

Alaska



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Given the relatively mild and protracted fall season, freeze-up was irregular south of the Alaska Range and fairly late across the North Gulf. Winter 2004–2005 was otherwise punctuated with discrete freeze-thaw sessions, which included at least four strong southerly-flow anticyclones. These periodically warmed much of the Region and diminished what would have otherwise been a heavy snowpack.

This season produced optimal conditions to showcase a wealth of semi-hardy forms that have come to be known as irregular winter visitors. Most of these irregular species were found in the winter “hot zone” bounded by Kodiak, the Anchorage Bowl, across the southern and eastern Kenai Peninsula, and around the coastal fringe through Prince William Sound to Ketchikan. Ephemeral open water, stocked feeders, fruiting exotic plantings, and limited deep-freeze periods provided classic conditions for noteworthy birds all season long. Most C.B.C. tallies were at or above long-term averages, while lingering species created an exciting early-season flurry into

December. Excellent coverage in the Fairbanks area exemplified this trend, and even mid-season highlights there were impressive. Coverage in other coastal areas and in the Aleutians, where winter potentials remain poorly known and/or documented, was typically sparse to none. It's these areas—including the Bering Sea ice edges, the Pribilofs, the south side of the Seward Peninsula, and the riparian sections along the Mainland Southeast watersheds—where the Region's remaining winter pioneering needs to happen. If you have read this column over the past twenty-odd years, you will recognize the amazing strides that Alaskans have made with status and distribution of winter bird species in that timeframe. This season's report reads like a summary of that new information.

Abbreviation: North Gulf (n. Gulf of Alaska). Referenced details (†), specimens (*), photographs (ph.), and videotape (vt.) are on file at the University of Alaska Museum. Italics indicate unusual locations or dates.

LOONS THROUGH WATERFOWL

Few loon highlights came in, but a feeding aggregation of 45 Red-throated Loons near Gustavus was a highlight, if not an unexpected behavior for the species. Only a single Pied-billed Grebe wintered, at Juneau 13 Jan+ (GVV, MM). Ketchikan produced the season's peak Western Grebe numbers, with a maximum 310 in Clover Passage 24 Dec (AWP). Northernmost this winter was a single at Juneau 15 Jan (GVV). As usual,

Great Blue Herons were concentrated at the w. edge of their North Gulf winter range, with the season's peak of about 12+ birds from two sections of Kodiak in Jan (EW, RAM, RB). A flyover near Girdwood 30 Jan (RLS, TT) was the latest ever in winter in Upper Cook Inlet, where they are sporadic in fall, with few reports beyond Nov.

Several hardy Cackling Geese lingered in South-Coastal areas into Dec, notably singles in Kodiak with Emperor Geese through 18 Dec (RAM) and near Palmer with *parvipes* Canada Geese through 19 Dec or later (ph. BW, *vide* RLS). Any Canadas away from the immediate North Gulf interface after mid-Nov are significant. Getting late for the Mainland and n of usual areas was a single Greater White-fronted Goose in Gustavus through at least 1 Dec (ND). Predictable in a mildish winter are good numbers of dabblers and less common *Aythya*, and this year provided notables of each. Eurasian Wigeons appeared at several coastal sites, highlighted by 9 at Kodiak 30 Jan+ (RAM). At least 4 Northern Shovelers were scattered around Kodiak, a single 18 Dec and 3 there 16–28 Feb (RAM), and 2 were in Juneau through 29 Dec (MS, PS). Green-winged Teal were equally tardy, with 151 still staging 17 Dec at Juneau (PS), where at least 20 wintered, while a single remained on fresh water at Sitka through at least 5 Jan (MET, MLW)

A few Redheads were noted in Dec but more unusual were: 2 near Petersburg 12–29 Feb (RL) and one in Gustavus 12 Jan (ND). Four Ring-necked Ducks wintered 18 Dec+ at Kodiak (RAM), where they are nearly annual in similar numbers. Curiously, few Lesser Scaup were noted, and only a group of 13 wintered, in Juneau (GVV, PS). Attesting to an unprecedented late southward pack-ice advance in the Bering Sea (where new ice was only barely forming and moving southward by the end of Dec), counts of 76 Common Eiders and 302 Long-tailed Ducks at Gambell 18 Dec were both late and high (BT); both species are known in winter from the pack ice edges and polynyas.

EAGLES THROUGH SHOREBIRDS

An ad. Bald Eagle braved Fairbanks conditions and hunted *through* 21 Jan along the Chena R. (LD), where there are very few mid-season reports. Bald Eagles were otherwise widespread and more common at the edges of winter range, with dozens around Upper Cook Inlet all season (m.ob.). Surprisingly, the season's only Northern Harrier observations came from the Kodiak grasslands, where up to 3 were studied 16 Dec–12 Feb (BP, RAM, JBA). With good numbers of carduelines concentrating along the North Gulf spruce/hemlock fringe, winter Sharp-shinned

Hawk observations were correspondingly plentiful, especially in Juneau, where the species was "widespread" (*vide* GVV); elsewhere were 2 at the boreal periphery in Dillingham 3 Jan and 26 Feb (*vide* RM), 4 around Ketchikan, and 2 in Sitka, all wintering (SCH). Extremely late for the Region was a single Sandhill Crane that lingered through 1 Dec near Ketchikan (PD).

This season's shorebirds of note included above-average numbers of most of the standard semi-hardy forms, several extremely late lingerers, and excellent calidrid numbers from the North Gulf coast. A peak of 12 Killdeer in Juneau

ter, numbers were noted on the Inlet's e. side, off Anchorage, in Dec (*vide* RLS, REG). Most of the Region's wintering Dunlin were concentrated in the Gustavus–Glacier Bay area, with the winter's high count of 1515 noted there 18 Dec (ND). Some 1100 were still in the area through most of Feb (ND).

Gulls made an above-average showing, especially given the season's mild conditions. Light ice conditions in Cook Inlet no doubt allowed gulls to linger farther n. than usual, with several Glaucous-winged Gulls reported from Anchorage through 18 Dec (*vide* RLS). Unheard of in Upper Cook Inlet

Fairbanks, where a new winter road allowed access s. onto the Tanana flats. Peak Feb tallies included what seemed like unusually high numbers of most resident forms, highlighted by 29 Great Horned Owls, 16 Boreal Owls, 20 Northern Hawk Owls per day, and 15 Great Gray Owls per day (*vide* LD). Systematic owl surveys are rare from the Interior, but these provide a window into what may be regular counts from ideal habitats. Elsewhere, a single Western Screech-Owl spent Dec vocalizing near downtown Sitka (MLW, MET), and another was located near Gustavus 3–8 Feb (ND). Only one Short-eared Owl report came in, submitted from Kodiak from 25 Dec (LW).

Hummingbirds made big news, no doubt surviving at feeders in the mild conditions. A male **Anna's Hummingbird** spent the entire season at a Ketchikan feeder (DC, AWP, SCH), while a male **Costa's Hummingbird** tried to do likewise in Cordova, confirmed at least from 16 Dec–6 Jan (HJ, ph. PM), a 2nd local record. An imm. Rufous Hummingbird hung on at a Sitka feeder into "mid-Dec" (ph. MLW, MET, *vide* RLS, DWS). For whatever reason, woodpeckers made a coastal push into parts of the Southeast in early Jan, and small numbers of rarer, mostly Interior forms were located into Feb. While a few Red-



This photograph, taken in early March 2005, shows nearly the entire known population of nominate-race Rock Sandpipers, which winter each year in the intertidal habitats of Upper Cook Inlet, Alaska. Typically these birds feed in freshly exposed tideflats with receding tides and in grooves gouged by icebergs moved about with extreme tidal actions. Photograph by Bob Gill.

through 15 Feb (MB) and another 6 farther n. at Gustavus through 14 Dec (ND, PV) were slightly above the mid-winter norms. Casual after early Dec, one or 2 Greater Yellowlegs wintered in Gustavus; singles were seen at separate sites 1 Dec–31 Jan and 15 Feb (ND, BP). Significant Sanderling observations included 3 near Kodiak 2 Feb (IB), only the 2nd ever there in winter, and a peak of 35+ from the Gustavus–Glacier Bay shores 9 Dec–Feb (ND, BP). This year's surveys of nominate Rock Sandpiper flocks wintering in Cook Inlet were "book-ended" by totals of just over 14,000 birds in late Nov and early Mar, but perhaps milder conditions allowed more than the usual dispersal through mid-season, as the next highest aerial survey tallies produced fewer than 10,000 in both late Dec and late Feb (REG). For only the 2nd time in win-

ter, numbers were noted on the Inlet's e. side, off Anchorage, in Dec (*vide* RLS, REG). Most of the Region's wintering Dunlin were concentrated in the Gustavus–Glacier Bay area, with the winter's high count of 1515 noted there 18 Dec (ND). Some 1100 were still in the area through most of Feb (ND). Gulls made an above-average showing, especially given the season's mild conditions. Light ice conditions in Cook Inlet no doubt allowed gulls to linger farther n. than usual, with several Glaucous-winged Gulls reported from Anchorage through 18 Dec (*vide* RLS). Unheard of in Upper Cook Inlet

for midseason was a concentration of nearly 100 gulls of five species at the Soldotna dump 20 Jan, which included a Thayer's, a *kumlieni* Iceland, a Slaty-backed, and 3 Glaucous Gulls (DWS, TE). Another *kumlieni*'s Iceland was nicely documented in Kodiak 16–25 Jan (ph. RAM). We have perhaps 10 Alaska records of variously detailed and photographically documented Iceland Gulls, mostly from late fall from the North Gulf, including Anchorage, Kodiak, and sites in the Southeast. Other Slaty-backed reports away from the Bering Sea included 2 in Homer 15 Feb (LD, NH) and one in Kodiak 14 Jan and later (RAM).

OWLS THROUGH SWALLOWS

Aside from a few mid-season reports of local residents in the Southeast, owls made major news in the Interior, at least around

breasted Sapsuckers are known in winter at most Southeast locales within its range, this year's numbers and distribution were atypical. Birds were noted at their winter periphery, including singles from Kodiak until at least 11 Dec (TH) and farther around the North Gulf coast at Gustavus on 20 Jan (ND). Elsewhere, they seemed to amass in Jan in unprecedented numbers in the Ketchikan area, where 14 were noted on the immediate coast 9 Jan and numbers grew to at least 30 individuals by 15 Jan (AWP, SCH). Two Hairy Woodpeckers were rare in Ketchikan 9 Jan and 19 Feb (AWP, SCH), while American Three-toed Woodpeckers were equally unusual along the coasts in the Southeast, with 5 around Gustavus 2 Jan (ND) and 3 near Juneau 20 Feb (PS). Northern Flickers, including Red-shafted/Yellow-shafted intergrades, were

noted in Juneau 30 Dec–18 Jan (one bird; PS), Ketchikan 9 Jan–19 Feb (8; AWP, SCH), and Gustavus 18 Dec–16 Jan (2; ND). The only noteworthy Northern Shrike sighting was one s. to Ketchikan 15 Jan–11 Feb (TLG).

NUTHATCHES THROUGH WAXWINGS

Following a fall coastal irruption, Red-breasted Nuthatches continued to make news at sites where they are traditionally uncommon. Peak summaries included 45 on the Gustavus C.B.C. 18 Dec (*fide* BP, ND), where the previous high had been 5, and up to 4 on 2 Jan in Fairbanks (LD), where the species is casual. It was a banner thrush season, with probably the winter's highest ever species total and with large numbers noted well into Jan. Mountain Bluebird highlights included one in Seward 18–31 Dec (ph. CG, *fide* RLS), which was probably a first there, and up to 3 in the Gustavus area 18 Dec–18 Jan (ND, PV). At least 3 Townsend's Solitaires survived on exotic berry bushes in Anchorage all season (TT, SS et al.), while one in Homer 18 Jan (DWS), which was accompanied by 4 others by 5 Feb (LD, NH), represented one of few mid-winter North Gulf coast reports. Anchorage remains the only regular locality for solitaires in winter, probably only because of the abundance of exotic fruit-bearing plantings. Only a decade ago, Hermit Thrush was considered a winter accidental, when an occasional bird lingered to an early-date C.B.C. This year, multiples remained well into the season, including singles in Juneau 7 & 25 Dec (PS), Seward 31 Dec–17 Jan (RLS, DWS), and Ketchikan 9 Jan (AWP, SCH), only the 2nd in winter there. Weather conditions certainly benefited American Robins, which can be hard to locate in most winters after the first few C.B.C.s. Representative high counts included 25+ wandering around Anchorage all season (RLS, SS, TT), another peak count of 33 in Juneau 6 Jan (GVV), and an amazing group of 120 feeding on fruiting bushes in Homer 19 Jan (DWS), which has to be the Region's all-time winter maximum. At least 5 managed to hang on in Fairbanks through 16 Feb (LD), where they are distinctly rare by mid-Nov.

European Starlings wandered offshore to Kodiak 30 Jan (SS, RAM), where occasional in winter; numbers in Anchorage continue to increase slowly. Several scattered groups of up to 15 at a time were located through the season (SS, TT). American Pipits made their best winter showing ever, with quite a few noted at most coastal sites checked by birders. Like Hermit Thrush, historic winter records are few and concentrated in Dec. Multiple ac-

counts were received from Seward, Kodiak, Gustavus, and s. to Ketchikan. Significant sightings included one in Seward through 1 Jan (CG, RLS), a peak of 40 on 31 Dec, dwindling to 2 on 12 Feb (SS, RAM, JM, JBA) at Kodiak, at least one in Juneau through 15 Jan (MB), a high count of 14 in Gustavus 3 Feb (BP), and 3 around Ketchikan 5 Jan+ (AWP, SCH). These numbers and mid-season dates genuinely dwarf all previous winter reports. Rare in winter on the North Gulf coast, where most records come from late fall, Cedar Waxwing was again reported from the w. edge of known occurrences, with a single lingering at Kodiak through 14 Dec (JD) and a tally of 20 in Homer 20 Jan (DWS), which represented a South-Coastal record count.

WARBLERS THROUGH HOUSE SPARROW

It was an above-average warbler winter, with three species reported, including an Orange-crowned hanging on at an Anchorage feeder through at least 18 Dec (*fide* DFD), 2 Yellow-rumped Warblers in Juneau 26 Dec and 10 Jan (GVV, NM), and a hardy Townsend's Warbler, also at an Anchorage suet feeder, 1–19 Dec (*fide* DFD). The Anchorage warblers were Upper Cook Inlet's latest for each species. Although the Region often holds a few scattered warblers into early Nov, individual reports past that time remain rare.

Winter sparrows, especially *Zonotrichia*, were widely represented, and a few pockets of unusually large numbers were noted at a few coastal sites. Uncommon and irregular in winter, American Tree Sparrows were at several coastal sites, with atypically large peaks of 18 in Juneau 7–8 Jan (GVV, PS, LE) and 40+ in Gustavus 3–15 Jan (BP), which may be the Region's highest winter one-day tally. Rare for winter was a Chipping Sparrow in Ketchikan all season (JFK), a first local winter record. A Savannah Sparrow, present from 14 Nov–Mar at a Ketchikan feeder (SCH, AWP), also became that locale's first and one of few winter records in the Region. Red Fox Sparrows (probably *zaboria* or intergrades) were widely represented and documented from across the coastal "hot zone," with at least 4 in Kodiak all season (ph. RAM) and singles in the Southeast near Petersburg through 18 Dec (ph. BP, *fide* RLS) and Gustavus 1 Dec–8 Feb (ND). For a mild season, it was surprising that only one Lincoln's Sparrow was reported, from Homer 18 Jan (DWS). A single White-throated Sparrow, probably a late migrant, was detected offshore at Sitka 8 Dec (MLW, MET). Other *Zonotrichia* numbers were above average from all coastal sites. Single Harris's Sparrows were in

Juneau 13 Dec and 5–6 Feb (RJG, MS, DM), the source of all historic fall/winter reports, and others in Gustavus 21 Dec (ND) and Petersburg through 7 Jan (ph. BP, *fide* RLS) were notable. A record one-day winter total of 35 White-crowned Sparrows in one flock at Homer 18–20 Jan (DWS) and a brave single in the Interior at Fairbanks through 16 Jan (LD) were noteworthy. A Golden-crowned Sparrow was seen 8–20 Dec (SG) at Unalaska I. in the Aleutians, where casual.

Typically sporadic or even occasionally missing from coastal sites in most winters, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings were also distributed across the breadth of most coastal sites through the season (m.ob.). Twenty Snow Buntings hung around the University of Alaska/Fairbanks campus, where they are casual in mid-season, through 13 Jan (LD). Two Brambling reports were submitted, singles each at Homer 18 Jan–6 Feb (DWS, LD, NH) and in Eagle River n. of Anchorage, the latter arriving with redpolls at a feeder in "late Feb" (*fide* RLS). Female-plumaged Purple Finches again appeared at Southeast feeders, including a single at Petersburg mid-Dec through year's end (ph. BP, *fide* RLS) and 2 in Ketchikan 2 Jan–10 Feb (ph. AWP, SCH), where most winter records occur.

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