

THE SEASON, WINTER 1971

Compiler and Editor - Thomas A. Imhof

The year 1970 was a bit less cold than usual, only 2.1° below normal, whereas the 1966-69 average was 3.4° below normal. Although December was near normal, January was 2.9° below normal and February 4.5° below. December and January were dry, but not as dry as the last 2 years, and February with a 4.00 in. excess in precipitation more than made up for any water shortages.

It appears that man does not know what to do with water anymore. Normally such a 4-inch excess would sustain life through dry periods in the coming growing season. But, our management of water rarely looks beyond today's "flood" let alone today's generation. So, we channelize, dam, pave, de-forest, drain, fill, level, bulldoze, subdivide, and herd our precious water rapidly to the sea with a heavy burden of contaminants including silt. Then, when we want water we holler because it isn't there.

One interesting thing about birds is their mobility which often carries them far beyond their normal range and delights the local observer with unusual additions to his list. Often these birds wander because their range cannot support them. We used to think that it indicated better than average nesting success, but now we suspect that their original range has become smaller and poorer! (See Oldsquaw, Dunlin, and others below.)

Seven Winter Bird Surveys were conducted between 15 Jan and 15 Feb around Birmingham as a pilot operation. A 5-mile walking route, roughly square, near the center of a 7½' topographic map is completed in the 4 hours immediately following sunrise. Three of the routes (2 suburbs, in farms) tallied 9346, 5903 and 4412 individuals, but these included 86%, 73%, & 80% blackbirds. The remaining 4 routes (2 suburbs, 2 mostly wooded) varied from 219 to 606 individuals. All 7 routes varied from 30 to 41 species for a grand total of 62 species. Observers were: RDB, DCH, JMI, TAI, HHK, RDK, EGR, RRR, HHW.

Our Christmas Bird Counts are tabulated and evaluated in this issue. Please check this excellent compilation by Robert Reid for more complete information on distribution and winter abundance. The account below will become more uniform in content when everyone remembers the deadlines of 10 Mar, 10 Jan, 10 Sep, & 10 Dec. Records submitted without all particulars cause a great deal of difficulty and we often must withhold printing them until we have all the facts. This particularly applies to Christmas Counts without observers listed for the noteworthy species and to records of difficult-to-identify species that require substantiating details beyond the fact that the bird had been seen there before. Remember that the acceptability of the records printed here is in direct relation to the reputation we have for being careful and accurate.

Grebe, Pelican, Cormorant - Eared Grebes on Mobile and Dauphin Christmas counts are our 12th and 13th coastal records since 1960. Lib Toenes, keeping a close eye on Dauphin Island Brown Pelicans, reported 3-4 daily and a max of 11 (6 immature) on 30 Dec and 18 Jan. On 23 Feb literally thousands of Double-crested Cormorants were on Dauphin Island (LRT).

Hérons, Ibis - This year the Green Heron that often winters near Dog River, Mobile remained until 16 Feb (LMcK); another near Tuscaloosa on 31 Dec (JCT) is only the second inland in winter. Four Little Blue Herons, an adult and 3 immatures, at Wheeler Refuge on 23 Jan (MLB & ROH) are the second in winter north of the Fall Line. Cattle Egrets seem to be more regular in winter on the coast recently—most seen this winter were 39 near Miflin on 4 Dec (PFC),

13 near Foley on 5 Jan (PFC), and 9 at Mobile Airport on 21 Jan (MMW). The 30-40 White Ibises north of Foley on 24 Jan (HHK and many) are the largest number out of barely half-dozen Dec-Jan records.

Waterfowl - Apparently fewer waterfowl used Wheeler Refuge this winter, peak goose count was 36,500 compared to 40,000 last year; for ducks it was 53,000 compared to 65,000 last year (TZA). In last report an omitted decimal caused a report of 2200 instead of 22.00 ppm of DDT in Wheeler Reservoir fish. Now comes a report of a fish with 300 ppm of DDT killed on Huntsville Spring Branch near the Olin-Matheson DDT plant—now shut down.

A second Whistling Swan near Decatur this winter (see Fall report) was one shot through error on 29 Dec at Swan Creek, where else, (CHB) and now a specimen, first for the state, in the Dept of Conservation (JEK). Two Barnacle Geese were sighted at Wheeler Refuge near Mooresville on 22 Nov (HHG & JHB), same place as our only other state record 11 months ago. (Do wandering birds repeat their wanderings in later years? Banding records indicate this possibility.) White-fronted Geese visited Eufaula Refuge for the 3rd straight winter when 7 were reported on 8 & 9 Feb (ST, HG, fide LAW). Snow and Blue Geese are common in fall in Alabama but winter commonly only in the Tennessee Valley and in Louisiana; thus a Snow and 5 Blue Geese at Lakeland Farm, near Marion, on 20 Feb (JRB et al) constitute only the second spring record for the Snow Goose south of the Tennessee Valley and may indicate that more of them are wintering in Alabama.

Of 210 ducks of 8 species on the Birmingham Christmas Count (26 Dec), a Gadwall (GBC) was the only tip-up duck listed! Oldsquaws were quite common especially around Birmingham on at least 3 different lakes in December and January (MHP, MFP, ALM and many), with a max. of 50 at Lake Purdy on 16 Jan (HHK, ALM and many). This duck is not recorded annually at any inland locality and 50 is twice the previous inland max. The weather at the time was not very cold, and it appears to this writer that perhaps some ecological catastrophe took place at, possibly, Lake Erie. As if to confirm this, 7 White-winged Scoters, another total unprecedented inland, were there the next day, 17th (HHK, RJK et al.) Another White-winged Scoter, at Gulf State Park on 25 Oct (PFC) is not only earliest fall for the state by 4 days but the 3rd scoter species for that lake this winter. Surf Scoters were later seen on 27 Dec, a male on Lake Shelby (LPA & LRT) and on 23 Jan, 22 at Fort Morgan (TAI & RJK). Single Com Mergansers were at Lake Purdy, Birmingham on 8 Dec (ALM & ADM) and 28 Dec (HHK).

Hawks - Vulture peaks noted in south Alabama were near Evergreen, 175 birds, 75% Black (CLK et al), and south Baldwin County, 38 Black and 19 Turkey (PFC). Broad-winged Hawkswere noted migrating when 71 were counted between Spanish Fort and Fairhope on 5 Oct (PFC) as part of a larger flock which spread out westward over Mobile Bay. An immature Swainson's Hawk was seen perched and in flight at close range at Wheeler Refuge on 2 Jan (TAI et al.) Two Rough-legged Hawks were recorded this winter, one at Wheeler Refuge on 2 Jan (TAI et al) and another at Fairhope Airport on 2 Feb (PFC). Immature Bald Eagles were reported from Wheeler Refuge, several times during the winter probably the same individual (TZA); and near Foley on 27 Dec (LPA & LRT). A Peregrine Falcon was seen in Birmingham on 26 Dec (HHK) and a female Pigeon Hawk the same day and place caught a Cedar Waxwing (JMI & TAI).

Bobwhite and Crane - A Bobwhite mating call was first heard on 17 Feb on Dog River (LMcK). The Sandhill Crane flock that winters annually in southern Baldwin County was estimated this year at a high 30-32 (PFC) and many.

Shorebirds - An Oystercatcher at Alabama Point on 23 Jan (A.O.S.) is the first for Baldwin County. Spotted Sandpipers were at Dauphin on 9 Dec (LRT) and at

Lake Purdy on 26 Dec (DCH). In flocks of 10-12, 59 Greater Yellowlegs were counted flying downriver at dusk on 2 Jan at Decatur (TAI et al.) Knots were recorded frequently on Dauphin Island in the same area and most commonly after freezes, maxima 40 on 8 Jan & 14 Feb, and 52 on 15 Feb (LRT). The latest Dunlin for the Mt. Region was in the Fall report and the latest for the Tennessee Valley were 3 on 25 Nov at Wheeler Refuge (RMB & RGB); the first instances of wintering inland, Lake Purdy through 3 Feb (HHW & PAR) and Eufaula Refuge through 13 Feb, 5 birds (LAE), may mean a scarcity of adequate coastal habitat. Late news of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper; 28 Aug at Wheeler Refuge (MLB) earliest for Tennessee Valley; 14 Sep at Battleship State Park, 9 birds (HMS); 15 Sep at Fort Morgan, 5 (HMS), 15 Sep at Dauphin, 3 (REH, MEM & LRT) added to the Birmingham records (see Fall report) indicate an excellent flight. At Mobile, 33 Avocets on 24 Dec (LRT), about half the highest 20-year max, were the highest this winter; 7 of them showed up on Dauphin on 17 Feb (LRT).

Gulls - Ring-billed Gulls seemed to be more numerous than usual inland at Wheeler Refuge, 501 on 2 Jan (MLB) and at Columbus, Ga, 457 on 2 Jan (LAW); but on the coast were far outnumbered by Herring and Laughing Gulls. Bonaparte's appeared plentiful on the coast especially at Gulf Shores 23-24 Jan (A.O.S.) and inland at Wheeler, 22 on 22 Dec (MLB), a record 33 on 3 Jan (MLB), and 6 on 23 Jan (MLB & ROH); at Phenix City, 8 on 2 Jan (LAW). On 12 Feb on Dauphin Island, a flock of 150 Laughing Gulls showed black heads (LRT).

Woodpecker, Flycatcher, Martin, Crow - Thanks to the locating of a new flock (WFC) a highest ever of 17 Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were recorded on the Birmingham count on 26 Dec (B.A.S.) The early Vermilion Flycatcher on Dauphin in Fall report should read 4 (not 8) Oct. First Purple Martins were noted on 6 Feb at Spring Hill (JLD), on 7 Feb at Mullet Point (RY) and Chickasaw (fide MAG); 9 Feb at Dauphin (LRT); 20 Feb at Marion (HHK), and 24 Feb at Birmingham (HHW). Fish Crows were in Lee County near Phenix City on 17 Feb (LAW).

Nuthatch, Thrushes, Waxwing - The only Red-breasted Nuthatches anywhere were 2 near Birmingham on 26 Dec and 17 Jan (RRR, EGR & JVP). The late Wood Thrush reported on 27 Oct (see Fall report) is exceeded by one belatedly reported for 11 Nov 1969. Twelve Eastern Bluebirds were on Dauphin on 27 Jan (LRT). Cedar Waxwings were well scattered most of the winter, possibly because there were no hackberries to concentrate them in January and February, as normally happens; however, a flock of at least 1800 in an abandoned nursery in Birmingham on 26 Dec (TAI & JMI) gave that count a double highest ever of 1949.

Blackbirds - These birds continue to cause comment in the press about their large concentrations, often in the millions. As long as they have sufficient food, they are not going to be killed off easily. Man himself is the one who provides them with food by his wasteful harvesting techniques and by feeding livestock in the open. As long as this happens, we will have herds of blackbirds. Birmingham, not being agricultural, had few blackbirds until recently. About 100,000 of them roost inside the dynamite plant at Watson, Jefferson Co., where matches and firearms are prohibited. Each morning the birds fan out southward into the city and suburbs to feed on man's tremendous amount of discarded food. As noted under Winter Bird Surveys above, blackbirds can comprise ¼ or more of the local birdlife in winter. A male Baltimore Oriole, a much more interesting blackbird, was seen in Dothan on 8 Jan with Robins feeding on dogwood berries (MLH).

Finches - The date of the large number of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks near Jasper is 2 (not 20) Oct. A male Black-headed Grosbeak visited Lee Ola Dewberry's Smyer Lake feeder from about 20 Jan to at least 24 Feb (LOD, HHW and many); the second inland winter record, first north of the Fall Line. Northern finches were few and far between, understandable in the face of reports of abundant food in northern forests. The few Pine Siskin records (from Birmingham and Mobile only) served to emphasize its scarcity, yet showed that, like the Red-breasted Nuthatch, the species does occur every winter. The probable source of these few birds is the Smokies. Most Birmingham feeders report just a few Purple Finches, but Gaynell Hayward's in Roebuck had 25-30 daily since 9 Nov. Away from these feeders the birds are just about absent. With one exception, nothing unusual has been reported for sparrows all winter. On 15 Feb a Tree Sparrow, only the second positively identified in Alabama, was in a yard in Decatur (CG); the temperature was 5° with 2 inches of snow on the ground. This same weekend, probably the coldest of the winter, 130 Tree Sparrows were counted in Nashville, Tenn. and 9 banded (MLB).

Observers (reporters in capitals) - THOMAS Z. ATKESON, Lois P. Archer, Alabama Ornithological Society, J. Russell Bailey, ANDREW K. BATES, Raymond D. Bates, R. M. Bays, MICHAEL LEE BIERLY, Birmingham Audubon Society, R. G. Bisbee, J. H. Blackwood, Carl H. Bullion, G. Bradley Carlisle, P. F. CHANDLER, Walter F. Coxe, Lee Ola Dewberry, J. L. Dorn, S. J. MARY A. GAILLARD, Carolyn Garrett, Harry Geeslin, Henry H. Grammer, Marion L. Hanahan, Roger O. Harshaw, Gaynell Hayward, R. E. Hayward, Dan C. Holliman, John M. Imhof, Thomas A. Imhof, J. E. Keeler, CURTIS L. KINGSBERY, HELEN H. KITTINGER, Ronald D. Kittinger, Richard J. Kittinger, Louise McKinstry, Al D. Miller, Ann L. Miller, Margaret E. Miller, James V. Peavy, Morton H. Perry, M. F. Prather, Elberta G. Reid, ROBERT R. REID, Pat A. Riley, HENRY M. STEVENSON, Sam Tate, James C. Thompson, LIB R. TOENES, Marion M. Waters L. A. WELLS, Harriett H. Wright, Joe L. Wright, R. York.

1036 Pike Road
Birmingham, Alabama 35218



NEW BIRD DATA from the LOWER COASTAL PLAIN

- David H. Turpin -

While a resident of Brewton, Escambia Co., Ala., I had opportunity to make observations of local birdlife which resulted in the following new extreme records of occurrence in the Lower Coastal Plain. Status, written after the locality, is for Lower Coastal Plain, and is marked e for early, l for late, s for spring, and f for fall.

Pied-billed Grebe	15 April 67, 1, Brewton, ls
White Ibis	10 March 64, 2, Brewton, es
Am. Widgeon	9 October 69, 5 males, 7 females, Uriah, ef
White-winged Scoter	9 February 67, 1 imm or female, Brewton, first record
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	7 November 65, 1, Brewton, lf
Chuck-wills-widow	9 July 66, 1, Brewton, lf
Chimney Swift	21 March 65, 2, Brewton, es
Barn Swallow	1 Aug 65, 5, Brewton, lf; 26 Oct 65, 2, Evergreen, lf
Red-breasted Nuthatch	4 October 65, 1, Repton, Conecuh Co., ef
Brown Creeper	16 October 64, 1, Repton, ef
Catbird	13 September 64, 2, Brewton, ef
Robin	2 April 66, 1, Pollard, ls

(continued on page 14)