sparrow** flushed out of Juneau's Mendenhall Wetlands Jan. 12 (PS), a 2nd local and one of few winter records; two Lincoln's Sparrows at Kodiak Dec. 1 & 26+ (RAM) and another at Ketchikan Jan. 4 (SCH); and only one Harris' Sparrow with juncos at the traditional Juneau feeders Jan. 30 (PS). Snow Buntings staged farther east along the North Gulf coast in exceptional numbers, e.g. a record local peak of >305 from coastal Kodiak sites there by Dec. 15 (RAM, DWS, HP). Another >75 at Seward Dec. 28 (WS) grew to >100 birds by late January (RLS). As is usual in strong Snow Bunting years, McKay's Buntings also appeared, this time in record numbers for SC. At least seven McKay's, a new record local high, were described from Kodiak Dec. 5–Feb. 3 (RAM, DWS, SS), another >two were picked out of the Seward Snow Bunting flock Dec. 28–late January (WS, RLS), and a most astonishing single appeared alone at a roadside pullout at Fox, n. of Fairbanks, in "late December" and stayed at this site through -50° F. weather to at least late January (KK, PDM, DDG *et al.*). Small numbers of McKay's winter on the Mainland Bering Sea coast, mostly around large *Elymus* patches, between Kotzebue Sound and the N. Alaska Pen. A ♂ Purple Finch found a Ketchikan feeder for one day only Dec. 10 (JP), and a female visited the same feeder sporadically mid-December–mid-January (†SCH). Ketchikan has been the Region's most reliable site to produce Purple Finch winter reports, about every other year on average. Winter finches made a vary mixed showing, with White-winged Crossbills still in the midst of a long-term absence from essentially all parts of the Region—only small local flocks continue to turn up at best. Common Redpolls did their usual winter build-up to a February/March peak at most sites s. of the Alaska Range, while

Pine Siskens retreated completely from White Spruce/Birch forests into the coastal Sitka Spruce/W. Hemlock woods of the N. Gulf.

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