

alaska region



THESE TOBISH

Although weather conditions deviated significantly from the conditions of the previous two winters, distribution of species and numbers of rarities during winter 1998–1999 were remarkably similar to those of the two previous winters—i.e., excellent waterbird representation, a generally poor or sporadic showing of semi-hardy species from the ephemeral northern edges of winter ranges, and a nice scattering of casuals. Following the mild fall, conditions remained warmish with below-normal precipitation into the first of the year. The Aleutian Low dipped south of normal latitudes in early January, allowing a massive Arctic continental high pressure cell to blanket the mainland for nearly three weeks. In that time, most stations reported significant below-average temperature deviations. These extremes reached well into the North Gulf where Kodiak's bays actually choked with sea and shore-fast ice. Essentially all fresh water was frozen right to the immediate North Gulf Coast. Although too late in the season to significantly influence winter bird distribution in the Interior, this cold cell produced 18 successive days below -20°F in the Fairbanks area. Both the Bering Sea and Cook Inlet pack ice edged towards seasonal extremes at period's close, and even the Aleutians were blanketed with heavy snowpacks, ice-clogged bays and iced-in lacustrine waters. Southeast Alaska, as usual, remained relatively free of the extreme cold although heavy snow pack accumulations hit that mainland during the January snap. La Niña conditions otherwise prevailed throughout most of Southeast for the season with even more precipitation and cloudy conditions than normally expected.

Perhaps secured by early season mild-

ness and then because of concentrating conditions, waterbirds made big news with some of the best ever winter showings and broad distributions of casual and semi-regular forms. A late season round-trip report of a shipboard transect from Adak to Attu produced some of the best comprehensive Aleutian winter data in years, punctuated by significant changes in the North Pacific status and distribution of Laysan Albatross. As is usual, bird highlights were otherwise concentrated temporally within the Christmas Bird Count period and geographically south of the Alaska Range.

Abbreviations: North Gulf (*North Gulf of Alaska*); PWS (*Prince William Sound*); SE (*Southeast Alaska*); SC (*Southcoastal Alaska*); SW (*Southwest Alaska*); UCI (*Upper Cook Inlet*).

LOOKS THROUGH WATERFOWL

Although waterbird concentrations were unusually high after late or protracted arrivals into December, the tally of 56 Pacific Loons in one flock near Juneau Dec. 28 (GVV, BA) was the only significant concentration. Most observers commented on good loon diversity and above-average numbers from the N. Gulf between Kodiak and Seward's Resurrection Bay. Also notable were two probable **Arctic Loons** flushed out of Attu's Abraham Bay Feb. 24 (DDG)—there are few confirmed winter records of this Palearctic form. Heinl's W. Grebe seasonal peak included a low 60 at Ketchikan's Totem Bight Dec. 16 (SCH).

From the past few winter reports and now after a late-season shipboard survey in the w. Aleutians, our picture of Laysan Albatross status between November and March has evolved significantly. Prior status profiles of this apparently increasing pelagic, mainly from the 1950s and '60s [see Kenyon 1961, *Auk* 78:305–326 & Murie 1959, *N. Am. Fauna* 61:1–261], noted Laysans as uncommon to rare in mid-winter. Recent regular reports of singles and small groups in the N. Gulf and now Gibson's running summary of 209 individuals between Kiska and Amchitka Is. Feb. 27 (DDG) clearly illustrate that substantial numbers of Laysans spend the winter in their favored 100–300 fathom waters. Another Laysan was found off Kodiak Jan.

15 (RB). Also rare in winter, Black-footed Albatross was represented by counts of six in Amchitka Pass Feb. 22–27 (DDG) and at least one inshore at Kodiak (= first confirmed in winter) Jan. 7 (JB, RAM). Rare inshore anywhere after November, and a local winter first, were two Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels in Kodiak's Chiniak Bay Dec. 26 (DZ). West of PWS where the winter peak was 13, Great Blue Herons were reported from Kodiak with an above-average 12 noted through the season (RAM, MM) and Seward with one Feb. 20 (NS).

Another Greater White-fronted Goose lingered into December, a single at Sitka to at least Dec. 12 (MLW, MET). Notable in the Juneau area's winter Canada (Dusky) Goose concentrations were single *parvipes* Dec. 5–6 and *minimus* Jan. 17 (GVV, PP, DWS), both casual in the Region after November. Away from the Cordova-area strongholds where the season peak reached 298 in December, good Trumpeter Swan counts included 10 at Sitka Dec. 1 (MLW, MET), 20 near Ketchikan all season (MW), and 20 on Prince of Wales I. Feb. 22 (MW). Six Whooper Swans counted in saltwater bays on the s. side of Kanaga I. Feb. 21 (DDG) were in winter sites historically described for this form in the Aleutians.

This season's significant waterfowl counts: 43 Eur. Wigeons around Adak I. Feb. 17 (DDG); 3288 and 2706 Mallards on the Juneau (Dec. 19) and Anchorage CBCs (Dec. 19); 565 N. Pintails on the Cordova CBC and an exceptional 320 around Adak I. Feb. 27–March 3 (DDG); 13 Ring-necked Ducks at Ketchikan Jan. 18 (SCH) and nine around Kodiak Dec. 26 (SS); and 12 Hooded Mergansers in Ketchikan Dec. 23 (MW). Winter waterfowl rarities were well represented, highlighted by a single drake Eur. Wigeon at Juneau Dec. 6, joined by another Feb. 15 (GVV, DWS, PS); three Am. Wigeon, distinctly rare on the Aleutians, at Adak Feb. 28+ (DDG) and two at Anchorage all season (m.ob.); a northerly Green-winged Teal through the period at Anchorage (m.ob.); and exceptional numbers of *Aythya*.

This winter's expansive cold cell forced wintering divers into salt water concentrations at Adak I. where a late-season survey (Feb. 27–Mar. 3) produced an unique array of rarities: ten Canvasbacks in Sweeper Cove, the Aleutian's highest count ever; the

Aleutian's 4th ever Ring-necked Duck, a drake, a pair of Barrow's Goldeneyes, irregular in the Aleutians; and a male nominate **Common Merganser**, the first identified e. of Buldir I. Other rare divers included a male Redhead at Sitka all season (MLW, MET), a drake Tufted Duck from Kodiak Feb. 8 (RAM) and a female at Gustavus Feb. 26 (BPP = local first); single female Greater and Lesser scaups in Anchorage into January (m.ob.); two Buffleheads well n. in Anchorage all season (m.ob.); and a female Ruddy Duck lingering in Juneau Dec. 17 (GVV).

HAWKS THROUGH OWLS

This winter produced exceptional reports of semi-hardy raptors at coastal sites, highlighted at Kodiak where observers tallied an unprecedented 12+ N. Harriers and 15 Rough-legged Hawks along the road system all season (RAM et al.). Other out-of-season reports included another N. Harrier at Juneau to Dec. 10 (RJG); a *harlani* Red-tailed Hawk, also at Juneau Dec. 16–Jan. 5 (RJG, GVV), one of Alaska's few winter records; up to seven Rough-leggeds at Sitka to Dec. 27 (MLW, MET); and single **American Kestrels** at Kodiak's grasslands Dec. 27–Jan. 24 (= 2nd in winter; HP, ph. RAM) and near Sitka to Feb. 4 (MLW, MET). Kestrels are rare migrants in SE and the n. Gulf, and there are roughly 3 previous Alaska winter records. Four+ Am. Coots around Ketchikan Dec. 13 through the period (SCH), three in Sitka into March (MLW, MET), and two in Juneau to Dec. 19+ (m.ob.) furnished above-average numbers and followed heavy fall (q.v.) staging.

Notable shorebird reports were down from the average with no semi-hardy species included except a single Killdeer near Juneau Dec. 19 (GVV). One of the Region's highest-ever Black Oystercatcher counts was a peak of 318 roosting birds at Kodiak Dec. 20 (RAM). Rock Sandpipers again arrived at UCI winter sites in large numbers although the early December maxima of nearly 18,000 near the Beluga R. mouth was not duplicated after the mid-season hard freeze (REG) Once again these birds foraged at the shorefast ice/receding tide interface and roosted on ice floes and other ephemeral sites in unfavorable conditions. After specimen verifications Gill still believes the majority of these birds are nominate *ptiloenemis* Another five nominate birds were described Dec. 12–13 (GVV, PS) well s. of Juneau Rock Sandpiper flocks, which peaked at an above-average 1500+ Jan. 18 (PS, GVV)

Most unusual were overwintering Bonaparte's Gulls in good numbers with at least 25 around Ketchikan to Jan. 15 (SCH) and at Kodiak where a single first-year bird to Feb. 7+ (RAM, ph.) represented a local winter first. While Bonaparte's regularly push their departure limits into early December, at least in SE, they are casual after mid month. Other larids of consequence included two ad. Ring-billed Gulls near Juneau Jan. 1–Feb. 7 (GVV, BA, PS); single December California Gulls, at Juneau Dec. 13 (GVV) and from Sitka Dec. 27 (MLW, MEW); and a first-winter **Iceland Gull** (nominate *glaucoides*-type) photographed at Kodiak Dec. 26–Feb. 14 (ph. DWS, RAM). Although Ring-billed Gull remains rare in the Region, one nearly always turns up each winter; California Gull is still casual (Heinl 1997, *W. Birds* 28:19–29); and there are few documented Iceland Gulls from Alaska.

Probably because of limited winter surveys, **Whiskered Auklet** has historically been considered casual between November and late March. Gibson's winter transect w. from Adak produced local groups of Whiskered in alternate plumage in classic tide-rip habitats, including 353 in Adak Strait and another 194 just e. of Kanaga I. Feb. 19 (DDG). Farther west were another eight in Amchitka Pass Feb. 27. Most unusual inshore in winter was a single Horned Puffin near Kodiak Dec. 26 (DWS ph.).

Up to three N. Pygmy-Owls around Juneau Feb. 6–25 (DM, GVV) furnished the season's only reports. Unseasonal Short-eared Owl were concentrated in the Kodiak grasslands with 20+ there through the season (*vide* RAM) and another three or more around Juneau Dec. 27–Feb. 15 (GVV, BA, PS, SZ). These may have represented individuals pushed away from more northerly coastal sites (PWS, Kenai coast) by the mid-season Arctic high cell. Another N. Saw-whet Owl wintered in Anchorage (GJT), where casual, while at least four appeared in the Juneau area Feb. 7–24 (MWS, GVV), likely in response to the January cold spell. Two Boreal Owls near Juneau, where there are about 7 prior records, in late February may have also been related to the cold snap.

WOODPECKERS THROUGH FRINGILLIDS

Possibly in response to heavy snows and extended cold, the single Red-breasted Sapsucker at Sitka Jan. 22 was the season's only find. Two (Yellow-shafted) N. Flickers survived the UCI winter, one each at Anchorage and Eagle R. feeders (DFD, *vide* RLS), and another two Red-shafted forms

found homes at Juneau and Sitka feeders to Feb. 21 (JB, MLW, MET), about average for the past decade. Red-breasted Nuthatches continued their UCI expansion even with the extended cold weather with yet another new December CBC record high of 272 established from Anchorage. Although most birds clung to feeders for the 2nd half of the season, there was no obvious dieback from the extended sub-zero periods. Two Red-breasted that found a King Salmon feeder in early December to at least Dec. 8 (TG) were noteworthy in winter and may have been leftovers from the periodic fall dispersals out of their normal range. Above-average numbers of Ruby-crowned Kinglets lingered in the UCI area with a Dec. 19 peak of 20 (m.ob.) around Anchorage. All but a couple, however, survived the January extremes, but two remained in Juneau through Feb. 7 (PP, GVV).

Although all of this season's unprecedented **Hermit Thrush** accounts were likely tardy migrants—including two around Ketchikan Dec. 19–26 (JFK, SCH), and singles in Sitka Dec. 22–Jan. 10 (MLW, MET) and Juneau Dec. 28 (GVV, BA)—they were still noteworthy as there are few past records later than early December. *Sixty-two* Varied Thrushes from the Homer area mid-December CBC (m.ob.) were unparalleled since this frugivore is rare away from Kodiak after late November. Astounding and a first for winter for the Bristol Bay coast was a single Varied at a *Dillingham* feeder Jan. 2–Feb. 5 (CP, RM ph.). Varied Thrushes "invaded" portions of the SE in midseason without clear explanation with "hundreds" in the Sitka area by Feb. 10 (MLW, MET) and another dozen in Juneau by Jan. 18 (GVV). Another **Northern Mockingbird** overwintered in downtown Anchorage, defending its patch of berry bushes from late November through the period (m.ob.); it represented Alaska's 2nd winter record following another Anchorage bird from winter 1992–93 and cleverly survived several weeks of short days and sub-zero conditions by roosting on the edges of heat-producing chimneys.

Bohemian Waxwings continue to push their overwintering limits with this season's 1200+ finding food in the Anchorage neighborhoods through the period. For the past 4 years overwintering waxwings in UCI have steadily increased, taking advantage of increased use of berry bushes in landscaping projects.

An imm. Chipping Sparrow, probably a tardy migrant, found a Juneau area feeder Dec. 6 (DWS), one of few Alaska reports

after November. Rarer still after November were single **Savannah Sparrows** at feeders in Eagle R. late December–Feb. 10+ (LM, RD, DWS, RLS, DFD) and Palmer Dec. 21–Jan. 6 (*vide* DWS). These constituted the first winter reports for SC—there are few other documented Alaska winter records. The only Lincoln's Sparrow report beyond the CBC period was a single in Anchorage all season (*vide* DFD, RLS). An average four White-throated Sparrows were reported, all singles, from Kodiak all period (CH ph., RAM), Juneau Dec. 1–19+ (ph. DM), Sitka Jan. 13–Feb. 21 (MLW, MET), and Ketchikan to Jan. 24+ (SCH). Two Harris's Sparrows in Sitka Dec. 12–Jan. 10+ (MLW, MET) were the only reported. Aside from a decent CBC tally of 12 Dec. 19, White-crowned Sparrows were way down Regionwide. Anomalous was a single at a *Dillingham* feeder Jan. 2–Feb. 12+ (CP, ph. RM), one of few Bristol Bay/Bering Sea coast winter records.

Out of range for the season were 15+ Snow Buntings near elevation 4000' in the Chugach Mts. above Anchorage Feb. 13 (BM). Although it was tempting to consider these early spring migrants, given the heavy snow and cold conditions, I think they were wintering birds navigating for windblown habitats. Good numbers of Bramblings returned after a several-winter hiatus. Singles were described from *Dillingham*, n. and w. of usual winter sites, Jan. 2–Feb. 12 (CP, ph. RM); Kodiak Dec. 23 through the period (JD ph., RAM); and in Homer, where the first bird, found during the December CBC, was joined by six by the end of February (SS, NS, RK).

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british columbia –yukon region



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The winter weather was most interesting as the cool La Niña waters of the eastern Pacific contrasted with an anomalously warm pool off Japan. The result of this pattern was the generation of a strong westerly storm track slamming onto the southern sections of the coast. Indeed, it was the stormiest winter on the coast since that of 1971–1972. Heavy rains fell on the lowlands, and the deepest coastal mountain snowpack in many years accumulated by the end of the period. Interior precipitation was also bountiful over the southern three-quarters of British Columbia, especially in the mountains. About the only thing people didn't complain about was the temperature, which remained above normal in most areas. Larger lakes in the southern interior were mainly ice-free through the winter. The Yukon was too far removed to be affected by all this, its weather being colder and snowier in December, still on the cold side but drier in January, and milder and generally dry in February.

Abbreviations: B.C. (*British Columbia*).

LOONS THROUGH DUCKS

A winter rarity in the interior, a single Pacific Loon was at the head of Okanagan L. Dec. 6 (DGC). On the N. Arm of the Fraser

R., off Sea I., a Clark's Grebe was found Feb. 25 (MKM). Extremely rare in nearshore waters, a juv. **Short-tailed Albatross** was photographed off Langara I. Jan. 19 (RL). Northern Fulmars rarely enter the Strait of Georgia, making one off Newcastle I. Dec. 17 (GAP) noteworthy. Brown Pelicans lingered unusually late with the last reported in mid-January from Pedder Bay (GF). The 1238+ Sooty Shearwaters at Rose Spit Dec. 23 (MH, PH) represented an unusually high number for the season. Although increasing steadily in the interior of Washington, Double-crested Cormorants are still relatively rare in the B.C. interior. A single bird observed at various locations on Okanagan L. during January was last reported from Sandy Beach near Vernon Jan. 31 (DGC).

An imm. Ross's Goose was at Campbell R. Nov. 24–Dec. 2 (JI, VH, ES); another was at Como L., Coquitlam, from late in 1998 through the end of the period (m.ob.). Unusually far north, a Wood Duck observed on the Williams L. CBC Jan. 2 (JiS, PR et al.) provided the first winter record for that area. A flock of 21 Mallards tallied at McIntyre Cr. wetlands during the Whitehorse CBC Dec. 26 provided a record-high winter count (CE). This is still the only known regular winter location of Mallards in the Yukon. Blue-winged Teals are rarely reported in B.C. during the winter, but six were tallied on the Vaseux L. CBC Jan. 1 (ILR). A male Tufted Duck visited Lost Lagoon, Stanley Park, Feb. 25 (EW). A White-winged Scoter at Duck L. Dec. 5 (BK, MAB) was a rather late fall straggler.

RAPTORS THROUGH ALCIDS

Two ad. Golden Eagles, rare in winter in the Yukon, were first seen Nov. 22 near Deep Cr. at L. Laberge and again Dec. 4 (CE). Two were spotted 2 km s. of Christmas Cr. about 50 km n. of Haines Jct. Dec. 25 (LF). Another was over Whitehorse Feb. 4 (BD, BMu). The deaths of four Golden Eagles in the greater Whitehorse area this winter remain a mystery. One was a radio-tagged individual that had been followed into the Yukon (CM). At least one of the eagles appeared to be emaciated, and the dead birds have been sent out for further assessment.