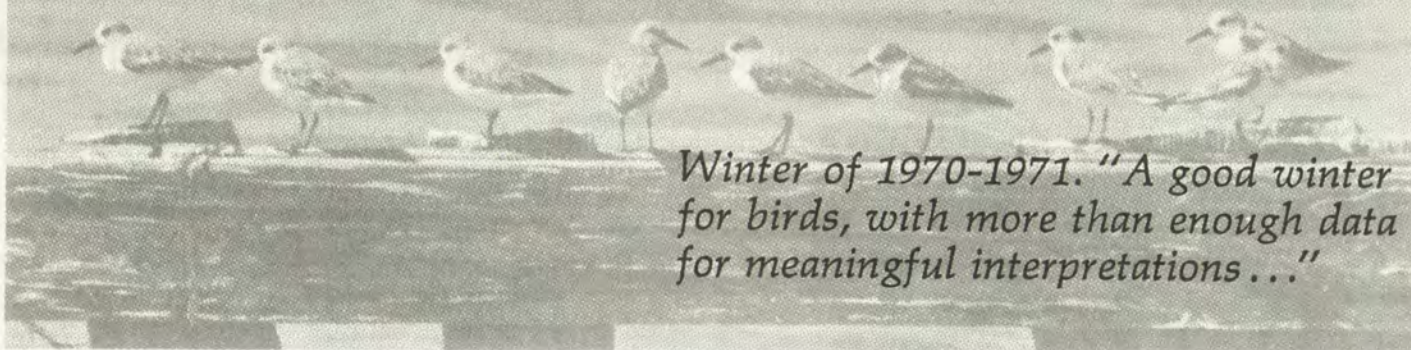


THE CHANGING SEASONS

by P. A. Buckley*



Winter of 1970-1971. "A good winter for birds, with more than enough data for meaningful interpretations..."

Photo by Allan D. Cruickshank from N.A.S.

One does not normally think of winter as the time for discovering significant population changes and trends, but this year's winter season certainly merits the heading of a "changing season." A great many changes of evolutionary and zoogeographical interest have been elucidated by some observers and other reporters, collated in turn by regional editors, and hopefully, will be summarized in this brief overview of the continental bird life this past winter. It was certainly not a dull season, even if it proved a harsh one in the northern two-thirds of the continent after early January.

It is difficult to summarize in a few lines the vagaries of the weather across an entire continent for one whole winter, but it probably does not distort the facts to emphasize a generally mild and extended autumn in most of the continent east of the Rockies and south of the U.S.-Canadian border, with a concomitantly high incidence of late-lingering insectivores and high Christmas Bird Count (CBC) totals. This late autumn was followed by a generally very cold winter and delayed, cold spring. The late fall mildness persisted, with some serious breaks, throughout the winter in the extreme south, which was afflicted in s. Florida, s. Texas, Arizona and New Mexico by severe droughts, some of the worst on record. Weather in the Rocky Mountains and along the Pacific Coast was variable, although most areas reported exceptional—even record—snowfall. Alaska set historic lows for recorded temperatures.

In general it was a good winter for birds, with more than enough data for meaningful

interpretations in several categories. There was, for example, sufficient information—in addition to that from s. California—to merit a separate discussion of pelagics, not a winter commonplace. The usual number of vagrants from various origins was complemented by many late lingering birds, invasions by diverse northern species, and simplified by an almost total absence of "winter" finches following last year's spectacular. Christmas Bird Counts continue to increase in both quantity and quality, and the problem of their place in this report and their value in general refuses to go away.

WIDESPREAD DISPERSALS

Sea Ducks Among the sea ducks, Barrow's Goldeneye, Oldsquaw, Harlequin, and both species of eiders (but especially King) spread further, and in far greater numbers, than normally. It is not known whether common causes affected these rather closely related high arctic breeders, but they reached Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf coasts as well as inland waters. King Eider in particular was found in large flocks, and some counts of Barrow's Goldeneye (200 in one flock on the St. Lawrence River, 3388 on the Vancouver CBC, and 18 in Oakland, Calif.) are almost, if not actually, unprecedented, as was a Harlequin inland in Pennsylvania. Oldsquaws reached the Gulf Coast in several locations and on the way were noted inland. At range extremes the Monterey Bay

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King Eider returned, as did the Shark River, N.J. Barrow's Goldeneye and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel Harlequins.

Predators Almost every regional editor commented on the numbers of Rough-legged Hawks this winter, and they reached the Gulf Coast in numerous places, as well as Arizona, New Mexico, and s. California (Salton Sea!). Snowy Owls were conspicuous by their absence on the Atlantic Coast, but there was a slight increase in numbers in the northern portions of the Great Plains, at least four individuals reaching Colorado, where they are only vagrants. West of the Rockies, good numbers were reported only as far south as British Columbia and n. Washington. But Great Gray Owls staged what must be termed an invasion, one that spread across the southern Provinces and into the northern tier of states. Unlike some previous irruptions, it did not appear to be restricted to New England and the Maritime Provinces, or Minnesota, or the northern Rockies. A minor flight of Hawk Owls occurred, but was generally restricted to Canada. No appreciable Boreal Owl incursion was detected.

Gulls Glaucous Gull (another predator) staged an impressive, continent-wide (coastal and inland) dispersal, almost all editors mentioning, if not emphasizing, the species' occurrence.

Passerines Northern Shrike was especially numerous, but only in central and western United States. On the Atlantic coast, its scarcity was conspicuous. The always unpredictable waxwings of both species were not generally numerous this winter; most editors also called attention to the subnormal numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches. Their low numbers were doubtless accentuated by comparison with last year's irruption; even so, they were almost absent or in low numbers continent-wide (at least where observers had access). Boreal Chickadees stayed put in Boreal forests. "Winter" finches, after last year's phenomenal invasions, were also almost totally absent, with some local abundance of Red Crossbills in the Northwest that probably belonged to populations not extensively involved in last winter's movements. But one aspect of winter finch phenomenology is now clear: Evening Grosbeaks are now *sui generis*, seemingly independent of those factors normally influencing other winter finch movements. There is very little concordance between Evening Grosbeak movements and numbers, and

those of other winter finches, except that in particularly bad conifer-yield years they may move with the others, and in particularly good years, not as many may move as usual. Otherwise, they seem to go their own way.

Half-hardy stragglers This group was exceptionally numerous this past winter, because of the extended autumn weather summarized above. Many species established new late departure dates; thrushes, vireos (!) and warblers were recorded on many C B Cs. Sample out-of-season occurrences include Least Bittern, Toledo, Ohio, Dec. 28; Pectoral Sandpiper, Montauk Pt., N.Y., Jan. 2; Hudsonian (?) Godwit, Cape Hatteras, N.C., Feb. 27; 5 Wilson's Phalarope, Midland, Tex. in January, where a Northern wintered; Rivoli's and Blue-throated Hummingbirds, Ramsey Canyon, Ariz. most of the winter; Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Tucson, all winter; Thick-billed Kingbird, Big Bend Nat'l Park, all winter; Western Flycatcher, on the Medford, Oreg., C B C and at Berkeley, Calif. on Jan. 3; Yellow-throated Vireo, Back Bay, N.W.R., Va., Dec. 29; Philadelphia Vireo, Cape Charles, Va., Dec. 27; Golden-winged Warbler, Monroe, La., Jan. 5; Ovenbird, Estes Park, Colo., and Cassin's Sparrow, Denver, Colo. all winter. Perusal of the April, 1971 issue of AMERICAN BIRDS will help make the point.

DISPLACEMENTS

Often, the least scientific import, but of greatest interest to the observer, are the off-the-wall accidentals. The past winter had its share, and, of course, it always remains to be seen whether such individuals represent the vanguard of incipient population or range changes, or are merely one-shot occurrences. Because only the future can properly place such records in zoogeographic and historic context, they should not be buried or dismissed as of little value. Some of those listed below are already parts of distributional patterns established in the last 30 years.

Western Birds Eastward Western birds found east this winter included numerous Eared Grebes and several Western Grebes on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts; Swainson's Hawks in Rhode Island and Louisiana; Ferruginous Hawks in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Louisiana; Lesser Nighthawk in Louisiana; Clarke's Nutcracker in Minnesota; Kiskadee Flycatcher in Louisiana; Cassin's and Gray Kingbirds in Ontario (late autumn); Ash-throated Flycatcher in New York and Louisiana; Wied's

Crested Flycatcher (perhaps half a dozen) in s. Florida and one that wintered in New Orleans; Black-chinned Hummingbirds that wintered in Louisiana, plus Allen's and Anna's on the Texas coast; Varied Thrush all over the map, in almost every eastern state (see Keith, *Bird-Banding*, 39: 245-76); Western Bluebird in Oklahoma and Mountain Bluebird in Minnesota; Townsend's Solitaire in Minnesota; Audubon's Warbler on Long Island, N.Y. and in Illinois; Bullock's Orioles in a number of e. states, including a flock in Georgia; Black-headed Grosbeak in bewildering multiplicity, with an equal number of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks (see C B Cs); Green-tailed Towhee in Massachusetts; Black-throated Sparrow in Virginia and Clay-colored Sparrow in Massachusetts.

Eastern Birds Westward In addition to the usual long list of eastern warblers reaching s. and central California, and this year, because of the warm weather, attempting to winter, the following records were notable: Brant in s. California; Black Duck in Wyoming and the Aleutians; Franklin's Gull in British Columbia and central and s. California; Blue Jay in Spokane and Seattle; Brown Thrasher in a number of western locations including 9 in Arizona, and in s. California; Rusty Blackbird in some numbers in British Columbia, Colorado, n. Texas and s. California; Pyrrhuloxia in s. California; several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks in western states; Sharp-tailed Sparrow (race unknown) in central California; larger than normal numbers in California of (seemingly "pure") Slate-colored Juncoes and White-throated Sparrows. As is the case in the East, these vagrants are concentrated along the coast, especially at natural landbird oasis-traps and at feeders.

Other Displacements Heermann's Gull wandered north to Washington and British Columbia, and east to Tucson. South from higher latitudes came Rock Sandpipers in possibly larger numbers than previously (13 in central coastal California); and McKay's Bunting to winter on the beach at Nome. In a category all its own was the Mottled Duck collected in Oklahoma.

INVADERS

West Indian / Mexican Sporadic Bahama Pintails still reach s. Florida. This winter one was seen at W. Palm Beach in December, and another in the Everglades in late March. Masked Ducks continue to appear away from

their normal (?) s. Texas haunts: a ♂ was at Loxahatchee Refuge in s. Florida for almost a month, and a ♀ was shot in Louisiana near the site of a displaying ♂ last year. The prospects of this species establishing itself along the Gulf coast would appear to be good. In s. Texas, the second United States Ruddy Ground Dove (*Columbigallina talpacoti*) spent almost two months at Santa Ana Refuge. In Tucson, at least three different Rufous-backed Robins (*Turdus rufopalliatu*s) wintered at feeders. It seems to be establishing itself as a (breeding?) resident in Tucson. The only Black-bellied Tree Duck report was, as usual, from the Patagonia area of s. Arizona.

Eurasian Waterfowl continue to provide the greatest opportunity for extracontinental enrichment. A Whooper Swan spent the winter on St. Paul's Island, Pribilofs; they are occasional in the Aleutians but nowhere else in Alaska. Barnacle Geese were this winter reported from Massachusetts, North Carolina, Alabama (2: same location as last year) and Texas. The Massachusetts bird was an escape, but no one has adduced valid reasons for doubting the provenance of the others (cf. Ross' Goose, below). The Chinese Spot-billed Duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) on Adak I. has been present since April, 1970; in February it had for company 2 Falcated Teal and several Steller's Eiders, along with a dozen European and 2 Am. Widgeon, and both Common and Green-winged Teal. Adak seems fertile ground for examining the taxonomic status of the widgeon and teal-species pair, at least on the Asia / North America edge of their sympatry. Clearly, however, anatine honors go to the Tufted Duck. This winter no less than 14 were recorded, most spending the winter, as follows: Massachusetts, 1; Connecticut, 1; Long Island, N.Y., 2; Adak I. (!), 4; Vancouver I., 1; Vancouver, 2; Seattle, 1; Harrison Lake, B.C., 1; and Palo Alto, Calif., 1. There seems little reason to believe extensive duplication was involved, and no reason to invoke the old shibboleth of "escape": the simple fact is that Tufted Duck is colonizing North America on two fronts, along the Atlantic Coast from Iceland, and along the Pacific coast from Siberia. Eventual North American breeding is highly likely, if not already history. European Widgeon has been occurring in North America with such regularity in the last 30-40 years, increasingly in recent years, that its numbers this winter, all across the country, merit only passing mention. North American breeding,

especially in e. Canada, certainly would deserve more comment, but is still unknown. Common Teal, on the other hand, has never been as regular or numerous as the widgeon, but is certainly on the up-swing. This winter saw a remarkable number of reports from inland, and east and west coasts; there also seems little doubt that these are wild birds, colonization again taking place, like that of the widgeon and Tufted Duck, on two fronts from two different populations. Common Teal, of course, already breeds in the Aleutians; it is now a question of time before it moves further east to contact Green-winged, or *vice versa*. Sympatry in e. Canada seems less likely, but should be looked for.

Eurasian shorebirds do contribute regularly to the North American avifauna, but not usually in winter. The January Lapwing in Newfoundland was not particularly unexpected, and it may be a regular occurrence in that province following winter easterly gales. But the Bar-tailed Godwit that spent the winter at Cape Canaveral, Fla., certainly was unexpected: aside from the Alaska population (of another race) there were previously North American records only from New Jersey (2), L.I., New York (1), and Cape Cod, Mass. (2). The Curlew Sandpiper reported from the Texas coast was seasonally surprising; despite its rarity it is a regular spring and fall migrant in the New England/New Jersey area, and surely further south along the coast as well since it does not winter in temperate areas. It is probably overlooked. Curiously, the Eurasian shorebird most frequently seen in North America at all seasons, and probably soon to breed—the Ruff—was unreported this winter.

Certain European (and to a much lesser extent, Asian) gulls continue to occur with predictability in North America, notably on the Great Lakes and the Atlantic seaboard. This year was no exception, and Little and Black-headed Gulls were mentioned by many regional editors. Little has already bred twice in North America (in Ontario) and as I write this (May 30), a count of 16 from the Raritan Estuary, N.J., makes one wonder if they are not about to breed elsewhere. Black-headed Gull has not yet been found breeding on this continent, but winter counts totalling in the hundreds, in the Maritime Provinces, make it seem unlikely that they have all flown from Iceland. Lesser Black-backed Gull, until not many years ago a very rare bird in North America, is either being detected more frequently, or has increased fantastically. This winter I know of the follow-

ing reports: New York City and Long Island, 4; North Carolina, 3; Florida, 1 (collected but race not given; surely *graellsii*, as all previous North American specimens have proven to be); and Texas, 1 (3rd year in a row; see photo in AFN, 24: 520); the adult that had returned to Ithaca, N.Y. every year since 1963 failed to this year. For some strange reason, there seem to be few if any firm reports of this species from New England: Is it possible that all Atlantic Coast birds reach it from a Gulf of St. Lawrence/Great Lakes route? There are several Buffalo area records, including one valid specimen (but see p. 574 for details about one that was *not*), and several inland records south, now, to Texas. Mew Gull continues to be the rarest of the European gulls, although it too is on the increase. Its true status, like that of Lesser Black-back and for the same reason, may in fact be underestimated since the immatures, which do the greatest wandering, are so difficult to separate from similar species. This winter there were two Mew Gulls, one in Massachusetts, and one in Newfoundland; almost all eastern North American records for the European race *canus* have been confined to that region.

PELAGICS AND LITTORALS

A storm-caused wreck of Fork-tailed Petrels in late March dumped individuals as far ashore as Hayward, Calif., and they were seen in some numbers off the Washington coast. Besides these, the only other storm petrels reported were Leach's: one off the Washington coast, in February and incredibly, one from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in mid-January; there are increasing winter reports of storm petrels from the Atlantic Coast north of Virginia: almost all have been identified as Leach's, but specimens are patently desired. Scaled Petrels (*Pterodroma inexpectata*) are known in North America almost exclusively from the Aleutians; the documented occurrence of probably two different individuals off the Olympic Peninsula and Vancouver I. coasts in late February, at the same time and place as probably two separate Laysan Albatrosses, emphasizes our still rudimentary knowledge of offshore seabird distribution, particularly in winter. Unseasonal December shearwater occurrences included a Manx from Cape Cod, and a Greater from Cape Hatteras. The formerly regular Slender-billed Shearwater staged something of a comeback, with reports from both central and s. coastal California with

flocks of Sooties. Fulmars continue to be "discovered" in the Gulf of Maine, and one certain and three more probables were seen from Long Island shores in late November. It may be that Fulmars are actually increasing and extending their range, offshore, down the Atlantic Coast from the Grand Banks. Data here too are sorely lacking.

Jaegers, abnormal winter fare for most of the continent, were recorded in late November, December, and January (rarely into February) from such diverse sites as Cape Cod, North Carolina, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, and the central and southern California coasts. Usually only Parasitics were involved. A single Skua was seen onshore in Massachusetts, and recent Atlantic coast records (especially offshore and almost all year long) place Skua in precisely the same category as Fulmar for the moment.

Great Cormorant, as observers increasingly look for it, is proving to be more numerous than suspected, even as far south as Florida and the Gulf coast. Nonetheless, this winter there was a significant dispersal; inland in New England, and coastwise to Florida's Tallahassee area.

Sabine's Gull, highly pelagic, was seen onshore on the remarkable date of Dec. 24 at Cape Cod; Black-legged Kittiwake, equally pelagic, staged an impressive "dispersal", even to inland sites: out-of-range occurrences included Florida, Michigan (3), Ohio, and Colorado. The origin of some of these inland birds is moot. Ivory Gull was reported in (for that species) a superabundance. New England had four, and incredibly, Minnesota had two; one every five years for all the coterminous states is an enviable record. Significant alcid movements were generally lacking, although there was a better-than-average November/December Dovekie flight (including inland wrecks) and the usual sprinkling of Razorbills in the Northeast, percolating as far south as South Carolina.

OTHER TRENDS

Loons The number of reports of Yellow-billed Loons from the Pacific Coast continues to increase each year. Whether this reflects merely increased awareness and sophistication on the part of observers remains to be determined. At least we are closer to a true understanding of the winter distribution of this species than we were only ten years ago. In the Aleutians, an even more interesting situation is developing: the two putative races of Arctic

Loon, *Gavia arctica*—the North American mainland race, *pacifica*, and the Siberian breeding race, *viridigularis*—seem to be sympatric, or about to be sympatric, affording an opportunity to resolve the question of their taxonomic status. The situation should be followed closely.

Cattle Egret Its New World colonization seems to be somewhere in the log phase of growth, and this is reflected, in a winter season summary, by its terrific increase in western North America. Most regional editors south of the Canadian provinces commented on it, and some sort of apex is presently achieved by the discovery of a winter roost of 1000+ in the Imperial Valley. Its spread should be documented very carefully, as well as some of the none-too-subtle changes in its winter and habitat requirements. Just this past May I was astonished to see a flock of almost 100 Cattle Egrets picking over steaming refuse on a garbage dump in Delaware, while Herring Gulls sat off to one side. The implications of that scene shake one to his foundations.

Ross' Goose In publishing the discovery of the first Atlantic coast bird a few years ago (Buckley, *Auk*, 86: 551-2) I commented that in the future they should be looked for in flocks of "lesser" Snow Geese. This fall saw an even greater increase of reports away from their supposed normal wintering grounds in California; Ross' Geese with "lesser" Snow Geese were seen in North Carolina (probably the same bird as in 1968); Missouri, 1; Colorado, 3 and 1; Louisiana, 2; Nevada, 1; New Mexico, 100+; and Texas, 1 in the north, 1 in El Paso, and several in the south—Fred Webster commenting that observers are now aware that it is worth scanning thousands of Snow Geese, so reports are on the increase. Hopefully, more observers will follow his dictum in other parts of the country and the species' correct range can be delineated.

Raptors Caracara, recently quite scarce if not absent from most of s. Arizona, appear to be increasing; similarly, White-tailed Kites are reported as expanding their ranges and populations in Texas and California. (See Eisenmann, this issue, pp. 529-36.)

Shorebirds There seems to be a general increase in both numbers and species of shorebirds wintering in the United States—east, south and west. Many of these changes are due to increases in optimal, undisturbed habitat, such as on National Wildlife Refuges; but others seem to be just recent discoveries of previously existing situations, e.g. the fantastic shorebird numbers wintering on the never-

before-covered marsh islands on the e. shore of Virginia. Then, too, there are the ubiquitous, spurious increases due to better detection of formerly overlooked species, notably in the case of Stilt Sandpiper. Superimposed on all three are actual changes in status, such as that of the Northern Phalaropes that now winter at San Diego, Calif., probably, as Guy McCaskie notes, the only such wintering flock in North America. Am. Golden Plover also seem to be staying later and later, and frequently overwintering successfully; and many other species on both coasts seem to be doing the same. This is certainly a case where C B C data have clarified the picture admirably.

Flickers As many eastern and western banders are aware, introgression of genes from "yellow-shafted" Flicker populations in the east into "red-shafted" Flicker populations in the west, and *vice versa*, has been underway for some time, and is sharply on the increase, particularly as one approaches the two ocean coasts. Observers in the field are now noticing what banders have been aware of for some time, and many regions are rife with reports of "hybrid" flickers. In an article easily accessible to banders and observers alike, Short (*EBBA News*, 34: 4-8, 1971) emphasizes the point that true hybrids are restricted, generally, to the actual hybrid zone in the Middle Plains, and that the rest are merely introgressants, the result of genes from one population percolating across the country into the other. Nonetheless, efforts should be made to document this introgression, and everyone should be on the lookout for it in other hybridizing species (towhees, orioles, buntings, grosbeaks.) Banders in particular have an opportunity to quantify this phenomenon, and breeding flickers showing mixed characters should be documented, as well as their mates and offspring.

Hummingbirds Many regions report attempts at wintering by hummers that normally leave the United States at that time. Anna's seems to be spreading out in all directions, having established a resident population in the Washington/Oregon area, and this year reached the Texas Gulf coast along with Allen's and several Broad-taileds. Rufous Hummers continue to increase all along the Gulf, and Black-chinneds even successfully wintered in Louisiana. Perhaps one of the most interesting items reported was the establishment of a mainland population of the Channel Islands' race of Allen's Hummer, *Selasphorus sasin sedentarius* [sic !] at Palos Verdes. Its fate should be watched with great interest.

Chestnut-backed Chickadee This species is extending its range slightly away from the narrow coastal strip eastward and northward, east of San Francisco Bay.

European Tree Sparrow Long restricted to, and even very local within, the St. Louis, Mo. area, this species now seems to be breaking out of its confinement and spreading northward and eastward further into Illinois. Interactions with resident House Sparrows should be documented whenever possible, and the species' spread carefully monitored.

House Finch The species continues its incredible expansion in the east, developing migratory habits and patterns as it goes. This winter numbers on C B Cs in the center of the eastern range, the Long Island, N.Y. area, continued their increase, and the species is now usually recorded, in some numbers, on almost every C B C in this region, even to Montauk and Orient Points. At the northern end of this new range, it is now well-established, and expanding into New Hampshire and Maine; the first Maritimes record is surely not far away. In upstate New York small flocks are established in Syracuse, at Elmira, Ithaca, and are near Lake Erie and the Canadian border at Amherst. To the south two large roosts were reported, 1000 in Goshenville, Pa., and 300 in Rockville, Md. The House Finch continues to spread south and east in North Carolina, reaching the coast at Beaufort Co., and approaching South Carolina in Stanly Co. In Virginia it spread southwestward to Blacksburg and Front Royal. In the west, another population continues to expand northward, now being established as far as Missoula, Mont. Where and when will the two populations meet?

Lincoln's Sparrow et al. One of the more significant qualitative benefits of extensive C B C activity has been the discovery of the true status in the United States in winter of Lincoln's Sparrow. This year the evidence increases, and the species is now being reported with regularity, in limited numbers, well north into the Middle Plains and New England. While there always is the possibility of range changes associated with warming (?) climate, this seems to be more a case of simple discovery. In the east, House Wren and White-crowned Sparrow, in the east and west Pigeon Hawk, Swainson's and possibly other thrushes, and in the west Swamp Sparrow, among many others, seem to fit the pattern of discovery as a result of C B C efforts. As for the persistently reported Broad-winged Hawks, they can't all be Red-shouldered!