

THE SEASON, WINTER

December, 1976, January and February, 1977

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The purpose of this column is to keep A.O.S. members informed of the current status of Alabama's birds. Acceptable data consists of records on 3 x 5 cards to include species, age and sex (where possible - especially where critical to the identification), locality, date, number, observers, how identified, and significance, if known. These cards may be obtained from Dr. Robert J. Newman at L.S.U. (address in last issue of Alabama Birdlife). Other data for this column includes information as presented here other than records - weather, counts, lists, population figures, migration, breeding success, changes in ranges, all of which should be submitted in writing. Acceptable records include those which supersede Alabama Birds and those on endangered and special concern species. If you think your record will be doubted, please include details, especially critical field marks seen. The observer is responsible to know when to include details, for it is he who must also know when to use extra care in identifications in the field. Please avoid such statements as "seen by competent observer" - unnamed, "all field marks seen" - none listed, "we have x number of local records" - so we don't need to be as careful anymore, but do include the fact that you have or have not seen the species before.

If the species is new to the state, we suggest that an article be submitted to this journal to include all pertinent facts including its status in nearby states. In this case, and for accidentals and hypotheticals, every effort should be made to substantiate the record and make it as convincing as possible. Alert other birders as soon as possible, so that they can verify your record and share in its fun and excitement, photograph or record it if possible, or, as a last resort, collect it. You must remember that the more unusual the record, the more likely it is to be doubted, and the harder it will be for us to convince the editors of American Birds or the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist Committee. So, write your article accordingly.

The insistence on 3 x 5 cards is necessary in order to meet Alabama Birdlife and American Birds deadlines. We simply do not have the time to peruse lengthy lists or letters or newsletters to extract records which you did not think important enough for individual treatment. It is never too late to amend the state list, so we are always open to additional data about records that were not submitted on cards or with insufficient information to judge them properly and quickly. The state list is still being kept current by all possible sources, and it is our intention to produce periodic supplements.

Cold was the word for this winter. On top of a colder-than-ever fall with November like a winter month, the daily means for the next three months were all colder, December and February by just over 3 degrees, January by more than 10! Although labeled as the coldest winter since weather records began, January, 1940, got colder for a longer period of time (-10 degrees F. was reached in the Tennessee Valley, and the main channel of the river froze solid). It will be many months before we see all the effects of this weather on the birds, but some species are scarce. Tom Atkeson notes that the cold killed off much of the green forage Wheeler Refuge plants for waterfowl; as a result, some ducks and geese left the region and others were close to starving. Ice conditions brought south many more gulls and diving ducks than usual.

On the Gulf Coast, it appears that away from feeders Whitethroats and Catbirds were scarcer and, in many places, replaced by lingering Juncos and Fox Sparrows, which normally move back inland after the cold front that brought them south has abated. Species notably in short supply since the severe cold may either have moved farther south or else suffered considerable mortality. Included are both kinglets, House Wren, and possibly Yellowthroat and Catbird. One would expect the Golden-crowned Kinglet to survive cold weather well, so perhaps there is a better explanation for their low numbers. It also appears that the Catbird might have been low before the severe cold. Strangely, some species which should have difficulty with cold weather appear to be doing fine at the end of the period. These include Am. Woodcock on the coast, Brown Creeper, Solitary Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, Am. Goldfinch, Junco, Fox Sparrow, and possibly E. Bluebird.

Three interesting banding returns at Fort Morgan indicate something about winter survival. A female Cardinal banded February 27, 1975, with a brood patch (in breeding condition) weighed 38.7 grams and had no visible fat. She was recaptured March 7 with 1/3 capacity fat, no brood patch, and weight 39.4 grams. Two years ago, this bird was in breeding condition, but this year she was still fighting the cold weather. The other two - a Myrtle Warbler, immature female, banded November 10, 1976, recaptured March, 1977, and a Whitethroat banded February 10, 1974, recaptured March, 1977 - indicate that some birds held to their original wintering site at Fort Morgan in spite of the severe cold that seared brown the famous Oleanders (reputed to have been planted there by Isabel DeSoto while her husband was exploring over 450 years ago).

Noteworthy records appear below. Abbreviations are: TV - Tennessee Valley, MTr - Mountain Region, ICP - Inland Coastal Plain (replaces UCP, LPC and Lee County), GC - Gulf Coast, rec - record, ref - refuge, mob - many other birders, max - maximum, exc - except.

Red-necked Grebe: Jan. 14, 16 (2), & Feb. 2 (2), vicinity of Decatur (DCH), 7th rec for Ala., 3rd for TV.
Horned Grebe: Feb. 26, Miller's Fy, Wilcox Co. (PFC), very few recs for ICP.
Great Blue Heron: Feb. 7, Alabama Point, 83 (PFC), GC winter max.
Reddish Egret: Feb. 7 & 9, Alabama Point (PFC), 1st Baldwin Co. winter rec.
White Ibis: Dec. 30, 6, Eufaula Ref (GDJ) 1st inland winter rec Ala.
Whistling Swan: Dec. 14-17 (said to be present 3 weeks), Foley, 5 adults, 2 immatures (Walter Tatum, LPA, LRT, Photo-PFC, mob) 1 adult with neck band placed there in the Chesapeake Bay (fide PFC), 3rd rec for GC, all in Dec. and first of more than 1 bird; only other CP rec is for Eufaula Ref.
White-winged Scoter: mid-Jan. to Feb. 26, 2-5 birds Decatur (DCH, HHK, mob), latest inland rec; others, 25 at Gulf Shores, Jan. 1 (fide PFC) and 4 at Fort Morgan, Mar. 7 (MLM, others).
Black Scoter: Dec. 31, 5, Dauphin I. (GDJ), max for small flock present all winter.
Common Merganser: max of about 150 in late Jan. & early Feb., vicinity of Decatur (many).
Rough-legged Hawk: Dec. 15, Mobile (BAW, JTW), 10th rec for GC.
Bald Eagle: at Wheeler Ref, 2 regularly (an adult & an immature) with possibly as many as 5 fleeing icing conditions farther north (TZA). (Newspapers reported many eagles fleeing Reelfoot).
Golden Eagle: Jan. 27 to Feb. 5, Wheeler Ref (WCD, DCH, DoH), always noteworthy.
American Golden Plover: Dec. 18, Wheeler Ref (RJC, HME, CDu, ALM), latest Alabama.
American Woodcock: Jan-Feb, largest winter population in 30 years - PFC Baldwin Co. (also MAG, A&MN).
Greater Yellowlegs: Mar. 10, Blackely I., 500 (TAI, MN).

Lesser Yellowlegs: Mar. 10, Blakely I., 100 (TAI, MN).
 Dunlin: Mar. 10, Blakely I., 3000 (TAI, MN).
 Western Sandpiper: Mar. 10, Blakely I., 2000 (TAI, MN), good late winter shore-bird concentration speaks well for their survival.
 Parasitic Jaeger: Mar. 8, Fort Morgan, an adult chasing Royal and Forster's Terns; Mar. 10, Fort Morgan, an immature worrying a tightly-packed flock of Bonaparte's Gulls like an accipiter with Starlings - identified by relative size and smallness of victims (TAI, SS, MN, SG, CS).
 Glaucous Gull: Dec. 23 to Feb. 20, Decatur and vicinity, 1-6 birds (GDJ, DCH, mob) 6 seen on Jan. 16, 5 on Jan. 1, 1st inland rec for Alabama, 4 recs GC.
 Great Black-backed Gull: Jan. 1 to Feb. 9, Decatur and vicinity, 1-2 birds (DCH), 2nd inland rec for Alabama, 7 recs GC.
 Long-eared Owl: Dec. 24 to Jan. 2, Birmingham (L, P & CW, photo-EBr), heard, seen and pellet examined, 4th rec since 1909, 1st for MTR.
 Eastern Kingbird: Mar. 7, Fort Morgan (TAI, MLM, A&MN), earliest Ala. by 5 days.
 Vermilion Flycatcher: Oct. 30 to at least Jan. 19, male and female, Magnolia Springs (PFC, mob), lengthy stay is encouraging, birds were there last year. ✓
 Tree Swallow: Feb. 28, Wheeler Ref, 2 (CDC) earliest TV, Feb. rec all regions now.
 Rough-winged Swallow: Dec. 31, Gulf Shores (GDJ) 8th late Dec. rec GC.
 Sprague's Pipit: Jan. 6, 1 and 31, 2, vicinity of Decatur (DCH), 2nd TV rec.
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet: Aug. 4, 1976, Decatur, male picked up dead (DMB), 1st Aug. rec Alabama (previous early fall is Sept. 13).
 Cape May Warbler: Dec. 1 & 3, Birmingham, Vestavia (HBT) and Jan. 1-9, Birmingham, Irondale (LMF, JVP), 10 miles apart along same ridge, could be the same bird, 1st winter rec Ala.
 Wilson's Warbler: Dec. 2, male and female, Spring Hill, Mobile (JLD), other recs - male banded Ft. Morgan Nov. 11 and male in Birmingham Mar. 25-29 are all 3 1st recs for their respective months. A possible explanation is that the western race which is more often found in winter is involved.
 Red Crossbill: Jan. 19-24, 1-8, and one badly-mashed specimen on Jan. 24, Decatur (DCH), only rec this winter.
 HOUSE FINCH: Jan. 27 to at least Mar. 15 at feeder in Decatur (DMB, mob, photo-many), removes this bird from hypothetical list, 3rd rec for Ala., 1st for TV.
 LeConte's Sparrow: Dec. 30, Eufaula Ref (GDJ), 14, a state max, seen there, date and observers unknown (fide SP).
 Tree Sparrow: Feb. 12-28, 3 places near Decatur, 3-20 birds (DMB, CDC, mob), seen and heard, 5th Ala. rec. Jan. 20 to Feb. 8, 1 at a feeder in Jasper (DAR), 6 Ala. recs include 2 each for TV, MTR & ICP.
 Lincoln's Sparrow: Feb. 28, Wheeler Ref (CDC), probably a migrant as there are no Dec., Jan. or earlier Feb. recs for TV, the only Ala. region where it does not winter.
 Evening Grosbeaks were not recorded, Red-breasted Nuthatches were in fair numbers, and Pine Siskins were few and scattered, mostly near Birmingham. Christmas Bird Count records are adequately commented upon by R. R. Reid, Jr. in this issue of Alabama Birdlife.

Observers: Thomas Z. Atkeson, Lois P. Archer, D. Mark Brown, Ed Bruchac, P. Fairly Chandler, C. Dwight Cooley, Charles Duncan, W. Cecil Davis, J. L. Dorn, Howard M. Einspahr, Sherlie Gade, Mary A. Gaillard, David C. Hulse, Doug Hagan, Thomas A. Imhof, Greg D. Jackson, Helen H. Kittinger, Mary Lou Mattis, Ann L. Miller, Lloyd MacFadyen, Albert & Mini Nonkes, Sam Pate, David A. Rowland, Steve Stedman, Charles Saunders, Helen B. Thigpen, Lib R. Toenes, Leroy, Page & Chance Willingham, Beverly A. Winn, John T. Winn.

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