

## The Changing Seasons

*Winter 1984-1985 seemed to be a dull season, but proved on close examination to be a rather interesting one*

*Paul Lehman*

AS WITH ANY SEASON, the winter of 1984-1985 was described by the Regional Editors in a broad, often conflicting, variety of terms. In many areas it was thought to be relatively dull. For example, it was the "dullest winter in years" and "a good season to bird elsewhere" (Hudson-Delaware Region), "rarely seen such an unexciting season" (Middle Atlantic Coast Region), "a fairly dull season" (Middlewestern Prairie Region), and "observers in all three states commented on the boredom of the season" (Western Great Lakes Region). In contrast, other Regions noted that "even though individual reports may have shown a dull season, after putting together the reports from throughout the Region it becomes apparent that it was indeed an interesting and good season" (Appalachian Region) and "the abundance and variety of birds present this winter was probably as good as we can ever expect" (Northern Great Plains Region).

The season began with a strong contrast in weather conditions between eastern and western North America. While many regions in the West (except Alaska) were colder and somewhat wetter than normal, many sections of the Midwest and East (north to southern Canada) were experiencing balmy conditions, generally with little snow. Many record high temperatures for December were set in the East. During mid-month a strong southwesterly flow developed, resulting in unseasonably high temperatures, a condition that repeated itself late in the month. On December 28, such absurd temperatures as 69°F in Chicago, 64°F in Detroit, and 77°F in Richmond, Virginia, were recorded. And, on December 29, 75°F in Washington, D.C., 77°F in Baltimore, 74°F in Hartford, Connecticut, and

73°F in Boston were registered. It was the warmest December on record in New York City.

The effects of the mild early winter varied from region to region. Some editors commented on the good numbers and variety of late-lingering stragglers. For example, there was "a diverse array, and often remarkable quantities of semi-hardies, lingerers, and reverse migrants" in the Northeastern Maritime Region; "moderate weather combined with an exceptional wild food crop to entice many passerines to overwinter" in Quebec; "the mild weather of December produced an unusual number of very late records" in the Appalachians; "December was extremely mild and many migrants and summer residents lingered throughout the month" in the Southern Great Plains; and there was a "bumper crop of late-lingering migrants" in South Texas. More herons than usual were found in several regions; several December Osprey sightings were made from the Middlewestern Prairies to Quebec, the Northeastern Maritimes, and Hudson-Delaware Region; and an actual reverse migration of Tree Swallows was noted late in the month into the Middlewestern Prairies.

Impressive numbers of lingering shorebirds were found throughout regions in the Northeast during December. Highlights included the Lesser Golden-Plover in Ontario and Pectoral Sandpipers in Ontario (2), New Jersey, and Texas. Scattered Least Sandpipers and dowitchers were found north of their normal winter ranges; all such dowitchers identified to species were Long-billeds, certainly the more expected of the two at this season at more northerly latitudes and anywhere in the interior. A good number and variety of sparrows were

found in Alaska, Quebec, and Northeastern Maritime regions, likely the result of little snow.

The Northeastern Maritime Region again stole the passerine show, with a good number of lingering gnatcatchers and *seventeen* species of warblers, including Black-throated Gray, Yellow-throated, and an *Oporornis* sp. Other impressive half-hardies in December included Great Crested Flycatcher in New Jersey; single Blackburnian Warblers in Washington, D.C., and northwest Florida; a Wilson's Warbler in Ontario; and Scarlet Tanager in Virginia. A Summer Tanager survived the entire winter in New Jersey. Less hardy species of waterfowl (*e.g.*, Wood Duck, teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, wigeon) were encouraged to tarry well to the north, but, at the same time, in many regions the regular wintering species were in low numbers or not found in significant concentrations.

Waterfowl were not the only group to be widely dispersed by the mild conditions. Early winter concentrations of gulls were virtually nonexistent away from the Great Lakes, and the high temperatures combined with the relative lack of snow cover and a generally good wild food supply in the East kept many songbirds away from feeders. To make matters worse, a number of regions apparently prospered little from the mild conditions and recorded few half-hardy lingerers. "The warm December did not induce a large number of birds to linger" in the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, surprisingly few vireos, warblers, and summer finches were found in the Middlewestern Prairies; an "unexceptional number of winter warblers" was in Florida; and fewer warblers than in the pre-

vious winter were observed in Louisiana

January began on the mild side in the East, and with seasonal temperatures elsewhere. During the second week of the month, the first of several snow and ice storms hit the South. During mid-month the most severe outbreak of arctic air of the season east of the Rockies occurred. Stretching from the Arctic Circle to the Tropic of Cancer in the Gulf of Mexico, this cold wave sent temperatures below zero as far south as Alabama and Georgia and into the single digits in central Texas, southern Louisiana, and northern Florida. Isabella, Minnesota, recorded a "high" temperature of  $-31^{\circ}\text{F}$  on January 19th. Central Texas temperatures at noon on the 20th were as high as  $70^{\circ}\text{F}$ , at midnight they were in the low teens. Record lows included  $-24^{\circ}\text{F}$  in Knoxville, Tennessee;  $-16^{\circ}\text{F}$  at Asheville, North Carolina; and  $6^{\circ}\text{F}$  at Tallahassee and Cape Hatteras. Temperatures down to  $-10^{\circ}\text{F}$  were recorded in the middle Atlantic states. Two subsequent surges of arctic air occurred before month's end, with record low temperatures in Idaho and Utah on January 31 (e.g.,  $-69.9^{\circ}\text{F}$  in the Wasatch Mountains). The West Coast was mostly dry (it would remain this way for the remainder of the winter), while Alaska was enjoying near-record warmth.

The month's cold weather and snow and ice storms in several areas may have caused excessive mortality in such groups as wrens and kinglets and in many of the half-hardy species (e.g., Clay-colored Sparrow in Duluth) that were enticed to linger by the mild December. Several regions, however, thought such avian mortality was generally low. The advent of cold and snow did bring a late movement of American Tree Sparrows into several regions.

Impressive numbers of gulls were found along sections of the Great Lakes shoreline in December, with enormous concentrations noted on Lake Erie. Eighteen kittiwakes in Ontario and one in upstate New York during the month were unprecedented for the period, although clearly, almost all of these only represented late transients. Movement patterns in the two dominant gull species were normal, with a preponderance of Ring-billeds before the mid-January cold forced them south, to be replaced by Herrings. Subsequent freezing of the lakes forced further retreat in the Herrings and other species, and relatively few gulls could be found there after late in the

month

February began with temperatures (in the lower 48 states) varying from  $-61^{\circ}\text{F}$  at Maybell, Colorado, to  $89^{\circ}\text{F}$  at Daytona Beach, Florida. Around mid-month there began a significant warming trend, with temperatures reaching into the 60s in South Dakota, the 40s in upper Michigan, the 70s in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and the low 80s in the middle Atlantic states. Many all-time high temperature records were set in the East. An influx of early migrants was noted in many regions during the second half of the month.

Two interesting weather anomalies resulted in the landfall of a number of extra-limital species at the borders of the area covered by *American Birds* regional reports. Unusually strong easterly trade winds may have been responsible for several North American shorebird and, possibly, waterfowl species reaching Hawaii and lingering there. Some of these birds were not found at previously-censused localities until mid-February, indicating that they may have been northbound migrants. And, in parts of the West Indies Region, an unseasonal December hurricane deposited an unusual assortment of ducks, shorebirds, and gulls.

#### *Irruptions*

THE MOST NOTABLE irruption this season clearly involved the movement of western "montane" species into the lowlands, southward, and, possibly, well to the east. This irruption involved both an excellent number and variety of species in many areas. It was almost certainly related to food conditions and not to weather phenomena, the latter possibly only affecting arrival dates and localized movements at specific localities. The exact origins of many of these individuals and species is only a matter of conjecture, but for many of these birds it should NOT be assumed that they originated from the regularly occurring populations closest to the site of observation. Probably the best example of this is the Red Crossbill. This notorious wanderer is actually made up of a number of independent subspecies, some would say semispecies or even species, which often maintain "tight, exclusive little social systems" that are likely somewhat inbred, and nest to some extent at different seasons. This has resulted in some distinct subspecific differences in overall size, bill size, plumage, and, perhaps, calls. Several subspecies may be involved in a "single" invasion, and their origins may surprise a good

many readers. For example, Red Crossbills of the *Mexican* subspecies *stricklandi* have been recorded in central California, and the race *sitkensis* of the Pacific Northwest has been found throughout much of North America, all the way to the East Coast. The classification and distribution of Red Crossbills is a very complex issue; readers interested in further information are encouraged to read Allan R. Phillips' treatment of this topic in the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Arizona* (1981, University of Arizona Press). Large numbers of Red Crossbills were found this season from California through the Southwest and lowlands of the Mountain West Region to the Dakotas, Iowa, the Southern Great Plains Region, and beyond. Flocks of individuals with notably different bill sizes and calls were noted in northern California, where several specimens proved to be of the race *sitkensis*. That *sitkensis* was involved significantly in the species' overall movement is supported by the scarcity of Red Crossbills this season in Alaska and northwestern Canada. This species also occurred in good numbers in the Western Great Lakes Region, southeastern Ontario, where small-billed birds (*sitkensis*?) were noted, and the Niagara-Champlain Region (where the regional editors discuss the possibility of more than one subspecies being involved, including possibly *sitkensis*).

White-winged Crossbills staged a record invasion into parts of the Mountain West Region, especially in Utah and Wyoming, with a few seen east into eastern Colorado, the Dakotas, Iowa, and the Southern Great Plains Region (including one south to Oklahoma). Also unusual was one in western Washington. Townsend's Solitaires were common in western Texas, and two individuals each wandered to Kansas and Iowa. Pine Grosbeaks are normally resident within much of their range in the western mountains. However, this season numbers visited lower elevations in the Mountain West Region and, especially, the Northern Rocky Mountain/Intermountain Region; there was an "irruption" into the Dakotas; a few were in western Washington; and two were noted in Kansas. Purple Finches made news in the lowlands of Arizona, with a few also in neighboring southern Nevada and southeastern California. Cassin's Finches were in excellent numbers in the Southwest, and included some record high counts in Arizona; smaller numbers were noted in

the northern California lowlands and in Nebraska. Pine Siskins were also exceptionally numerous in southern California and in the Southwest, and in good numbers on the northern and southern Great Plains. This species was common in Iowa but scarce farther east, evidence that a number of "montane" and winter finch species recorded in that state this winter may well have originated from the west instead of from the north. Evening Grosbeak numbers were notable in the Northern Pacific Coast Region, locally in California, in Arizona and New Mexico, in parts of the Mountain West Region, and on the western Great Plains (including one south to Big Bend National Park). Two individuals were found north of their normal range in Alaska. Associated with the major irruption of the above species was a smaller, more localized movement of Clark's Nutcrackers, Mountain Chickadees, Plain Titmice, and Red-breasted Nuthatches.

In the East and Midwest it was generally another poor year for winter finches. Exceptions occurred in parts of eastern Canada and northern New England, where an excellent food supply attracted good numbers of birds.

Bohemian Waxwings "descended in droves" over the northern Mountain West Region and good numbers were in eastern Washington, Idaho, and eastwards into the Northern Great Plains and across northern Minnesota and Michigan into northern Ontario. Smaller groups pushed west into western British Columbia and Washington and northeastern California, and southeastward into Iowa. Three in southern New York were even more unusual.

Redpolls were unusually abundant in sections of Alaska, and Commons invaded the Mountain West Region and sections of the Northern Rocky Mountain/Intermountain Region, with individuals occurring south to western Washington and northeastern Oregon. Numbers were also present on the Great Plains south to Oklahoma. More unusual were sightings in Arkansas and Tennessee. Few were present elsewhere. Hoaries occurred in unusually large numbers in the Dakotas and Minnesota, and one was in Wyoming.

Good counts of Gyrfalcons this season included a slightly above-average 10+ in the Northern Pacific Coast Region, a "banner year" involving five individuals in eastern Montana, a report of 12 from the Nebraska sandhill region, where they

have supposedly been of regular occurrence for at least the past six years, and four in the Duluth/Superior harbor area.

Following last year's record irruption, Great Gray Owls and other northern owl species apparently moved south very little this winter. Only two Great Grays were noted out-of-range in Ontario this year, vs 419+ last year. One notable exception, however, was a local invasion of this species into southwestern British Columbia and western Washington involving at least ten individuals.

Mountain Bluebirds staged a major invasion into California, Arizona, and western Texas, with most of these birds probably originating well to the north. Perhaps associated with this movement were records of single individuals far to the east in Iowa, Kentucky (first state record), and Pennsylvania.

Other notable, more localized irruptions included unusually high counts of Northern Shrikes in the Pacific Northwest, Mountain West Region, and on the Great Plains south to the Texas Panhandle; and excellent numbers of Rosy Finches in the Northern Great Plains Region.

#### Rarities

**I**N CONTRAST TO THE previous winter, nicknamed "the Siberian Express" owing to the unprecedented number of Siberian passerine vagrants that appeared in North America outside Alaska, the winter of 1984-1985 provided virtually no such records. The only Siberian passerines recorded were a Brambling in mainland Alaska and the infamous Eurasian Skylark returning to Point Reyes, California. A well-studied Bean Goose along the Nebraska/Iowa line was of one of the Siberian races (perhaps *middendorffii*), and a "Bewick's" Tundra Swan was seen in Washington. Also probably of Siberian origin was yet another Marbled Murrelet far east of its normal range. This individual (subspecies undetermined) was present at Michigan City, Indiana; all previous records of this species in North America east of the immediate vicinity of the breeding grounds have involved the Asiatic race *perdix*.

The number of western species in the East seemed to be at or slightly below average. The more regularly occurring species east of their normal range included a total of five Arctic Loons, only one Eared Grebe, six Western Grebes, 38 Varied Thrushes (including first records

for Missouri and Louisiana), and nine Western Tanagers. Louisiana again recorded an impressive number of "western" hummingbirds, including four Black-chinned (low), one Allen's, 14+ Rufous, and 10+ *Selasphorus* sp. Neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi each recorded single Rufous Hummingbirds.

Some of the season's best highlights not previously mentioned include two Mourning Doves (!) and a Rufous-sided Towhee in Alaska; a Green-tailed Towhee in British Columbia; a Mottled Petrel (seen from shore) and a Greater Pewee in northern California; a Lesser Black-backed Gull and Streak-backed Oriole in southern California; a Lawrence's Goldfinch in western Texas; a Fork-tailed Flycatcher in southern Texas; a Zone-tailed Hawk, a Scott's Oriole, and a Lesser Goldfinch in Louisiana; a Green-tailed Towhee in Michigan; a Harlequin Duck in Tennessee; the returning Greenshank in Newfoundland; a White-winged Dove in New Brunswick; a Golden-crowned Sparrow in Maine; single Le Conte's Sparrows in Massachusetts and New Jersey; and two more Ferruginous Hawks, LaSagra's Flycatcher, and a Bananaquit in Florida. Palm Warblers and Swamp Sparrows are now being reported annually in winter from the Washington/Oregon area. Virtually a repeat of last winter's "invasion," five Chestnut-sided Warblers were in Arizona and there was another in northern California. However, most of these individuals were seen only in December and probably represented very late migrants. A Yellow-throated Warbler in northern California was the first for that area in winter; what makes the record even more interesting is that, based on the bird's yellow lores and chin and particularly long bill, it was either of the race *dominica* or *stoddardi*, only the second such record for the state. The white-lored race, *albilora*, is the much more regularly-occurring vagrant in the West. Congratulations to Arizona for finally recording the Common Grackle (two of them!) within its borders, thus becoming the last mainland state or province to do so.

There was a significant number of sightings of species for which great care should be exercised when reporting them from most of North America in winter. Many of these sightings were made during the mild December, and most likely pertain to very late transients, not to birds that were truly attempting to winter local-

ly Single Swanson's Hawks and Black-chinned Hummingbirds were reported from northern and southern California, respectively. December Eastern Kingbird sightings came from Long Island, New York, Pennsylvania, and northwestern Florida; and December Swanson's Thrushes were seen in Ontario (three), Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Single Broad-winged Hawks were found during December in Quebec and western Pennsylvania. Even more unusual was a single Broad-winged Hawk in New Jersey in early February and three in the Appalachian Region later that same month; the latter were believed to be exceptionally early "spring" arrivals, a belief supported by the unusually mild conditions and the arrival of early individuals during the same period in southern Texas.

Franklin's Gull is a species that winters regularly only from Central America south. While a small number of lingering individuals is annually seen at scattered localities across North America (particularly on the Great Lakes) well into December and even in early January, there are far fewer records of birds clearly wintering here. An unusually high number appears to be reported almost annually on Christmas Bird Counts from states in the southern Great Plains. Observers are encouraged to assess the status of this species carefully wherever it is now reported regularly in numbers at this season, particularly after early January when most of the late-lingering transients should have departed. This year, lingering individuals were seen in December in Oregon, in Ontario, and at Austin, Texas; four were reported in New Jersey in early January; singles were in Oregon and northern California for several days in February; and one bird clearly wintered in northern California, being present throughout the period.

Sabine's Gull is another species not usually found in North American waters in winter. This season three adults were reported from Vancouver Island during February and another adult was seen from shore in northern California in late December. While late-lingering individuals casually remain into December, there have only been several mid-winter sightings. Observers are urged to use extreme caution when reporting this species in winter, and observers on the Pacific coast should consider the possibility of the birds being immature Red-legged Kittiwakes.

Lastly, a *Chaetura* swift came down a

chimney in northwestern Florida during February. Inasmuch as the Chimney Swift is unknown in winter in North America, the bird was most likely a sooty Vaux's Swift, although almost anything is possible. Readers should study this account, found in the Central Southern Regional Report.

*Just when you thought it was safe to look at gulls again . . .*

SOME OF YOU may have been thinking that a winter season might pass without there being a lively debate on gulls. Such is not the case! The "controversy" this season involves Iceland, Glaucous, and, possibly, hybrid gulls. This winter one first-year and five adult Iceland Gulls were extensively studied and well described from British Columbia; a first-year bird there last winter provided the first documented record for this species on the Pacific coast. The adults all showed gray spots in the primaries typical of the race *kumlieni*, the *only* race of Iceland Gull known to winter in North America (see *AB* 37(4):376). Other possibilities that were considered by the observers included Thayer's Gull and hybrids between Glaucous and Glaucous-winged, Herring and Glaucous, and Herring and Glaucous-winged. The latter three were apparently eliminated by all or some of the following: their larger size, bigger bills, shorter wing extensions, and darker wing spots. An additional adult white-winged gull was found this season in northern California and generated extensive debate. Believed by many to be the state's first Iceland Gull, it differed from the British Columbia birds by showing pure white primaries, even when seen at point-blank range. This prompted the still unresolved question as to whether such a closely scrutinized bird could be *kumlieni*; some observers feel that all adult *Kumlien's* Gulls show at least some gray in the primaries when seen well, while other authorities and some literature suggests a few individuals (all from Baffin Island?) may appear to show pure white wing tips. If the palest extreme *kumlieni* can show pure white tips to the outer primaries, then these birds may well be inseparable (unless mantle color differences are significant) in the field from the nominate race, *glaucoides*, which breeds in Greenland and winters (exclusively?) in southern Greenland (?), Iceland, and northern Europe. Then what was the California bird? Was it an "extreme" *kumlieni* (if such a plumage ex-

ists), and what are the chances of such an individual occurring on the Pacific coast? Was it a nominate *glaucoides*, therefore establishing one of the first winter records for North America? Or was it a Glaucous Gull?

The idea of this individual being a Glaucous Gull may seem somewhat ridiculous to many observers, especially those away from the Pacific coast. However, a western North American race, *barrovianus*, breeding in northern Alaska and the Yukon and wintering along the Pacific coast, averages *smaller* than Glaucous Gulls farther east. I have personally seen several Glaucous Gulls in coastal California the size of *smaller* Herring or larger Thayer's gulls. Some *barrovianus* have been described as being smaller, slimmer, and daintier than eastern birds, and with wing tips extending more than two inches beyond the tail. I have never seen such small Glaucous Gulls farther east, nor am I personally aware of other observers away from the Pacific coast seeing such birds. Therefore they must be quite rare in the East (Note: sexual variation in overall body size also exists in gulls, with females often significantly smaller than males of the same species.) Specimen evidence suggests there may even be some overlap in size between *barrovianus* and *kumlieni*. So how can one tell an extreme *barrovianus* Glaucous from an Iceland? This topic is being debated and potential field characteristics proposed. These differences include overall size, the length of wing extension beyond the tail, bill size, tarsus length, mantle color, and the color of the orbital ring (particularly in breeding condition). Some or all of these may prove to be unreliable. I certainly do NOT claim to have the answers myself. A *cautious* approach to this problem, complete with an extensive review of specimens from Alaska and arctic Canada, is suggested to determine what the limits of mensural and color variation are in these populations.

Now, about those Thayer's x Iceland Gull hybrids. . . .

*The debate over escapes and introductions*

THE DISCUSSION OVER the publication and countability of sightings of species of "questionable" origin or viable status has probably raged for as long as people have used binoculars. If anything,

this debate has intensified over the past several years with the occurrence of a number of particular species, most notably the Western Reef-Heron in Massachusetts, Barnacle Geese almost everywhere, Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots in southern Texas, and Jackdaws in the Northeastern Maritime Region and Quebec. When entering into such a discussion as this, the first rule is to use caution! Some authors take a more conservative approach and accept only a small number of such sightings as representing true vagrants, rejecting most of those species frequently kept in captivity, and believing that the burden of proof lies with those who feel a particular bird is a genuine wanderer. On the other hand, several authors have taken a much more liberal view of the issue (e.g., Richard Veit. 1983. Escapes vs. Vagrants: a Comment. *Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts* 11(6):309-311), and believe that a given individual is more likely to be a *bona fide* vagrant, that too conservative an approach limits our perception of the true magnitude of vagrancy in birds, and that the burden of proof lies with those who "cry escape." Whatever the point of view, the analysis of such records is often quite difficult. In only some cases can one comfortably state that an individual clearly does or does not represent an escape. When the picture is more muddied, observers must make the best guess based on the behavior and appearance of the bird, the timing and location of the sighting, the known migratory capabilities of the species, importation data, a check of local zoos and aviaries (but see below), and the broader, continent or world-wide pattern of records.

In support of the more conservative view, there are certainly countless examples of "obvious" escapes based on the presence of bands, plumage wear, telltale behavior (e.g., "failing the bread test"), and lack of migratory behavior in a species of distant origin known to be kept in captivity. I do not think many observers would count a Mandarin Duck begging for food in their local city park, or a Yellow-headed Parrot, Brazilian Cardinal, or Red Bishop at their feeder. However, even such disquieting behavioral attributes as those mentioned above are not always sufficient to dispense with a particular sighting. For example, there are a number of examples of apparently wild Greater White-fronted Geese, Ross' Geese, and Wood Ducks arriving in early winter at localities frequented by domes-

ticated waterfowl, only to be "corrupted" by these local residents as the season progresses and, in turn, becoming quite tame themselves by late winter or early spring, sometimes staying unseasonably late, even through the following summer or beyond. If an observer did not discover such an individual until spring would he not be inclined to dismiss it as an escape on the basis of its behavior? And if such a bird subsequently remains for several years on the bread line with the domestics is it "still" countable?

In support of the more liberal approach to this question it can be said that by publishing almost all such records one will preserve potentially valuable data for the future. Several Regional Reports in *American Birds* regularly devote space to such species. However, *American Birds* magazine could not possibly publish all such reports; other depositories for this information may be needed. Such data, when accumulated over many years, may begin to show temporal patterns, giving support to a particular species being a true vagrant since such patterns usually result from a sample of wild birds, not from most or all escapes. For example, over the past decade or so a pattern of spring Garganey records has developed throughout North America. Almost all spring records of this species are certainly acceptable. Most older sightings of this species were dismissed as involving escapes. Without the knowledge of these earlier records, however, it would have been more difficult to see the spring pattern develop. But are *all* such records of Garganey acceptable? How does one know if a particular individual might not still be an escape, even in spring? We will probably never know. Another pattern which may now be coming to light involves the occurrence of Ruddy Ground-Doves north of the species' normal range. There have been a number of recent records from fall and early winter between southern California and south Texas, as well as from northwestern Mexico. Yet another recently established pattern involves Jackdaws in the Northeast. This season a flock of 52 was present in eastern Quebec, that is, before most of them were shot by government officials who viewed the birds as potential pests. In addition, two Jackdaws were on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, and singles were in Nova Scotia and on Miquelon Island. As stated in an earlier "Changing Seasons" report (*AB* 38(5):881), to document such patterns

properly observers should look at the larger, continental or world-wide picture. To do this, an increase in the inter-region and overseas sharing of information is strongly encouraged. Such correspondence should include not only the discussion of potential escapes but also questions regarding the distribution and identification of rarities.

Taking a more conservative approach to this question again, I believe some observers are too quick to accept such records as involving genuine vagrants based on "a check of local zoos and collections failed to turn up any missing. . . ." First, many species are illegally smuggled into North America and are therefore not reported. Second, a surprising number and variety of birds are kept as pets. And third, escapes, like true vagrants, have wings and can fly. There are many examples of known escapes traveling long distances once loose; for example, a banded Red-breasted Goose shot in southern California many years ago had escaped from a locality in Canada.

In sum, I personally find myself on the more conservative side of this debate and feel that a cautious approach is warranted, often delaying acceptance of a species as a genuine straggler until a clearer pattern of occurrence can be demonstrated. At the same time, however, records of possible escapes should not be buried in obscurity, but should be made available to the researcher for future comparison and evaluation.

This season saw the appearance of a nice selection of species that have generated significant debate over their status or origin, either as escapes or through local introductions. A number of these deserve special comment here.

WESTERN REEF-HERON: Additional sightings come from the West Indies Region.

GREATER FLAMINGO: The flock on Florida Bay dwindled to one individual this season, which elicited the hopeful comment from the Regional Editor that the chronic argument over the origin of these birds "will mercifully become moot." Flamingo sightings in North America have always generated much debate as the species is prone to wander but, of course, is also commonly kept in captivity. It should be said here that observers should be careful and not automatically assume that a given free-flying flamingo is a Greater; there are numerous records of other flamingo species on the continent, species that have an even slimmer chance of being genuine stragglers

**TRUMPETER SWAN** Sightings this season from Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, and Missouri involved individuals originally released in Minnesota.

**BARNACLE GOOSE:** This species may have generated more debate in the past several years than any other. For a good discussion of this species' occurrence in North America see: Alan J. Ryff. 1984. The Long Sea-flights: a Precise Tradition *Birding* 16(4):146-154. This season found a rather wary individual arriving in Maryland with a large flock of Canada Geese, but then remaining behind to beg for food and even attempting to copulate with barnyard geese! Almost all Barnacle Goose records to date have come from the East and Midwest; however, this winter single "wandering escapees" were seen in Washington and Oregon.

**MUSCOVY DUCK:** An immature was seen along the lower Rio Grande in south Texas in December, and a pair was seen there following the period in early spring. One's first inclination, in addition to being very unexcited, would be to dismiss these sightings as pertaining to obvious escapes. However, these birds were very wary and showed the plumage characteristic of wild birds. In addition, the Muscovy is increasing in numbers south of the border and presently occurs regularly as close as one hundred (possibly as little as forty-five) miles south of Brownsville. These sightings may well represent the first genuine records for this species north of Mexico. Readers are encouraged to investigate the excellent write-up on this species found in the South Texas Regional Report.

**AMERICAN BLACK DUCK:** An introduced, resident population has become established in northwest Washington and scattered individuals of questionable origin (possibly from this same group?) were seen in southern British Columbia and farther afield in Oregon. This will certainly further confuse the situation with American Black Duck records throughout the far West. What was the origin of an individual seen this season in Idaho?

**RINGED TURTLE DOVE:** I gladly admit to being one who questions the viability of this species anywhere in the "wild," and am surprised at the regularity with which it is reported in Regional Reports and on Christmas Bird Counts. I do not think anyone claims any of these "extralimital" records represent vagrants from the "accepted" populations in Los Angeles or St. Petersburg. This season one

was noted in northern Georgia and reports were received of the species becoming established at Key West and increasing in numbers locally in Delaware. It was also reported from Quebec, where the Regional Editors also included a very interesting and educational discussion on the identification of Ringed Turtle Dove vs Eurasian Collared Dove, the latter species having expanded westward to Iceland and therefore having some chance of occurring in North America as a genuine vagrant.

**PARROTS:** The lively debate over this family in South Texas continues, with flocks of Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots regularly noted in the lower Rio Grande Valley during the period. While the former species is supposedly rare to nonexistent in captivity, the latter is commonly kept as pets. Therefore, it is quite difficult to judge the validity of any particular individual or flock of Red-crowned Parrots, particularly since they are sometimes seen associating with known escapes. At the same time "Florida continues to accumulate exotic psittacines at an amazing rate," and readers are encouraged to peruse the parrot section found in that state's Regional Report.

**PURPLISH-BACKED JAY:** An individual of this species was present for several days in El Paso, Texas; however, see the comments regarding the likely origin of this bird found in the Southern Great Plains Regional Report.

**WHITE-COLLARED SEEDEATER:** A brilliant-plumaged male White-collared Seedeater at Bentsen State Park in South Texas was tentatively identified as being of the nominate race from Mexico's Pacific coast, and therefore likely an escape. Males of the naturally occurring race in Texas, *sharpei*, are noticeably duller. This is an excellent example of the importance of paying close attention, if possible, to the subspecies involved when observing birds.

#### *Potpourri*

**GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE** Reports are clearly increasing in parts of the East and Midwest, particularly in the Hudson-Delaware, Middle Atlantic Coast, Appalachian, and eastern Middle-western Prairie regions. Many of these records involve northbound transients in late winter and early spring. As an aside, it should be noted that in the Southwest, Greater White-fronted Geese are notoriously early migrants in "spring" and

northbound flocks are recorded regularly in California as early as late January. Which races are involved in this increase? It is believed that, at least in the past, a majority of the winter sightings in much of the Northeast was composed of individuals of the Greenland race. Has the recent increase, however, been the result of changes in the more western, North American populations, especially those involving flocks of northbound transients? This season, birds of North American origin were also more widespread north and east of the usual wintering areas in the Central Southern Region.

After returning faithfully for fourteen consecutive years, the New Jersey Barrow's Goldeneye failed to appear this winter and thus has almost certainly passed on to the great inlet in the sky. Its hold on the top honors for longevity among rarities has been passed on to the Eurasian Skylark in northern California and Grace's Warbler in southern California, these individuals returning this winter for their seventh and sixth years, respectively.

With the increased interest in the two forms (species?) of Western Grebes, an accurate delineation of their respective ranges and examination of all extralimital records is needed. This season, unusual sightings of light-phase individuals were made in coastal Oregon and west Texas.

A Mute Swan, not typically thought of as a great wanderer, wandered too far for its own good and was found dead well off shore at Sable Island, Nova Scotia.

The status and distribution of the different species of wintering orioles in the Southwest makes for an interesting study. Northern Orioles (predominantly Bullock's) are the most numerous by far in coastal California, where they border on "locally uncommon"; in the interior they are much rarer and are usually outnumbered by Hooded and Scott's orioles.

In Newfoundland, a spectacular movement of alcids occurred off the north coast during January; and an adult, yellow-legged, dark-mantled gull at Saint John's was believed to be a Herring Gull of a western Mediterranean race that some authorities consider resident.

The number of Double-crested Cormorants lingering well into December from New England to Minnesota continues to grow. Such counts as 349 at New London, Connecticut, late in the month would have sounded totally absurd only a few years ago. Much smaller numbers

are seen later in the winter, and it would be interesting to see to what extent individuals clearly over-winter.

A small number of *Pyrrhuloxias* in Arizona and New Mexico regularly move north from the breeding range in winter.

A Peregrine Falcon banded in the Brooks Range in Alaska was found in Louisiana.

Wood Ducks may survive severe cold when attempting to winter at the northern limit of their range by taking advantage of temporary food and shelter at zoos (*cf.* Middle Atlantic Coast Regional Report).

Words of concern come from the Hudson-Delaware Region where the cutting of dead timber for firewood may be significantly affecting populations of several hole-nesting species, most notably the Hairy Woodpecker; and from Florida where habitat and water regimes in the central and southern sections of the state are being further threatened by citrus grove expansion. A tremendous decline

in Pacific Flyway duck populations was noted in northern California and may be attributable to drought conditions on the Canadian prairies. Observers in the San Francisco Bay Area have noted significant predation on Black Rails by Great Egrets during high tides.

Normally thought of as a resident species, the Tufted Titmouse was widely reported on the outer coast of Louisiana.

Feeder owners in the Mountain West Region were cleaned out by Rosy Finches, while those in Alaska regarded the invading redpolls as pests, "like having mice at the feeders."

A Red-necked Phalarope in southern California for one day in late January was not only out-of-season but in full breeding plumage. Which way was it going? Also in late January, what was a *juvenile* Horned Lark doing in Ontario?

A Spotted Owl was recorded on the floor of the Central Valley in northern California, the latest example of how this

species may actually move fair distances during the nonbreeding season. Two birds showing the characteristics of "Caribbean" Coots were seen in the same region this season. The Regional Editor notes that such birds "are not exceptionally rare in this Region" and that it is *not* likely that we are dealing with "repeated, transcontinental, reverse-migration, vagrant coots."

Lastly, it should be duly noted that a Northern Gannet was found in a snowy Vermont backyard; a Northern Goshawk was seen feeding on suet at a Wyoming feeder, while an early Purple Martin in Texas was watched feeding on seeds in the snow; a Greater Roadrunner frequented a frozen, snow-covered lake at 7200 feet in Arizona; and a Winter Wren spent the season in the bobcat cage at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

—P.O. Box 1061,  
Goleta, California 93116

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#### Abbreviations frequently used in Regional Reports

ad.: adult, Am.: American, c.: central, C: Celsius, CBC: Christmas Bird Count, Cr.: Creek, Com.: Common, Co.: County, Cos.: Counties, *et al.*: and others, E.: Eastern (bird name), Eur.: European, Eurasian, F: Fahrenheit, *fide*: reported by, F.&W.S.: Fish & Wildlife Service, Ft.: Fort, imm.: immature, I.: Island, Is.: Islands, Isles, Jct.: Junction, juv.: juvenile, L.: Lake, m.ob.: many observers, Mt.: Mountain, Mts.: Mountains, N.F.: National Forest, N.M.: National Monument, N.P.: National Park, N.W.R.: Nat'l Wildlife Refuge, N.: Northern (bird name), Par.: Parish, Pen.: Peninsula, P.P.: Provincial Park, Pt.: Point, not Port, Ref.: Refuge, Res.:

Reservoir, not Reservation, R.: River, S.P.: State Park, sp: species, spp.: species plural, ssp.: subspecies, Twp.: Township, W.: Western (bird name), W.M.A.: Wildlife Management Area, v.o.: various observers, N,S,W,E.: direction of motion, n., s., w., e.: direction of location, >: more than, <: fewer than, ±: approximately, or estimated number, ♂: male, ♀: female, ø: imm. or female, \*: specimen, ph.: photographed, †: documented, ft: feet, mi: miles, m: meters, km: kilometers, date with a + (*e.g.*, Mar. 4+): recorded beyond that date  
Editors may also abbreviate often-cited locations or organizations.

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