

changing seasons

The Winter Season, December 1998 through February 1999

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Unaccustomed as I am to writing this report, I spent a little time perusing the last 20 years of "Changing Seasons." In that time its writers, led by the perspicacious Kenn Kaufman, who wrote half those reports, made observations upon virtually every trend and facet of this continent's birdlife. I find little room for the startling and original insights that I might have discerned in these tea leaves, the Regional Reports, scattered before me. Just so. Perhaps, instead of attempting to offer insights which I don't have, I'll concentrate on framing some questions.

GLOBAL WARNING: SAVE YOUR PREDICTIONS

It is customary to begin this essay with a summation of the continent's weather. First, though, a slight digression. When it comes to the weather, we humans definitely don't take the long view. Our memories are short. The perspective obtained for a person during even a keenly observed lifetime affords little to go on, a tiny snippet from the long cyclic story of our planet's climate. The meteorological establishment isn't very helpful. Detailed, daily, continent-wide records have only been kept for about a century, yet from that paltry database, the planners of our destiny have planted in the language such preposterous terms as "hundred-year storm" or "hundred-year flood."

Climatologists, looking at global accumulations of minute temperature changes and analyzing them against a host of variables with complex and powerful computer models, have concluded that we are undergoing anthropogenic global warming. They are almost certainly right. But from that, aren't we much too quick to conclude, after a few mild winters, that we are in the momentary and tangible grip of global warming? Never mind that the climatologists have warned us that the real effect will be gradual and chaotic with some areas as likely to experience colder, more severe winters as warmer ones.

As most of us have emerged from a third consecutive mild winter, it behooves us to remember that we know nothing about the weather (relatively speaking), and we ain't seen nothing yet. Recall that 1995-1996 produced the "mother of all prairie winters" and buried the northeast in snow, or that in December of 1989 ice formed along the littoral of the Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida. It was just fifteen short years ago, while we were deep into this period of global warming, that we were talking about a "Siberian Express" and ducking for cover.

Last winter was mild virtually everywhere. The dissent came from the Pacific Coast, where Southern California experienced "slightly cooler than expected temperatures," and Oregon-Washington, where temperatures were near normal but the overcast and rain made it "seem quite gloomy and cold." Alaska had a mild December,

but then it got very, very cold. There were, of course, brief cold spells in Canada and the northern states, but mild conditions and open water were the norm far to the north. In the east precipitation was either not mentioned or was reported to be above normal. The plains and mountains saw mixed snowfall totals. The southwest was generally dry. The northern Pacific coast was stormy and wet. Hawaii saw a break in its drought, but precipitation remained below normal on the main islands. (There, I got through the weather without resorting to Spanish.)

FACULTATIVE, OBLIGATE, AND WHAT OF IT?

In a mild winter, facultative migrants tarry amidst unexpected plenty. Birds whose southward, or coastward, or downhill migrations are driven by diminishing resources (insects, or seeds on bare ground, or fish in open water) are able to remain north, or inland, or up in the mountains. Obligate migrants—whose migratory urges are primal, driven by their genes—don't linger even though there are unexpected resources. They depart for points south, usually in the Neotropics, because they've evolved doing that and have therefore not evolved defenses for dealing with Nearctic winters. If they fail to migrate or migrate to the wrong place (become vagrants), it is because they are defective. In a normal winter they perish, but they can often survive well into a mild winter, at least long enough to be found by a birder.

That is one way, one oversimplified way, of looking at winter birds. It doesn't explain everything. Some species don't fit easily into either category. Why do some Great Egrets cling tenaciously to the last ice-free pond to the north while others have long since made the 450-mile journey across the Gulf of Mexico and still others subsist nicely at points in between? Indeed, why this last January were American Robins still abundant around the Great Lakes while six were found winging out over the Gulf of Mexico, over 100 miles south of the nearest land in Louisiana?

LINGERING AND NOT LEAVING (OR ARRIVING) AT ALL

If you were looking for lingering facultative migrants, it was a great year. There was widespread mention of loons, American White Pelicans, Sandhill Cranes, a range of waterfowl, shorebirds, doves, swallows, wrens, mimids, and sparrows. For the most part the irruptives (what we might call the *grudging* facultative migrants—northern hawks and owls, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and winter finches) generally stayed wherever it is they call home (somewhere, way up there, home to few birders). Golden-crowned Kinglet numbers were somewhat up in parts of the lowland west and southwest, and both Northern Shrike and Bohemian Waxwing made good showings in several regions. But on the whole irruptive species did not confound our expectations with a big show in a mild winter

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A FEW BRIGHT SPOTS IN THE WINTER LANDSCAPE

Among the group of largely obligate migrants, wood warblers made an exceptional showing. Excluding West Indian species and not counting the recently promoted (to its own family) Olive Warbler, there were 42 species of warblers mentioned in the Regional Reports. Not only were the "hardest" species, Orange-crowned, Yellow-rumped, Pine, Palm, and Common Yellowthroat, found lingering well north and inland, but normally Neotropical winterers (obligate migrants) were well represented. Rather than list all of the lingerers reported this season, the vireos, grosbeaks, buntings, tanagers, and orioles, I'll look instead more closely at the warblers as a representative group.

It follows that the suite of species that winter relatively far north in Mexico or the West Indies—and are thus regular in the southernmost United States—could be expected to have lingered far north and inland in this mild winter, and they did. I made a rough count that turned up 13 Nashvilles, three Northern Parulas, five Yellows, five Cape Mays, seven Black-throated Blues, one Black-throated Green, eight Yellow-throateds, six Prairie, numerous Black-and-whites, five American Redstarts, five Ovenbirds, three Northern Waterthrushes, and six Wilson's north of the Gulf or southeast Atlantic coasts and east of the Great Plains. Many of these species also turned up, as expected, in the Southwest or on the West Coast, primarily in California, but with strays of some species north to British Columbia. (The exception was Yellow-throated, not surprisingly unrecorded in the west this winter) A Prairie in Montana and a Wilson's in Idaho were outside this pattern, strictly speaking, as were late fall Northern Parula and American Redstart in Colorado. The western-only warblers—Virginia's, Lucy's, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, Hermit, and MacGillivray's—were well represented, more or less in the expected western haunts. With the exception of two Hermits in Texas and really exceptional MacGillivray's in New York and Florida, most of these did not stray. All fell into a predictable pattern for a mild winter, but the number, variety, and distribution were nevertheless impressive.

There is another suite of species that winter almost exclusively in South America and are exceedingly rare or unknown in North America after the end of fall migration. Four species fitting this category were reported this season. Two Blackburnians were found in California, with one seen into late January, representing the fourth and fifth in "winter" for that state where the species has been reliably recorded in that season more often than in the rest of the states combined. A Bay-breasted in Nova Scotia January 4 belies known patterns and was surely a defective bird that lucked out. A very late Blackpoll in Maine December 19 was probably a straggling defective; and I don't know what to make of the report of a male in alternate plumage December 22 in South Carolina. Finally, in the really late category, a Canada was seen in California December 10. I do not believe there are any re-verifiable winter records of either Blackpoll or Canada for the United States or Canada, and there is only a tiny number for Blackburnian and Bay-breasted (though many are reported, few are proven)

A third suite of warblers winters in Mexico and Central America but is relatively under-recorded in the southern United States. This group was very well represented last winter. An exceedingly late Blue-winged was in Massachusetts December 5. Outside of south Florida, Blue-winged just doesn't linger much in the United States; thus, a bird found in Arizona December 20 was amazing. Given the abundance of Tennessees and their not particularly southerly wintering range, it turns out to be a very rare winterer except in coastal California where four were found. Elsewhere, two were in Texas and one each was in Louisiana and, exceptionally, Arkansas Chestnut-sided is another

species surprisingly rare in the east outside of south Florida but expected in the southwest (three in Arizona and two in California). The exceptional individual was seen in North Carolina December 19, but even one in Jacksonville, Florida, was noteworthy. Magnolia is similarly quite rare outside of Florida in the east. None were reported east, but two were rarities in California, and the prize goes to an individual in British Columbia December 20.

Others in this group of surprisingly scarce winterers made appearances. Two Prothonotaries were in Texas and one was in California. Single Worm-eating Warblers were in Arizona and California. A Louisiana Waterthrush in Arizona was on the periphery of the west Mexico wintering range. This species is really rare (and poorly documented) in winter in the southeast. The lone report last winter was from Florida. Want to find a wintering Kentucky? Go to . . . California where individuals in early December and mid-March bookended the season. The final entry in this category just squeezed in—two Hoodeds lingering in Texas.

A few warbler odds and ends will round out the group. I left out Yellow-breasted Chat because of its anomalous wintering: it seems to be more common on the northeastern Atlantic Coast than anywhere else. So, too, this season when the tally was one each in Arizona and Florida, a very good showing of four in Louisiana, but eleven between Washington, D.C., and Newfoundland. Most surprising, though, was a bird in Chicago. Inexplicably, Pine strayed westward with individuals in both Dakotas, two in Colorado, one each in New Mexico and Arizona, and a fall holdover in California. The border specialties were well represented: Tropical Parula in Texas, an outstanding Grace's in northern California, Painted Redstarts in New Mexico and California, and, best of all, one Rufous-capped in Texas and two in Arizona.

This somewhat labored analysis helps to elucidate the nature of one of migration's mysterious characteristics. Why do different species respond so differently under similar circumstances? Why are some species found year after year, in varying numbers, in some places and not others? It will also, I hope, open the eyes of a few serious birders to whom these patterns have not been apparent, cause them to take a second look, and realize that rarity is relative. Birds that winter almost exclusively in South America, for instance, including more than just the warblers mentioned, should be thoroughly documented when found here in winter. The fact that Bay-breasted is an abundant fall migrant has no bearing on the likelihood of its being found in winter.

TRENDS AND TREND-SETTERS

Several species of geese have been rearranging their distribution patterns for a couple of decades, and this winter did not buck the trend. While burgeoning populations of Snow Geese grab the headlines, Greater White-fronted Geese continue to colonize the east, quite possibly from Greenland as well as points west. Ross's Geese, once considered exciting anywhere east of California or coastal Texas, are now becoming expected anywhere that Snow Geese winter. Smaller races of Canada Geese have been spreading eastward from Texas up into Louisiana along with Ross's Geese for a decade, occupying the range abandoned by the once abundant, but now completely short-stopped, large Canadas. This year, several individuals of the smaller races, identified as both *hutchinsii* and *minima*, were reported from the Atlantic Coast. Stay tuned to what promises to be the next chapter in goose distribution.

If it weren't for the ability to comb through flocks of geese and gulls most winters, how would many birders spend their time? Even in this mild winter gulls were scrutinized, and it paid off. Following on the fall invasion and surviving into the mild winter, Franklin's Gulls,

which ought to be in South America, were everywhere. California Gulls were very well represented eastward. The Thayer's/Kumlien's/Iceland complex continued to give observers fits, but what's new? Problematic Slaty-backed-like gulls were reported east and west, stirring much debate, as did potential European Herring Gulls on the east coast. The east coast was studded with Black-tailed Gulls, and one was all the way down in Brownsville. Yet another Kelp Gull was found, this one in Maryland. Topping the list, a Gray-hooded (=Gray-headed) Gull (*Larus cirrocephalus*) was reported for the first time in North America, in Apalachicola, Florida, December 26. It joins a list of South American gulls—Gray, Belcher's, and Kelp along the Gulf of Mexico, and Swallow-tailed in California—that have somehow gotten here. The mystery deepens, and the debate must rage.

Two decades ago, a few demented individuals in coastal Texas and southeast Louisiana began transforming their winter gardens into hummingbird attractors in the hopes of enticing what were thought to be rare jewels from the west and south. Did it work? Oh my. From those small outbreaks, the dementia spread, and this last winter there were hummingbird reports from most regions. To put it into perspective, *four* Broad-billed Hummingbirds were banded in Louisiana last winter. Read the account of the death of a Rufous in Massachusetts. I might offer my own take: leave up your feeders if you wish—a hummingbird will no more be prevented from migrating by a syrup feeder than will a Chipping Sparrow by a seed feeder. But let's use our influence to stop well-meaning but ill-conceived interventions. Free-flying hummingbirds should not be captured and transported, and they should not be caged through the winter. These activities are not only illegal, they are also of dubious value to individuals and are deleterious to populations.

A FEW OF THE REASONS WE DO IT

Here is a sampling of some choice morsels: Black-browed Albatross off Virginia (in February!); Short-tailed Albatross off California and British Columbia; Purple Heron and Gray Herons from Barbados; a (possibly wild) Whooper Swan from Massachusetts; Long-billed Murrelet in Rhode Island and Ancient Murrelet in Massachusetts; Common Redshank in Newfoundland; Black-tailed Godwit from Prince Edward Island; Northern Wheatear in Ohio; Fieldfare and Redwing from Newfoundland; Sky Larks of possible Asiatic origin and Rustic Bunting in Washington; holdover Hooded Oriole in Quebec; and belated fall reports of Southern Lapwing and Wood Sandpiper from the West Indies.

EUROTRASH AND OTHER DOVES

The Eurasian Collared-Dove phenomenon continues to sweep across the continent like a forest fire, spotting ahead of the main conflagration by hundreds of miles. In those areas of Miami where lawn is the dominant life form, I saw a vision of what may be the future for the rest of us. Eurasian Collared-Doves has become the dominant free-living vertebrate (in terms of biomass). The reason is hinted at in the Florida report: they have now been found breeding in every month except January.

From another direction other doves are staging for what looks to be their own explosive expansions. White-winged Dove numbers on the Gulf Coast have increased exponentially over the last two years. They are showing up in ones and twos all over the place elsewhere, but one has to wonder—are the really big numbers coming? Inca Doves are making a slower, more deliberate infiltration, but they are expanding slowly and surely through the central Gulf states. Get ready

PERSPECTIVE IS EVERYTHING

While perusing the Texas report, my eyes had all but skimmed over the offhand mention of a Chihuahuan Raven at Texas Point, Jefferson County, Feb. 10. Something, perhaps the letters "U.T.C." caused me to look again, and then it hit me: Chihuahuan Raven at Texas Point! But, but, Texas Point is just across the Sabine River from Louisiana! I have spent the last twenty years combing the cheniers of Cameron Parish, on my side of the Sabine, hoping to discover the next stray from west or south, the next Tropical Parula or Red-faced Warbler, the next Hooded Oriole or Blue Bunting. They will all come to Cameron eventually. But in that time, among all the species I've fantasized about, I don't believe the possibility of Chihuahuan Raven ever occurred to me. And yet, from the perspective of my peers across the river, the Louisiana border was just a minor range extension. No big deal, not even boldfaced. New vistas open.

For a week in January a Crested Caracara was observed in Plymouth, Massachusetts. I will not quibble with the conclusion that, "given the non-migratory nature" of this species, the record will probably not pass muster. Given our understanding of migration, Caracara certainly seems sedentary. But nobody told the four Caracaras out of place in Arizona this winter, including one seen flying over Phoenix, nor did they tell the two seen flying along the coast in Cameron, Louisiana. Perhaps our perspective on migration is about like our perspective on the weather—we are trying to draw big conclusions from small data sets. Maybe some species go through slow changes, cycling from sedentary to migratory. That is the way it begins to look to me: as one sedentary species after another shows up far afield—Xantus' Hummingbird in British Columbia, Gray Silky-flycatcher in California, or Chestnut-backed Chickadee in Alberta—I begin to wonder about the reality of "sedentary species" Maybe all of these sightings can be explained by recourse to some form of human intervention. But maybe not. After all, at some point in the past Crested Caracara colonized Florida. And remember those early "escapee" Ruddy Ground-Doves in Arizona? There were sixteen seen there this winter, and the species has been removed from the Arizona Review List.

FINALLY . . .

It has recently been observed that with the creation of an anthropogenic climate, we have witnessed the end of nature. This development will pass unheeded by birds: they must, and will, be about their business. As I composed some of this essay, I was able on occasion to click a few buttons on my computer and see almost live doppler radar images of birds streaming northward over my head, putting an end to another winter. These spring migrants are returning to a landscape tortured by our machinery and poisoned by our chemicals, their habitat washed away in the tide of our recent affluence, its fragments invaded by the exotic creatures of our tinkering and broiled by ultraviolet light. As we contemplate what we have wrought, we need to remember that birds will be about their business. Our business, as contributors to *North American Birds*, is to do the best job we can to make this a valuable record of our continent's avian life. More of us are reporting birds than ever before, but most of what gets reported is lost in the ephemera of the internet. We need to re-double our efforts to make this the permanent record and to make sure that it is a clean, accurate, and complete record.

