

concentrations were still encountered there. Two Baltimore Orioles were well-documented with photos.

A total of eight finch species were observed in Illinois this winter. The winter 2011-2012 season produced a pretty significant invasion of both crossbills, Pine Siskin and Common Redpolls mainly in northern Illinois but at least small numbers of all four species were found south into central Illinois as well. A single Evening Grosbeak was also located. Eurasian Tree Sparrows were found in good numbers this winter, including one bird which spent much of February in a Cook County yard for many to view.

## The Changing Illinois winter bird community

The shorter and warmer Illinois winters brought about by global climate change are quickly bringing about marked changes to the Illinois winter bird community and its dynamics. It has already been shown that migrants travelling over short or medium distances arrive earlier and stay longer in their breeding areas. And for the most part, these are the species for which the most noticeable changes in the Illinois wintering bird community are occurring. For instance, as recently as the winters of 1989-1991, Canada Goose numbers in the heavily hunted southern Illinois quota zone were counted by aerial censuses and their numbers ranged between 565,000 and 871,000, with 3 or 4 southern Illinois "goose" refuges annually attracting 150-250, 000 or more Canada Geese at each refuge every winter. During those years and earlier, a flock of 10-25 Snow Geese was something to get excited about anywhere in Illinois, and even a single Greater White-fronted Goose or Ross's Goose was unheard of, even in the big southern Illinois goose flocks, and always needed to be documented. Flash-forward to the past several years on those same southern Illinois "goose" refuges. Highest tallies for Canada Geese now come from central and northern Illinois, and those counts only range between 1,500-5,000, with counts on two of the three big southern Illinois goose refuges having only tallied between 500-1,200 birds on two of the refuges the last few years. Contrast that with Snow Goose and Greater White-fronted Goose numbers, which now far outnumber the Canada Goose flocks, with several areas harboring 50,000-100,000 Snow Geese (as far north as Springfield and Lake Chautauqua), and as many as 5-10,000 Greater White-fronted Geese in several areas. Counts of 10-25 Ross's Geese are not uncommon for those willing to sort through the huge Snow Goose flocks. Most of the large Canada Goose numbers are now wintering northward at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge and other areas in Wisconsin and points farther north.

On the flip-side, the 2011-2012 winter season saw the largest numbers of wintering Tundra and Trumpeter Swans likely yet reported for an Illinois winter... a good sign for the Midwest's rebounding, re-introduced Trumpeter Swan population. Migrating south(east) bound Tundra Swans in mid-December and even into January, almost met the returning northbound flocks of early to mid-February, and like today's Illinois Sandhill Crane migrants, made it hard to tell if the birds were coming or going... or maybe some were actually even wintering. Three species of wintering swans have become the norm at the Channahon Widewaters area in Will County. Speaking of those cranes, good numbers of that species were detected in each month of the winter season, with birds flying southbound in December and January as well as northbound in January and February. In fact, some Sandhill Cranes fitted with radio-

transmitters for a study being conducted in northeastern Illinois have shown that several of the birds were flying back and forth between northeast Illinois and the main eastern staging area for cranes in northwestern Indiana, 4 or 5 times in fall/winter "migration"! Large numbers of cranes (including Whooping Cranes!) are now wintering in northwest Indiana, instead of continuing on to their more normal wintering areas in Florida and the Gulf Coast states.

Concerning raptors, Golden Eagles appear to be forming a regular wintering area in central/southern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois, to the extent that the National Fish & Wildlife Service is beginning to conduct a winter aerial survey of their numbers. Historically most Illinois winter Golden Eagle records usually came from the same refuges in far southern Illinois that attracted the large numbers of geese on which they feed. Although they are still often found there, in recent years up to at least a half dozen or more of these eagles are getting detected in other areas of Illinois, especially in northwest Illinois during the winter. Winter records of Merlin have increased fairly dramatically within the last 20-25 years or so as well. The winter 1991-1992 Merlin account in the Illinois birding journal *Illinois Birds & Birding* read "first confirmed overwintering Merlins in state history" (4 records, w/3 in northern IL). All winter records prior to this were asked to be "thoroughly documented". Bohlen (1989) referred to both Golden Eagle and Merlin as "rare winter residents", with rare defined as occurring only "once or twice a year, and some years not at all". Most of the earlier Illinois bird journals for the 1980's and early 1990's listed 2-5 Merlin sightings per winter, occasionally fewer. The *Meadowlark: A Journal of Illinois Birds*, lists between 10-18 Merlin sightings most winters for about the last ten years... quite a jump in numbers for such a short time period since they were formerly considered rare. Interestingly, this same phenomena has been detected in other surrounding Midwestern states, as well as the fact that a large number of wintering Merlins in each state are detected at cemeteries, both in Illinois and in other Midwestern states. This is not due to the Merlin's sudden preference for cemetery head stones but likely due to the presence of the large, old conifers found in many cemeteries, which they can roost in... trees which they are known to use as roosting sites (Sodhi et al. 1993). Their winter range has also generally been spreading northward the past thirty years, and their breeding range southward (Sodhi et al. 1993).

Other species which are showing changes in their wintering status within Illinois (all either beginning to overwinter, linger into winter longer, occur in winter more than formerly or increasing in population or more northerly distribution during winter) in the last few decades include Red-throated Loon, American White Pelican, Turkey Vulture, various shorebirds (especially American Woodcock), Forster's Tern, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, Northern Shrike, Barn, Tree and No. Rough-winged Swallows, Hermit Thrush, American Robin, American Pipit, Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers, Chipping, Savannah and LeConte's Sparrows, and all blackbird species. Bohlen (1989) states for Red-throated Loon, "no recent winter records and few old ones", though small numbers of these birds have either wintered or lingered into early/mid-December since at least the 2006/2007 winter season along the Lake Michigan shoreline, as well as at a few large, downstate reservoirs. All of the above species present their own interesting stories, but somewhere within that story, the warming Illinois winter temperatures play a role. These relatively recent trends can easily be noted, either