

Alaska



Thede Tobish

2510 Foraker Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 99517
(tgt@alaska.net)

Although observers were primed for a winter of atypical birding—following the incredibly mild fall season and late onset of snow cover—conditions altered abruptly in early December into a “classic” Alaskan winter. Consistent snow accumulations, extended strong high pressure, and subzero cold snaps clearly limited this season’s highlights. The species counts on Christmas Birds Counts were down, with below-long-term average totals and fewer individuals. All but the outer Southeast coast was mired in frozen conditions for the period, in direct contrast to last year, when many areas were snow-free and with considerable open fresh water. Nonetheless, and probably because of tenacious observer coverage, this winter produced or revealed some interesting trends for semi-hardy forms, exceptional extralimitals, raptors, and certain waterbirds.

Abbreviations: A.B.O. (Alaska Bird Observatory); S.E. (Southeast Alaska); S.C. (South-coastal Alaska); U.C.I. (Upper Cook Inlet). Referenced details, specimens, photographs, and videotape are on file at the University of

Alaska Museum. *Italicized place names* denote especially unusual locations for the noted species.

LOONS THROUGH COOT

Perhaps because of the harsh season, loon concentrations and peak winter grebe counts were way down or missing completely from standard coastal sites. No Pied-billed Grebes were reported either. Although pelagic coverage was lacking this year, reports of noteworthy inshore seabirds again came in from S.E., including *Ketchikan*’s first ever Northern Fulmar after a storm on 22 Dec (LS, *vide* SCH), and late single Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels near Sitka 11 Dec (MLW, MET) and in Ketchikan 22 Dec (SCH). Great Blue Heron reports away from S.E. were subpar, and only a single was noted in Seward through 27 Dec (RLS, TT). At the species’ extreme w. winter limit were 3 around Kodiak town all season (RAM) and another 5+ on the island’s w. side at Old Harbor (MB), where good habitat holds decent numbers every winter at the limits of post-breeding dispersal. One of few ever found in winter, a Great Egret managed to make it n. to the coast in Juneau 31 Dec–6 Jan (MS, GVV, KH *), at which point it succumbed to cold and icy conditions. There are a few winter reports from the Central Aleutians of presumed Old World forms.

It was an unusually sparse waterfowl highlight season, perhaps because a mild fall was quickly followed by full-on freeze-up in early Dec. Noteworthy reports, other than a sporadic Green-winged Teal in Anchorage and a female Bufflehead there through the season

(DFD, RLS, TT), were submitted from the coastal zone from Kodiak through S.E. Inclusive in this year’s short list were 3 each Eurasian Wigeon at Kodiak through Feb (RAM) and Juneau 19 Jan–29 Feb (PS); single drake Common-type (*nimia?*) Green-winged Teal also at Kodiak 16 Feb (ph. RAM, MMM) and Juneau 30 Jan–26 Feb (PS), where this form is casual mainly as a migrant; up to 4 Ring-necked Ducks offshore in the Gulf at Kodiak 21 Dec–16 Feb (ph. RAM, MMM); one female Tufted Duck also there 16 Feb (ph. RAM, MMM); and a good S.E. count of 15+ Lesser Scaup in the Juneau area 14 Feb+ (GVV).

Diurnal raptors fared well, especially considering this season’s tough conditions, which likely concentrated semi-hardy forms more than is typical. An incredible C.B.C. tally of 183 Bald Eagles in the Eagle R. area, while certainly not a conservative calculation, nevertheless represented a strong Dec showing at the extreme n. limits of the species’ winter range in U.C.I., where most were attracted to the Anchorage landfill (*vide* RLS). A few dozen is a typical mid-season high count. Sharp-shinned Hawks were present in Dec s. of the Alaska Range, highlighted by a couple scattered around U.C.I., mainly near Anchorage through mid-month (*vide* DFD, RLS), up to 3 in the Juneau area even later from 16 Jan–28 Feb (GVV, MB), and more significantly, one around an *Unalaska* feeder in the e. Aleutians 10 Dec–Mar (ph. MK)—an Aleutian Islands first. The season’s only mid-season Red-tailed Hawk was a single offshore at Sitka 1 Feb (MLW, MET), where casual. Notable Golden Eagle sightings were singles in alpine habitats near Anchorage in late Dec (RLS), where a few are often found in winter hunting ptarmigan, and offshore in the Sitka area, where casual in winter, 24 Jan (MLW, MET). Juneau’s American Kestrel from the past two winters again occupied its favored grass flats near the airport all season (GVV et al.), while at least 3 Merlins wintered in the greater Kodiak area 27 Dec–29+ Feb (RAM). American Coots were only accounted for in Sitka, with 4 on productive Swan L. 1 Dec+ (MLW, MET).

PLOVERS THROUGH ALCIDS

It was a surprisingly good season for shorebirds that are considered sporadic or semi-hardy, possibly because these were able to linger from the late and mild fall. After several years of fairly widespread winter coastal distribution, the season’s only Killdeer were 6 in the Juneau area 1–29 Feb (PS). Usually the Region’s best site, Kodiak’s winter Black Oystercatcher concentrations peaked consistently at 400+ all season (RAM). Significant after early Nov and casual in winter were single Greater Yellowlegs in Gustavus to 14 Dec+ (ND, PV) and in Juneau through 5 Jan (DR), in the same area where one survived last winter. The Spotted Sandpiper that survived through 25 Jan in Juneau’s Auke Bay beaches

(NM, MS, GVV) became the Region's first true mid-winter report. Since most of the world's nominate Rock Sandpipers winter in the intertidal fringes of Cook Inlet, reports of extralimitals were notable, including at least one in Kodiak 25–29 Feb (ph. RAM), a first Kodiak record, and 2 in Juneau 17 Jan (GVV). Although this winter's Cook Inlet Rock Sandpiper concentrations were elusive, or essentially gone from winter haunts in Feb, high counts from the "shoulder" portions of winter were otherwise about par with the past few years (*vide* REG). Dunlin were limited to a few sites but in very good numbers, highlighted by up to 950 in the Gustavus–Glacier Bay coast 8 Dec–16 Feb+ (ND, PV) and at least 46 in Kodiak 22–29 Feb (RAM). The season's only Wilson's Snipe was a single offshore in Sitka 25 Jan–15 Feb (MLW, MET).

Gulls also made a relatively poor showing, including very few lingerers from the mild fall. A group of 250 Thayer's Gulls was a decent winter tally from n. of Juneau 6 Dec, which had dwindled to about 40 there by 18 Jan (GVV). Bucking a now fairly long-term trend of decent winter distribution, only a single Slaty-backed Gull report was submitted, a third-year bird in the Petersburg Narrows early–29 Jan (ph. RL, *vide* SCH). The season's only onshore Marbled Murrelet aggregation was of 1500 estimated off Juneau 15 Feb (GVV). An Ancient Murrelet inshore near Kodiak 20 Dec (RAM) was considered rare for the season there. MacIntosh noted that the fall season's Crested Auklet concentrations (q.v.) persisted through Feb in unseasonably high winter numbers for the area.

OWLS THROUGH THRUSHES

Owls made big news and were best represented in S.E. this season. An early calling Western Screech-Owl was noted in the Sitka area 24 Feb+ (MLW, MET), the site of the Region's historic initial records. Unprecedented numbers of Northern Pygmy-Owls staged an incursion along the n. half of S.E., with an incredible 20+ cautiously tallied along the Greater Juneau area road system through the season (m. ob., *vide* SZ, GVV). This tally alone probably betters any previously collective total for the entire Region from any season. At least 3, probably 4–5, were noted to the n. between Glacier Bay N.M.'s Bartlett Cove and Gustavus 1 Dec–16 Feb (ND, PV), while another wandered offshore to Sitka 24 Feb (MLW, MET), where there are few records. Two Barred Owls around Juneau 27 Dec–4 Feb (DB, DR) and another w. at Sitka 9 Feb (MLW, MET) were about an average winter showing for S.E., while 2 Short-eareds in the Juneau area 6 Dec–29 Feb+ and 1 Feb (GVV, BA, PS) were more unusual, especially for a harsh winter. Both our knowledge and the distribution of Barred Owls have evolved significantly since the first Alaska record

from Oct 1977. Although Boreal Owls are considered resident within their range, winter reports are always notable, so a single in Gustavus 15 Feb (ND, PV) was a local first and rare for S.E. At least 2 Northern Saw-whet Owls were conspicuous through early Jan in w. Anchorage (DFD, SS), where there are occasional winter reports.

Not always annual in winter, Red-breasted Sapsuckers were widespread within S.E., highlighted by at least 6 in the Ketchikan area 1 Dec–6 Feb (*vide* SCH). A notable and extreme extralimital was a male that attempted to winter at a *Kenny L.* feeder, which it found in Oct and where it remained roosting in a hole in the fascia of a home through at least 29 Dec (LR, ph. BH, *vide* RM). This Interior community is a long way from favored coastal forests and in the heart of sub-zero winters. The Juneau area's Interior *septentrionalis* Hairy Woodpecker, which had visited a feeder there earlier in the fall, overwintered there, a rare S.E. occurrence (*vide* MM). A Northern Flicker in Sitka all season (MLW, MET) was about average for this occasional winter lingerer.

Northern Shrikes were reasonably widespread within their typical range on the Mainland, while a single reached s. to Ketchikan 19 Feb (JFK), where not annual in winter. Unusual for a tough winter, but probably just late migrants, were 4 Horned Larks in Gustavus 9–14 Dec (ND, PV). Rare dispersants out of the Interior were Black-capped Chickadees in S.E., including one in Juneau to 14 Dec (MM, GVV) and 2 n. in Gustavus 6–14 Dec (ND, PV, BPP). Black-capped are occasional in late fall to the North Gulf. Interior sightings of Brown Creeper from the isolated and elusive Fairbanks area population, where small numbers are resident in older White Spruce stands, were submitted for 1–28 Dec (BEL, TW, A.B.O.). There were no reported excursions of boreal forest semi-hardy forms, with Red-breasted Nuthatches and Golden-crowned Kinglets generally staying put. Following a lead from a local photographer, Anchorage birders located a fine Mountain Bluebird along the s. slopes of Turnagain Arm near Rainbow, s. of Anchorage 2–15 Dec+ (*vide* DWS, PP, EM, et al.). Providing a haven for berry eaters, this productive area was covered with snow-free patches of mountain ash and supported an active mixed flock of frugivores, which included a Northern Flicker, 32+ American Robins, and at least 2 Townsend's Solitaires, all either casual or present in winter in very low numbers (RLS, TT, DWS, DFD). There are few winter records in the Region for Mountain Bluebird, which is casual in S.C. This winter's only Hermit Thrush was one in Kodiak 10–12 Jan (JP, ph. CH), only the 2nd in winter there and one of few ever for S.C. Seven American Pipits lingered quite late along Kodiak's Narrow Cape shores to 27 Dec (RAM), while up to 2

remained close to town through 13 Jan (ph. RAM), a surprising number for such a tough winter.

WARBLERS THROUGH FRINGILLIDS

The only warblers of the winter were 2 Yellow-rumpeds at Juneau area feeders 14 Dec & 1 Dec–29 Feb (MM, GVV, SZ, MB). American Tree Sparrows were scattered mostly as singles at a few coastal sites, highlighted by 2 in Ketchikan, where not annual in winter, 6 Jan and 1 Dec–29 Feb (SCH, AWP). Following a great fall showing of 3 individuals from the Ketchikan area were 2 more Swamp Sparrows in Saxman 9 Dec (SCH, AWP). The majority of Alaska's fall reports of this casual migrant have come from this area. Only 2 White-throated Sparrows were found all season, both from the same Ketchikan feeder 7 Dec and 30+ Jan (JFK); most of the Region's winter reports come from Ketchikan. Golden-crowned Sparrow highlights were above the norm, including 7 in Kodiak 16 Jan+ (JD, SD), 3 in Ketchikan Dec–Feb (SCH), and a single at Sitka all season (MLW, MET). Wayward Snow Buntings included two groups of 10–20 birds in the Fairbanks area 6 Dec–11 Jan (A.B.O., LH), where rare, up to 150+ in S.E. in the Gustavus area 4 Dec–15 Feb (ND, PV), and at least 25 in Juneau 23–28 Jan+ (PS, GVV). McKay's Buntings wandered to the e. of their winter range, with 2 documented in Kodiak 9–22 Jan (ph. RAM, SB, CH) and a single even farther e. to Seward 27 Dec (RLS, TT), where casual. As is typical, these individuals were mixed in with Snow Buntings. Certainly the bird of the season was a waif *Hawfinch* that appeared at a *Dillingham* feeder 27 Dec–23 Jan (*, ph. RJ, *vide* RM), the Region's first winter record and only the 2nd ever for the Mainland.

Contributors and observers: A.B.O. (N. DeWitt et al.), B. Alger, J. B. Allen, R. Armstrong, T. Barber, A. M. Benson, M. Berns, S. Berns, D. Beuttner, L. Cole, L. Craig, J. Dearborn, L. DeCicco, D. F. Delap, B. Dinneford, R. Dodelson, N. Drumheller, R. M. Fowler, R. Fritz, D. D. Gibson, R. E. Gill, S. Golodof, R. J. Gordon, T. L. Goucher, H. Griese, K. Hart, L. Hawkings, S. C. Heintz, C. Heitman, B. Henspeter, P. Hunt, L. Johnson, R. Johnson, M. Knecht, J. F. Koerner, B. E. Lawhead, J. Levison, R. Lowell, R. MacDonald, M. M., I. R. & R. A. MacIntosh, M. McCafferty, R. McHenry, E. Meyers, R. Meyers, N. Mollett, R. Nelson, L. J. Oakley, B. P. Paige, A. Palmer, A. W. Piston, J. Pontti, D. Porter, P. Pourchot, H. & M. Renner, D. Rudis, L. Rutledge, D. Salesky, J. Sauer, S. Savage, R. L. Scher, M. A. Schultz, W. Schuster, M. Schwan, N. Senner, S. Senner, D. Shaw, J. Sinclair, D. W. Sonneborn, S. Studebaker, P. Suchanek, A. Swingley, M. E. Tedin, T. Tobish, P. Vanselow, G. Van Vliet, T. Walker, M. L. Ward, R. Winckler, M. A. Wood, K. Zervos, S. Zimmerman. 🐾