

Field Notes:

The 2012-2013 Winter Season

BY KELLY J. MCKAY AND STEVEN D. BAILEY



Illustration of a Spotted Towhee by Frank Bennett.

During the 2012-2013 winter season in Illinois, temperatures fluctuated substantially and periodically, ranging from considerably above to well below normal. The majority of this season experienced warmer than usual temperatures, although not as extreme as the previous season. The state also experienced above normal precipitation.

Temperatures in December ranged from considerably above to slightly below normal, with most of the month being warmer than usual. January temperatures ranged from well above to well below normal with the majority of the month experiencing warmer than usual temperatures. The most active weather month was February with temperatures fluctuating from moderately above to moderately below normal and much of the month experiencing near normal temperatures.

Overall, 25 notable storms traveled across Illinois during the winter of 2012-2013. These frequent storms produced rain, freezing rain, sleet, and/or snow depending on the current temperatures.

Six winter storms moved through the state in December after the winter began late on 9 December with a storm that produced light snow and freezing rain across the northern tier of counties, light to moderate rain in the remaining northern 2/3 of the state, and moderate rain and severe thunderstorms over the southern 1/3. A major storm hit on 20 December producing considerable rainfall (1-2 inches) across the entire state followed by heavy, wet snow which accumulated to 4-10 inches over the northern 1/3 of Illinois, 1-4 inches through the central region, and light snowfall over the southern 1/3 of the state. The backside of this storm was accompanied by 40-60 mph winds, which created blizzard conditions and wind chills of -10 to -15 degrees. The southern portion of Illinois experienced a second major storm on 25-26 December, which produced 3-18 inches of snow.

There were eight winter storms in January, with small to moderate amounts of rain, freezing rain and snow. A storm on 20 January that included 25-35 mph winds resulted in bitterly cold wind chills of -15 to -20 degrees. The month ended with a very slow moving storm on 29-31 January the first half of which produced light to heavy rainfall and scattered thunderstorms statewide, changing to 1-4 inches of snow throughout the state on 31 January. This storm was accompanied by strong winds (20-40 mph), with created wind chills of -10 to -30 degrees.

In February, 11 storms impacted the state, the worst of which traveled through the entire state on 18-19 February producing moderate to heavy rainfalls and some snow to the north. This storm was ushered through by 25-35 mph winds, resulting in wind chills of -5 to -15 degrees.

The avian community observed this winter was diverse with 185 species identified throughout the state (plus four

introduced/or exotic escapees). Most of the expected wintering birds were present as was a noteworthy variety of lingering migrant, semi-hardy species. However, a few uncommon to rare species that are often usually detected during the winter period such as Harlequin Duck, Sora and Virginia Rail, Purple Sandpiper, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel were not located this winter. Many of the birds typically present only in the southern region of the state were present as usual. A considerable number of uncommon and accidental species were documented throughout the state. As usual, by mid-Feb or sooner, there were signs of early spring migration, including several species of waterfowl, cranes, Killdeer, American Woodcock, blackbirds and other species.

There were 10 exceptional species this winter season (California Gull, Gyrfalcon, Prairie Falcon, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Bewick's Wren, Mountain Bluebird, Varied Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Smith's Longspur and Hoary Redpoll), which require review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC). Several other rare winter visitors were also observed. Among these, were American Avocet, Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Forster's Tern, Barn Owl, Swainson's Thrush, Northern Waterthrush, and Palm Warbler.

Waterfowl to Vultures

Increased numbers of wintering geese continue to grow in Illinois at several statewide locations, with an increasingly large percentage of the birds being composed of Snow, Ross's and Greater White-fronted Geese as opposed to the once much more common Canada Goose. As this seasons counts show, flocks of Snow Geese in the tens of thousands or more and flocks of White-fronted Geese numbering in the hundreds or thousands are not uncommon, with increasing numbers of flocks (instead of single birds) of Ross's Geese no longer the exception. This year, two Barnacle Geese (at least one unbanded) were also sighted, both in with Cackling, Greater White-fronted, and/or Ross's Geese mixed flocks. These species also nest in the far northeastern Canadian provinces where truly wild, native Barnacle Goose nesting populations can be found. How long will it be before one of these birds is considered a legitimate new species on the official list of Illinois birds? With the increase in the re-introduced, north-central U.S. breeding population of Trumpeter Swans, Illinois is becoming a major part of the species' developing migratory flyway. The state also has a substantial number of wintering birds in southern Illinois. All three species of swan were widespread in good numbers statewide. A male Barrow's Goldeneye was encountered/returned for the second consecutive year to the same location at the Skokie Lagoons in Cook County (same bird?). This was also the fifth consecutive