

idaho-western montana



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For the third consecutive year the Region enjoyed a mild winter. Snowfall was relatively light, temperatures were above normal, and many lakes and reservoirs remained ice-free. Unlike typical winters, some colder mountain valley locations reported only a day or two of subzero temperatures. Open water, adequate food supplies, and warm temperatures encouraged record numbers of waterfowl and “half-hardy” species such as doves, wrens, and blackbirds to linger or overwinter. Winter finches were absent, with the exception of Common Redpolls.

Although the season’s weather held few surprises, birders had plenty of excitement with the discoveries of several remarkable birds. Most incredible was the fact that the best birds of the winter season were a shorebird, a flycatcher, and a warbler! Please read on for the interesting details.

Abbreviations: A.F.R. (*American Falls Res., by American Falls, ID*); D.F.N.W.R. (*Deer Flat N.W.R., Canyon, ID*); Latilong (area encompassed by one degree latitude and one degree longitude, used in mapping bird distribution in both Idaho and Montana).

LOONS THROUGH CRANES

An imm. Yellow-billed Loon below A.F.R. dam 7 Dec–15 Feb (MCR, TS, m.ob.) provided the first winter record for Latilong 27. Unusually late grebes included a Pied-billed

in *Flathead, MT*, 3–8 Dec (SG), two Eareds in *Boise, ID*, 4 Dec (DT), and a Clark’s in *Gooding, ID*, 18 Dec (m.ob.). Above-average numbers of Am. White Pelicans stayed in Idaho: up to eight wintered in *Gooding (KF)*, one was in *Lemhi* 18 Dec (HR), one was at A.F.R. 26 Dec (CT), and three were in *Owyhee* 2 Jan (JD). Up to five Great Egrets were in *Gooding, ID*, 18 Dec–5 Feb (KF), where they are now expected in winter.

Higher-than-usual numbers of seasonally rare geese lingered in Idaho until mid-Jan, including two Greater White-fronteds, ≤36 Snows, and 11 Ross’s. Record counts for Tundra Swans were reported on two CBCs: 268 on the Bigfork, MT, CBC 18 Dec and 245 on the American Falls, ID, CBC 26 Dec. A Mallard × N. Pintail hybrid was a noteworthy find in *Helena, MT*, 5 Dec (JS). As in the past several winters, a male Eur. Wigeon returned to *Boise* to winter. Two other Eurasians were in *Kootenai, ID*, 28 Dec (SS), and two were in *Lewiston, ID*, 2 Jan–6 Feb (KD, BJ, CS). Seldom reported in winter, 1–6 Long-tailed Ducks stayed below A.F.R. dam 1 Dec–7 Jan (CT, m.ob.) and one wintered in *Canyon, ID*. Several record duck counts were reported on CBCs, including 4144 Com. Goldeneyes at *Bruneau, ID*, 2 Jan, 103 Hooded Mergansers at *Bigfork, MT*, 18 Dec, and 798 Com. Mergansers at *Nampa, ID*, 26 Dec.

Although very rare in winter, two lingering Ospreys were tallied on the *Libby, MT*,

CBC 18 Dec and another, possibly an early migrant, was in *Gooding, ID*, 16 Feb (KF). The total of six Gyrfalcons observed during the period was about average. A Sora discovered near *Bozeman* 31 Dec (JRy) provided a rare winter record for Montana. The Sandhill Crane that overwintered in *Blaine, ID* (BS), and another at D.F.N.W.R. 4 Feb (JG) were unusual.

SHOREBIRDS THROUGH FLYCATCHERS

Two Dunlins in *Canyon, ID*, 6–21 Feb were rare (JG, m.ob.), but another near *Belgrade, MT*, 16 Jan–29 Feb (MS, m.ob.) was even more unusual. The Greater Yellowlegs that persisted in *Nez Perce, ID*, 1 Dec–22 Jan (BJ, m.ob.) was rare but not unprecedented. An amazing discovery was Idaho’s first **Ruff** at D.F.N.W.R. 26 Dec–9 Jan (ph. FH, †JG, m.ob.). Almost as surprising was an **American Woodcock** found dead in *Helena, MT*, 9 Jan (LG).

It was another banner season for rare gulls. Single Bonaparte’s Gulls near *Lewiston* 4 Jan (CS) and at D.F.N.W.R. 6 Feb (DB) provided Idaho winter latilong firsts. Mew Gulls were unaccountably down by half from last year, with singles in *Gooding, ID*, 7 Dec (KF), *Boise, ID*, 31 Dec (CS), and near *Bigfork, MT*, 18 Dec (DC). Discovered in *Canyon* last November, Idaho’s first **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was sporadic in *Boise*



Idaho’s first Ruff was this unseasonable adult female at Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge 26 Dec 1999–9 Jan 2000. Most records in the West are during fall. This image was captured on 28 Dec. Photograph by Fred A. Hill.

through 22 Jan (m.ob.). An ad. **Kumlien's Iceland Gull** at A.F.R. 26–27 Feb (DB, MCr, †CT) was especially significant because of increasing reports of Iceland Gulls in the West. A total of six Glaucous-winged Gulls were reported in Idaho, one of which overwintered in Boise (DT). Montana reported two Glaucous-winged × W. Gulls in *Lake 4* Dec and one in *Flathead* 18 Dec (DC). Single Glaucous Gulls visited *Kootenai*, ID, 8 Jan (LH, m.ob.), A.F.R. 26 Feb (MCr), and *Polson*, MT, 26–27 Feb (CP, TT).

A wayward Band-tailed Pigeon stopped in *Canyon*, ID, 2 Feb (MJ). For the second consecutive winter, record numbers of Mourning Doves were reported in w. Montana. With vole populations down from last year, owls wandered in both states. In a continuing trend, two Barn Owls strayed to *Ravalli*, MT, 1 Dec–9 Jan (WT). An E. Screech-Owl in *Broadwater*, MT, 17 Jan provided a first for Latilong 28 (EA) and a W. Screech-Owl in *Blaine*, ID, 23 Dec was a new addition to Latilong 25 (BS). Another seasonal first was a Barred Owl that wintered in Boise, ID. Sightings of at least four Great Gray Owls away from expected wintering areas were noteworthy. A Boreal Owl that wandered to Twin Falls, ID, 1 Jan provided a first for Latilong 25 (MT). Like last year, single Lewis's Woodpeckers overwintered in Boise, ID (DT), and *Ravalli*, MT (Cpo). Montana's 6th **Eastern Phoebe** was an incredible find in *Lake 5*–26 Dec (FT, m.ob.). At least ten Say's Phoebes were reported in sw. Idaho, more than usual. One of the best birds of the season, a stunning male **Vermilion Flycatcher** graced *Ravalli*, MT, 2–11 Jan (BG, ph. CB, m.ob.) and furnished Montana's first record.

JAYS THROUGH GOLDFINCHES

Only five Blue Jays were reported in Idaho throughout the period, the lowest tally in many years. They were also scarce in Montana, with the exception of a record 13 counted on the Kalispell CBC 2 Jan. Two early **Tree Swallows** in *Gooding* 17 Feb (KF) provided a first winter record for Idaho and the Region. Usually absent or rare in winter, many Mountain and Western Bluebirds were reported in *Owyhee*, ID, throughout the period. Reports of several wintering Hermit and Varied Thrushes in sw. Idaho and single Gray Catbirds in Montana's *Lake 19* Dec (SC) and *Gallatin* 31 Dec (SH) definitely indicated a mild winter.

More seasonally rare warblers than usual were reported in both states. Single Idaho Orange-crowned Warblers were in *Twin Falls* 2 Jan (*fide* JR), D.F.N.W.R. 16 Jan (DT), and below A.F.R. dam 17 Jan (*fide* CT).

Montana birders reported Yellow-rumped Warblers in *Missoula* 1 Dec–5 Feb (TT), *Ravalli* 25 Dec (WT), and *Park* 1 Jan (TM). A superb find was Idaho's first **Pine Warbler** at *Moscow* 7 Dec–29 Feb (†KD, †MD, ph. RH, m.ob.). Providing a first winter record for Montana was a **Common Yellowthroat** in *Lake 13* Jan (JB).

Seasonally rare in Idaho, three Savannah Sparrows tarried in *Canyon* 26 Dec (FH), and one was below A.F.R. dam 8–22 Jan (MCr). Some sparrows that returned to Idaho early furnished winter latilong firsts, including a Sage Sparrow in *Ada* 21 Feb and nine Savannah Sparrows in *Owyhee* 4 Feb (DT). Single Lincoln's Sparrows persisted in *Blaine*, ID, 5 Dec (KF), *Gallatin*, MT, 31 Dec (EH), and *Canyon*, ID, 2 Feb (MJ). As usual, there were many reports of rare White-throated and Harris's Sparrows, but two Golden-crowned Sparrows that stayed below A.F.R. dam provided a first winter record for Latilong 27 (MCr). Another Golden-crowned in *Cassia*, ID, 13 Dec (MA) was a latilong first. An outstanding find was the imm. **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** near *Pocatello* 18 Dec (†CT), providing a first winter record for Idaho.

Rare and local in winter, single Yellow-headed Blackbirds were reported in *Gooding*, ID, 18 Dec–12 Jan (KF), *Blaine*, ID, 2 Jan (BS), and *Ravalli*, MT, 2 Jan (DL), but an astonishing 72 were tallied on the Bruneau, ID, CBC 2 Jan. The only report of Rusty Blackbirds featured 2–3 in *Gallatin*, MT, 26 Dec–23 Feb (EA, JP). Small numbers of

Brewer's Blackbirds usually winter in Idaho, but a record 610 tallied on the Bruneau CBC 2 Jan provided further evidence of the mild winter. In Great-tailed Grackle news, 32 were tallied at D.F.N.W.R. 26 Dec (JG), one wintered below A.F.R. dam (CT), and one visited *Twin Falls*, ID, 28 Jan (KF).

Montana's 5th **Brambling** was sporadic in *Helena* 1 Dec–13 Feb (†JS, m.ob.). The Com. Redpoll irruption from last fall continued through winter in most locations outside of sw. Idaho. Less than annual, two Hoary Redpolls were in *Gardiner*, MT, 12 Dec (TM) and eight were in *Flathead*, MT, 2 Jan (DC). A Lesser Goldfinch that stayed below A.F.R. dam 1 Jan–26 Feb provided a first winter record for Latilong 27 (MCr).

Observers cited (subregional editors in boldface): IDAHO: Miriam Austin, Dave Burrup, Marty Collar (MCr), Mike Denny, John Doremus, **Kas Dumroese**, Kent Fothergill, John Gatchet, Lisa Hardy, Fred Hill, Ray Hoff, Bryan Jamison, Marlin Jones, **Merlene Koliner**, **Hadley Roberts**, Jeff Ruprecht (JR), Terry Sadler, Brian Sturgis, **Shirley Sturts** (SS), Charles Swift, Michael Todd, David Trochlell, **Chuck Trost**, **Poo Wright-Pullium**. MONTANA: Eric Atkinson, Claude Birkeneder, Jim Brown, **Dan Casey**, Susannah Casey, Steve Gniadek, Bill Good, Laura Gould, Suzanne Hainsworth, Ed Harper, David Lockman, **Jeff Marks**, Terry McEneaney, **John Parker**, Colleen Powell (Cpo), Caleb Putnam (CP), Joan Ryshavy (JRy), John Shipley, **Don Skaar**, Marc Susser, Fred Tilly, Terry Toppins, Wayne Tree.



mountain west



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This year most areas in the Region were above normal in temperature and about normal or slightly below in moisture. Many species wintered much farther north than usual. In Colorado, various species which normally do not winter were reported. Some included Sandhill Crane, Bonaparte's Gull, Burrowing Owl, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Savannah Sparrow, and Bullock's Oriole. Many others were reported in high-er numbers than usual.