



Field Notes: The 2011-2012 Winter Season

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Barrow's Goldeneye drawing by Barbara Williams

Overall, the weather in Illinois during the 2011-2012 winter season was noticeably milder (i.e. longer periods of warmer temperatures and lesser amounts of precipitation), as compared to the previous three winters. Throughout the entire winter temperatures fluctuated widely, but the majority of the season experienced normal to considerably above normal periods. By comparison, only brief episodes of slightly to well below normal temperatures occurred. Statewide temperatures never dipped below 0, and a wind chill of 0 to -5 degrees in mid-January was the coldest of the season. Reduced amounts of precipitation fell across Illinois during fairly frequent minor and major winter storm events this season. In total, 14 noteworthy winter storms traveled across all or a portion of the state during 2011-2012. These storms produced rain, freezing rain, and/or snow depending on the current temperatures.

Throughout December, temperatures across the state ranged from moderately below to considerably above normal, with the majority of the month being warmer than usual. A number of major and minor storms moved through the state during December. Temperatures in January ranged from well below to considerably above normal. However, most of the month was warmer than what typically occurs, with the exception of mid-January which produced the coldest temperatures of the season. January was also a fairly active month in terms of storm events. Another strong wind storm (20-30 mph), moved through Illinois on 1 January but produced very little precipitation. On 12 and 13 January, a powerful winter storm dropped 4-8 inches of snow in the northern portion of the state, 2-4 inches in the central region, and even 1-2 inches of snow through the south. This storm was accompanied by strong winds (20-30 mph), which produced the coldest wind chills of the season (0 to -5 degrees). Temperatures in February ranged from moderately below to considerably above normal. However, as with the two previous months, February was overall much warmer than usual. A strong winter storm dropped 4-8 inches of snow in the northern 1/3, light to moderate rain and freezing rain in the central 1/3, and light rain in the southern 1/3 of the state on 23 February. The winter season ended on 28 February with a very strong storm which produced moderate to heavy rainfall across the entire state, including several strong thunderstorms and tornados throughout the south.

During the winter of 2011-2012, a substantially diverse avian community (193 species) was observed within Illinois. This community included most of the "expected" wintering birds, along with a noteworthy variety of lingering migrants and "semi-hardy" species. Additionally, many birds which are typically present only in the southern region of the state were also recorded this winter. Furthermore, a considerable number of uncommon and accidental species were also documented throughout the

state. By the end of the winter season, early spring migration had noticeably commenced within Illinois.

Once again, the avian community observed this winter was substantially diverse with 193 species identified throughout the state. This community was even higher than the high diversity reported during the previous three winters (182, 185, and 189, respectively). Consequently, Illinois again played host to a notable wintering avian community. Overall, the majority of species composing the wintering avifaunal community were observed in greater abundance during the 2011-2012 winter season, as compared to last winter. During the 2011-2012 winter season, many species groups were reported in greater abundance. These groups included: waterfowl (both puddle and diving ducks), "waterbirds," permanent residents, "semi-hardy species," woodpeckers, shrikes, mimic thrushes, sparrows, blackbirds, and finches.

The avian community this winter included many exceptional vagrant and lingering/wintering species. These included Brant, Barrow's Goldeneye, Western Grebe, Prairie Falcon, Little Gull, Mew Gull, Rufous Hummingbird, and Mountain Bluebird), which required review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC) before they could be accepted. Several additional species were noted requiring IORC review within the state due to rarity or season of occurrence. Among these, some of the more interesting species included: Harlequin Duck, Pacific Loon, Spotted Sandpiper, Purple Sandpiper, Greater & Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, California Gull, Barn Owl, Fish Crow, White-eyed Vireo, Tree Swallow, No. Rough-winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Gray Catbird, Orange-crowned Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Spotted Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Scarlet Tanager, Dickcissel, and Baltimore Oriole. The Whooping Crane was the only exotic/released species observed within Illinois this winter.

Waterfowl to Vultures

Overall, 35 species of waterfowl were reported in Illinois during the 2011-2012 winter season. The majority of waterfowl species, including both "puddle" and "diving ducks," were more plentiful this winter. Goose populations appeared to be more abundant this season at traditional central and southern wintering locations. Additionally, Snow Goose populations were elevated throughout central and southern portions of the state. While Mute Swans were somewhat less numerous this winter, Trumpeter and Tundra Swans were much more abundant. The northward migration began in earnest with geese in mid-February. Overall, both "puddle" and "diving ducks" were reported in greater numbers this year. Although various species were more abundant