

# Northern Great Plains

## RON MARTIN

The memories of this winter will undoubtedly remain etched for many years in the minds of the hearty people who lived through it. Eastern North Dakota and northeastern South Dakota had the worst conditions, with record snowfalls and no periods of relief from the cold to melt the accumulation. By early March the snow total at Fargo had topped 100 inches, the result of seven blizzards and five winter storms.

The November to January three-month period was the coldest on record in South Dakota. The rest of the Region also received snowfalls well-above average, with little melting. February was relatively mild, with little precipitation, which brought some relief from the blizzards, but by early March the storms and below-zero temperatures returned.

After the Christmas Bird Counts bird activity diminished, and birder activity diminished even more, with daily survival taking up the majority of people's energy.

## Cormorants to Falcons

A Double-crested Cormorant remained at Garrison Dam to Dec. 1, furnishing the 2nd winter record for North Dakota (HCT).

The Ross' Goose in Bennett, SD, Feb. 19, was likely a very early migrant (L.N.W.R.S.). Most years 5000–10,000

Mallards winter at Garrison Dam, but this year only 1500 remained by January. Unexpectedly early were six Mallards at Upper Souris N.W.R., ND Feb. 10 (TMP), and three at Medicine L., MT Feb. 16 (MR). North Dakota's first winter Ring-necked Duck was noted at Arrowwood N.W.R., Dec. 2 (PRS). Oldsquaws peaked at seven at Garrison Dam Dec. 7, a new high count for that area. One braved the winter for the 4th wintering record there (GBB). Also providing the 4th wintering record at Garrison Dam were two Buffleheads (CDE). A Hooded Merganser at Garrison Dam Dec. 21 provided North Dakota's 3rd-latest (REM). The Red-breasted Merganser at Garrison Dam Feb. 15 furnished only the 2nd wintering record there (CDE, HCT). A Ruddy Duck at Yellowtail Dam, MT Jan. 4 provided a rare mid-winter Regional record.

If accepted by the records committee, a Turkey Vulture documented Jan. 27 in Richland, ND, would be that state's 2nd-latest record, and 5th winter record (WEH). Details have been requested for an Osprey reported Jan. 2 from Bennett, South Dakota. If accepted, this would represent about the 2nd winter record for the state (L.N.W.R.S.). The extreme cold of December drove most Bald Eagles out of North Dakota and n. Montana. The annual January count on the Missouri R. in North Dakota turned up only two birds, tying the record low of 1994 (N.D.G.F.D.).

Goshawk numbers in North Dakota and Montana were not spectacular, with mostly scattered singles reported. They were reported as slightly higher than normal in South Dakota. Only three Rough-legged Hawks were reported in North Dakota after CBCs, but good numbers

were present in e. Montana. A Peregrine Falcon at Fargo Jan. 1–7 provided North Dakota's 10th January record (DW), and an individual at Medicine L., Feb. 6 was unusual there (RS). There were 5 additional Montana reports. Only two Gyrfalcon reports provided a very low total.

## Gray Partridge to Owls

While still not approaching the numbers of the early 1990s, Gray Partridge seems to be well on the way to recovery in North Dakota and Montana. The severe weather took a toll on Ring-necked Pheasants, with reports of  $\leq 75\%$  mortality in some areas. Very unusual and probably indicative of the severe weather was a report of four Sage Grouse at a feeder in Stark, ND Jan. 10 (NT). With this winter's deep snow, Sharp-tailed Grouse were found in large flocks and mostly in the trees. Flocks in the 100s were reported from all over w. North Dakota and e. Montana. The Ft. Peck, MT, CBC recorded an incredible 579 (CC).

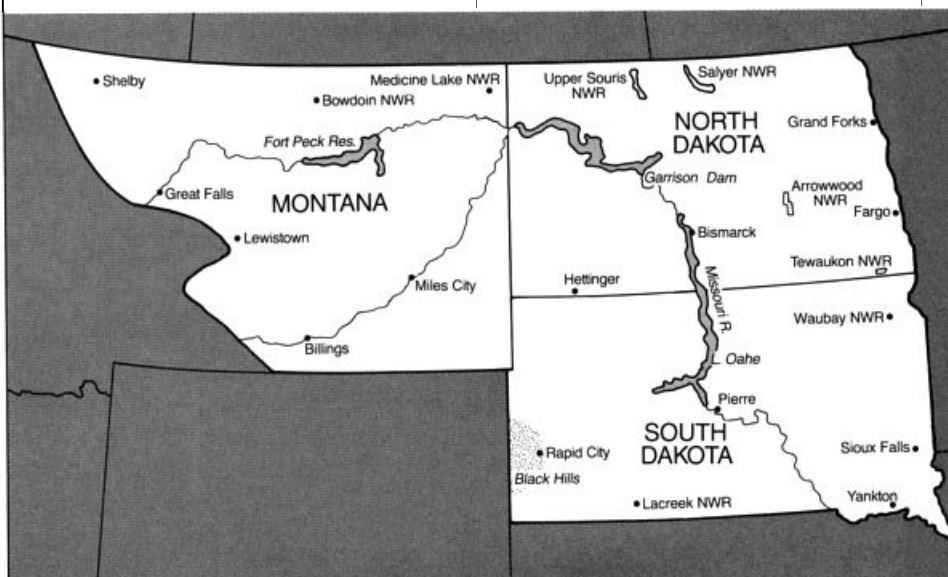
South Dakota's 2nd Pomarine Jaeger reported in November at Oahe Dam remained to Dec. 1 (DB). A Parasitic Jaeger at Ft. Peck Dec. 21–23 provided about the 14th Montana record (SG). Also at Ft. Peck, a first-winter Glaucous-winged Gull Dec. 14–26 furnished the 7th record for Montana (CC). A Black-legged Kittiwake was at Ft. Randall Dam, Charles Mix, SD Dec. 7 (RS).

Great Horned Owl numbers were low in North Dakota and e. Montana. Northern owls, however, made a strong showing, particularly in the Dakotas. Snowy Owls were noted in higher-than-usual numbers across the entire Region. Northern Hawk Owls were in North Dakota for the 2nd consecutive winter, with one Dec. 27–Jan. 10 in Grand Forks (EEF) and another in Pembina Dec. 30.

South Dakota's 2nd Great Gray Owl delighted observers in Sioux Falls, Minnehaha, Jan. 29–Feb. 2 (RS et al.). The only previous record was a dead bird found in January 1984, also in Minnehaha. Boreal Owls were at Minot, ND Dec. 22 (TL, SL, ph. GBB), and at J. Clark Salyer N.W.R., ND Jan. 6 (GAE). South Dakota's 4th Boreal Owl was photographed in Day Jan. 11 (LU). Only five Short-eared Owl reports were received from North Dakota and Montana.

## Woodpeckers to Shrikes

Very rare in winter, a Red-headed Woodpecker was in Pembina, ND Dec. 30. Horned Larks were mostly absent in North Dakota, with only 132 reported on CBCs. Blue Jays made a very strong showing in e. Montana.





Present since fall, this Golden-crowned Sparrow at J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge December 7, 1996, represented the fourth record for North Dakota. Photograph/Gordon Berkey.

Twenty were at a feeder in Malta Jan. 19, and six were at Bowdoin Jan. 26 (DP, LH). In Miles City, 26 were noted Dec. 21.

Mountain Chickadees moved E and N, with one at Bowdoin Jan. 7 & 26 (LH); two spent the winter at Ft. Peck (CC). Red-breasted Nuthatch numbers were very low except at Minot, ND, where 53 noted Dec. 22 established a new high for a North Dakota CBC.

Varied Thrush made a strong showing, with four in North Dakota and one Dec. 20—Jan. 7 in Lake, SD (JSP, R&NB). Bohemian Waxwings were low in North Dakota, but noted as more common than usual in South Dakota. At Bowdoin the species began to stage in late February, and had built to >1800 by early March (DP, LH). The weather pushed N. Shrikes out of n. areas, as numbers were low in North Dakota or Montana.

#### Sparrows to House Sparrow

Also probably weather related, Am. Tree Sparrows were very low in North Dakota and Montana. Awaiting details is a report of a Field Sparrow Jan. 2 in Bennett, SD (L.N.W.R.S.). Only about 3 winter records exist for the state. The 4th North Dakota record of Golden-crowned Sparrow, reported in the fall season at J. Clark Salyer N.W.R., was last seen Jan. 8 (GAE).

Along with the Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs were virtually absent in North Dakota and e. Montana. Snow Buntings, however, were present in good numbers for the 2nd consecutive year. Flocks in the 100s were found all winter in North Dakota and Montana.

Notable at Bowdoin were 14 Rusty Blackbirds Dec. 9 & 21 (DP). Only a few scattered Pine Grosbeak reports were received.

House Finches again reached a new high in North Dakota, with 1612 on CBCs, but many observers noted reduced numbers in January and February, as birds probably migrated out. Several birds wintered at a feeder in Malta, MT (DP, TP). The first reported cases of *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* in North Dakota were noted in House Finches at Bismarck and Fargo (RNR, CAS).

Red Crossbills made a good showing in c. North Dakota and e. South Dakota, and birds were nest building at Denbigh Experimental Forest, ND Feb. 16 (GBB). After last year's notable numbers, White-winged Crossbills were almost absent in North Dakota. However, 15 were at Denbigh Experimental Forest Feb. 9, and courtship display and copulation were observed (REM). Most of the few Com. Redpolls observed were seen in February.

American Goldfinches were widely encountered in North Dakota, as is usual when redpoll numbers are low. After almost

no reports last year, Evening Grosbeaks came in with scattered small numbers.

Numerous observers have noted a decline in House Sparrows over the last few years in North Dakota. Recent CBC totals run about 60% of the numbers recorded in the 1970s and 1980s.

#### Contributors (state editors in boldface):

MONTANA: **Charles Carlson**, Shawn Goodchild, Lon Hanebury, Dwain Prellwitz, Thora Prellwitz, Mike Rabenberg, Ronnie Sanchez. NORTH DAKOTA: Gordon B. Berkey, Cory D. Ellingson, Gary A. Eslinger, Eve E. Freeberg, William E. Huckell, Tim Ladendorf, Sherrie Leslie, **Ron E. Martin**, North Dakota Game and Fish Dept., Tom M. Pabian, Robert N. Randall, Paulette R. Scherr, Carol A. Spurbeck, H. Clark Talkington, Nita Talkington, Dick Ward. SOUTH DAKOTA: Doug Backlund, Robert and Nancy Buckman, Lacreek N.W.R. staff (L.N.W.R.S.), **Jeffrey S. Palmer**, Robb Schenck, Laura Umbright.

—Ron E. Martin, 16900 125th St. SE, Sawyer, ND 58781-9284.