



Field Notes

The 2001/2002 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

The winter season of 2001-2002 was one of the warmest and driest on record in Illinois. In fact, new or near-record high temperatures occurred throughout the season statewide. Unlike last year when Illinois endured a succession of substantial winter storms, this year produced very few storms which resulted in an extremely dry and uneventful winter. The total number of species recorded within the state this year (166) was similar to last year (162).

The mild winter followed an unusually warm fall season. Temperatures during the first two-thirds of December were exceedingly mild statewide. Normal to slightly below normal temperatures characterized the last third of the month. A major storm front passing through southern Illinois at mid-month produced 2-3 inches of rain. Otherwise, no winter storms and very little precipitation occurred during December.

December's relatively mild conditions were followed by one of the warmest Januaries in Illinois. New or near-record high temperatures occurred statewide, especially near the end of January when high temperatures were seldom lower than the 50s or 60s. During the first two-thirds of January, no winter storms and little or no precipitation occurred. The first major winter storm occurred 30-31 January, as temperatures statewide dropped into the 20s and 30s. The storm produced 4 to 12 inches of snow across the northern one-third of Illinois, with locally heavier amounts near the Chicago lakefront. Throughout the central and southern sections of the state, temperatures remained high enough to result in heavy rainfall instead of snow.

During February, temperatures statewide ranged from normal to substantially above normal readings, until the last few days of the month when they dropped to slightly below normal. Two major storm fronts passed through Illinois in February, producing the only substantial precipitation for the month. The first storm, which dropped 1 to 2 inches of snow over most of the state, and locally more, occurred 19-20 February. The second storm resulted in a 1 to 2-inch snowfall over northern portion of Illinois 25-26 February.

The extraordinarily mild fall and winter of 2001-2002 permitted many migrants to linger throughout Illinois. For example, a large number of waterfowl and other waterbird species wintered in relative abundance. Most of the "semi-hardy" passerine species were present. Some species were relatively abundant; others inexplicably rare. A few species typically encountered, mostly in the south, went unreported (e.g. Eastern Phoebe, Vesper Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, and Lincoln's Sparrow). However, I believe this was due pri-

marily to the extremely low number of reports submitted from the central and southern portions of the state. The typical wintering avian community was present this year, but in many cases fewer numbers were observed. Additionally, several uncommon and accidental species were reported. During the 2001-2002 winter, Illinois experienced a minor invasion of "winter finches." With mild weather dominating the past winter, spring migration began very early; many migrants appeared in late January and early February. The number of observers submitting seasonal field notes was surprisingly low (102), particularly from the central and southern regions.

The winter avifauna included five species requiring review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC): Prairie Falcon, Purple Sandpiper, California Gull, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Townsend's Solitaire; see *Meadowlark* 11:65 for published acceptance of the last two species. (See the current review list at <http://www.illinoisbirds.org/iorc.html>.) Many additional species meriting documentation were observed in Illinois during the 2001-2002 winter. Some of the more interesting species included Red-throated Loon, American Bittern, Blue-winged Teal, Harlequin Duck, Golden Eagle, Merlin, Greater Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Red Phalarope, Little Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Caspian Tern, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Barn Swallow, American Pipit, Orange-crowned Warbler, Pine Warbler, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Spotted Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, and Baltimore Oriole. The only other exotic/released species identified this winter was Trumpeter Swan.

Loons - Waterfowl: As with last year, a good diversity of waterfowl and other waterbird species was present in Illinois during the 2001-2002 winter season. **Three Red-throated Loons** were recorded in the state (1 in the north, 2 in the south), while relatively abundant and widespread populations of Common Loons, Pied-billed and Horned Grebes, American White Pelicans, and Double-crested Cormorants were detected, especially in December. Noteworthy concentrations included: **20 and 17 Common Loons** at Carlyle and Clinton Lakes, respectively; **74 Horned Grebes** at Carlyle Lake; and an incredible **7000 Double-crested Cormorants** at Rend Lake. The Great Blue Heron was abundant and widespread statewide, along with relatively small numbers of Great Egrets, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and both vulture species. Additionally, **2 American Bitterns** were encountered in the south.

Once again, Illinois maintained a diverse waterfowl community: **4 species of geese, 3 swans, 9 "puddle ducks," and 16 "div-**