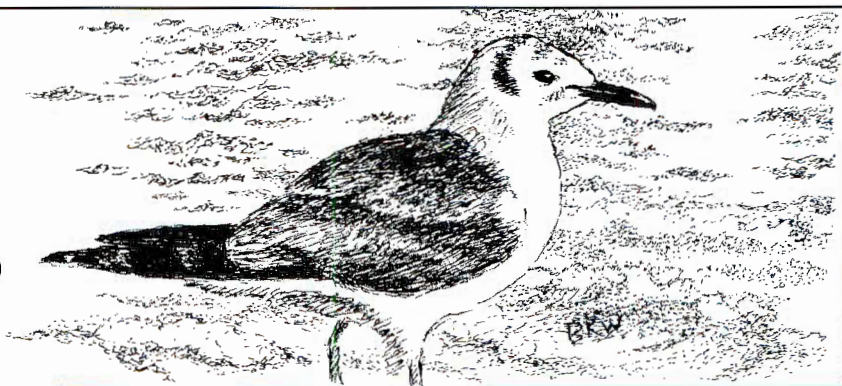


Field Notes



Drawing of Bonaparte's Gull by Brian Willis.

The 1998/1999 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

The winter of 1998-99 continued the recent trend of mild weather. Throughout most of the season, the entire state enjoyed substantially higher than normal temperatures, and the larger lakes and rivers showed minimal freezing. In general, precipitation seemed fairly normal. The central and southern portions of the state experienced a couple of significant precipitation events. However, it was the major winter storm of January 1-3 which produced most of the snow in the northern 2/3 of Illinois. Most of this area received between 12 and 16 inches.

During the first 20 days of December, mild temperatures dominated much of the Midwest. A cold front passing through Illinois on 21-22 Dec ushered in the first seasonably cold temperatures. This was followed by the strong winter storm which occurred on January 1-3. Following the storm, temperatures remained at or below normal for the first three weeks of January. This allowed the snow cover to persist throughout the month. Temperatures returned to above normal during the last week of January and remained there throughout February. In fact, much of the state experienced near or above record high temperatures in early February. In sum, true wintry weather spanned only four weeks beginning the last week of December. The remaining two months of this period were unseasonably mild.

The warm winter certainly influenced the avian community present in Illinois. Many late fall migrants lingered well into the early winter and most typical wintering species were around, but often in reduced numbers. Furthermore, early spring migrants began returning to Illinois sooner than usual. Additionally, several uncommon or accidental species were identified. As a result, observers throughout the state were able to detect a very impressive 177 species during the 1998-99 winter. This represents one of the highest species totals encountered during a winter season in Illinois.

Included among this community are 12 extraordinary

species that require review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC): Yellow-billed Loon, Brant, Barrow's Goldeneye, Prairie Falcon, Purple Sandpiper, California Gull, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Barn Owl, Rufous Hummingbird, Townsend's Solitaire, Bohemian Waxwing, and Brewer's Sparrow. In addition to these outstanding species, many other excellent birds were observed in Illinois during the 1998/1999 winter field season. Some of the more interesting discoveries were Red-throated Loon, Red-necked and Western Grebes, Harlequin Duck, Surf, White-winged, and Black Scoters, Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Franklin's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Snowy Owl, Barn Swallow, Marsh Wren, Gray Catbird, American Pipit, Pine Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Spotted Towhee, Harris's Sparrow, and Dickcissel.

Examination of the overall avifaunal community produced some interesting results among the various groups and families. The waterbirds were represented by 3 species of loons and 5 species of grebes. This included the Yellow-billed Loon in McLean County, along with a couple of Red-throateds and several Commons throughout the state. Impressive numbers of Pied-billed and Horned Grebes were scattered across Illinois, as were a few Red-necked and Eared Grebes and a single Western Grebe. Notably large numbers of American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants lingered well into December in southern and central locations. Overall, Great Blue Herons remained throughout the state in fairly decent numbers. The waterfowl were represented by 5 species of geese, 3 swans, 9 "puddle duck" species, and 17 "divers." Large concentrations of Canada and Snow Geese were found in their typical central and southern wintering areas. However, increasing numbers of Canadas and Greater White-fronteds continue to be observed in the north. Impressive numbers of Mute and Tundra Swans were located in northern Illinois this past winter, while smaller groups of reintroduced Trumpeter