



Field Notes

The 2005/2006 Winter Season

Field Notes drawing of Great Horned Owl by Peter Olson.

by Kelly J. McKay

The winter of 2005-2006 showed temperatures well below normal early and late in the season, but well above normal for most of the season. Illinois experienced six substantial winter storms with a variety of precipitation (rain, ice, snow), depending on the temperature at the time. Bird diversity was low compared with recent years, at 168 species compared with 177 species encountered in each of the previous two winters.

Temperatures in the first 2/3 of December were among the coldest in the last half-century, and were accompanied by significant precipitation. Light snowfalls (up to 1-2 inches) were recorded across much of Illinois on 1, 3, 6, 12, and 15 December. The first of two winter storms in this period, on 8 December, dropped 4-8 inches of snow. This was followed on 14 December by a storm producing 2-4 inches of snow and very strong winds with bitterly cold wind-chills. Conditions moderated in the last 1/3 of the month, resulting in temperatures substantially above normal by the last week of December.

January 2006 was one of the warmest on record, with several days in the 50s to low 60s across Illinois. For the most part January was fairly dry, but for 3 major storms. The first occurred on 2 January, as strong thunderstorms passed through the northern portion of the state, producing 1-2 inches of rain. The second moved through the state on 20 January under near-seasonal temperatures. This storm precipitated 3-6 inches of snow over northern Illinois, 4-8 inches of snow across the central third, but rain in the south. The third storm, on 27-28 January, dropped up to an inch of rain over most of the state.

Most of February continued the seasonal to slightly above normal temperatures, with only minor precipitation, but there were significant weather systems at mid-month. On 10 February, southern Illinois received 2 inches of snow and some freezing rain. The following day, 1-2 inches of snow fell over most of the state. Then on 15-16 February, the northern edge of the state was grazed by a front bringing

about an inch of snow with ice and sleet, while the rest of the state experienced heavy rains. This front continued southward under high winds and very cold temperatures, with wind-chills at -20 to -30 F, and by 19 February it reached extreme southern Illinois, where it left 1-2 inches of snowfall.

While bird diversity was low this season, most of the expected wintering birds, along with a variety of lingering migrants and several "semi-hardy" species were encountered. Additionally, several species typically found only in the southern section of the state were also found further north. Comparatively few uncommon and accidental species were reported this winter, and very little early spring migratory movement was noted, even in late February.

Reduced numbers were generally reported for upland game birds, various waterbirds, shorebirds, gulls, owls, black-birds, and "winter" finches. Several scarce but regularly occurring species went unreported, including White-winged Scoters, Gray Partridge, Red-throated Loon, Black-legged Kittiwake, White-winged Crossbill, and Evening Grosbeak. By contrast, most woodpeckers, thrushes, "semi-hardy" species (but see Johnson 2006 this issue), and sparrows were found in greater numbers. Some species groups, such as waterfowl, doves, and the non-migratory residents, showed roughly equal numbers of increases and declines across various species.

WATERFOWL TO VULTURES.

Thirty-four species of waterfowl were found in Illinois this winter. About half the species showed increases over recent years, and the other half appeared in smaller numbers. Greater White-fronted, Snow, and Ross's Geese continued to increase and were more widespread, particularly within southern concentration sites and/or the Chicago area. Canada and Cackling Geese were considerably less numerous this winter at their typical central and southern wintering grounds. Mute and Trumpeter Swans were slightly more common and widely distributed, while Tundra Swans occurred in considerably reduced numbers this winter.