

Southern Great Plains Region

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The winter had its curiosities. The weather, however, appeared routine. Several cold spells occurred during December, causing many Nebraska lakes to freeze up early. A significant cold snap occurred in mid-January, but most of the rest of the period was relatively mild as winters go, particularly in Oklahoma.

The winter was notable for a few small bursts of species, nothing outlandishly outstanding, yet still subtly standing out. The Red Crossbill outbreak from the summer continued to produce a scattering of records across the Region, with local concentrations, mostly in western Nebraska. Along with crossbills was a subregional surge in Cassin's Finches, which also maintained a few local hotspots in western areas. More subtle, but still part of a pattern, were better-than-normal (but local) numbers of some other montane species, such as Mountain Chickadees, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches, and, perhaps, Townsend's Solitaires, with a sprinkling of normally absent Clark's Nutcrackers, and Steller's Jays. Then add some Bohemian Waxwings for good measure. A subtle pattern? Sure.

As subtly evident was the small surge in Snowy Owls, and perhaps a snow-induced pulse of Snow Buntings in the northern parts of the Region late in the season. Continuing the patterns from the fall was an overflow of Western Grebes, and the "burst" of Black-legged Kittiwakes. Perhaps part of a longer-term pattern were the continued occurrences of Inca Doves in western Oklahoma and southwestern Kansas, and the growth in numbers of Trumpeter Swans, both from the breeding of birds earlier introduced to the north, and some still being introduced.

Gulls continue to make news, from the upswing in clearly identifiable Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which at seven birds for the Region this season is relatively exponential growth from the zero and one just five years ago, to the more controversial (and humbling) Thayer's and "Thayer's," as well as a few who-knows-what's-

its. Humbling is good here, as it helps gain earthly perspective for the power of the binocular, and our abilities to interpret our growing information sources.

Half-hardies didn't seem as prevalent, but some of the tougher ones (*i.e.*, black-birds) probably did too well this winter in the Region. With that, and beyond that, it becomes fun. There were three scoter species in one spot, and 13–15 species of gulls to contemplate and over which to risk our reputations.

This Regional Editor would like to wish Larry K. Malone the best in his retirement. New Mexico will gain a fine observer, while I and others will miss his exceptional and detailed reporting from western Nebraska.

Abbreviations: K.B.R.C. (*Kansas Bird Records Committee*); McConaughy (*L. McConaughy, Keith Co., NE*); Keystone Dam (*L. Keystone Dam, Tulsa Co., OK*); N.O.U.R.C. (*Nebraska Ornithologists Union Records Committee*); Ogallala (*L. Ogallala, Keith Co., NE*); O.B.R.C. (*Oklahoma Bird Records Committee*); Quivira (*Quivira N.W.R., Stafford Co., KS*).

Loons to Ducks

A few lucky folks relocated a Red-throated Loon Dec. 3–7 in *Pawnee*, OK (JCH, JWA *et al.*). The only report of Pacific Loon for the period was one in *Russell*, KS Dec. 8 (MR).

Normally scattered, the 427 Horned Grebes in *Haskell*, OK Jan. 25 (JWA, JSi, JT) provided an impressive count. The fever pitch of W. Grebes from the fall overflowed into the winter. Thirty were noted at McConaughy Dec. 1 (RCR, DJR), with one lingering to Dec. 28 (SJD, JSu). About 10–12 W. Grebes were reported from 4 localities in Oklahoma in early December (*vide* JAG), with one Feb. 9 in *Pawnee* (JM *et al.*). Among the most easterly reports was one in *Linn*, KS Feb. 25 (TL, DF). Four Am. White Pelican wintered in *Lincoln*, NE (*vide* WRS, JGJ).

The introduction and breeding of Trumpeter Swans continues to increase their numbers. Trumpeters now appear more likely than Tundra Swans in the Region. Two Trumpeters were noted in *Keith*, NE Dec. 28 (SJD, JSu), with eight at Ogal-

lala Feb. 1–15 (LKM, JGJ, WRS). Nnine were present in *Garden*, NE Jan. 30 (LKM). Two collared birds found Jan. 18–Feb. 16 in *Saunders*, NE (TH), were released during the fall at Storm L., IA. In Kansas, two were observed at Quivira Dec. 1 (MR, SP), three in *Shawnee*, KS Jan. 1 (MM, GP, LM), and two in *Finney* Feb. 2–6 (T&SS). Four Tundra Swans at Quivira Dec. 1 (MR, SP) were the only reported.

Ross' Geese lingered at *Buffalo*, NE, with 11 noted Dec. 7 and one Jan. 4 (LR, RH). Only a few scattered reports were received for the rest of the Region.

The 52,000 Mallards at North Platte N.W.R., *Scotts Bluff*, NE Dec. 16 (LK) was an impressive number. Outdoing the past several years combined were the six Am. Black Ducks reported from 4 locations in e. Kansas: two in *Douglas* Dec. 7–Feb. 22 (*vide* LM), one in *Wyandotte* Jan. 5 (LM), one in *Coffey* Jan. 25 (BF, MM, GP), and two in *Osage* Feb. 15 (DG). Several Wood Ducks were noted at scattered locations in Nebraska, the northernmost a female in *Dixon* Dec. 8 (JJ). A N. Shoveler in *Sarpy*, NE Feb. 2 (DSt), probably wintered.

Greater Scaup were noted in *Lincoln*, NE Feb. 15 (JGJ, WRS), and at 4 locations in Kansas (*vide* LM); singles and pairs were observed in *Tulsa* Dec. 21–Feb. 4 (*vide* JL). Perhaps more than usual, single Oldsquaws were noted in *Russell*, KS Dec. 1–21 (MR), *Riley*, KS Dec. 26 (DR, TC) and Feb. 22 (TC), *Jefferson*, KS Jan. 7 (RR), *Tulsa* Jan 18–Feb. 1 (JL *et al.*) and Feb 7 & 15 (MS, PS, JL), and *Coffey*, KS Feb. 28 (JB).

Who would expect to see all 3 species of scoters in one spot in the Region? The ♀ Black Scoter spotted earlier in *Pawnee*,



OK, was joined on a nearby pond by one each of the other 2 species Dec. 3–8 (JCH, JWA, m.ob.) Certainly “scoops” were a pair of **Barrow’s Goldeneye** at Ogallala Feb. 15 (JGJ, WRS), as well as a male in *Riley*, KS Jan. 19 (DR).

Common Merganser numbers built to >23,000 Dec. 15 in *Harlan*, NE (JGJ); a meager 4000 were at McConaughy Dec. 28 (WRS, JGJ), where cold December weather developed more than the usual ice cover. One ♀ Red-breasted Merganser persisted through the winter at Ogallala (SJD, JGJ).

Raptors to Hummingbirds

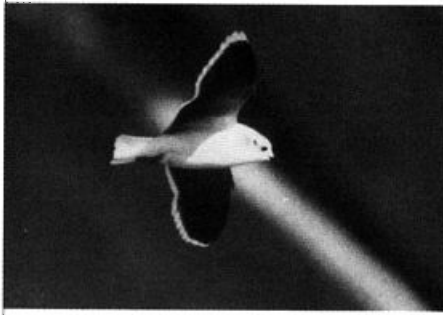
A Turkey Vulture wandered back to *Comanche*, OK Feb. 14 (TJ). West of most in Oklahoma were two Black Vultures in *Stephens* Dec. 13 (FN, J&MC). An Osprey lingered to at least Dec. 21 in *Tulsa* (JWA).

Excluding CBCs, N. Goshawks appeared in *Leavenworth*, KS Jan. 5 (PW, MW) and *Cowley*, KS Feb. 14 (JN). This winter, 10 Merlins were reported from Nebraska, >30 from Kansas, and ≥11 from Oklahoma; even considering a certain proportion of misidentifications, the trend appears to indicate increasing populations.

Don’t know how they do it, but Virginia Rails wintered the colds of Nebraska with one at Crescent Lake N.W.R., *Garden*, NE Dec. 1 (MF), and eight in late December in *Garden/Keith*, NE (SJD, WRS, JSu). Two were found in *Cimarron*, OK Dec. 29 (JS) and two were noted in *Texas*, OK Dec. 31 (JS). A Sandhill Crane in *Sequoyah*, OK Jan. 3 (JH, OF) was east of most.

Among exceptional wintering shorebirds was a Snowy Plover which made it in *Oklahoma* until at least Dec. 31 (NK, JAG). A Greater Yellowlegs in *Scotts Bluff* Jan. 14 (LKM) provided a first January record for Nebraska; two were present in *Pawnee*, OK Jan. 24 (JS). Several Com. Snipe braved the climate at 2 locations in *Scotts Bluff*, NE Dec. 1–Feb. 7 (LKM *et al.*). A Com. Snipe was also noted in *Cimarron*, OK Feb. 6 (JS, JNm). Two Dunlin lingered in *Tulsa* Dec. 13–Jan. 2 (JWA, m.ob.), one was noted in *Cleveland* Jan. 1 (JAG, NK), five were present in *Sequoyah* Jan. 3 (JM *et al.*), with four still present Jan. 25 (JWA), and two apparently wintered in *Oklahoma* (JGN, NK, m.ob.).

Two imm. **Pomarine Jaegers** dazzled observers with their close-up antics at Keystone Dam Nov. 29–Dec. 12 (JWA, m.ob.). Two others, which remained more distant, were identified in *Oklahoma* Dec. 5–8 (LMA, JAG *et al.*). A Franklin’s Gull Feb. 23 in *Lancaster*, NE, was an apparent eager migrant (JGJ). Adult Little Gulls made appearances in *Cherokee*, OK Dec. 1–3 (JM *et al.*) and Jan. 12 (JM), and *Bryan*, OK Jan.



Adult Little Gull at Fort Gibson Dam, Oklahoma, December 3, 1996. Photograph/Steve Metz.

6 (JW), with an immature noted in *Sequoyah*, OK Jan. 4 (SB, BB *et al.*).

Were there any other gulls around? You bet! About 30–40 California Gulls were present at McConaughy Dec. 1, with fewer present through the winter (*vide* WRS, JGJ). South of Nebraska, first-year California Gulls were found in *Mitchell*, KS Dec. 8 and Keystone Dam Jan. 18 (JWA *et al.*); an adult was noted in *Sedgwick*, KS Jan. 23, and a 3rd-year bird was reported from *Coffey*, KS Feb. 1 (MM). An ad. **Mew Gull** Dec. 1–5 in *Lancaster*, NE (JGJ, BP, LP), awaits approval by the N.O.U.R.C. to become the potential 3rd Regional record.

Two Herring-Gull-sized first-winter gulls at McConaughy provided an interesting example of some problems in gull identification. Three experts provided 3 different opinions. The issues can probably be reduced to plumage and morphological variation, potential hybridization, aberrancies, observer experience, birder knowledge, and interpretations of literature by different individuals.

Now, what did you say that Thayer’s Gull looked like—got any pictures? Thayer’s Gulls in first-winter plumage were well studied in *Lancaster*, NE Dec. 8 (MB), *Harlan*, NE Dec. 15 (WRS, JGJ), *Lincoln*, NE Dec. 27 (SJD, WRS), and Ogallala Dec. 15 (JGJ, WRS), with a 4th-winter bird also present at the latter location. Eight were reported from Kansas, including two in 2nd-winter plumage (*vide* LM), and one was well studied at Keystone Dam Jan. 17–30 (JWA, m.ob.), and *Kay*, OK Jan. 18 (NK, JCH). Most (all!?) were unphotographed.

An **Iceland Gull** record from *Douglas*, KS Feb. 22, being circulated by the K.B.R.C. would provide a first for Kansas, if accepted. Another from Nebraska is up for grabs (*vide* WRS, JGJ), with some discussion favoring the Glaucous Gull subspecies *L.h. barrovianus*. A 1969 Oklahoma record of Iceland Gull was reevaluated as a small Glaucous Gull (Tomer and Grzybowski, 1995, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 28:14–15).

Lesser Black-backed Gulls continue to increase in the Region. The 2nd and 3rd records for Kansas, if accepted by the K.B.R.C., may be the adult photographed Dec. 21 in *Russell* (MR, SS), and the first-winter bird video-taped in *Douglas* Dec. 21 (MM, MC). A 2nd-winter bird was noted in Keystone Dam Jan. 17–18 (JAG, JWA, m.ob.). An adult was also seen in Oklahoma City Dec. 22 (JS), and an ad. and two 2nd-winter birds were present there Feb. 5–12 (JAG, DE, MO).

Then there were the first-year **Great Black-backed Gulls** in *Sedgwick*, KS Dec. 21 (PJ) and at Keystone Dam Jan. 14–Feb. 11 (JL, MK, m.ob.). The *Tulsa* record, if accepted by the O.B.R.C., will furnish a first for Oklahoma. Up to nine Glaucous Gulls were noted at McConaughy Feb. 1, with a smattering of additional records across Nebraska (*vide* WRS, JGJ); 17 individuals were reported from 10 locations in Kansas (*vide* LM), and three–four from 3 locations in Oklahoma (*vide* JAG).

The surge of first-winter Black-legged Kittiwakes reported in the fall period continued into December, with two observed in *Riley*, KS Nov. 29–Dec. 21 (m.ob.), one at Keystone Dam Nov. 30–Dec. 1 (PS, JWA, m.ob.), one in *Jefferson*, KS Dec. 22–Jan. 9 (MM, BF), and one in *Oklahoma* Dec. 2–7 (MO *et al.*). An adult was also detected with the first-winter bird in *Oklahoma* Dec. 5–6 (JAG, MO). Exceptional for Jan. 3 were >20 Forster’s Terns at *Sequoyah*, OK (JM *et al.*); eight were noted in *Bryan*, OK Feb. 16 (JS).

An Inca Dove was reported in *Seward*, KS Dec. 30 (SP). Between four–nine Inca Doves were noted in *Jackson*, OK (JTi), through the winter, and one was studied in *Cimarron*, OK Feb. 6 (JS *et al.*).

A W. Screech-Owl on the Colorado-Kansas line Jan. 18 slipped into *Morton*, KS (SP *et al.*), and established the 2nd Kansas record at the same location as the first in 1985. Snowy Owls staged a small showing, with one in *Kearney*, NE Dec. 3 (LR, RH), seven for Kansas in *Stafford*, *Paumee*, *Scott*, *Sedgwick*, *Finney*, and *Meade/Seward* (*vide*



Black-legged Kittiwake in first-winter plumage at Lake Overholser, Oklahoma, December 6, 1996. Photograph/Joseph A. Grzybowski.

LM), and one in *Texas*, OK Dec. 28–30 (JS, JC, JSi). Northern Saw-whet Owls appeared in *Morrill*, NE Dec. 28 (roadkill; MB, BFH), *Scott*, KS Jan. 5 (T&SS), and *Russell*, KS Jan. 21 (MR). A Rufous Hummingbird persisted to at least Dec. 19 in *Cleveland*, OK (NK *et al.*).

Jays to Shrikes

Two Steller's Jays present in *Scotts Bluff*, NE, remained through the winter period (m.ob.). Blue Jay numbers have steadily increased in w. Nebraska; 23 were noted in *Scotts Bluff*, NE Dec. 21 (*fide* WRS, JGJ). Making several appearances were Clark's Nutcrackers: \leq six were present in *Sioux*, NE Dec. 29–30 (MB *et al.*), one–two in *Morrill*, NE Jan. 11 (AK) to Feb. 8 (LKM, LR, RH); others also appeared at *Morton*, KS in January and February (TG), *Grant*, KS (MK), *Ford*, KS (DSp), and *Cimarron*, OK.

Mountain Chickadees visited w. Nebraska this winter (*fide* WRS, JGJ), and a few wandered E to *Morton*, KS Jan. 19 (SP *et al.*), and *Grant*, KS Jan. 31–Feb. 15 (SS, DS). Not often reported in *Latimer*, OK, were Brown-headed Nuthatches (two Dec. 27; JM *et al.*). A Winter Wren in *Nemaha/Richardson*, NE Feb. 1 (WRS) was trying to live up to its name. Two Sedge Wrens in *Sequoyah*, OK Jan. 3 (JM, LH) were unexpected.

Over 1400 Mt. Bluebirds were estimated in *Barber*, KS Dec. 6 (PJ). Townsend's Solitaires appeared east to *Saunders*, NE Feb. 1 (LKM); six were observed in *Comanche*, OK Dec. 21 (JAG, KL, MSh). A Sage Thrasher in *Comanche*, OK Dec. 21 (KM, JDT), provided only the 2nd local record.

Bohemian Waxwings pushed S into the Nebraska panhandle in reasonable numbers, with 362 in *Harrison*, NE Dec. 29 (SJD, m.ob.), and \leq 70 in *Dawes*, NE Jan. 18 (RCR, DJR); seven made it to *Scott*, KS Jan. 1 (T&SS), but none was detected farther south. At least ten N. Shrikes were noted in Nebraska (*fide* WRS, JGJ), three in Kansas (*fide* LM), and three in *Cimarron*, OK.

Warblers to Finches

Surprisingly, there were no exceptional warblers to report. Among the few more tropically inclined vagrants was an imm. ♂ Rose-breasted Grosbeak photographed in *McCurtain*, OK Dec. 28 (JM). Part of a small, and localized, population in e. Oklahoma and adjacent Arkansas were two Rufous-crowned Sparrows noted Jan. 4 in *Sequoyah* (SB, BB *et al.*). A few more Chipping Sparrows wintered in Oklahoma than normal, with one exceptional record for *Cimarron*, OK Dec. 29 (JS). Swamp Sparrows wintered n. to *Scotts Bluff*, NE

(LKM), exceptional in being n. and w. of most occurrences. Also wintering farther north than most was a Harris' Sparrow in *Dawes*, NE (ZU).

The 10,000 Lapland Longspurs estimated in *Dixon*, NE Feb. 20 (JJ) furnished the high count for the season. Snow Buntings invaded in Nebraska in numbers during February, with 3000 noted in *Sheridan* Feb. 7 (RCR, DJR); six crept down to *Mitchell*, KS Dec. 22 (SS, MR), with one in *Coffey*, KS Feb. 1 (MM, BF, GP).

Unheard of during winter 10 years ago, 2000 Great-tailed Grackles in *Linn*, KS Dec. 27 (GP), and a whopping 7500 in *Leavenworth*, KS Jan. 5 (MC), as well as the 100 noted in *Texas*, OK Dec. 28 (JS), indicated the good fortunes of this invading species. A Yellow-headed Blackbird found in *Muskogee*, OK Feb. 27 (JI) was noteworthy for a species that rarely winters in the Region.

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches were evident in w. Nebraska, with flocks of 30–100 noted in *Dawes*, *Scotts Bluff*, and *Sioux*, NE (m.ob., *fide* WRS, JGJ). Cassin's Finches were also noted in *Scotts Bluff*, NE, through the winter (*fide* WRS, JGJ), with eight in *Morton*, KS Dec. 8 (PJ). Hundreds were noted in *Cimarron*, OK Dec. 29–31 (SP *et al.*) and Feb. 6–7 (JM *et al.*). Red Crossbills continued their story from this past summer. With poor cone crops in the Nebraska Pine Ridge, they invaded areas with sunflowers (RCR, DJR), occurring statewide in Kansas (*fide* LM), but mostly only from *Cimarron*, OK. A ♂ White-winged Crossbill graced a feeder Jan. 23 in *Oklahoma* (SM).

No Com. Redpolls were reported from Nebraska, but one somehow made it to *Hamilton*, KS Jan. 18 (T&SS), another was found *Tulsa* Feb. 14–17 (EL), and still another appeared in *Oklahoma* Feb. 23 (SM). The first report of decent numbers for some years, Pine Siskins made a good showing, at least in w. Nebraska (RCR, DJR).

Cited observers (area editors boldfaced):

KANSAS: Joann Brier, Ted Cable, Mark Corder, Bob Fisher, Dan Fisher, Terrell Giddens, Dan Gish, Pete Janzen, Mary King, Tom Liston, Mick McHugh, **Lloyd Moore**, John Northrup, Sebastian Patti, Galen Pittman, Mike Rader, Dave Rintoul, Richard Rucker, Diane Seltman, Scott Seltman, Tom & Sara Shane, Doug Spain (DSp), Margeret Wedge, Phil Wedge. NEBRASKA: Mark Brogie, Stephen J. Dinsmore, Robin Harding, Thomas Hoffman, Bill F. Huser, Jan Johnson, Joel G. Jorgensen, Alice Kenitz, Lucy Koenig, Larry K. Malone, Babs Padelford, Loren Padelford, Lanny Randolph,



Among the western montane birds that invaded the lowlands, Cassin's Finch played a prominent role. This male was near Kenton, Oklahoma, December 7, 1996. Photograph/Steve Metz.

Dorothy J. Rosche, **Richard C. Rosche**, **W. Ross Silcock**, Dave Stage (DSt), John Sullivan (JSu), Zee Uridil. OKLAHOMA: James W. Arterburn, Bill Beall, Sandy Berger, Jeff Cox, John & Moryne Craythorne, David Elmendorf, Opal Fulton, Joseph A. Grzybowski, Jim Harman, James C. Hoffman, Laura Hunnicutt, Jay Isbell, Tammy James, Marty Kamp, Nathan Kuhnert, E. Lindsey, **Jo Loyd**, Kent Lucas, Larry Mayes (LMa), **Louis McGee** (LMc), Jeri McMahan, Kurt Meisenzahl, Frances Neeld, John G. Newell, Jim Norman (JNm), Mitchell Oliphant, M. Sarasua, Pat Seibert, Meredith Sherman, Jerry Sisler (JSi), John Sterling, Jim Thayer, Jim Tinsley (JTi), Jack D. Tyler, Jeff Webster.

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