

# Field Notes



*Illustration of Snow Buntings by Denis Kania.*

## 1993 - 94 Winter

by Robert Danley

The winter of 1993/94 provided a perfect example of the forces that shape the number and types of birds we observe. It was as if three seasons of the year, fall, winter, and spring, were compressed into the winter period. Mild temperatures (about 2.5 degrees above normal) and plentiful food sources (good berry crop in central/southern Illinois) in December may have induced many species to linger past their typical departure dates. Eastern Phoebe, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird, American Pipit, Nashville Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Palm Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Summer Tanager, Indigo Bunting, Dickcissel, and Lincoln's Sparrow were observed in December, and some even into January.

A frigid air mass descended from Siberia in January enveloping much of the nation during the last half of the month. Most rivers and lakes quickly froze over as temperatures hovered near zero for daytime highs in southern Illinois. Gulls even departed traditional sites along Lake Michigan during the intense cold. Feeder watchers also saw an abrupt change, many birds suddenly "disappeared". Observers visiting the few patches of open water at power plant lakes or Lock & Dam sites along the major rivers were treated to such rarities as Red-necked Grebe, Brant, Harlequin Duck, all

three scoter species, and California Gull.

February continued the trend of less than normal precipitation. The temperatures moderated by mid-month with springlike conditions, but the month still finished slightly below normal.

Evening Grosbeaks and Red-breasted Nuthatches, guided by conditions elsewhere, irrupted across the state early in winter only to isolate into scattered pockets of abundance. Common Redpolls descended into the northern half of the state after the mid-January frigid air blast.

Even with abundant flood habitat, no large concentrations of waterfowl were found along the major rivers. Perhaps the floodwaters sterilized, instead of creating habitat. Large local grasslands afforded good numbers of Northern Harriers and Short-eared Owls to winter. Rough-legged Hawks and other owl species were scarce outside traditional strongholds.

Other species deserving special notation include Red-throated and Pacific Loons, Western Grebe, Northern Gannet, King Eider, Common Moorhen, Rufous Hummingbird, Varied Thrush, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle and Hoary Redpoll. All the records herein will be reviewed by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee.

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