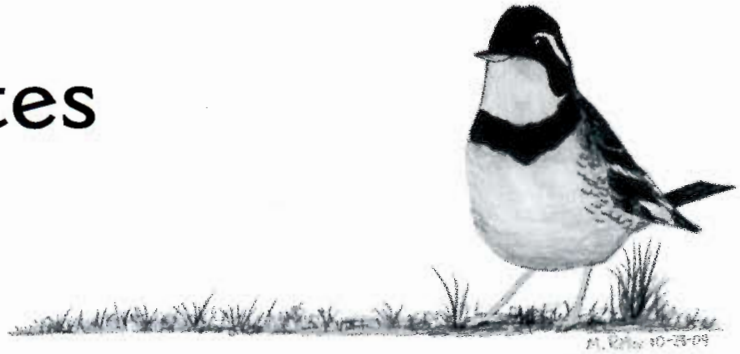


Field Notes

*Male Varied Thrush drawing
by Michael L. P. Retter.*



The 2003/2004 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

Temperatures in Illinois during the winter season of 2003-2004 ranged from well-above to well-below normal levels. Overall, Illinois experienced a fairly dry winter season, interrupted by a few notable winter storms, which produced primarily snow across the northern 2/3 of the state and rain or ice across the southern 1/3.

Overall, temperatures during December across the state were normal to slightly mild. The exception occurred during the last ten days of the month, when well-above average temperatures occurred. A fairly strong winter storm moved across Illinois early in the month, producing heavy rain on 9 December and < 1 inch of snow on 10 December. Precipitation was otherwise minor, with a couple of light snows (< 1 inch) statewide in mid December and a light rainfall over most of the state on 28-29 December. Additionally, an isolated storm resulting in a few inches of

snow occurred in central Illinois on 13 December.

January was very cold, with temperatures ranging from below normal to well-below normal. Compounding these frigid temperatures were high winds (> 20 mph) over several days during the latter 2/3 of the month, yielding severe wind-chills of -20 to -30 degrees Fahrenheit. A major winter storm moved across Illinois on 3-4 January, which dropped 6-10 inches of snow statewide. Little precipitation fell across the state in mid January. A major winter storm on 25-26 January produced 4-8 inches of snow across the northern 2/3 of Illinois, and 0.75 inch of ice over the southern third. Two days later, another 1-2 inches of snow fell across Illinois.

In February, temperatures were considerably below normal during the first half of the month and then well-above normal through the latter half. High winds on several days in early February

resulted in substantial wind-chills. A couple of storms in early February dropped 3-4 inches of snow across the northern 2/3 of the state and freezing rain in the south 2-3 February, then an additional 2-3 inches of snow over the northern 2/3 on 5 Feb. The balance of February saw little or no precipitation. Warming temperatures during the latter half of the month caused a rapid elimination of snow cover. Most of the snow in Illinois had melted by 20 February.

Bird diversity during the 2003-2004 winter season was among the highest ever, with 178 species reported by more than 100 contributors in Illinois. Virtually all of the expected wintering species, along with a considerable number of lingering migrants, were encountered. Additionally, several "semi-hardy" species were present. Some early spring migration began by late February, but no major movements occurred until after February.

WATERFOWL TO VULTURES... Waterfowl diversity was impressive, although the majority of species occurred in lower than expected numbers. The Greater White-fronted Goose continues to expand throughout the state, while concentrations of the Canada Goose remained relatively low. Notable numbers of Snow and Ross's Geese wintered at traditional southern and central locations.

Due to harsher winter weather, and the associated increase in ice cover on many water bodies, most "puddle ducks" were less numerous this winter. The only notable concentrations included 100,000 Mallards at Carlyle Lake and 34,813 at Chautauqua. Similarly, most diving ducks were less abundant. Exceptions included slightly greater numbers among the

Ring-necked Duck, Hooded and Common Mergansers, and Ruddy Duck. A female Harlequin Duck was found on the Mississippi River in Rock Island County and a male was found at Winthrop Harbor in Lake County.

Among the various other waterbird species, most occurred in typically low numbers. Noteworthy concentrations were tallied for Horned Grebe, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant and Great Blue Heron. The most unusual waterbird was Pacific Loon in Madison County.

DIURNAL RAPTORS TO GULLS... The season produced 13 species of diurnal raptors. Overall, most were found in greater abundance, especially so for Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, and Merlin. One Northern