



Field Notes

Prairie Falcon drawing by Eric Secker

2002/2003 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

Editor's note: This summary incorporates changes in species sequencing and in English names as adopted by the American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U.) in its 44th Supplement to the A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds*, published in *The Auk* 120.3 (issued 7 Aug 2003). In particular, waterfowl (geese, swans, and ducks; order Anseriformes) and "upland game birds" (pheasants, grouse, turkeys, quails; order Galliformes) are moved to the head of the linear sequence, before loons. One English name has been changed; viz., "Rock Dove" becomes "Rock Pigeon." The Supplement revised the scientific names of a few additional species recorded from Illinois, but no other changes in sequencing or in English names of species confirmed for the state are proposed in the Supplement.

The winter season of 2002-2003 was characterized by alternate periods of normal to above-normal and normal to below-normal temperatures. Overall, the northern 2/3 of Illinois experienced a very dry winter season. By contrast, the southern 1/3 of the state experienced periodic episodes of heavy precipitation throughout the winter, particularly in December and January. The total number of species encountered (170) was very similar to the total recorded last year (166).

During the early half of December, temperatures across the state were normal to slightly below normal. By comparison, the latter half of the month showed normal to slightly higher than normal temperatures. Little to no precipitation occurred in the northern 2/3 of the state, except for a major rainfall event which dropped 2-3 inches on 18 and 19 December. Additionally, 2-4 inches of lake-effect snow fell in the Chicago vicinity on 24 December. By contrast, two major winter storms moved across the southern portion of the state in early December. Each storm produced 6+ inches of snow. The warmer, latter half of the month had two additional storms each dropping 2-3+ inches of rain in the south, which caused flash flooding.

For the most part, above-normal temperatures continued through early January. By the latter half of the month, temperatures were average to well below. Precipitation events occurred periodically throughout various portions of Illinois. For example, on 1 January, 4-8 inches of snow fell across the southern 2/3 of the state. This

was followed by a moderate rainfall event on 4 January across the northern 2/3 of Illinois. On 16 January, colder temperatures resulted in 1-2 inches of snow in the central and northeast regions. Lake effects produced 6-12 inches of snow locally in the Chicago area. By the end of the month, a couple of light snow events dropped 1-2 additional inches each across the state.

Average to slightly below-average temperatures characterized the early part of February. During the latter half of the month, temperatures ranged from normal to well above-normal to below-normal by the end of February. Minor snowfalls (< 1 inch) occurred in various portions of Illinois during the early half of the month. A major winter storm on 14 February produced 6-10 inches of snow over the northern 2/3 of Illinois, while slightly higher temperatures in the south resulted in 0.5-0.75 inches of ice. During the last half of the month, only a couple of minor snowfalls (1-2 inches each) fell in the southern 1/3 of the state, while the northern 2/3 experienced little or no precipitation.

The avian community reported in Illinois during the 2002-2003 winter season was exceptionally diverse. The majority of expected species, along with several lingering migrants and a diversity of "semi-hardy" birds were recorded. Most of the species typically encountered only in the southern region were also present this winter, however several of these occurred in very low numbers. Additionally, several uncommon and accidental species were documented within the state. Early spring migrants began appearing in February, especially during the latter part of the month.

Although overall diversity statewide was good, the relative abundance of various species groups ranged from less abundant to more numerous than usual. For example, virtually all waterbirds, waterfowl, and typical gull species were considerably less common throughout Illinois. Raptors, woodpeckers, and permanent residents (e.g., corvids, chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches) seemed to occur in somewhat typical numbers. In general, the less common "winter" gulls, "semi-hardy" species (i.e. wrens, kinglets, thrushes, and mimids), sparrows, and blackbirds were reported in greater abundance. "Winter finches" were almost totally absent. In fact, there were no reports of crossbills, redpolls,