

SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS - Winter Season 1997/98

Breeding Plumage Franklin's Gull found in January

On 2 January 1998, I went to Wilmette's Gillson Park with Josh Engel to look for unusual gulls. We brought plenty of bread to attract the birds, and we hoped for some close views of white-winged gull species that can be found here in winter. The recently completed Christmas Bird Counts had yielded some unusually late stragglers in northern Illinois, and the weather remained unseasonably warm.

Soon after arrival, I scanned the gull flock on the ice mound on the beach south of the harbor mouth entrance. A small, dark-hooded and dark-mantled gull resting among the Ring-billed and Herring Gulls startled me. I yelled to Josh that I thought I had a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*), reasoning that the other dark-hooded, dark-mantled gull, the Franklin's, winters in South America. But the more we looked, the more its features fit a Franklin's Gull (*L. pipixcan*). Not satisfied with the look, we threw bread into the harbor channel. Immediately, the gull flew towards us affording us views as close as 15 feet away.

The bird had a dark hood; thick, white eye crescents; a reddish unmarked bill; a dark gray mantle; black legs; and a small amount of black in the wings separating white tips from the white crescent-shaped inner primaries. There was no doubt about it; we had discovered a Franklin's Gull in January.

This is the second northern Illinois record for January and



Breeding plumage Franklin's Gull at Wilmette's Gillson Park, Cook Co. 2 Jan. 1998. This is northern Illinois's first January record for this species. Photo by Eric Walters.

only the fourth in January for the state. A Franklin's Gull was reported in Rock Island on the Mississippi River from 11-12 January 1992 (Danley 1992: 111). The other two January records are from central Illinois; one adult was found on the Mississippi River in Hamilton 16-17 January 1987 and another adult stayed as late as 6 January 1976 at Lake Springfield (Bohlen 1989).

A Franklin's Gull in January is rare enough. But one in breeding plumage is even rarer. This species goes

through a complete molt starting sometime between November and April on its South American wintering grounds. The Franklin's Gull wears the adult summer plumage from February to September (Grant 1986).

Literature Cited

Bohlen, H. D. 1989. The birds of Illinois. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Danley, R. F. 1992. Field notes. 1991-92 winter season. Meadowlark 1:106-118.

Grant, P. J. 1986. Gulls, A guide to identification. Buteo Books, Vermillion, SD.

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Yellow-breasted Chat Winters in Northern Illinois

On 21 December 1998, I ran into Craig Thayer who was helping me with the Christmas Bird Count at Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center in the Palos area, Cook County. He told me of his morning highlight of over a dozen Tufted Titmice, which we thought was a spectacular number for northeast Illinois. He also mentioned that he met Karen Hart, who claimed to have seen a Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) at the beehives!

Craig made two forays after this large warbler but had no luck. News spread on IBET, the computer E-mail list for Illinois birders, that this chat was seen eating dead bees at the nature center. Later in the week, I went out to meet Joe Milosevich who had his camera set to photograph this unusual winter occurrence. Joe pointed out the chat, which was facing away from me, sitting still in the brambles. No wonder others had missed this bird in the previous few days. The area around the beehives was surrounded by thickets of multiflora rose and if the bird was not active, it was unlikely to be seen.

On 31 December 1998, everything was quite different. The temperature was warmer, the sun was shining, and bees were flying. The chat was actively feeding, mostly on the many dead bees on the snow, but sometimes as bees exited the hives. At one point, the chat landed 25 feet away in completely unobstructed snow-covered grass. My previous experience has been ones of brief fleeting glances, usually through leaves and bushes. Against the snow, the chat stuck out like a shining lemon.

Bohlen (1989) mentions three records of wintering chats in Illinois, none in the northern part of the state. The chat stayed through 21 January 1998, and was seen sporadically by naturalists at the nature center.

Literature Cited

Bohlen, H. D. 1989. The birds of Illinois. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

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