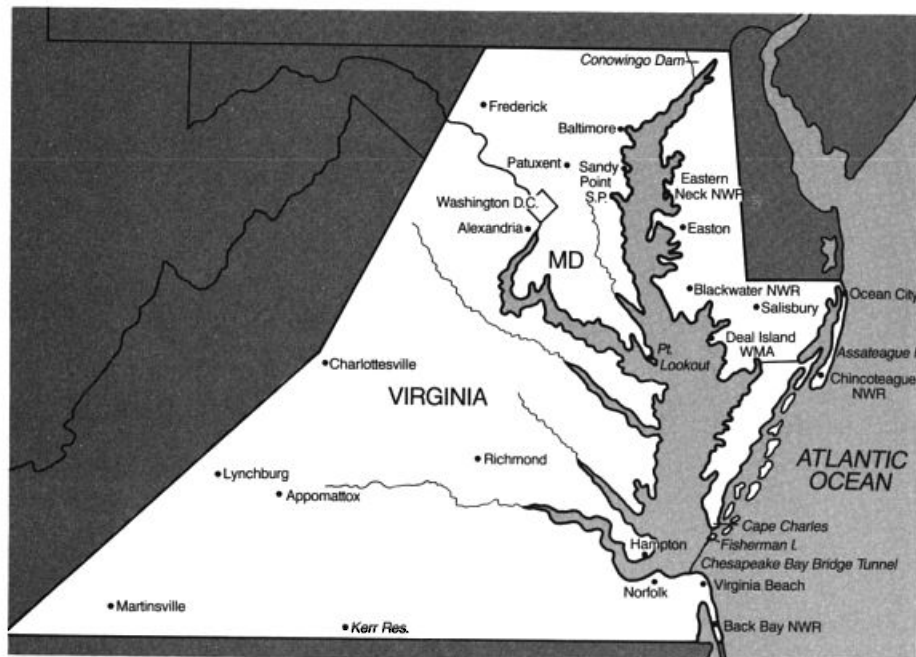


# middle atlantic coast region



## MARSHALL J. ILIFF

Whether due to El Niño or not, this winter was exceptional. December was warm but not remarkably so, while January averaged 5.3°F above normal and was the seventh warmest in history. One record-setting streak at National Airport in the District of Columbia had eight straight days of 60°F temperatures, and four straight where the low was in the mid-50s. February was even milder, and the winter as a whole was the fourth mildest on record, with temperatures 8.4°F above average. At National Airport, there was only 0.1 inch of measurable snowfall, tying the record low from the winter of 1972–1973.

The winter was much wetter than usual. Rainfall at National Airport was twice what is average in January, and in the District of Columbia the winter as a whole was the fourth wettest on record, with 10.63 inches of precipitation. In southeast Virginia, it was the wettest winter on record. The high precipitation levels were primarily the result of severe nor'easters which struck the Region in late January and February. The first hit January 28, dropped a lot of rain,

and caused significant coastal flooding. The second, February 4–5, was termed by some the most severe winter storm to hit the mid-Atlantic since the 1962 “Ash Wednesday Storm.” Coastal flooding was severe and there was significant property damage and erosion. Foremost among those may have been a break introduced into the northern section of Assateague Island, Maryland, something which has been imminent for several years since that section of the island was blasted by a similar winter storm several years back.

The warm winter clearly persuaded a number of less hardy species to attempt to winter, and may also have allowed species common in the Region in typical colder winters to winter farther north. The mild weather was more noticeable for the effect it had on the breeding biology of birds in the Region. Bazuin kept copious notes on phenology, and gave special attention to bird species singing and in courtship displays during the warm winter weather. Most songbirds do some singing during the winter months, especially on warm mornings, but Bazuin noted that 31 species in song in *Mathews*, VA, during January and

early February was clearly atypical. Spring migration was also more evident this winter than most, with early Tree Swallows, Ospreys, and several other species defying the *Field Notes* reporting seasons.

The predominant avian event for most birders involved crossbills. Both species invaded the Region for the first time in well over a decade. Other winter finches were around in pretty low numbers, and most other northerners (raptors, owls, Golden-crowned Kinglets) seemed to stay away. A few rarities are particularly noteworthy, with the best being Short-tailed Shearwater and Yellow-legged Gull. Rumors of Western Tanager, Rufous Hummingbird, and White-winged Junco in Virginia, and an Ovenbird in Baltimore, Maryland, were never confirmed and are not included here.

A database of *all* reports of the season (even the most mundane), and all reports from Fall 1995 on, is being maintained, and the data are available to all interested persons upon request. Many thanks (as always) to Ned Brinkley, Jim Stasz, and especially Gene Scarpulla, for helpful editorial comments.

**Abbreviations:** Assat. (*Assateague I. National Seashore*); au. (*Audio Recording*); Bay (*Chesapeake Bay*); Black. (*Blackwater N.W.R.*); C.B.B.T. (*Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel*); Chinc. (*Chincoteague N.W.R.*); Conowingo (*Conowingo Dam*); Craney (*Craney I. Disposal Area*); D.C. (*District of Columbia*); Deal (*Deal Island W.M.A.*); E.S.V.N.W.R. (*Eastern Shore of Virginia N.W.R.*); Hart (*Hart-Miller I.*); Kipt. (*Kiptopeke S.P.*); p.a. (*pending acceptance by state records committee*); P.L.S.P. (*Point Lookout S.P.*); S.P.S.P. (*Sandy Point State Park*); W.W.T.P. (*Waste Water Treatment Plant*). All locations can be assumed to be in Maryland, except that each Virginia location is annotated the *first* time it is mentioned in the text.

## LOONS TO WATERFOWL

Although not noted to be unusually common in coastal areas of the Region this year, two stellar Red-throated Loon counts were made: 1375 on the Little Cr., Virginia Beach, VA, CBC Dec. 31 (*vide* PS), almost 10

times the previous record from 1967; and 661 on the C.B.B.T., *Northampton*, VA, CBC Dec. 26 (*fide* NB). In the Upper Bay, where the species is scarce, a count of 23 was equally noteworthy Feb. 28 (EJS) at Hart, *Baltimore*, a very high count for that section of the Bay.

Of about 10 Red-necked Grebes reported, all were coastal, most were from the C.B.B.T., and there was no apparent push of migrants as is often obvious in late January and February. Eared Grebe reports probably pertained to four birds (a good number for the Region in any event), with singles reported from Chinc., *Accomack*, VA, Dec. 13–Feb. 8 (DBr, TK, m.ob.); Craney, Virginia Beach, VA, Jan. 4–mid-February (AW); near Phoebus, Hampton, VA, Dec. 19 (NB); and P.L.S.P., *Saint Mary's*, Feb. 9–16 (ph. PC, CF).

**SA** Probably unprecedented in the Region in winter, 2 pelagic trips off Virginia Beach, VA, produced a combined total of 4 tubenose species. A single Manx Shearwater was not unexpected Jan. 18 (BP, NB, m.ob.), while 83 N. Fulmar counted Feb. 21 was noteworthy for Virginia. A **Sooty Shearwater** Feb. 21 was extraordinary, though there is at least a single December report from Maryland, and several have been reported from North Carolina (the most recent last year). All paled next to the **Short-tailed Shearwater** (p.a.)—a first for the state, Region, and Atlantic Ocean—which made 3 passes by the small boatload of birders on the Jan. 18 (†NB, BP et al.) trip. Close study of the head, bill, and underwing pattern on at least one of its flights past the boat convinced the leaders and others aboard that the characters were consistent with Short-tailed Shearwater and eliminated Sooty Shearwater, as well as other small dark shearwaters and gadfly petrels. Expert opinions of the descriptions (no photos were taken) have been supportive. Although seemingly an extraordinary record, the species' occurrence in the North Atlantic has been predicted by some, its winter appearance seems logical, and there is a precedent for Pacific seabirds (Buller's Shearwater in New Jersey, for example) on the East Coast.

Only the Back Bay, VA, CBC Dec. 28 (*fide* PS) produced a notable count of N. Gannets with 2640. A few spent the winter in—or at least visited—the Middle section of the Bay, with reports from P.L.S.P. (PC); North Beach, *Calvert* (DB, JLS); and New Pt. Comfort, *Mathews*, VA (JBB), from January onward. The Ocean City, *Worcester*, CBC just barely missed its first Brown Pelican when a late one was seen in Assateague Bay a day prior to the count, Dec. 28 (EB, RFR et al.). Four Virginia reports of Am. White Pelican was above average. Singles were at Chinc. Dec. 5 (SG); Fisherman's I., *Northampton*, VA, for a Cape Charles CBC first Dec. 27 (RLA, MB, DD); remarkably, several miles off Virginia Beach on the Feb. 21 pelagic trip (BP, NB et al.); and at Mason Neck, *Fairfax*, VA, Feb. 28 (RoL).

Great Cormorants turned up nowhere surprising, but one at Hart was interesting Dec. 21 (EJS). In Maryland, the only recent regular Bay wintering sites away from *Saint Mary's* may be Sharpe's I. Lighthouse, *Talbot*, and Baltimore Lighthouse, *Anne Arundel*. Up to seven were seen at the former Dec. 22 (DMe) and Feb. 22 (JLS, RL), while at Baltimore Lighthouse 17 were counted for the Annapolis CBC Jan. 4 (*fide* HLW). The C.B.B.T. always holds the highest count for the species, with 56 there for the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 27 (*fide* HTA). A count of 615 Double-crested Cormorants on the Little Creek CBC Dec. 31 (*fide* PS) was high, though the species has been increasingly wintering in coastal areas in the Region. More remarkable on that count was Virginia's (and the Region's) 2nd winter record for **Anhinga**, a female found Dec. 31 (ph. TB, †MAM, *fide* PS). The previous winter record was on this count in 1981.

A rare trip to Smith I., *Somerset*, Jan. 18–19 found one ad. Little Blue Heron Jan. 18 and two there the next day, along with three Snowy Egrets (MJI, JLS, RL). Both have fewer than 5 previous reports in Maryland in January. Tricolored Herons at several coastal locales were not unexpected, but might have been absent in a harsher winter. Three Green Heron reports in December, as well as a single Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at E.S.V.N.W.R., *Northampton*, VA, Dec. 27 (MJI, JLS), were similar products of the relatively warm year.

Remarkable even for this mild winter were the 105 White Ibises present at Fisherman's I. for the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 27 (*fide* HTA), besting last year's record count. Two at E.S.V.N.W.R. (less than 2 mi from Fisherman's I.) Jan. 16

(HTA) evidenced that at least some of the ibises continued into January, though no one visited Fisherman's I. after the CBC. The 13 Glossy Ibises at Deal, *Somerset*, Feb. 2 (SHD) furnished only the 4th ever for Maryland in February, and probably a high count for winter.

This was the first year of a Trumpeter Swan reintroduction effort in the Region. Three birds hatched in the Virginia Piedmont followed an ultralight aircraft to Black., *Dorchester*, for the winter, and all survived. A 4th bird was transported there as well, and also survived. Some hope the birds will return successfully to Virginia in the spring and that this flock will be expanded next year, though there has been little discussion in the Region about possible negative effects that this reintroduction might have (see *Field Notes* 51(5):962). Even less encouraging swan news was the immense count of 1038 Mute Swans on the St. Michael's, *Talbot*, CBC Dec. 21 (*fide* HTA). Not your typical winter season report, a record-early Mute Swan egg date was established by Reese, who found an incubating adult Feb. 27 at Newcomb, *Talbot*.

Four Greater White-fronted Geese were all returnees from previous years (v.o). An ad. **Ross's Goose** at Beaverdam Res. (where Snow Geese do not winter in numbers), *Loudoun*, Dec. 6–18 (p.a. DFA, DG) was a great Piedmont bird and followed on the heels of 2 other Piedmont reports from the Fall. Ross's Geese at more expected locales were up to three throughout the winter at Black. (v.o.); two immatures at Snow Hill, *Worcester*, Dec. 27 (MO); one adult at Back Bay N.W.R., VA, Dec. 28 (†HTA, MJI); four adults near Salisbury, a *Wicomico* 2nd, Dec. 30 (MJI, JLS, RL); and one adult at Critcher Rd., *Worcester*, Jan. 17 (MJI, JLS). The only noncoastal Brant reported was one at S.P.S.P., *Anne Arundel*, Dec. 26–Feb. 1 (v.o.). Special efforts in Maryland to find "Richardson's" Canada Geese (*B. c. hutchinsii*) during December and January yielded 13 reports (MJI, JLS), from areas with significant Canada Goose concentrations. More problematic is a report of a bird with somewhat different proportions and a "dark breast," possibly suggesting *B. c. minima*, near E.S.V.N.W.R. Jan. 18 (HTA). Interestingly this was the only "small" Canada Goose found among Snow Geese. The possibility that this race may occur in the Region is not yet established.

Wood Ducks may have wintered in better-than-average numbers in some locales, and several CBCs had quite high counts.

The Am. Black Duck count on the Cape Charles CBC disturbingly dipped below the previous low of 523, with 343 recorded Dec. 27 (*fide* HTA). A White-cheeked Pintail was at Hampton, VA, Feb. 2-8 (p.a. †NB, v.o.). Origin will obviously be controversial, but perhaps this bird should not necessarily be flagged as an escapee: It showed no signs of captivity, its appearance corresponded with the first severe winter storm, and Virginia has 2 old records (December 1937 and November 1966) currently treated as wild by the state records committee.

Quite rare in the Region in most winters, Blue-winged Teal remained in several coastal locales. The 174 counted for the s. *Dorchester* CBC Dec. 26 (*fide* CSR) was the most astounding, establishing a record winter count for Maryland and demolishing the previous count high of 32. Puddle ducks were generally in good numbers. About four ad. male Eur. Wigeon reports were widely scattered and came from *Worcester*, *Prince George's*, and *Fauquier*, VA (v.o.). The flock of 2500 Redhead counted in Fishing Bay, *Dorchester*, Dec. 31 (*fide* CSR) was a great surprise: the only other place on the East Coast where they are known to occur in comparable numbers (up to 10,000) has been Pocomoke Sound, *Somerset*, about 30 mi to the south. Since none was recorded on the *Crisfield* CBC (*fide* CV), perhaps the birds in Fishing Bay were part of that flock.

Eiders and Harlequin Ducks were unusually common. The 34 Com. Eiders recorded by 3 different parties on the Little Creek CBC (previous high of four) might have established a record state count for Virginia, were it not for up to 30-50 which wintered on the various islands of the C.B.B.T. The high count of 55 was made Dec. 27 (DS), and 40-50 were counted on a number of occasions through the season (v.o.). At Ocean City Inlet, *Worcester*, the large flock peaked at 25 Jan. 18 (MJI, JLS, RL, JBj). Both Ocean City and the C.B.B.T. harbored up to 12 King Eiders, with that count Dec. 28 (MO) at Ocean City and Jan. 17 (BP) at the C.B.B.T. (and including one ad. male). Harlequin Ducks also were well above average, and peaked at 13 at both the Ocean City Inlet Dec. 28 (NS, FS) and the C.B.B.T. Dec. 26 (NB). Brinkley has looked closely at the sum of the reports for coastal Virginia and estimates (from sex ratios, flock composition, etc.) minimum counts of 89 Com. Eiders, 22 King Eiders, and 17 Harlequin Ducks over the season. The Cambridge, *Dorchester*, King Eider from the Fall Season remained at least through mid-December.

Black Scoters are generally the scarcest scoters in the Upper Bay, so a large flock at P.L.S.P. through much of December, peaking at 800 Dec. 15 (PC), was most unusual. Counts of Black Scoters elsewhere on the coast were relatively high, but no significant White-winged Scoter flocks were noted. Surf Scoters, however, congregated in exceptional numbers at the mouth of the Bay, with up to 25,000 reported there (with 3500 Black Scoters and only 25-30 White-winged Scoters) from early February through March (*fide* NB).

#### HAWKS TO ALCIDS

Seven late December and January Ospreys (including one through most of the winter at Hughes Hollow, *Montgomery*) were more than usual in this part of winter (v.o.). The flurry of 8 reports in the last 2 days of February were clearly returning migrants, with the earliest being a pair at Jug Bay, *Anne Arundel*, Feb. 20 (RD). Bald Eagles continue to do extremely well in the Region: the high CBC totals were 108 on the Hopewell, *Prince George*, CBC, VA, Dec. 21 (*fide* LR), and 94 on the s. *Dorchester* CBC Dec. 26 (*fide* CSR). No significant N. Goshawk movement reached us, despite a good fall flight at some coastal hawk watches. Aside from a very few in Bay saltmarshes where they are regular, Rough-legged Hawks were also very scarce (with only 3 additional reports). The only Golden Eagle reports away from the Black. area (where there were at least three this year) were one at Conowingo, *Harford*, Dec. 5 (BS) and one at Dameron, *Saint Mary's*, Feb. 13 (†PC). Close to 40 reports of Merlin was unusually high, even given that the vast majority were from the coast.

No Ring-necked Pheasants were reported from the areas where this species was once well-established in the Region, though Wild Turkey numbers continue to flourish and the species seems to be becoming more and more common and conspicuous in new areas, such as Maryland's lower Eastern Shore.

Though there has been some evidence that Clapper Rails may be resident on the Western Shore of Maryland, one seen at Chesapeake Beach Dec. 22 (†MJI) provided probably only the 2nd winter report for *Calvert*, very close to the species' northernmost breeding locale on the Western Shore of the Bay. Single King Rails at Garden Cr. Marsh, *Mathews*, VA, Dec. 15 (JBB) and at Courthouse Point W.M.A., *Cecil*, Feb. 8 (MWW) were both unusual. A *Gloucester* first were the three ad. Sandhill Cranes that

remained on the Catlett Is. in the York R. from Dec. 14-Jan. 15 (TK, m.ob.); surprisingly, they were joined by two other adults for one day only Jan. 4 (TK). One ad. and two imm. Sandhill Cranes stopped in at Jug Bay, *Anne Arundel/Prince George's* Jan. 5-9 (CS, JLS, DM, ph.).

The mild weather seemed to have had a noticeable effect on shorebirds in particular, with a number of unusual winter records of species which normally winter somewhat farther south. Semipalmated Plovers are not regular in the Region in winter, so seven on the Chinc. CBC Dec. 28 (*fide* TK) were good, while two at Bethel Beach Preserve, *Mathews*, Dec. 6 and seven there Dec. 20 (D&JM) were even more surprising inside the Bay. Two Am. Avocets were at Craney Jan. 30 (WY) and five were there Feb. 20 (BL). Lesser Yellowlegs, far scarcer than Greater Yellowlegs in winter, were reported from at least 12 localities, and high counts of 30 on the s. *Dorchester* CBC Dec. 31 (*fide* CSR) and at Girdletree, *Worcester*, Jan. 10 (SHD) suggest that the mild winter significantly impacted this species. Similarly Willets, though regular winterers just s. of the Maryland line on Virginia's Eastern Shore, are extremely rare in Maryland in winter. This year the Ocean City CBC recorded 16 (in several groups) Dec. 29 (*fide* CSR), and at least six lasted the winter to March (v.o.). All seen well seemed to show the size and structure typical of "Western" Willets (MJI, JLS).

Marbled Godwits are similarly regular in Virginia in winter but very rare in Maryland. One at Ocean City Jan. 19 (ph.GMJ) was a one-day wonder. On a different vein, a Spotted Sandpiper at Black Hills Res., *Montgomery*, in the middle of the Feb. 28 nor'easter (NS) was an astoundingly early arrival, besting the previous record by more than 3 weeks. At the other end of migration, a White-rumped Sandpiper at Scotland, *Saint Mary's*, Dec. 1 (PC) rounded out a small surge of very late fall reports of this species, and provided Maryland's 3rd for December. A large flock of Dunlin on the Smith I. jetty Jan. 19 (MJI, JLS, RL) contained one Ruddy Turnstone, four Sanderlings, and three Purple Sandpipers, with the latter affording only the 2nd record for the location and for *Somerset*. However, Smith I. is not often visited by birders, especially in winter, and Purple Sandpipers may regularly winter there.

Two Red Knots spent the winter at Ocean City Inlet (v.o.); at least one has been present most recent years. Seven (eight Feb. 28) Least and one Western sandpiper, which

appeared at Hart Feb. 15 (EJS) and remained into March, may have been flooded out of coastal marshes by the Feb. 4-5 storm. A scarce winterer even on the coast, one Least Sandpiper flocking with Killdeer at a flooded field near Allen's Fresh, *Charles*, Jan. 18 (GMJ) & 25 (GMJ, MJI) was much more absurd. Five Short-billed Dowitchers at New Pt. Comfort, *Mathews*, Jan. 3 & 5 (JBB) were unusual there.

**SA** Hart-Miller I. Dredged Material Containment Facility, *Baltimore*, has long been well represented in this column. This 1100 acre facility, in operation since 1983, has provided some of Maryland's best shorebird habitat, is an important area for wintering waterfowl and roosting gulls and terns, and has even hosted small tern colonies over the years. This habitat has changed frequently over the years, depending on dredging and pumping activity in the cells, and its future as a consistent shorebird locale has always been limited by the inevitable end to the pumping and colonization of the area by *phragmites*. Recently though, Federal, State, and non-governmental agencies working on the environmental restoration plan for the filled 300-acre South Cell of the island have selected a design alternative that will create mudflats and pools for migrating shorebirds, open water for migrating and wintering waterfowl, and an isolated interior island for nesting terns. This exciting option will allow Hart-Miller to permanently provide habitat for these groups for years to come.

A 2nd-winter Pomarine Jaeger on the Jan. 18 pelagic trip (BP, NB et al.) was noteworthy. Single Parasitic Jaegers were reported on the Back Bay CBC Dec. 28 (*vide* PS) and at the C.B.B.T. Jan. 18 (BP, HTA). Lone Great Skuas were found on both Virginia Beach pelagic trips Jan. 16 and Feb. 21 (BP, NB et al.).

A 2nd-winter Franklin's Gull reported from Neabsco Cr., *Prince William*, VA, Dec. 15 (CT) was late for that species, which is rare but regular as late as November. Little Gull reports from the C.B.B.T. Dec. 26 (NB et al.), Ocean City Dec. 27 (NS, FS), and Cape Charles, *Northampton*, VA, Dec. 27 (BP, NB) were of adults, except for the C.B.B.T. bird, which was in 2nd-winter plumage. Four Black-headed Gulls was a

pretty good number. One adult at Denton W.W.T.P., *Caroline*, Dec. 26 (MJI, JLS) was at a location where one appeared in March 1992, and provided only the 2nd county record. Others were an adult at Conowingo Jan. 6 (MJI, RL), an adult at Flag Ponds, *Calvert*, Feb. 8 (TD), and an immature at Ocean City Feb. 28 (SHD).

The ad. **Black-tailed Gull** at the C.B.B.T. was back for its 2nd consecutive winter Dec. 13 (LL et al.) and remained at least through March (ph., †, m.ob.). Obviously, there is still some discussion as to whether the New World records away from Alaska are likely to be natural vagrants or not, and hopefully further records will clarify this question some. Those interested in the pattern of records and arguments for natural vagrancy should check out *Western Birds* 29:49-54 (1998).

**SA** An interesting gull at Conowingo Jan. 1-6, and perhaps longer, was the subject of much debate and discussion. Originally identified and reported as a first-winter Common Gull, the tail and rump pattern appeared to match that species almost perfectly. Structure, size, back color, wing pattern, and other characters were mostly ambivalent or favored Ring-billed Gull, and good flight photos by Hoffman and others appear to show the median covert pattern of Ring-billed Gull. Support for the identification of the Conowingo bird as a Ring-billed Gull is nearly unanimous now, though it has not undergone review by the Maryland / D.C. Records Committee yet (and no documentation supporting Com. Gull has yet been submitted). Interestingly, a first-winter gull with a nearly identical tail pattern was photographed at Breezy Pt., NY, Jan. 17 (A. Wilson) and was identified as a Ring-billed Gull with an abnormal tail pattern.

An apparent first-winter *michahellis* **Yellow-legged Gull** (p.a.) was on the beach at Back Bay N.W.R. Dec. 28 (ph. †NB, BP). The photos and description have been sent out for expert review, but "fulfill 100% of the desiderata for *Larus cachinnans michahellis*" according to Brinkley. Among the salient field marks observed were large size, full chest, pale head and belly superficially suggesting Great Black-backed Gull, black bill with limited pale pink base, dark upperparts and upperwing, very little in the way

of a window on the inner primaries, white uppertail coverts with limited dark speckling, and a white tail with bold black sub-terminal band and white outer tail feathers. Observers in the Region and elsewhere are urged to familiarize themselves with all plumages of this species. Virginia has one prior report (March 2, 1997; see *Field Notes* 51(5):984) that is still under review.

Four Thayer's Gulls were found at 2 localities: an adult was at Conowingo Dec. 29 (EJS) and a first-winter was there Jan. 3 (JLS, EBo), while Salisbury Landfill, *Wicomico*, held an adult Jan. 17 (ph. MJI) and a first-winter Jan. 26 (ph. GMJ). Iceland Gulls, all presumed to be the expected *kumlienii*, were reported from at least 7 localities from Dec. 28 on, the most productive of which was Salisbury Landfill, hosting three first-winters Jan. 19 (ph. MJI) and up to two 2nd-winters Jan. 26 (SHD). An apparent first-winter at the Virginia Beach Landfill, Virginia Beach, VA, Jan. 17 (ph. NB) had a pale bill "dipped in ink," though the jury is still out on whether the bird might be a *glaucoides* Iceland Gull. Just three Glaucous Gulls were found (all first-winters), with one at Liberty Res., *Carroll*, Dec. 17 (MJI, GMJ); one at St. Andrews Landfill for a *Saint Mary's* 3rd Dec. 23 (KR); and one at Conowingo Jan. 1-24 (OJ, JLS, EB, m.ob.). A probable Glaucous × Herring Gull was spotted at Ft. Story, Virginia Beach, VA, Feb. 16 (PP, OJ), and another first-winter was on the beach at Back Bay N.W.R. Feb. 22 (NB, DC). A Black-legged Kittiwake on the seawall at Ocean City Feb. 7 (SHD), and two there the next day, were due to the nor'easter 2 days prior, and the Jan. 18 and Feb. 21 (BP, NB et al.) pelagics from Virginia Beach, VA, recorded 600 and 164 kittiwakes, respectively.

For alcids, the Jan. 18 (BP, NB et al.) trip recorded one each of Dovekie, Razorbill, and Atlantic Puffin, while the Feb. 21 (BP, NB et al.) trip found six Dovekies, eight Razorbills, and nine Atlantic Puffins. A large alcid reported from Kipt., *Northampton*, VA, Jan. 5 (RW) was either a young Razorbill or a Thick-billed Murre, though even a Razorbill would be unusual there.

## OWLS TO SHRIKES

An imm. Snowy Owl that visited Chinc. Jan. 13-Feb. 1 (FD, DWo, m.ob.) was the only one of the season. Northern owls were in very short supply: there was only a single report of Long-eared Owl, fewer than 5 reports of N. Saw-whet Owl, and Short-eared Owl—typically at least the most visible of the three—was present only at a

couple of its usual haunts. Eastern Phoebes always winter in small numbers on the Coastal Plain in the Region, but the numbers found in the Piedmont (about 10 birds) were unusual and suggest that the mildness of the season allowed them to stay in those typically colder and less hospitable portions of the Region. Though **Western Kingbird** has occasionally been found on Regional CBCs, one at Ft. Story Feb. 7 was especially notable so late in the season (MRB).

A highlight of the coastal CBCs were the large numbers of Tree Swallows which remained. They stuck mostly to the coast and were seen feeding over saltmarsh and dune habitats, where hundreds would descend upon single Bayberry bushes like a plague of locusts. Some counts were a record 246 on the Wachapreague, *Accomack*, CBC Dec. 20 (*fide* TK), 26 on the C.B.B.T. Dec. 26 (*fide* NB), a record 67 on the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 27 (*fide* HTA), a record 3400 (conservative count) on the Back Bay CBC Dec. 28 (*fide* PS) squashing the old record of 100 from 1956, 677 on the Chinc. CBC Dec. 28 (*fide* TK), and a very conservative 1480 on the Ocean City CBC Dec. 29 (*fide* CSR), topping the previous high of 759 in 1970. After the CBC period, there were intermittent reports from coastal locales like Deal, Elliot I., *Dorchester*, E. A. Vaughn W.M.A., *Worcester*, Chinc., and elsewhere (v.o.). Most enigmatic were the 16 counted at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, *Harford*, Jan. 31 (DW, SP). This date would be extraordinary for northbound migrants, but winterers are unknown away from the coast. Early returnees first appear in late February some years and, while detecting early coastal migrants is difficult given the widespread wintering of the species there, the two near Starr, *Queen Anne's*, Feb. 21 (DP) were undoubtedly migrants. A first for the Ocean City CBC Dec. 29 (MO) was the Barn Swallow observed at Mason Landing, *Worcester*.

Common Ravens may disperse away from the mountains in early spring, which might explain two over a Great Falls, *Fairfax*, backyard Feb. 21 (DBr). Several chickadees near Prettyboy Res., *Baltimore*, Jan. 6 (MJI, JLS) showed intermediate characters and were likely hybrids, rarely found away from the mountains. The distribution of Red-breasted Nuthatches painted an interesting picture. The species was by no means widespread, but was locally abundant in some areas and absent in many others. The areas in which they were most common were the "crossbill areas," places

where mature white pines were laden with cones; they were scarce or absent from areas of Loblolly or Virginia pines, the latter especially attractive to nuthatches in most years. The highest count was 183 on the *Carroll* Midwinter Count Jan. 24 (*fide* RFR), with well over half found in a single morning walk along the Liberty Res. shore (MJI). Brown-headed Nuthatches seemed to be more common in all parts of the Region than is typical, and many CBCs counts were higher than the past several years. For example, the Ocean City CBC recorded 41, the highest since 1971, and the s. *Dorchester* CBC's 73 was the highest since 1991.

Low CBC totals suggest that Winter Wrens may have been scarcer than usual this year. A Sedge Wren in Alexandria, *Fairfax*, VA, Dec. 20 (*fide* JBj) was a great find for the D.C. CBC. Golden-crowned Kinglets were remarkably scarce, and their complete absence from some areas was stark and obvious to active observers. Ruby-crowned Kinglets may have responded to the warm weather by wintering in greater numbers in our area, and the species was found in good numbers on most CBCs. Two Blue-gray Gnatcatchers lingered well into the winter: one at Dyke Marsh, *Fairfax*, VA, Dec. 14 to at least Feb. 15 (TD, SS, m.ob.) and another at Hains Pt., D.C., Dec. 20–Jan. 31 (OJ, TD). Even given that count day was intermittently rainy, it was a shock that the Cape Charles CBC missed Brown Thrasher for the first time in its 33-year history (*fide* HTA), and the all-time low of four on the Ocean City CBC two days later was almost as surprising (*fide* CSR). How did this declining species respond to the mild weather?

American Pipits were also generally scarce. Loggerhead Shrikes are barely keeping their place in this column since Maryland's most regular and well-known locale for the species in recent years (Lilypons, *Frederick*) seems no longer to have shrikes. A Loggerhead Shrike on the Dec. 21 Hope-well CBC (*fide* LR) and one at a location in *Frederick* Jan. 4 (LW) were the only reported.

#### VIREOS TO FINCHES

Away from the Dismal Swamp, *Suffolk/Chesapeake*, VA, where they winter regularly, White-eyed Vireos were found at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, *Anne Arundel*, Nov. 18–Jan. 24 (DB, m.ob.); Mt. Calvert, *Prince George's*, Dec. 21 (*fide* SD); and Ft. Story Dec. 31 (*fide* PS). A very few Blue-headed Vireos are regularly found wintering at

coastal sites. One was on the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 27 (EJ); two were at False Cape S.P., Virginia Beach, VA, Dec. 28 (GLA, HTA et al.); one was on the Little Cr. CBC Dec. 1 (*fide* PS); and one was at Hickory Pt., *Worcester*, Dec. 30 (MLH). Hoffman has found Blue-headed Vireos at this latter site in 3 out of 4 CBCs over the past several years, but later searches in January (MJI, JLS, RL, GMJ) found none. Far more unusual on the Piedmont, a Blue-headed Vireo at Patuxent R. Park, *Howard*, was a great find Dec. 28 (DE).

The mild winter coaxed 11 warbler species to remain: the commoner annual players (in order of abundance) are typically Myrtle, Pine, and Palm warblers, Com. Yellowthroat, and Orange-crowned Warbler. However, Orange-crowned Warbler was

**SA** Le Conte's Sparrows have recently been found wintering in certain patches of wet meadows and marsh edge at Back Bay N.W.R., and this year three were found for the Back Bay CBC Dec. 28 (ph. GLA, MS, MJI, JLS). Look for an upcoming article by G. Armistead and Brinkley detailing the specifics of this winter habitat. A concerted effort to find Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows added a small puzzle piece to our knowledge of this species in the Region (MJI, JLS). The 14 at E.S.V.N.W.R. Dec. 27 (JLS, MJI) included nine *nelsoni/alterus* and three *subvirgatus*, while the six found at E. A. Vaughn W.M.A. Jan. 17 (MJI, JLS, RL) and the six at Smith I., *Somerset*, Jan. 19 (MJI, JLS, RL) were all *nelsoni/alterus*. Searches at other locales, and later searches at E. A. Vaughn, were unsuccessful: The birds found on Jan. 17 were clearly concentrated by an unusually high tide. Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows were found in about the same proportions, in similar habitat, and in all the same sites as Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, though Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows were also found at several additional locales by other observers. Surprisingly, no Seaside Sparrows were found in those efforts, except at Smith I., where 25 Jan. 19 (MJI, JLS, RL) established a record January count for Maryland and suggested that the species may winter most regularly there. Others in Maryland were four at Irish Grove, *Somerset*, and one at Deal Feb. 15 (NS, FS).

only reported once, and, strangely, while Com. Yellowthroats seemed scarcer than usual on much of the Coastal Plain, several were found in the Piedmont where they winter very rarely (v.o.). Species such as Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Prairie Warbler, and Ovenbird are less than annual in the Region, but multiples of all were found this year. Yellow-breasted Chats lingered at Back River W.W.T.P., Baltimore, Jan. 17 (EB, RFR) & 21 (MJI, RL); at Scientist's Cliffs, Calvert, Feb. 8–22 (D&PB); and in Columbia, Howard, Feb. 15 (MJB). Four CBCs had Black-and-white Warbler: Newport News, VA (two birds!) Dec. 20 (*fide* HW); Seneca, Montgomery, Dec. 21 (*fide* BK); Bowie, Prince George's, Dec. 28 (*fide* FF); and Nansemond R., Chesapeake, VA, Jan. 4 (*fide* BTe). Prairie Warblers were discovered on the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 27 (MA, LR), the Back Bay CBC Dec. 28 (*fide* PS), the Dismal Swamp CBC (two birds) Jan. 3 (*fide* DS), the Nansemond R. CBC Jan. 4 (BA), and at Ft. Belvoir, Fairfax, Jan. 4 (SG).

An Ovenbird was in Annapolis, Anne

Arundel, Jan. 4 (†MJI). One with only a few prior winter reports in the Region is Black-throated Blue Warbler. The 2 reports this year came from Montgomery on the Seneca CBC Dec. 21 (*fide* BK) and Batesville, Albemarle, VA, Dec. 23 (PB). Cape May Warbler also is very irregular in winter, but one remained to be counted in Westmoreland, VA, on the Washington's Birthplace CBC Dec. 20 (*fide* BPO).

A molting male Indigo Bunting in Suffolk, Suffolk, VA, Jan. 7 (LW) was a rare bird in winter. There was a mini-invasion of Painted Buntings into Tidewater Virginia, and one outlier even visited a feeder in Charlottesville, Albemarle, VA, far into the Piedmont Jan. 1–Feb. 16 (ph. KB, *fide* CES). The Tidewater birds were one female/immature at Dam Neck Naval Base, Virginia Beach, VA, Jan. 11 (*fide* LW); an ad. male and two female/immatures at Holiday Trav-L Park, Virginia Beach, VA, Feb. 1 into March (DWo, DB, MRB, m.ob.); and one at Greenbrier, Chesapeake, at least Feb. 14 & 16 (*fide* RLA).

American Tree Sparrows were not par-

ticularly abundant, but two in the dunes at Back Bay N.W.R. Dec. 28 (MJI, GLA, MS) were rare so far southeast in Virginia. An Ipswich Sparrow at Hart Feb. 1 (EJS) was extraordinary, being the first midwinter sighting for the Maryland section of the Bay, and one of few in the Bay overall. One must speculate whether this bird was driven from the coast by the Jan. 31 storm, or whether the species simply winters here (or at other Bay sites) in low numbers and had not previously been detected.

Lincoln's Sparrows winter in very small numbers in the Region but are found most years: singles were at Julie Metz Wetlands Mitigation Site, Prince William, VA, Dec. 8 (CT); one was on the Dismal Swamp CBC Jan. 3 (*fide* DS); and one was at Decoursey's Bridge, Dorchester, Feb. 1 (JLS).

A female Yellow-headed Blackbird was at Jeffersontown, Culpeper, Dec. 17 (TD) and an ad. male passed over Bel Air, Harford, among a large flight of blackbirds Feb. 11 (EB). A Brewer's Blackbird was at Julie Metz Wetlands Mitigation Site Dec. 5 (CT).

A large Com. Redpoll movement did not follow with the crossbills, and only 4 reports were received: One was at a Laurel, Anne Arundel, feeder Dec. 7 (JSh); one at Julie Metz Wetlands Mitigation Site Jan. 26 (CT); and in Baltimore Jan. 25, singles appeared at Mt. Washington (LS, JT) and Woodensburg (GF) feeders. Pine Siskins were common only in the same mature cone-laden white pine stands that crossbills were found in. Evening Grosbeaks also kept with the winter finch themes of the season, being present—perhaps in better than average numbers—but very local and absent from most of the Region.

**Corrigenda:** Brinkley notes "Please delete the reference to a Bullock's Oriole attending a feeder at Gloucester Pt., VA, Jan. 16–Mar. 7, 1983 (see *Am. Birds* 37:290). Review of photographs by M. O'Brien, Paul Lehman, and Brinkley concludes that the bird was a somewhat pale but otherwise typical Baltimore Oriole."

**Observers (area compilers in boldface):**

David F. Abbott, Bob Ake, Robert L. Anderson, Mary Argenteanu, Henry T. Armistead, George L. Armistead, Tim Barry, John B. Bazuin Jr., Mary-Jo Betts (MJB), John Blaisdell, John Bjerke (JBj), Eirik Blom, Michael R. Boatwright, Dave & Paula Bohaska, Ed Boyd (EBo), Peter Brask, David Bridge (DBr), Ned Brinkley, Kathi Brown, Mitchell Byrd, Danny Bystrak, D. Couchman, **Patty Craig** (Saint Mary's, P.O.

**SA** This season was punctuated by a major crossbill invasion, though the erratic invaders were spotty and local, and closely tied to mature, cone-bearing white pines. Other pine species (which have been good for crossbills in some previous invasions) were largely avoided, with only a few exceptions (i.e., Red Crossbills in pitch pine at Elk Neck S.F., Japanese black pine on Assat., and one report from a Loblolly pine forest). The Liberty Res. watershed (especially Deer Park Rd., Pine Knob Rd., and Oakland Rd.) was by far the most reliable for both species, and is largely surrounded by fairly old white pine stands, the majority of which were heavy with cones. One or both crossbill species were found there from Dec. 17 (EB, EJS, LN) through the end of the season (ph., au., †, v.o.), with highs of 60 Reds there Dec. 27 (OJ) and 60–70 White-winged Crossbills there Dec. 27 (MO). Pine Ridge Golf Course on Loch Raven Res., Baltimore, Prettyboy Res., Baltimore, and Broad Cr. Boy Scout Camp, Harford, also hosted both species at various times through the winter season. Other than numerous reports from the 4 places mentioned above, the only other White-winged Crossbill reports were 13 at Sparks, Baltimore, Feb. 18 (BD) and one flyover at Alexandria (BP) for the

only Virginia report. Irregular or single reports of Red Crossbills hailed from Worcester (2 locales), Cecil (2 locales), Montgomery (4 locales), Howard (2 locales), and Loudoun, VA (v.o.), despite diligent searches in numerous other locations. Several observers (MJI, JLS, MO, OJ) made concerted efforts to obtain tape recordings of Red Crossbill call notes to identify the "type." Michael O'Brien reviewed most tapes and provided (tentative) identifications. Type IV appeared to be most common, with recordings of multiples from Liberty Res. (au. MJI, au. OJ, au. JLS) and Pine Ridge Golf Course (au. MJI, au. JLS, au. MO), and a few at Broad Cr. Boy Scout Camp (au. MJI, au. MO). Type III was the only other one found, with four at Broad Cr. Boy Scout Camp Dec. 23 (au. MJI, GMJ, MLH) and one there Jan. 2 (au. MO), and one at Pine Knob Rd. Dec. 28 (au. OJ). Tentative "ear only" identifications were made of one type IV at Assat. Dec. 29 (MO), one type IV at Pine Knob Rd. (MO), and three type III at Hickory Pt. (Loblolly pine forest) Jan. 17 (MJI, JLS, RL). Perhaps the 1978 Red Crossbill invasion involved more types I and II, since reports that year came largely from Coastal Plain Loblolly forest.

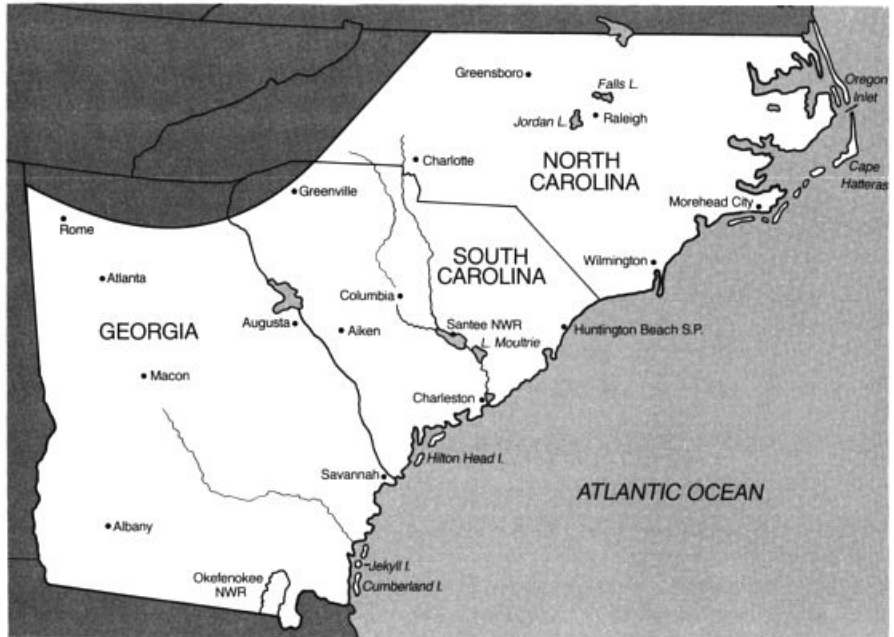
Box 84, Lexington Park, MD 20653), Doug Davis, Fenton Day, Todd Day, Bob Dixon, Rich Dolesh, Sam Droege, Samuel H. Dyke, Les Eastman, Dan Eberly (DEB), Darius Ecker, **Ethel Engle** (Caroline, MD, 20789 Dover Bridge Rd., Preston, MD 21655), Fred Fallon, Gail Frantz, **Sam Freiberg** (Montgomery, 8733 Susanna Lane, Chevy Chase, MD 20815-4713), Charlotte Friend, David Gersten, Stan Gray, Gary Griffith, Al Haury (Anne Arundel, 852 Redwood Trail, Crownsville, MD 21032 or cactuswren@erols.com), **Jane Hill** (Voice of the Naturalist), Mark L. Hoffman, Ottavio Janni, **George M. Jett** (Charles, 9505 Bland Street, Waldorf MD 20603 or JETT.GEORGE@epamail.epa.gov), Eric Johnson, Teta Kain, Bill Kulp, Ron Lees (RoL), Bev Leeuwenburg, Larry Lynch, Mary Ann Madison, Don & Joyce McKelvey, Don Merritt (DMe), Dotty Mumford, Lou Nielson, Michael O'Brien, Brian Patteson, Paul Pisano, **Elizabeth Pitney** (Wicomico, 7218 Walston Switch Rd., Parsonsburg, MD 21849), Danny Poet, Bill Portlock (BPo), Sue Procell, Kyle Rambo, Jan Reese, Robert F. Ringler, Chandler S. Robbins, Larry Robinson, Fran Saunders, Norm Saunders, Eugene J. Scarpulla, Bob Schutsky, Don Schwab, Matt Sharp, Jay Sheppard (JSh), **Jo Solem** (Howard 10617 Graeoch Rd., Laurel, MD 20723), Leslie Starr, Charles E. Stevens, Sherman Suter, Chris Swarth, Paul Sykes, Brenda Tekin (BTe), Bob Tripician, Craig Turner, Joseph Turner, Charles Vaughn, Ralph Wall, Marcia Watson-Whitmyre, Dave Webb, Audrey Whitlock, Hal L. Wierenga, Hayes Williams, **Les Willis** (Virginia Birdline), David Worley (DWO), William Young.

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Place names that are frequently mentioned, but very long, may be abbreviated in a form such as "C.B.B.T." or "W.P.B.O." Such local abbreviations will be explained in a key at the beginning of the particular regional report in which they are used. Standard abbreviations that are used throughout *Field Notes* are keyed on page 160.

# southern atlantic coast region



## RICKY DAVIS

The weather this winter was controlled by the well-publicized El Niño event. The temperatures were average to above average, with most areas reporting fewer below-freezing nights than normal. Ice and snow storms were few and far between. But copious amounts of rainfall more than made up for the lack of the frozen stuff. December was wetter than normal, and January to mid-February was extremely wet, with one rain event after the other coming through the Region.

The weather had several effects on the composition of the bird life in our area. There were, as expected, several lingering species from the fall, and some early spring returnees. When you add in some unexpected rarities, it becomes apparent that this winter was one that had a little bit of everything for the birders in the Region.

**Abbreviations:** C. Hatt. (Cape Hatteras, NC); E.L.H. (E. L. Huie Land Application Facility, Clayton Co., GA); H.B.S.P. (Huntington Beach State Park, SC); S.S.S. (Savannah Spoil Site, Jasper Co., SC); W.T.P. (Wastewater Treatment Plant).

## LOONS TO WOOD STORK

Inland Red-throated Loons are found somewhere in the Region almost every year. This winter, one was on the S. Lake Norman, NC, CBC Dec. 21 (DW et al.) and one was on L. Lanier, Hall, GA Jan. 17 (JS, PBr). Also, the very rare (but regular) Pacific Loon was found at least twice in North Carolina. Singles were at Wrightsville Beach Jan. 3 (DC) and s. Topsail I. Jan. 22 (NM). Even the Com. Loon made news this season, with several high counts noted. Good inland totals included 87 at Roanoke Rapids L., NC, Feb. 1 (RD), and 52 at West Point L., GA, Jan. 1 (JS, CL). And on the coast, in what must have been a remarkable sight, more than 8000 Commons flew N past C. Hatt. point Feb. 1 (HW, JHy et al.).

Horned Grebes were also found in excellent numbers inland, with 165 at Roanoke Rapids L., NC, Feb. 1 (RD) and 246 on West Point L., GA, Jan. 1 (JS, CL). The always noteworthy Red-necked Grebe was found only in North Carolina, with singles at Kerr L., Vance, Dec. 7 (fide TP), Atlantic Beach Dec. 21 (HL), Ocracoke I. Jan. 2 (PS), Jordan L. Jan. 31 (LT), and at Southport Dec. 24–Feb. 10 (BG, m. ob.). Eared Grebes once again were present at