

# changing seasons

Winter Season, December 1, 1997–February 28, 1998

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The big picture of North America's birdlife over a whole season is a picture that is usually painted in a pointillistic style, not with a broad brush—a patchwork of small details. Even when multiple regions are affected by major events, such as a hurricane's passage or a widespread drought, the effects of these events elsewhere are usually undetectable. But winter 1997–1998 was different.

I have written this column many times over the last two decades, and never before have I been faced with a season so dominated by one single theme. This theme had a name; and last winter, even the non-birders were talking about it.

### EL NIÑO'S IMPACTS—CONTINENT-WIDE AND BEYOND

I heard about El Niño for the first time when I was nine years old—reading about the phenomenon in Roger Tory Peterson's book *Birds Over America*. By the time the big El Niño event occurred in 1983, a great many birders were aware of it, and recognized some of its effects. The general public, however, seemed largely unaware of the phenomenon until last year, lending some support to my contention that birders generally know more than non-birders about the real world. As recently as the summer of 1997, an essayist in *Time* magazine pooh-poohed the very idea of El Niño. (So far I've seen no apology or retraction in *Time*; journalists like to hold other people accountable for things, it seems, but don't like to be held accountable themselves.)

By the time the winter of 1997–1998 rolled around, however, no one could ignore the effects of El Niño. The weather was strange everywhere in North America.

For virtually the entire continent, it was a warmer season than usual, with all-time records approached or exceeded in many areas. It was the third-warmest winter on record in New England, and the fourth-warmest on the middle Atlantic Coast. At Winnipeg, Manitoba, it was the warmest winter in 120 years. At Minot, North Dakota, often famously frigid in winter, golfers were out on the course in 50-degree weather on January first!

Along with the higher temperatures came odd patterns of precipitation in many areas of the continent. Heavy rains caused severe flooding in parts of California. Some other parts of the West were unusually dry. East of the Great Plains, however, more areas than had exceptionally heavy precipitation, mostly in the form of rain rather than snow. One example of this was the big ice storm in the Northeast, discussed in more detail later in this column.

In Hawaii—out in the Pacific, where unusually high water temperatures were the source of all the disturbance—serious drought gripped the main islands, and the nesting of many lowlands birds was apparently disrupted.

### WARM-WATER BIRDS ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST

Since El Niño is recognized primarily as a temperature anomaly in the Pacific, it seems logical to look for effects on birds along our Pacific Coast. The phenomenon was clearly reflected this winter in the distribution of Brown Pelicans and Heermann's Gulls. Numbers of these two warm-water species often vary roughly in tandem, and

this season both were found in notable numbers north of usual limits. Some 260 Brown Pelicans were found at one site in California's northernmost county in December, and coastal Oregon had unprecedented numbers for the season, although most of the highest counts were in December and numbers may have dwindled later in the winter. Heermann's Gulls, by comparison, drew the most comment in the latter part of the season. Southwestern Oregon had counts of up to 40 in February, and a few were as far north as the outer coast of Washington.

High water temperatures were also undoubtedly involved in the records of albatrosses (Laysan and Short-tailed) near Kodiak Island, Alaska, during the winter, and in high counts of several gull species in southeastern Alaska. However, other waterbird occurrences were not so clear-cut. For example, Common Murres and Marbled Murrelets invaded inshore waters in southern Alaska in record numbers. Northern Fulmars were seen in unusual numbers from shore in both Washington and Oregon, and many washed up dead on the beaches

### IN THIS MILD WINTER, MANY BIRDS CONTRADICTED THE RANGE MAPS

Bird species distributions are dynamic, and subject to change over time. We know that, of course. But it can be impressive to see just how quickly the birds respond to changes in conditions. Winter ranges are particularly fluid, because many species seem to be pushing the limits constantly, to see just how far north they can survive the season.

In an exceptionally mild winter like this one, it would be easy to dwell on a few gee-whiz records, such as the Summer Tanagers seen in Wisconsin and New Brunswick. Easy—but misleading. Every winter produces a few records of birds bizarrely far north, even if the season is an unusually harsh one. What was notable in winter 1997–1998 was the sheer number of lingerers and half-hardies in northern climes. This phenomenon is best appreciated by reading the columns for several regions. Take your pick; practically all the regions lying to the north of the southernmost tier reported the same general trend.

A few patterns stand out here. Some waterbirds migrate only when they have to, so the northern prairies recorded many ducks, geese, and gulls much later in the season than usual. Warblers wintering in northern regions always attract attention. This season, the Atlantic Provinces had near-record numbers of lingering warblers, and an unusually high percentage of these actually survived through the winter. The Hudson–Delaware region had 14 species of warblers during the season; several of these, including Ovenbird and Black-throated Blue, Townsend's, and Yellow-throated warblers, made it through until spring. The Middlewestern Prairie region had 12 warbler species for the season, while the western Great Lakes region had seven.

Less likely to draw mentions in boldface type, but probably more significant biologically, were the many records of birds wintering just a little bit north of usual ranges. These, in my opinion, are more likely to lead to actual consolidated range extensions. Read through a series of regional reports and you will see some species being mentioned repeatedly. Blue-winged Teal lingered north, posting new high

records in some areas. Lesser Yellowlegs were found in surprising numbers north to Maryland and New Jersey, and over 3000 were tallied at one spot in South Carolina. Swallows of several sorts were unusually numerous in northern California and elsewhere. Tree Swallows in particular were common north of usual limits in several areas. Eastern Phoebes were among the stars of the winter in many places, including the northern Appalachian region and Ontario. House Wrens were notable in a variety of places including Rhode Island, Ontario, and Montana. If you peruse the regional reports, you are likely to find many further examples.

### **THE WARM WINTER TRIGGERED AN EARLY SPRING, AS MEASURED BY THE TIMING OF MIGRATION**

Along with many birds attempting to winter north of usual areas, a great many started north earlier than normal. This was more noticeable, of course, in more northerly regions, where birders have more incentive to look for signs of spring. This year, the northward migration was well under way before the end of February.

Natural selection seems to drive the timing of spring migration, with many birds going north as early as they feasibly can. Males that arrive first on the breeding grounds probably stand a better chance of staking out a good territory—but if their arrival is too early, they will not survive into the breeding season. By pushing the limits every spring, migrant birds literally bet their lives. In late winter 1998, many birds appeared to be betting that the warm winter would lead into a mild spring.

Among the many northbound birds in February were expected ones such as Killdeer, Eastern Phoebe, and Tree Swallow. In Ontario, by February 28, numbers of northbound waterfowl at Long Point had already peaked, and more than a score of American Woodcocks were already displaying at Point Pelee. Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles were returning to Ontario in numbers by February 10. Perhaps most remarkable was the report from the Queen Charlotte Islands, well above 50 degrees north latitude off the coast of British Columbia, where an influx of Red-winged Blackbirds began as early as February 13. Again, a perusal of the regional reports will turn up many more examples of strikingly early migrants.

### **THE JANUARY 1998 ICE STORM AND ITS EFFECTS**

In terms of impacts on humans, one of the biggest events of the winter occurred quietly enough: for several days in early January, it rained in Québec, northern New England, and extreme northern New York. It was not even an especially heavy rain, but it was freezing on contact, and the buildup of ice had devastating effects on trees, power lines, power poles, practically anything breakable above the ground.

The impacts on humans were extreme. As reported by Pierre Bannon and Normand David in Québec, at the peak of the storm some 3.5 million people were without electrical power, and power had not been restored to some areas by a month later—not surprisingly, since more than 30,000 power poles had been knocked down by the ice. At least 25 deaths were blamed on the storm. People in the hardest-hit areas were still dealing with the aftermath of the storm several months later.

The effects of the ice storm on birds were not nearly so apparent. Undoubtedly some birds perished when natural food sources were buried under ice, but such mortality was not obvious to most observers. All regional editors involved with the affected area made the point that such immediate short-term effects are likely to be less important than the medium-term and long-term impact of altered habitats. Literally millions of trees were damaged or destroyed, over

a huge area. Populations of birds that nest in the forest canopy are sure to be negatively affected. However, not all birds will suffer. In far northern New York, subregional editor J.M.C. Peterson predicted that the impending surge of second-growth woodland would bring about a boom in Mourning Warblers and Indigo Buntings within a few years.

### **WHAT LITTLE IS LEFT: THE FEW EVENTS NOT CLEARLY AFFECTED BY EL NIÑO**

In surveying the season, it is practically easier to name the events that were not tied to El Niño than to list all of those that were. One notable non-happening was the virtual lack of any kind of northern owl flight. Even Snowy Owls were in relatively short supply almost everywhere except in parts of the Prairie Provinces. In the Pacific Northwest, where a big Snowy invasion occurred the previous winter, the lack of any “echo” flight this year was surprising.

Some of the winter finches and their fellow travelers did pull off a huge invasion in parts of the Northeast this season. Bohemian Waxwings staged apparently their largest influx ever in Newfoundland and their second-largest in Maine, with fair numbers elsewhere in the Maritimes and New England and parts of Ontario. Pine Grosbeaks made a much bigger showing than they usually do, even in invasion years, especially in northern New England and in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It was a good redpoll and Pine Siskin year in several northeastern regions. Even the missing-in-action Evening Grosbeak was seen in fair numbers in Ontario.

For some northeastern birders, crossbills provided the season's highlight. Both White-winged and Red crossbills were seen in their best numbers in years in some localities. Red Crossbill is, of course, a special case. Not just a nomadic species, it is potentially a complex of up to eight species, identifiable mainly by callnotes. Looking back on this year's invasion in the future, we may find ourselves wondering which species of “red crossbills” were involved. In the reports this season, only Marshall Iliff and company in the Middle Atlantic Coast region mentioned making actual attempts to identify their crossbills in this way: their tape recordings indicated the birds were mainly “Type 4,” with a few “Type 3.” We are still a long way from understanding the distribution of these potential species. Birders are encouraged to tape-record the callnotes of wandering Red Crossbills at every opportunity.

Finally, two patterns that have been going on quietly for years now involve steadily increasing numbers of Ross's Geese and Lesser Black-backed Gulls in eastern North America. These two patterns are obviously unrelated, but they both posted impressive data points this season. Consider the estimate of 100+ Lesser Black-backs at one spot, among the big gull concentration at Florence, New Jersey, or the 50 reported from a four-state area of the Middlewestern Prairie Region. Similarly, Ross's Geese are being reported matter-of-factly all over the east (consider that Tennessee had nine at one spot and five at another, Pennsylvania had eight, and Maryland reported at least ten). These are not just birds being displaced from the west: this was “an incredible winter” for the species in Arizona, and numbers “went through the ceiling” in Texas. In the case of both these species, a perspective involving many regions makes it clear that these population increases are profound.

This column can touch on only so many aspects of the season. As always, I invite you to read through the regional columns that follow, and find your own patterns.

