

Alaska Region

T. G. TOBISH, JR.

The widespread and relentless below-average temperatures and above-average precipitation, which was nearly entirely snow, continued from the fall season through most of December. Thereafter, strong Arctic high pressure systems expanded over most of the Mainland and initiated a mid-period cycle of alternating sub-zero and often windy conditions with heavy multi-day snow storms. Late winter snowpacks were above average almost statewide, and were nudging against record highs locally (e.g. Anchorage began March only 11 inches shy of the record snowfall).

The early season combination of heavy snow and lengthy cold and wind forced what had been near-record building numbers of semi-hardy species to quickly dissipate. A few of the early Christmas Bird Counts documented these numbers. These conditions once again highlighted the recently recognized phenomenon that fall migration protracts well into December for at least the southern half of the Mainland. Several Fringillid and larger omnivorous species often, especially in low snowfall conditions, manage in varying numbers to remain until an extended sub-zero period or heavy snows force them southward.

The effects of the early season conditions were especially noted in southern Southeast,



Grasshopper Sparrow at Armendaris Ranch, Sierra County, New Mexico, January 18, 1995. A new winter locale for this species. Photograph/Ann Henry.

A Yellow-eyed Junco discovered in the Peloncillo Mts., Feb. 4 (CR, DE, BN) was seen again Feb. 11 (JO); the species is a rare winter visitor to this range. Efforts to locate Lapland Longspurs in the northeast resulted in one-eight at Eagle Nest, Maxwell N.W.R., Springer L., Charette L., and Storie L., Jan. 29–Feb. 18 (JEP, JO, CR, JNP, DM). Up to 65 Yellow-headed Blackbirds were near Columbus in mid-January (CR, JO), where rarely reported in winter. The only Rusty Blackbird was at Washington Ranch Dec. 17 (SW, TH). North were 32 Brewer's Blackbirds at Española Dec. 31 (BF *et al.*), the first to winter there in 10 years. Northerly Com. Grackles included singles near Clayton Jan. 8 (*vide* WC), Santa Fe Dec. 18 (*vide* CR), and Zuni Dec. 17 (JT). Late for the north were five Brown-headed Cowbirds at Las Vegas Dec. 17 (CR). Amazing were five ♂ probable Bronzed Cowbirds at Carlsbad Jan. 2 (TH, *vide* SW); there are no verified winter records.

Except for about 20 Gray-crowns Rosy-Finches at Navajo Dam Dec. 3 (JEP, JO), *Taos* and *Colfax* cornered the rosy-finch market, with 350 Brown-capped plus 10 Gray-crowns at Eagle Nest Jan. 29 (JO) and small numbers of all 3 species at Bobcat Pass Feb. 11 (JNP), including 30–40 Blacks there Feb. 25 (JEP, JO). The only Pine Grosbeaks were 10 at Wheeler Peak Village Feb. 25 (JEP, JO). Cassin's Finches and Red Crossbills set local highs (of 125 and 156, respectively) at Zuni Dec. 17 (JT *et al.*), but elsewhere both were generally scarce and largely confined to n. counties. Lesser Goldfinches in the north included singles at Farmington Feb. 10 (TR), Navajo Dam Dec. 26 (TR), and Zuni Dec. 17 (JT); in the Gila Valley Dec. 30, Lessers outnumbered Am. Goldfinches by 20 to two (RF). Evening Grosbeaks were scarce

and mostly in the north and northwest (v.o.); six in the southeast were at Roswell Dec. 17 (E. Shores).

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where several snow storms and unseasonably cold apparently hit winter residents harder than normal (e.g. Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Song Sparrow). Despite the spoiling early season weather, winter 1994–1995 produced more than the average significant finds from nearly each subregion, culminating with a first Alaska record in February. Many of the fall season's notable finds lingered into this season.

Loons to Waterfowl

For whatever reasons, Pacific Loons appeared in near-record numbers in local aggregations in Southeast. Record highs were tallied in Juneau's Auke Bay, with >189 Jan. 24 (GVV), and around Ketchikan >385 Feb. 6 (SCH). Sixty-two in Petersburg's Wrangell Narrows Feb. 12 (PJW) was also above average. Although all 4 regularly occurring loons are widespread in winter s. of the Bering Sea, Pacific is the only one typically found in concentrations. This season's count from the Ketchikan area further points to the significance of the Tongass Narrows environs as a critical winter feeding site for several species. Western Grebe counts were consistently far below average, with a relatively paltry *maxima* of 81 in Sumner Strait Jan. 1 (PJW). A grounded Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel was picked up near Cold Bay Feb. 9 (CB, CPD), certainly a first local winter record. Although Cahn (*Condor*: 49:78–82) and subsequent authors listed this pelagic as present to "abundant" in winter in the Bering Sea from the pack ice southward, we have few winter data or "on-shore" records for the Region.

Great Blue Heron reports were average from the standard sites, except for an unusual count of 34 near Ketchikan Feb. 21–22 (SCH). This season's Tundra Swan "extralimital" report, away from the few regular winter sites, was an immature in Ketchikan Jan. 6–13+ (ph. SCH). The traditional w. Alaska Pen. winter peak reached 64 Feb. 14 (CPD, RPS). Southeast's Trumpeter Swan winter numbers are beginning to mirror the increases found in summer counts from Interior breeding areas. A record winter count of >88 was noted around Mitkof I., Jan. 5 (PJW) and ≥ 34 were tallied around Revillagigedo I. (Ketchikan and environs) through the period (SCH, MW), nearly twice the average. Emperor Geese were reported in average numbers at the e. edge of the center of their winter range from a Feb. 14 aerial survey, 12,461 between Bechevin Bay and Izembek/Kinzarof Lagoons (CPD, RPS). This winter's only extralimital report was a single adult on the Kupreanof I. side of Wrangell Narrows Dec. 23–Jan. 8 (PJW), one of few local records.

Lesser Scaup made a strong showing in Southeast, where they are limited by a lack of suitable fresh water habitat and distinctly rare and local in winter. A pair was noted at Ketchikan in saltwater Feb. 8+ (SCH) and ≤ 24 frequented the harbor at Petersburg Dec. 11–Feb. 20 (PJW). Any eider is casual in SE, so single imm. ♂ Kings at Petersburg Dec. 10–Feb. 12 (PJW) and at Juneau Feb. 11 (GVV) were noteworthy and provided, respectively, the 2nd and 3rd local winter records. Peak late season counts for Steller's Eider within winter strongholds on the w. half of the Alaska Pen. included 35,972 between Bechevin Bay and Izembek/Kinzarof Lagoons Feb. 14 and another 10,505 from e. of there at Nelson and Herendeen bays Feb. 22 (CPD, RPS). Add Oldsquaw to the list of species supported, at least periodically in winter, by coves and passes in the Ketchikan area. This year's peak count of >560 Feb. 21 (SCH) was nearly twice that area's previous winter high.

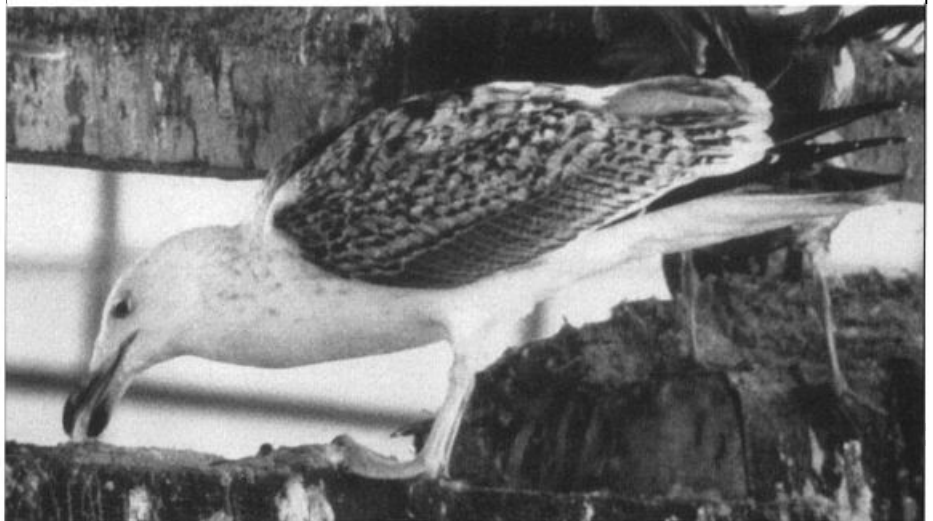
Hawks to Kingfisher

Noteworthy raptor reports included a N. Harrier at Kodiak Jan. 22 (HP), a dark-morph Red-tailed Hawk over Juneau's open intertidal wetlands Jan. 28 (GVV) (its description sounded more like an "Interior" *calurus* than the Southeast's rare and local resident *alascensis*), and scattered single Merlins from Ketchikan (Jan. 25, SCH), Kodiak (Dec. 31+, RAM), and Girdwood near Anchorage (Feb. 3, TGT). Two Am. Coots spent the winter in the Ketchikan harbor (SCH) for the season's only report. The Killdeer near the Ketchikan Airport Feb. 13 (SCH) was Southeast's first mid-winter report in several years. A Ruddy Turnstone made a one-time appearance Feb. 9 (GVV) with a local wintering group of other littoral

shorebirds in Juneau for one of very few winter records for the Region. Although distributed fairly normally, Com. Snipe winter numbers were above average, with singles noted at Kodiak Dec. 31 (RAM), Anchorage Feb. 4 (=2nd mid-winter record, TGT), and at least five around Mitkof I., Dec. 3–Feb. 25 (PJW).

Gull movements and numbers followed the typical patterns and timings of past winters, with concentrations and subsequent highlights coming from areas where winter fisheries were processed. The best locations for these observations continue to be Ketchikan and Kodiak, although better coverage would likely produce similar results at "secondary" fish ports like Seward and Unalaska. Only the large Larids made news this winter, including Slaty-backed Gulls around Ketchikan, with an adult Jan. 10, and single 3rd-winter and 2nd-winter birds Dec. 17 and Jan. 10–24 (†SCH, ph.), and another adult at the Kodiak canneries Dec. 31 into March (RAM); a "clean" 1st-winter Western Gull was also at Ketchikan Dec. 10–Jan. 19 (SCH, ph.). By far the season's highlight, and new for Alaska, was a 2nd-year Great Black-backed Gull which appeared at the Kodiak canneries Feb. 12 and remained through the period (ph. RAM, ph. DWS, †TGT). The Pacific Ocean region's only previous documented record was an adult photographed in late December in the Fraser R. drainage near Kamloops in interior British Columbia (Campbell *et al.*, 1990, *Birds of British Columbia*).

Northern Pygmy-Owls staged an unprecedented invasion into at least the s. half of Southeast. Peak counts came from the Mainland, at Juneau where up to 4/day and a minimum 20 individuals were found all season (GVV, DDG), and from the mouths



Great Black-backed Gull in second-winter plumage at Kodiak, Alaska, February 20, 1995. First record for Alaska, and probably the first for anywhere on the Pacific Coast. Photograph/David W. Sonneborn.

of Mainland draining rivers, e.g. Mitkof I. with >12 present Dec. 22+ (PJW). The above high counts alone represent easily twice the previous Region's high count. At least four were also reported from the Ketchikan area Feb. 10–11 (SCH). The Ketchikan ♂ Anna's Hummingbird, which arrived at a feeder in October, survived the season (JP, SCH), and was the only winter report. The two Belted Kingfishers near Cold Bay Dec. 28+ (CFZ, MGZ) were the northernmost for the season and the first local winter record since 1987.

Nuthatches to Fringillids

Equally as unprecedented as the fall's Red-breasted Nuthatch irruption (*q.v.*) was the number of individuals that actually survived the winter n. of the Alaska Range. Even after above-average snowfall and local December extremes of -60°F, at least two birds each continued at feeders in Tok and just w. at Tanacross (*fide* TJD), and another was located on the Delta Junction CBC Dec. 27 (*fide* TJD). Dozens of nuthatches survived at feeders in the Fairbanks area (*fide* DDG). Elsewhere, this winter's CBC count of 157 from Anchorage Dec. 17 clearly delineates that feeder-rich area of Southcoastal as the heart of this species' Alaska range. It wasn't more than 10 years ago that typical Anchorage CBC totals were a fifth of this winter's peak. It remains to be seen if this population rise can be sustained.

At least four Townsend's Solitaires wintered around Anchorage, including one n. to Eagle River, Dec. 15+ (*fide* RLS, m.ob.) and another lingered down Turnagain Arm at nearby Hope Dec. 10–20 (WT), an above-average showing for this frugivore. The Anchorage area is still the only locale in the Region where Solitaires winter with regularity, no doubt drawn by fruit-bearing exotics. American Robin numbers were also elevated at the n. fringe of winter habitat around Cook Inlet. A group of four Feb. 20 and up to four other singles were scattered around Anchorage through the period (*fide* RLS, m.ob.), and another three wintered around Kodiak through the period (RAM, PS). The Kodiak area produced a local and Regional 4th winter Orange-crowned Warbler that lingered at a feeder Dec. 2–20 (PS, ph. RAM). Only slightly less rare was the Yellow-rumped Warbler that appeared at a Ketchikan feeder Feb. 14–28+ (JP, SCH), a first local mid-winter record.

Considered last seen at its favored feeder in early December, the Juneau Rufous-sided Towhee was refound and photographed Dec. 18 (DWS, ph.) but was again not seen thereafter. Single Lincoln's Sparrows were noted at Anchorage feeders, one all season (TGT) and another one-day wonder Jan. 28

(*fide* DFD), while one was in brushy habitat at Kodiak Feb. 25 (RAM, RLS), about average for winter. The majority of the Region's sporadic winter reports come from the n. Gulf Coast. An imm. Swamp Sparrow, a 2nd local report, appeared Jan. 11–13 (+SCH, JC) in the Saxman near Ketchikan where Southeast's first record was established. There are now 9 Alaska records, 5 of which are from Ketchikan.

White-crowned Sparrows were reported as average around Cook Inlet, *maxima* 13 Dec. 17 (m.ob.), but below average or altogether missing elsewhere. Up to 12 Golden-crowned Sparrows around Kodiak all season (RAM, PS) represented an above-average winter showing, but they, too, were absent or very scarce elsewhere. Upper Cook Inlet's 2nd, Anchorage's first, and Southcoastal's 6th ever Harris' Sparrow turned up at a mid-town feeder Dec. 9, where it remained to Jan. 7 (TGT, *et al.*). Two of the previous Southcoastal records were winter birds, as are most of the reports from Southeast.

While Dark-eyed Juncos were breaking records around Anchorage, at least into late December, they went unreported or were otherwise unremarkable elsewhere. The Anchorage CBC tally of 302 Dec. 17 more than doubled the previous record high count. Throughout December, high numbers could also be found at feeders to the north in Eagle River and into Turnagain Arm (*fide* RLS, TGT). Since these numbers diminished quickly by early January, it was assumed that many had continued to migrate. North of the Alaska Range and well beyond regular winter areas, a single junco survived at a Tok feeder to Dec. 31 (TC, LC), for a 2nd or 3rd local winter record. The fall season's Rustic Bunting reported from a Fairbanks feeder

(*q.v.*) somehow survived extreme conditions through the period (DDR) and became the Region's first winter record.

The seemingly healthy and habituated Com. Grackle that had appeared at a Palmer feeder in November (*q.v.*) vanished from that area in "the last week" of December (*fide* RLS). Among the wintering rosy-finch flocks at Kodiak was a distinctive individual showing the restricted gray head plumage more typical of the e. Interior-breeding form *tephrocotis* (RAM, ph.). Very little work has been accomplished on the subspecies content of Alaska wintering rosy-finches. Up to three Purple Finches, a male and two females, appeared sporadically Dec 4+ at a Ketchikan feeder (JP, †SCH). This Interior form continues as a winter visitor to at least a site or 2 annually in Southeast. Redpoll numbers were fairly static through the period except in Southcoastal, where numbers steadily rose through the period. White-winged Crossbills continued in numbers and at general locations established in the previous spring. Small pulses out and back from these areas were noted at Tok and in the lower Noatak R. drainage (TJD, WRU).

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Rufous-sided Towhee in Juneau, Alaska, December 18, 1994. Photograph/David W. Sonneborn.