



Field Notes

The 2000-2001 Winter Season

by Kelly J. McKay

The 2000-2001 winter season had much colder temperatures throughout Illinois compared with recent winters. In fact, December 2000 was one of the coldest and wettest in Illinois history. Possibly as a result, the number of species identified within the state dropped from 181 last winter to 162 this winter.

Statewide temperatures ranged from moderately below normal early in December to substantially below normal during the latter 2/3 of the month. Additionally, several storm fronts with strong winds ushered in many days with bitter sub-zero wind chills. A major winter storm on 11 December dropped nearly one foot of snow over the northern half of Illinois, while substantial amounts of freezing rain fell over much of southern Illinois. Two days later (13 December) another 3-6 inches of snow fell over most of the state, followed by a major ice storm on 15 December. Two additional winter storms produced accumulations of 3-5 inches and 4-8 inches of snow over much of Illinois on 18 and 28 December, respectively.

January was characterized by normal winter temperatures and extremely dry conditions. In fact, January 2001 was among the driest on record. Cold temperatures maintained the snow cover over most of the northern half of the state, while slightly warmer temperatures in the south eliminated most of the snow cover by the end of the month. Ice cover persisted on most water bodies through January.

Temperatures during February were seasonably cold, with the exception of a couple of warming trends. One of these warming periods (8 and 9 February) also produced heavy precipitation, with 1-2 inches of rain and freezing rain falling over most of the state. The only snowstorm in February produced 2-4 inches across central Illinois on 25 and 26 February. By the end of the month, snow and ice cover was greatly reduced or gone from most of Illinois and its waterways.

Despite the extremely cold temperatures in November and December, many species of fall migrants lingered well into the early winter. However, it seems that the number of

individuals observed in this species was fewer than in recent years. In contrast, fewer than normal spring migrants appeared before the end of February. The wintering avian community was typical, along with several uncommon and accidental species. The winter's harsh weather, however, probably accounted for the decrease in abundance among many "semi-hardy" species, the noticeable delay in spring migration, as well as the substantial reduction in the number of observers and winter season observation accounts submitted this year.

This winter included reports of seven extraordinary species (King Eider, Barrow's Goldeneye, Western Gull, Barn Owl, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Varied Thrush, and Bohemian Waxwing), which required review by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee. Other interesting species requiring documentation included Red-necked Grebe, Black Scoter, Merlin, Virginia Rail, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Eurasian Collared-Dove, American Pipit, Cape May Warbler, Pine Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. The only exotic and/or released species identified in the state was Trumpeter Swan.

Loons to Waterfowl

The "waterbird" group was represented by only 1 species of loon, 4 grebe species, the American White Pelican and Double-crested Cormorant, as well as 3 species of herons. Only three Common Loons were recorded in northeastern Illinois in early December. All 4 species of grebes were also scarce, with the exception of the 225 and 35 Pied-billed Grebes reported at Crab Orchard (2 December) and Lake Springfield (14 January), respectively. Only four Eared Grebes were recorded in early December in the south, along with a single Red-necked Grebe at Mermet Lake (8 February). A relatively small number of American White Pelicans were observed in the southern region during February, while the Double-crested Cormorant occurred in reduced numbers statewide. The Great Blue Heron was fairly abundant