

Field Notes

The 2008-2009 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

Snowy Owl drawing by Robert Savannah, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Weather during the winter of 2008-2009 was very similar to that of the previous winter, with extreme fluctuations in temperature and substantial precipitation. Some 25 noteworthy winter storms moved across all or a portion of Illinois during the season.

December temperatures ranged from substantially below normal to well above normal. A winter storm on 1 December dropped 1-4 inches of snow across the northern half of Illinois. Two days later, 2-3 more inches of snow fell in the northern section of the state, along with a mix of rain and snow in the central region, and moderate rainfall in the south. On 8 December, another winter storm produced rain, freezing rain, and 4 inches of snow in the north, and moderate amounts of rain in the central section of the state. Nearly a week passed before the next major storm dropped heavy rain, freezing rain, sleet, and snow across most of the state on 14-15 December. This was followed immediately on 16 December by another storm which brought 2-6 inches of snowfall over the northern third of Illinois, and substantial freezing rain over the central third. A very strong winter storm slammed into Illinois on 18-19 December, producing freezing rain, sleet, and 2-10 inches of snow in the northern portion of the state, a severe ice storm with up to 1 inch of ice over the central region, and rain across the south. A fast moving storm on 20 December left 1-2 inches of snow in the north, coupled with winds at 25-30 mph statewide and wind chills at 25-35 degree below zero. A couple of days later (23-24 December), another storm dropped 2-4 inches of snow in the north, a quarter inch of ice through the central region, and substantial rain and freezing rain across the south. Additionally, 10-20 mph winds created severe wind chills ranging from 10 to 20 degrees below zero. On 25 December, light rain and freezing rain fell across the northern 2/3 of Illinois. A quickly-following storm the next two days dropped 1-2 inches of rain statewide, turning to light freezing rain in the north.

January was very cold, with temperatures ranging from severely below normal to nearly normal, and with continued frequent storms. Minor weather events at the start of the month included light rain and freezing rain across the northern third of the state on 3 January; light rain over the southern third and northeastern sections of the state on 6 January; and light snow in northern Illinois on 8 January. A more significant storm moved across the state on 9-10

January, producing 2-8 inches of snow over the northern half of the state and light rain and freezing rain across the southern half. The middle of January was exceptionally brutal. A major storm on 12-13 January yielded 2-6 inches of snow in the north and 1-3 inches of snow in central sections of the state, coupled with high winds creating severe wind chills of 20-30 degrees below zero. Immediately following this, another major winter storm on 13-14 January dropped an additional 6-10 inches of snow in the north, 3-6 inches in the central, and 1-3 inches in the southern sections of the state. Once again, very strong winds resulted in record cold wind chills of -40 to -50 degrees. The month ended with a series of minor storms. On 17 January, 1-2 inches of snow fell across the northern two thirds of the state, while another 1-2 inches of snow fell across the northern third on 19 January. A storm producing a quarter inch of ice moved across the southern region on 26 January.

Extreme temperatures in February ranged from substantially below normal to record highs. Precipitation continued fairly frequently in the last third of the season. After a two-week period free of storms, up to half an inch of rain fell over much of the state on 9 February. On 11 February, Illinois was soaked by another 0.5-1 inch of rain. Two days later, 1-2 inches of snow was dropped over the northern third of the state, and light rain fell over the central third. Another noteworthy storm yielded 0.5-1 inch of rain across most of Illinois on 17 February. The final snow of the season fell on 21 February, when a significant storm dropped 2-6 inches of snow in the northern portion of the state, moderate rain and freezing rain over the central region, and light rain over the southern section of Illinois. The last precipitation of the season occurred on 26 February, in the form of heavy rainfall. This storm produced 0.75-1.5 inches of rain in the northern half and 0.5-1 inch of rain in the southern half of the state.

Bird diversity in the winter of 2008-2009 was very high, with 189 species reported below. The total included a large variety of lingering fall migrants and "semi-hardy" species, as well as numerous species that are scarce to accidental in winter in Illinois. By season's end, very little early spring migration had been observed within Illinois.

Many species groups showed declines in overall abundance compared to the previous winter. These included: dabbling ducks, doves, "open country" birds, mimids,