

Prairie Provinces



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December was variously described as “terrible” and “brutal” in southern Manitoba and southeastern Saskatchewan; indeed, it was the coldest December on record in Winnipeg in over a century. Snowfall was heavy, particularly near the interprovincial border. Southwestern Saskatchewan and Alberta enjoyed both warmer temperatures and less precipitation in early winter. January was mild and dry across the region, while February was again cold in the east but still dry. By the end of the period, snow had all but disappeared in the west but was still thick on the ground in the east. Some astonishing owl numbers brightened an otherwise unremarkable birding season. Survival appeared to be high for those half-hardy birds that made it through December.

Herons Through Gulls

A Great Blue Heron at Banff N.P., AB 9 Jan was the only one reported (KB). A **Cattle Egret** at a Cypress River, MB feedlot into early Dec provided the first regional winter record (*fide* AW).

Lingering waterfowl were understandably scarce. A **Mute Swan** highlighted a Manitoba Naturalists Society outing at Powerview, MB 2 Dec and represented about the 6th sighting in the province (RKO et al.). Other highlights included a Gadwall at Gardiner Dam, SK 2 Dec (WG, m.ob.), a pair of Canvasbacks at Medicine Hat, AB 11 Feb (BFR, BV), 2 Redhead at Saskatoon, SK 3 Dec (WG), 3 Greater Scaup through the winter in Calgary (m.ob.), and another 12 at Wabamun L., AB 21 Jan (*fide* BP), a Long-tailed Duck through the period at Calgary (*fide* MH), and a Red-breasted Merganser at Medicine Hat 25 Dec (BL).

Farms attracted 14 Bald Eagles near Elma, MB 1 Jan (L&BdM, RP, LV et al.) and 10+ near Ft Macleod, AB 15 Feb (TK); another 2 were at Squaw Rapids, SK 27 Jan (RK, RM). The only midwinter Northern Harriers were near Calgary 7 Jan (AS) and near Eastend, SK 27 Jan (TH). Sharp-shinned Hawks, rare in winter in Manitoba, were spotted in Winnipeg, Lac du Bonnet, and Stonewall 13-21 Dec (AD, PT, RKO, DO). Singles were also seen on the Melita, MB, C.B.C. and at Weyburn, SK 3 Jan (*fide* RK). Equally unusual were Cooper’s Hawks, one through the winter at Leader, SK (BF, JF) and another at Saskatoon 24 Jan (GW). At least 30 Northern Goshawks were sighted in s. Manitoba, in sharp contrast to Saskatchewan, where none was reported, and Alberta, where

they did not elicit comment. Gyrfalcons were more widespread, with about 12 in Manitoba, 3 in Saskatchewan, and 20+ in Alberta. Of note was a white individual at Nipawin, SK 27 Jan (the first one for the observers in 25+ years of birding together; RK, RM) and a very pale gray bird near Calgary 30 Jan (RB).

Twelve Greater Sage-Grouse near Orion, AB 17 Jan (JG) and 102 Sharp-tailed Grouse in an unharvested sunflower field near Radville, SK 13 Jan (CB, MB, JW) were high counts. Other than on the C.B.C.s, the only shorebird noted was a Common Snipe at Fish Cr. P.P., AB 5-9 Dec (A&BA). An unidentified gull was late at Exshaw, AB 31 Dec (MM, BW); even more out-of-season was a Ring-billed Gull at Calgary 14 Jan (PS).

Owls

A **Flammulated Owl**, discovered dead in late Sep or early Oct in Edmonton, found its way to the Provincial Museum for a first Alberta record (*fide* TT). Snowy Owl numbers were unremarkable, except for 15 in the Standard/Hussar, AB area, 20 Jan (MC, KR).

Northern Hawk Owls staged an “unprecedented movement” in the Calgary region, with 6 each on Cochrane Wildlife Reserve and Snake’s Head C.B.C.s and numerous other sightings. “Fair numbers” were reported in Saskatchewan, with a high of 4 on 9 Jan in the Pierceland-Walburg area (FW). They were widespread in Manitoba, with up to 6 seen per day and numerous sightings outside the boreal forest, but numbers were barely 15% of those in the huge 1996–1997 invasion. Single Barred Owls were somewhat out of range at Weyburn, SK in late Dec (*fide* MB), Ft. Qu’Appelle, SK in early Jan (*fide* RH), and Rivers, MB on 16 Feb (NS).

Great Gray Owl numbers were average in Alberta, but they were widespread in Saskatchewan, with high counts of 21 on a cross-province trip along highways 3, 55 and 9, 9–12 Jan (FW) and 10 on 28 Jan between Love, Candle L., and the south end of Prince Albert N.P. (RK, RM). Numbers in se. Manitoba were perhaps highest in Jan, although this was partly a function of viewing conditions. Most were recorded in traditional areas along the edge of the boreal forest from Sprague to Manigotagan Birders routinely found 20 to 50 Great Grays per day, and two manic observers found no fewer than **101** in the Lac du Bonnet–Pine Falls area on 20 Jan (RKO, PT). Many were also reported off-road within the boreal forest by snowmobilers (*fide* JD). Those that were banded were generally in excellent shape and included some of the heaviest ever recorded (JD, RN, HC). Away from the forest, scattered individu-



An overwintering Northern Mockingbird made Pincher Creek, Alberta home after mid-January, establishing one of only four provincial winter records. *Photograph by Terry Korolyk.*

als turned up province-wide, w. and s. to Winnipeg, St. Adolphe, Neepawa, Lauder, Minnedosa and Melita. Inevitably, some were killed on highways, including 5+ in the Pinawa area (RZ). Reports of birds being shot in the Warroad, MN area "to save the grouse" were disturbing (*fide* JD).

Seven Short-eared Owl sightings were reported in Dec in Saskatchewan (BF, JF et al.), and about 4 turned up north of Lac du Bonnet, MB around the end of Feb (LP et al.). Four Boreal Owls appeared on the Edmonton C.B.C., and there was an exceptional late winter movement in s. Manitoba, with at least seven sightings between 23 Feb and 4 Mar, following earlier observations at Maple Creek Rd. 1 Jan (RKO), Gimli 17 Jan (BC), and Ponemah 1 Feb (AC). One Northern Saw-whet Owl in Saskatchewan and 3 in Manitoba were closer to normal numbers.

Woodpeckers Through Passerines

Red-bellied Woodpeckers survived the winter in Winnipeg and Stonewall; another at Delta, MB was last seen before Christmas (m.ob.). A Black-backed Woodpecker at Medicine Hat 20 Jan was out of range (BV). Saskatchewan and Manitoba each hosted about 5 Northern Flickers, including a hybrid in Winnipeg; these numbers paled in comparison with Alberta: 92 on Calgary C.B.C. and 73 on Medicine Hat C.B.C. American Crows winter in increasing numbers in s. Manitoba, e.g., 86 mobbed a Common Raven in Winnipeg 27 Jan (GH, CC). A Mountain Bluebird in Winnipeg 2 Dec was about the 3rd ever in winter in Manitoba (RBz). A **Northern Mockingbird** at Pincher Creek from about 17 Jan to the end of the period furnished about the 4th Alberta winter record (JR, m.ob.; ph. TK). Also notable were a

Brown Thrasher in Jansen, SK in early Dec (MK) and another at an Edmonton area feeder 30 Nov–11 Jan (PM)

Bohemian Waxwings drew attention in s. Alberta and s. Manitoba early in the season, but numbers dwindled rapidly and Saskatchewan had few. The Saskatoon area hosted 3 Harris's Sparrows: one at a city feeder 6-8 Feb (RW) and 2 at the Forestry Farm 11 Feb (SS). Fifty Lapland Longspurs were among 5000+ Snow Buntings in an unharvested sunflower field at Oak Hammock Marsh, MB 26 Jan (KG). Western Meadowlarks appeared in Feb near Okotoks and Calgary, AB (L&SB, TK), and near Burstall, SK (*fide* BF). Brown-headed Cowbirds were reported without details at Weyburn (*fide* MB). Winter finches were scarce across the region, except for Pine Grosbeaks in se. Manitoba. Scattered pockets of Pine Siskins were noted at feeders, and small flocks of Common Redpolls fed mainly on alder, birch, and tamarack seeds in se. Manitoba.

Observers (regional compilers in boldface):

A. & B. Armstrong, M. Bailey, R. Barclay, K. Barker, R. Bazin (RBz), C. Bjorklund, L. & S. Brown, B. Chartier, A. Cook, H. Copland, M. Coughlin, C. Curtis, L&B. de March, J. Duncan, A. Dyck, B. Flood, J. Flood, B. Frew (BFR), K. Gardner, W. Gierulski, J. Groves, **M. Harrison**, T. Herriot, G. Holland, R. Hooper, M. Kiehn, R. Koes (RKO), T. Korolyk, **R. Kreba**, B. Luterbach, P. Molineaux, M. Mulligan, R. Myers, R. Nero, D. Oakford, B. Parsons, R. Parsons, L. Plett, J. Rogers, K. Roman, S. Shadick, N. Short, A. Slater, P. Smith, P. Taylor, T. Thormin, L. Veelma, B. Verner, B. Walker, A. Walley, G. Wapple, R. Wapple, F. Whiley, J. Whitell, R. Zach.



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