

The Changing Seasons: Cold Enough for You?

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What brightens a winter's birding more than a "super-flight" of northern finches? In winter 2007-2008, after observers had carefully identified both Common and Hoary Redpolls across much of the northeastern quadrant of the continent, they sharpened their skills still more, separating redpolls, often tentatively, at the level of subspecies. This Hoary Redpoll of the *hornemanni* subspecies (Greenland Hoary Redpoll or Hornemann's Redpoll), a big frosty thing, was nicely documented at Moncton, New Brunswick on 28 February 2008. This subspecies has been thought to be quite rare in North America, but records south to Massachusetts this season suggest that, like various geese from Greenland, it is being detected, or is visiting, more frequently in recent times. *Photograph by Hank Scarth.*

Old Time Winter

Writing the regional report for the Atlantic Canada, Brian Dalzell called it "an 'old time' winter, the coldest and snowiest in at least 14 years." Editors in Québec wrote that 2007-2008 was one of the most severe winters in four decades, with record snowfalls across large areas. Across Canada, New England, the northern tier of the United States, and well into the southern Midwest and Great Plains, similar reports came in of massive snowfalls, brutally cold temperatures, and minimal post-holiday birding. In some places, thaws allowed snow to melt before the next blizzard, but in other places, the snow accumulated to remarkable heights: six meters in Bathurst, New Brunswick, five and a half meters in

Québec City, five meters in Caribou, Maine. Most of New England was blanketed in snow from early December through the end of the season, at least away from the Atlantic coast, and February was said to be the wettest in 114 years of record keeping—in four of New England's six states. In coastal New England southward, the latter half of the season was actually a bit warmer than average, and some semi-hardy species toughed it out through the entire season, mostly from southern New York southward. In the southeastern quadrant of the continent, from the Carolinas to Florida and west to eastern Texas, the season was characterized as milder than average, with below-average or normal precipitation and very little snow away from upland or montane ar-

reas. The long drought that extended from Mississippi to western North Carolina was broken mostly in the latter half of winter, when precipitation increased and temperatures fell. Only southern-tier states—and notably also the southern Great Plains and Pacific Northwest—celebrated avian diversity and remarked extensively on species lingering well north of their usual winter range: most commentators east of the Mississippi and north of 36° N latitude lamented a dull season with low diversity and few surprises.

The continent's center also endured a very cold and snowy season. Peter Taylor and Rudolf Koes report wind chills in excess of -50° C in February in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with even hardy resident species

observed to suffer the effects of the intense cold. In the Western Great Lakes, Adam Byrne notes record snowfalls in southern Michigan and Wisconsin (Madison broke the "100-inch" snow total for the first time ever) and Minnesota's snowiest winter in 12 years. Both Illinois and Indiana recorded very high levels of precipitation, with some areas receiving double the average snowfall; February in Chicago was the fifth snowiest ever recorded. Robert Cecil called it "one of the nastiest winters in years in Iowa and northern Missouri," despite a brief warm-up in early January; Iowa's precipitation for the season was the second highest in 136 years. In Ohio and the southern Midwest generally, winter's grip tightened in mid- to late January, with predictable effects on waterfowl, which moved southward, and half-hardy birds, which vanished or perished.

In the West, dry conditions persisted in western Texas, but many areas in the Great Basin, New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho, and Montana reported good snowpack (Figure 1) and mostly moderate temperatures, though the northern Great Basin was a bit colder than average. Wyoming and Colorado were "cold and wet," alleviating extreme drought over large areas, though most of that region remains dry. Mount Crested Butte in Colorado had 10.6 m of snow over the season, a record-breaking total. In Alaska, Thede Tobish described yet another season of relatively late freeze-up and milder-than-average temperatures that allowed a variety of species to linger. Washington, Oregon, and northern California saw rather average temperatures and precipitation patterns, though eastern Washington was snowy: Spokane missed the all-time snow record, set in winter 1949-1950, by just 10 cm! The general trend of milder weather from the Rockies westward, harsher weather from the Plains eastward is a pattern familiar from several recent winter seasons.

Large-scale patterns of bird distribution from autumn 2007 continued into winter, particularly movements of mountain birds into the lowlands in the West: Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees, Steller's Jay, Cassin's Finch, Townsend's Solitaire, Pine Siskin, locally a few Clark's Nutcrackers (North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas) and Lewis's Woodpeckers, and all three western nuthatches continued to pop up in unexpected locations or numbers. A movement of Green Jays into the Texas Hill Country continued the northward march of species associated with the Rio Grande Valley, and hummingbirds and orioles were among the gaudy

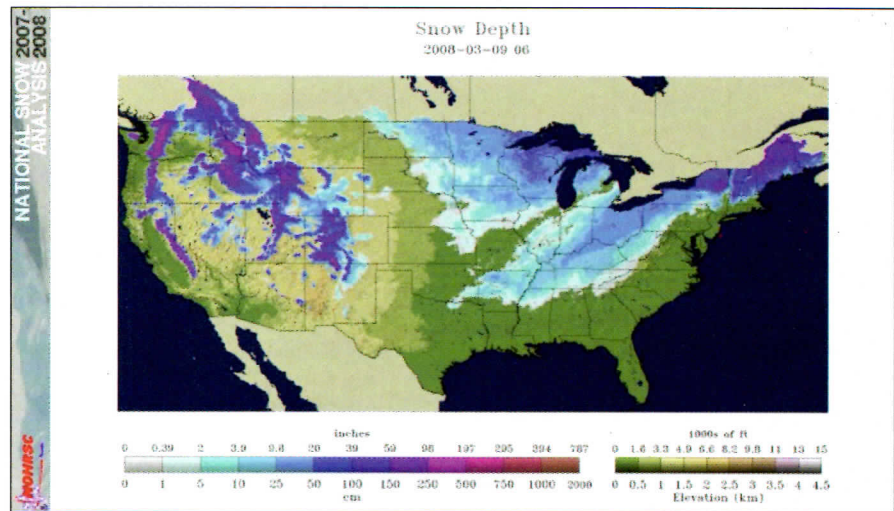


Figure 1. This graphic illustrates snow depths in the Lower 48 United States at the end of winter (9 March 2008); the season saw heavy snowfall in the Rockies and Cascades, as well as in the Upper Midwest, New England, and northern New York. Although cold, snowy weather does not appear to be associated with influxes of most bird species south of typical range, freezing of lakes can cause exoduses of waterfowl, loons, and grebes, and very heavy snow cover sometimes forces blackbirds, longspurs, larks, and other field-foraging birds to make facultative movements away from snowy regions. Map courtesy of and © the National Climatic Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina.

nectivores north of normal, especially, but not solely in the Southeast—Streak-backed Oriole in Colorado, Scott's Oriole in New York City, Green-breasted Mango in Georgia.

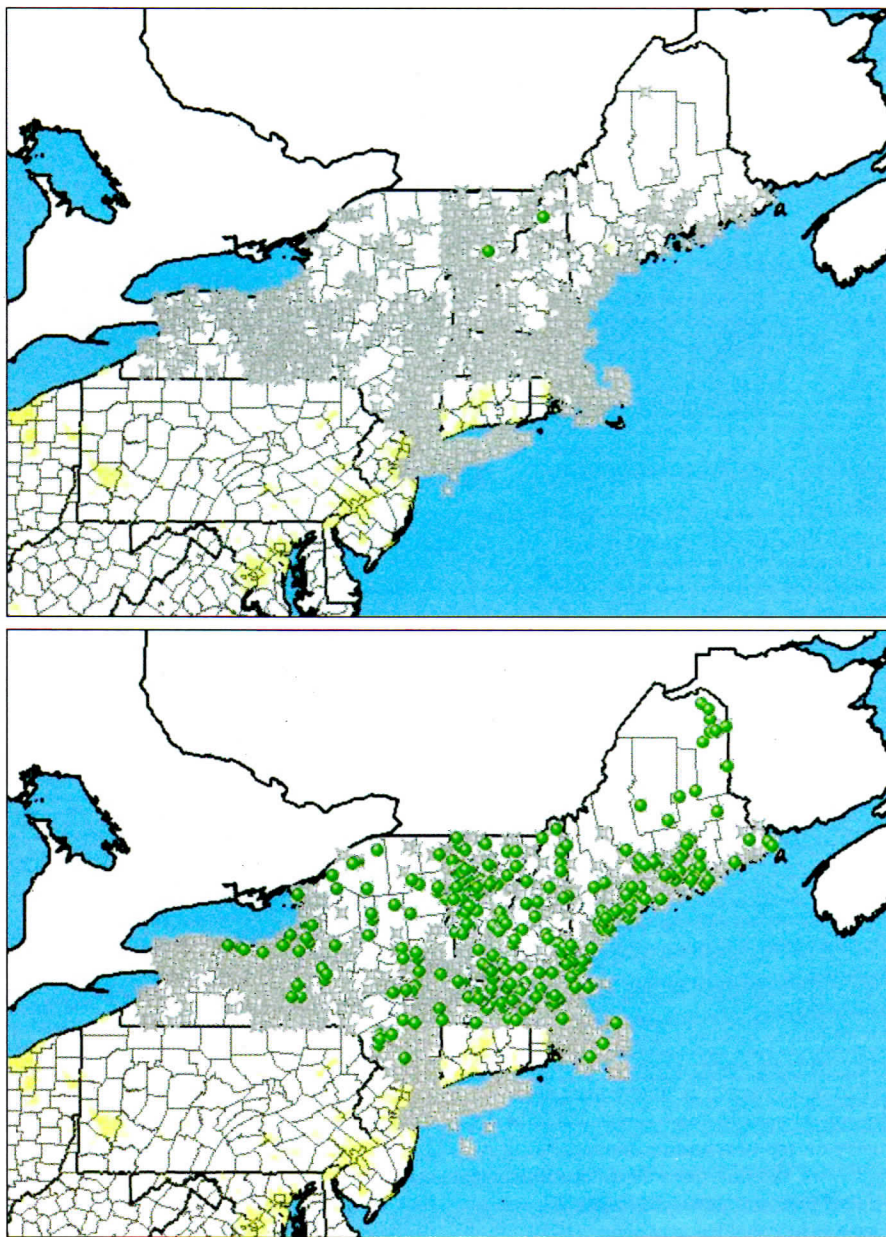
What's good for the goose

Now that most of our regional reports begin with whistling-ducks and geese rather than loons and grebes, the prominence of waterfowl seems to have risen over the past few years. Or is it that we have become more attentive to our local waterfowl throngs, teasing out vagrants, distinguishing subspecies, hypothesizing hybrids? I can remember a time not long ago when a bright male Eurasian Wigeon or a single Ross's Goose would be the cherry on top of a birding sundae; but in recent years, the shift toward greater subtlety in birding prizes a female Eurasian Wigeon or even a hybrid wigeon, or a state high count of Ross's Geese! Nowhere are these trends more evident than on the Pacific coast, particularly in the Northwest, and in the Northeast, where scrutiny of goose flocks now perhaps exceeds even attention to summer shorebird flocks.

Part of the reason for the ramped-up enthusiasm must be the birds themselves: goose populations, at least for most taxa, are surely higher now than in any of our lifetimes. Expanding and increasing populations mean several things: greater chances of encountering a stray (see the discussion of Baikal Teal in the Oregon & Washington report) and probably greater chances of hybridization: it would not surprise me to learn that hybrid

wigeon, for instance, are home-grown right here in North America (but then, male ducks don't stick around to dote on ducklings, and even if they did, we'd need Maury Povich to sort out paternity). Another reason for the spike in birder attention, perhaps, is that we've relaxed a little, even unclenched. Twenty years ago, it was routine in some quarters of the birding community to cast doubt on any vagrant duck, goose, or swan with a single phrase: "origin uncertain." (A previous editor of this journal was wont to point out that their origin was always certain: an egg. It was provenance that was in question.) Now, with excellent data on waterfowl populations, even from remote Arctic breeding stations and stopover sites, we see the picture more clearly, and we can begin distinguishing birds that are more likely to have escaped captivity from birds that are more likely wild vagrants. And with so many observers canvassing waterfowl, we have come to see patterns more clearly, particularly in those species whose numbers are increasing.

Where just a few years ago, we were apt to wring our hands over the provenance of a Barnacle Goose or two, we now find a dozen or more per season in North America, most of them probably wild birds. This season, there were four in New Jersey, two each in New York and Connecticut, one each in Massachusetts and Virginia—and one in New Mexico. It will be interesting to see whether the scattering of reports of Barnacles in the West continues to strengthen into a pattern such as



Figures 2, 3. Reports to eBird of Pine Grosbeak in Maine, New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire in winter 2006-2007 (upper, Figure 2) and winter 2007-2008 (lower, Figure 3). Maps such as these can be generated by users of eBird; they show presence (green dot) as well as absence (indicating checklists submitted that did not have the relevant species). More specific data can be mined through the maps or other features. Figures produced by eBird (www.ebird.org).

we've seen in other species that nest very near to North America, whether in Greenland or Iceland (e.g., Lesser Black-backed Gull—Nevada had its first!), with a gradual increase in records west of the Mississippi River. The continued increase in Barnacle Goose reports fits in the context of increases in numbers of Greenland Greater White-fronted Geese in the East (double-digit flocks in New York and North Carolina, six in Ontario)—and also in the context of a very recent pattern shown by

the much rarer Pink-footed Goose, two of which were found in New York this season.

Cackling Goose, after the 2006 split from Canada Goose, is arguably the new Ross's Goose in the East, and the post-split attention to this suddenly prized bird has been both welcome and predictable. Virtually every state east of the Mississippi has discovered that Richardson's Cackling Goose is a regular visitor in small numbers; meanwhile, western states, including many in Mexico, are seeing

Cackling Geese expand in number and into new areas, sorting out the status and distribution of the westerly subspecies, and discovering some Richardson's as well. Like Ross's Goose and Barnacle Goose, Cackling has gone quickly from a "boldface" rarity on the Atlantic coast to a bird summarized with minimal details in some regions. But it doesn't take a split to generate interest, as students of that enigmatic small goose Brant have shown. If you're a western birder, you might get hooked on seeing your first "Gray-bellied Brant" in Washington and trying to puzzle out how best to distinguish one if you see it farther south, out of usual wintering areas. If you're an eastern birder, it might begin with finding your first Black Brant bobbing among their brethren, then looking for another...and then, perhaps, finding a bird that sort of looks...intermediate. And then, you're down a rabbit's hole from which we don't yet know the exit (but hope that further studies of breeding Brant will illuminate!). To a fan of waterfowl, and of geese in particular, being in the thick of not-quite-yet-knowing is not a bad thing: the intellectual challenge we set ourselves in trying to identify wintering geese to the level of subspecies is perhaps even greater than working out Red Crossbill types.

Forecasting finches

We've come a long way from the days when U.S. birders assumed that a bitterly cold winter in Canada would usher in flights of owls and finches: we have long known that food resources, rather than weather/climate per se, drive these irruptions south of usual range, and we have become comfortable with predicting flights of some northern species, such as Red-breasted Nuthatch, which shows roughly biennial pattern and which was switched "on" across much of the continent this season, including across much of the West. Other species are far less regular in their movements, and divining their appearances well south of typical winter range has been more art than science—until fairly recently, that is. The increasingly nuanced Internet-posted forecasts of the "winter finch" and even "northern owl" flights compiled each autumn are eagerly awaited, particularly in the United States, where boreal forest species are generally rarer than in southern Canada. Again this season, Ron Pittaway of Ontario Field Naturalists (<http://ca.geocities.com/larry.neily@rogers.com/pittaway-old.htm>) prepared a forecast with the theme "finches going in three directions," which stressed that some finches had moved, or would be moving, east-