

New England



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The winter of 2003–2004 got off to a roaring start with the first northeaster of the season on 6–7 December, which dumped over a meter of snow on some parts of the Region. The storm was followed less than four days later by warm temperatures and heavy rain that ended up washing away much of the snow. Not to be outdone, a second winter storm raged up the East Coast on 14–15 December, providing several additional inches of snow. Again, it was followed by mild conditions and rain, with the result that even northern Christmas Bird Counts were

blessed with more open water than usual.

The respite was brief, and by 8 January, the Region was in the grip of bitter cold, with wind chills reaching -40° Fahrenheit in the north and a record low of -7° in Boston on 16 January. The cold stayed with the Region for the rest of the month, and as a whole the month ranked in the lowest ten percent for average temperature, with Massachusetts taking top honors for the coldest January since 1893. For a little bit of perspective: Nantucket Sound froze in late January, stopping ferry service and technically allowing people to walk to the island—not that anyone was silly enough to try. By February, temperatures returned to the warm side, resulting in an average winter overall. The same could be said of precipitation, as after the snowy December, both January and February were extremely dry.

With all the early coastal storms, it should come as no surprise that seawatchers in eastern Massachusetts had a field day. Dovekies, kittiwakes, phalaropes, fulmars, Pomarine

Jaegers, and even two skuas and a storm-petrel were among the noteworthy finds tallied from points on Cape Ann and Cape Cod.

It was a good winter for northern irruptives, including Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, and Common Redpoll. The latter were accompanied by an unprecedented number of Hoary Redpolls. Although many were not documented, all indications suggest that this may have been the biggest Hoary invasion in well over a decade.

Following an exceptional fall season for such strays, there seemed to be many more western vagrants than usual at the Region's feeders this winter. Topping the list were 2 Spotted Towhees in New Hampshire, but 4 Varied Thrushes, a Townsend's Solitaire, and Western Tanager were not far behind. Of course, there was also the usual smattering of "southern" species as well, including Black-throated Blue Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Painted Bunting, and Summer Tanager. The rarity of the season, a possible Slaty-backed Gull in New Hampshire, was without precedent here.

Abbreviations: Block I. (Washington, RI), First Encounter (First Encounter Beach, Eastham, Barnstable, MA), Little Compton (Newport, RI), M.A.R.C. (Massachusetts A.R.C.), M.V. (Martha's Vineyard, Dukes, MA), Nantucket (Nantucket I., MA), Napatree (Napatree Point C.B.C., Washington, RI), Ogunquit (York, ME), P'town (Provincetown, Barnstable, MA), Quabbin (Quabbin Res., w. MA), Rockport (Essex, MA).

LOONS THROUGH VULTURES

With the exception of a bird at Hull, Plymouth, MA 20 Dec, this season's Pacific Loons did not show up until early Jan, with individuals at Gloucester, Essex, MA 1 Jan and Stonington, New London, CT 3 Jan. Another was at Ogunquit in early Jan. At the very end of the season, 2 more Pacific Loons were photographed off P'town 29 Feb (BN). The Eared Grebe returned to E. Gloucester, Essex, MA for the 9th year. Two were reported from Rhode Island: Westerly (Washington) 13 Dec and Tiverton (Newport) 26 Dec.

Tubenoses made a good showing during the early Dec storms, mostly during frontal passage: 43 Northern Fulmars were seen from First Encounter 7 Dec, with only one seen the next day (BN). According to resident lobstermen, 10–20 fulmars were regular of Mt. Desert Rock, Washington, ME in late Jan (*vide* WT). Greater Shearwaters have become more regular off Massachusetts in early Dec, so 4 at First Encounter 8 Dec (SM) were par for the course. Decidedly *not* par for the course was an unidentified storm-petrel on 7 Dec, also at First Encounter (BN). Although not identified to species, this bird was most likely a Leach's, a species with a smattering of winter records for the Region. Nonetheless, it was far from expected, and almost 10 years have passed

since the last such sighting: a Leach's Storm-Petrel off Pt. Judith, *Washington*, RI 11 Dec 1993.

Seawatches in Dec also tallied good numbers of Northern Gannets, although the species was not as abundant as in the previous winter. High counts include 2500 at First Encounter 8 Dec (BN), 390 at Ptown 6 Dec (BN), 373 on Stellwagen Bank 20 Dec, and 1000 off Pt. Judith 15 Dec. While Double-crested Cormorants are increasingly common



This gull, identified as a Slaty-backed Gull, was discovered at the Rochester, New Hampshire Wastewater Treatment Plant on 24 December 2003, a potential first state and Regional record. The gull was seen regularly through 27 December (here). Photograph by Ben Griffith.

at coastal sites in early winter, an imm. at Pantton, *Addison*, VT 22 Dec (M. Kim) is one of only a handful of inland records in the past several winters. At the opposite end of the Region, an imm. **Brown Pelican** appeared briefly at Wellfleet, *Barnstable*, MA 23–25 Dec (G. Page), providing the 4th winter record for the Region in the past five years.

Hérons made some news in Rhode Island, with a very late Snowy Egret at Napatree 21 Dec, and 5 Black-crowned Night-Hérons spending most of Dec in Jerusalem (*Washington*). Perhaps as good a sign as any that Black Vultures are becoming a fixture in the Bay State is a total of 17 on the Southern Berkshires C.B.C., *Berkshire*, MA 3 Jan. Farthest e. were 8 at Ashaway, *Washington*, RI 15 Feb, while another showed up at the Nashua landfill, *Hillsborough*, NH 10 Feb (M. Medeiros, no details). The latter bird was accompanied by several Turkey Vultures, a species that until recently was not arriving in the Granite State until the very end of Feb.

WATERFOWL THROUGH TURKEY

Greater White-fronted Geese suddenly appeared in Connecticut at the end of Dec and disappeared soon afterward. Single birds were seen at Trumbull (*Fairfield*) 27 Dec–11 Jan, Avon (*Hartford*) 31 Dec–1 Jan, Blomfield (*Hartford*) 31 Dec, and Somers (*Tolland*) 1 Jan, with the two *Hartford* records potentially

referring to the same bird, as the locations are only about 9 km apart. Another made a brief appearance in Rochester, *Plymouth*, MA 6 Jan. Up to 5 Tundra Swans spent the winter in Coventry, *Kent*, RI, with singles at Nantucket though 4 Jan (GE, m. ob.); Bangor, *Penobscot*, ME 9 Jan (T. Hodgeman); and somewhere in Connecticut (*vide* GH).

Rarer dabbling ducks were scarce, with Regional totals including 8 Eurasian Wigeon (MA, RI), 3 Northern Shovelers (MA, RI), and 2 Blue-winged Teal (RI). A single Common (Eurasian Green-winged) Teal made a brief showing in Falmouth, *Barnstable*, MA 14 Feb (D. Furbish). A fish hatchery pond in *Grand Isle*, VT contained numerous out-of-season waterfowl during Jan and Feb (TM, DH). Among the more notable ducks were 4 Northern Pintails, a male Redhead, 43 Greater Scaup, 7 Lesser Scaup, and a female Red-breasted Merganser. It appears to be the end of an era in Sterling, *Worcester*, MA: the male Tufted Duck that has spent the last eight winters at Wachusett Res. did not reappear this season. In fact, the only report of this species was a female at Wakefield, *Washington*, RI returning for a 2nd winter.

Despite suggestions of increasing winter populations in Long Island Sound as recently as the mid-1990s, Common Eiders remain uncommon in Connecticut, with only 2 reported there this season (*vide* GH). Also noteworthy for the Connecticut coast were a female King Eider that wintered at Hammonasset Beach S.P. (*New Haven*) and a Harlequin Duck at Greenwich (*Fairfield*) 12–28 Dec. Peak Harlequin Duck numbers in more traditional wintering spots included 146 at Rockport, 142 at Sachusset Pt., *Newport*, RI, and 45 at Ogunquit. A King

Eider inland in Rochester, *Strafford*, NH 2 Dec was the state's 4th away from the immediate coast. A group of 7 Wild Turkeys was an unusual sight far out toward the tip of Cape Cod in Truro, *Barnstable*, MA 29 Dec (D. Manchester).

RAPTORS THROUGH ALCIDS

Three different Ospreys were reported from e. Massachusetts in Dec, but more notable "fish hawks" from the Bay State were in Feb: Shutesbury, *Franklin* 17 Jan and Chicopee, *Hampden* 27 Jan. Given the Jan weather, these latter 2—as well as an unconfirmed Jan report from Maine—are particularly remarkable and appear to be among only a half-dozen Jan records for the state. Numbers of Bald Eagles continue to rise, with mid-Jan counts of 47 in New Hampshire, 50+ in Massachusetts, 55+ in Connecticut, and 6 in Rhode Island. In Maine, where the national bird occurs in much higher numbers, the high count from a single wintering area was 59 along the Georges R., *Knox* 19 Dec (D. Reimer).

For the 2nd year in a row, observers in s. New England commented that Rough-legged Hawks seemed more common than usual (*vide* GH, MR), and this was certainly the case in New Hampshire, where at least 2 individuals frequented the state's limited coastline. Wintering Golden Eagles turned up in the expected areas at Quabbin and s. Connecticut, although a total of 7 from the latter area was more than twice the recent average. Elsewhere, Golden Eagles seemed unusually widespread, with reports of 3–4 elsewhere in Massachusetts, 2 in Maine, one in the upper Connecticut R. valley, one in se. New Hampshire, and even an imm. at Little Compton 14 Feb (GD).

The presence of 2 Sandhill Cranes at a bird feeder in Barnstable, *Barnstable*, MA 8 Dec–8 Feb brings new meaning to the term "feeder bird." The cranes in question were regularly



New Hampshire hosted two Spotted Towhees this season, with the first, in Grafton, showing up in November and providing the state with its first record. The second, shown here, was discovered during the Concord C.B.C. in Merrimack County on 14 (here 16) December 2003. Both birds remained through the winter. Photograph by Stephen Mirick.

observed taking sunflower seed from the ground below the feeders. Reports of 2 cranes in nearby Yarmouth on 14 and 20 Feb suggest that these birds had started to wander locally, perhaps in preparation for spring migration.

Shorebirds seemed in short supply this season. Two Lesser Yellowlegs were unusual in Harwich, *Barnstable*, MA 14 Dec, and both were still present 1 Jan (BN). Apparent Western Willets were in two locations: at Old Lyme, *New London*, CT through at least 6 Jan (T. Hendrickson) and through 19 Jan at Edgartown, M.V. (AK). A Marbled Godwit found at E. Falmouth, *Barnstable*, MA 27 Nov was relocated 20 Dec on the local C.B.C. (m. ob., ph.). The only remaining scolopacid of note was a White-rumped Sandpiper at Little Compton 14 Dec, providing a 2nd record for the Newport–Westport C.B.C.

In last year's summary, I commented that a total of 24 Pomarine Jaegers on 12 Dec was "twice the previous Dec high." Completely off the charts, however, were the 228 Pomarines seen from First Encounter during the 7 Dec storm (BN), providing Massachusetts with its 4th highest one-day total for any season. Also passing by First Encounter that day were 1435 Red Phalaropes, an unidentified skua, and 2060 Black-legged Kittiwakes, with 70 Pomarine Jaegers still present 8 Dec. The day before, a modest 14 were seen at Rockport (RH), a total that would have raised eyebrows only two years ago. Numbers were significantly lower during the northeaster of 14–15 Dec, although yet another skua was observed, this time at Rockport (RH). Jaegers seen from Rockport at the same time included 2 Pomarines (15 Dec) and one Parasitic (14 Dec, RH), the latter providing Massachusetts with a new record-late date.

Completely trouncing any other Regional larid sightings was a Slaty-backed Gull at the Rochester S.T.P., *Strafford*, NH 23–27 Dec (SM, DA, m. ob., ph.). If accepted by the state's Rare Bird Committee, this would be a first Regional record and first confirmed record for the entire Eastern Seaboard. The bird in question was usually in the company of some 10,000 other gulls, including up to 5 Icelands, 2 Glaucous, 3 Lesser Black-backed, an apparent Herring Gull x Glaucous Gull hybrid, and a leucistic Herring Gull. Despite regular searching, the gull was not relocated after 27 Dec. On the tern front, a Forster's Tern (no details) at Lynn (Essex, MA) 6 Jan would be only the 2nd Jan record for the Bay State.

The winter's alcid flight was dominated by Dovekies, with a mind-boggling 1270 passing First Encounter 7 Dec (BN). The next highest tally was 122 s. of Block I. 28 Dec (S. Tsagarakis), with all other reports consisting of fewer than 5. All the Common Murres were in Massachusetts, with high counts of 8 at Rockport 22 Jan (JB) and 6 at P'town 29 Feb (E. Nielsen). Razorbills peaked at

700–800 at various e. Massachusetts locations in Jan.

OWLS THROUGH CROWS

It was another slow year for Snowy Owls. After something of a push in early Dec, when 2 appeared briefly in Connecticut, only 10 were reported, and most of these showed up in Feb. A Long-eared Owl was a surprise sighting as it flew in front of a car in Whatley, *Franklin*, MA on 12 Dec (A. Magee). Short-eared Owls again wintered at Salisbury Beach, *Essex*, MA, where they were easily observed by birders from throughout the Region. Total numbers of this species throughout Massachusetts were in the 20–25 range, making it one of the better winters in recent years. Short-eareds were also more abundant than usual in Rhode Island and Maine, which each hosted 5 individuals.

Perhaps the time is coming when winter hummingbirds will become passé in this Region, or at least become listed in summary, like so many Harlequin Ducks or Snowy Owls. But we are not there yet: a Rufous Hummingbird lingering from the fall through 23 Dec at Chicopee (D. Glaszcz, m. ob.), and a Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird was at Lanesboro, *Berkshire* through 2 Dec (P. Dion). Another unidentified *Selasphorus* stayed at Little Compton through 6 Dec (GD), at which point it appears to have succumbed to the northeaster.

Lingering from Nov was a Least Flycatcher at Marblehead, *Essex*, MA through 22 Dec (RH). The "late Eastern Phoebe" award for the season goes to a bird at Canton, *Norfolk*, MA 16 Jan (S. Landry). On the coast of Connecticut, a Western Kingbird survived at least one Dec storm and was still present at Westport, *Fairfield* 8 Dec. After being discovered in Nov, Wellfleet's Scissor-tailed Flycatcher lingered until 4 Dec, thus providing the Region its first winter record. Northern Shrikes moved into the Region in respectable numbers, with 28+ in Maine, 27 in Massachusetts, and 5 in Connecticut.

A lingering Blue-headed Vireo at Napatree 21 Dec was par for the course in s. New England, but a Philadelphia Vireo in Plymouth, *Plymouth*, MA on 24 Dec (W. Petersen) most decidedly was not. The bird in question was found on the Plymouth C.B.C. and furnished the first winter record for the Region. Fish Crows continue to increase as wintering birds in the Region. This year an individual was well to the n. in Portland, *Cumberland*, ME 13 Feb, and others were reliable in s. New

Hampshire and w. Massachusetts. Migrants were back in force in the 2nd half of Feb, when flocks of over 300 were reported from Brighton and Newton, MA.

TITMICE THROUGH WARBLERS

There is rarely much mention of common "feeder birds" in these pages, but every now and then we need a reminder that not all areas are equally saturated with familiar winter residents. For example, Tufted Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatch are still rare or even absent on Massachusetts' offshore islands, so a titmouse on M.V. 1 Feb (AK) and a nuthatch on Nantucket 22 Jan (E. Ray) are worthy of note. After last year's scarcity, observers in the Region were ready for an influx of Red-breasted Nuthatches, and the fall flight certainly



One of two that spent much of the winter visiting a bird feeder in *Barnstable*, Massachusetts, this Sandhill Crane was photographed there 8 December 2003. Photograph by Stephen Mirick.

suggested that numbers would be higher this winter. This turns out not to have been the case in n. New England at least, where they ended up being downright scarce on some C.B.C.s. In contrast, the little nuthatches were "widespread and numerous" in Connecticut, with tallies as high as 26 from single locations (*vide* GH). To further muddy the picture, however, numbers of this species were considered low in neighboring Rhode Island (*vide* RF).

Western thrushes made news in n. New England this season. In Vermont, a Townsend's Solitaire was present in W. Rutland, *Rutland* 27 Dec–2 Jan (ph., m. ob.). A little to the n., a Varied Thrush appeared in Montpelier, *Washington*, VT in mid-Dec and remained through Apr. Across the border in New Hampshire, another Varied Thrush visited a feeder in Bradford, *Merrimack* through the middle of Mar. In late Jan, 2 more Varied Thrushes appeared in Massachusetts: Belchertown, *Hampshire* 25 Jan–29 Feb and Nantucket 30 Jan–19 Feb.

The expected flight of Bohemian Waxwings—given this species' recent propensity for a two-year cycle—got off to a slow start, with only scattered individuals and small flocks (<20) in the n. and interior through Dec. Then, as the Jan cold snap gripped the Region, they showed up in force. Flocks of 100 and higher were reported from

Maine and New Hampshire beginning around 20 Jan. In the s., Bohemians first appeared in e. Massachusetts, with 3 in Gloucester 24 Jan and 62 in Truro 25 Jan. In Feb, however, most were farther w., with a maximum of 94 in Royalston, *Worcester*. They also started showing up in Connecticut in Feb, where numbers peaked at 20 at Chaplin, *Windham* 12 Feb (M. Szantyr). Meanwhile, numbers continued to grow in the n., including an unfathomable count of 1600–2000 in Hanover, *Grafton*, NH 14 Feb (W. Shepard). The more typical maximum flocks during this period were in the 200–400 range, with Maine tending to host more birds than New Hampshire. Along with the Bohemians, there was a noticeable late-Jan increase in American Robins in New Hampshire and presumably the other n. states. This observation leads to speculation as to the geographic origin of both species; the ongoing increase in wintering robins in the Region appears no closer to being explained.

Warblers did not fare well in New England this winter, perhaps at least partially a result of the early storms and Jan freeze. Early in the season, a Yellow-throated Warbler held over from Nov at Nahant, *Essex*, MA, where it was last seen 5 Dec. Staying slightly longer was a Black-throated Blue Warbler on M.V. that was last reported on 18 Dec. Two more Black-throated Blue Warblers “appeared” in Massachusetts in Jan: one at Belchertown 2–11 Jan, and the other in Chatham (*Barnstable*) 7–14 Jan. For the 2nd year in a row, Massachusetts hosted a Dec Northern Waterthrush, with this season’s bird at E. Falmouth on 14 Dec (J. Trimble).

TANAGERS THROUGH FINCHES

Also lingering well into Dec were two tanagers that provided record-late dates for Massachusetts, both of which were at feeders. A male *Scarlet Tanager* graced a feeder in P’town 11–24 Dec (P. Post, m. ob., ph.), while

a female *Summer Tanager* made it through 25 Jan at Stow, *Middlesex*. Not to be outdone, a *Western Tanager* appeared in Brewster, *Barnstable*, MA 11 Jan and remained until 18 Feb. Additional *Summer Tanagers* were reported from Maine and Connecticut. The former appeared briefly in Bangor 1–2 Dec (J. Markowsky), while the other was at Old Lyme 8 Dec–6 Jan, where it survived by eating bees at a hive (H. Golet). In a season full of w. passerines, one might speculate on the origin of these birds, but it turns out that at least the Maine and Massachusetts individuals were of the e. race, those identifications being based on plumage and bill morphology.

When it rains, it pours. New Hampshire hosted 2 *Spotted Towhees* this season, providing the Granite State with its first and 2nd state records in quick succession. The first appeared at a feeder in Grafton, *Grafton* in Nov, where the homeowner kept detailed records of its visits (G. Renee, ph. J. Williams). The other was discovered at a feeder in Concord, *Merrimack* during the local C.B.C. 14 Dec (M. and R. Suomala, m. ob., ph.). Both birds were present through the end of the season. A *Vesper Sparrow* was unusually late in Swanton, *Franklin*, VT 28 Dec (TM). Lapland Longspurs definitely seemed more common than usual over much of the Region. The peak count of 44 from Newbury, *Essex*, MA 21 Jan is the highest in roughly 10 years, and more than twice the recent average. Numbers also seemed higher than usual in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut.

Two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks spent most of Jan and Feb in the Region: a young male in Derry, *Rockingham*, NH (B. Horton, m. ob.) and another in Truro (ph. C. Skowron). Meanwhile, a *Painted Bunting* appeared in Shrewsbury, *Worcester*, MA 11 Jan–5 Feb (E. Surette, m. ob., ph.). Single Baltimore Orioles were at Arundel, *York*, ME 11 Dec; Hadley, *Hampshire*, MA 14 Dec–19 Jan; Groveton, *Coos*, NH

through 6 Jan; and Saco, *York*, ME 13 Jan. The season’s only *Bullock’s Oriole* was at Walpole, *Norfolk*, MA 1–7 Jan (ph. W. Barnes).

Irruptive finches were back after last winter’s absence. Although technically an invasion year, Pine Grosbeaks were almost unreported s. of the n. portions of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. In the latter state, maxima of 50–70 were reported from *Aroostook*, *Penobscot*, and *Piscataquis*. After what appeared to be a good fall flight, Purple Finches were quite scarce over most of New England over the winter. A single White-winged Crossbill wandered to the extreme s. end of the Region at Block 1. 16 Feb. A few Evening Grosbeaks made it to Connecticut in mid-Dec, though it was generally an off year for the species.

Corrigenda: In the winter 2002–2003 Regional Summary, the Tufted Ducks in Vermont represented a 3rd state record, not the 2nd as stated. The White-rumped Sandpiper in Eastham, MA was seen on 15 Dec, not 15 Jan. The possible Yellow-legged Gull reported from Salisbury, MA on 19 Feb 2003 should be deleted, as the observer did not propose a specific identification for the bird in question; the error arose from miscommunication along the reporting chain, and the sighting was never submitted to M.A.R.C. as stated in the seasonal summary. The Long-billed Murrelet reported from Rockport in Jan 2003 was not accepted by M.A.R.C.

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SA The stars of the irruptive finch show were without doubt redpolls. Common Redpolls were already appearing in n. portions of the Region by the end of Nov. As the season began, they were still concentrated in the n. three states, with occasional flocks of up to 40 in parts of Massachusetts. Numbers climbed throughout the Region through Jan into early Feb, when the largest flocks numbered 300 in Maine, 200 in Massachusetts, 50 in Connecticut, and 20 in Rhode Island. By mid-Feb however, the flocks seemed to disperse and diminish, and it remains unclear where birds went.

There are often a few *Hoary Redpolls* among the hordes of Commons that invade New England every two years, but nothing prepared the Region’s birders for the magnitude of this winter’s flight. After a single early bird on Plum I., *Essex*, MA 22 Nov, there was a two-week hiatus before Hoaries started appearing in Maine and New Hampshire. By the end of Dec, the following statewide totals were reported: Maine (15), New Hampshire (10), Vermont (3), and w. Massachusetts (one). Numbers increased in Jan, with an additional 15, 15, two, and six reports, respectively. By the middle of Feb, they had started to disappear along with the Common Redpolls. In Connecticut, where there are only a handful of records, 2 “possibles” were reported, but neither was seen well enough for a positive identification (*vide* GH).

Given the difficulty of identifying Hoary Redpolls, it is unclear how many were in New England this winter. Conservative estimates suggest that there were at least five in Massachusetts, three in Vermont, 20 in New Hampshire (*vide* DD), and 20 in Maine, but these still await evaluation by state records committees. Detailed observations and photographs of several individuals (reports of up to 10!) in Keene, *Cheshire*, NH suggest that the invading birds were of the expected subspecies *exilis* (see J. Smith et al. 2004. Hoary Redpolls in New Hampshire in December 2003 and January 2004. *Bird Observer* 32: 86–91).

An interesting aspect of this Hoary invasion was the relatively high ratio of Hoary to Common Redpolls: many flocks containing Hoaries only had 20–40 total birds. In any event, even if we conservatively discount the numerous undocumented reports, this was an irruption for the record books. The most recent Hoary Redpoll invasion in the Region occurred in the winter of 1999–2000, when at least 15 were reported (mostly in Maine). Another invasion appears to have occurred in 1981–1982, when eight birds were documented in Massachusetts during Feb and Mar. Unfortunately, data for n. New England are scarce for that period, so the magnitude of that winter’s incursion cannot be fully assessed.