

LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2014-2015

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A lone Pine Grosbeak occupies the winter of 2014-15 rarities list. The top “also-rans” include a Ross’s Goose and a “echo Snowy Owl flight”. Otherwise there was little to deem this season’s birding memorable. This is not too surprising, as pack ice covered Lake Michigan for much of the season, eliminating open water that might attract waterfowl and gulls. And as seasoned lakefront birders know, those two species constitute the lakefront’s dominant winter bird groups.

Departure from Normal: Chicago		
	°F	Precip. inches
Dec	+4.3	-1.46
Jan	-6.7	-1.74
Feb	-13.1	-0.34

December was mild, but the winter hardened markedly in the two subsequent months. During the first week of January a brutally cold airmass moved into the Dunes area generating enormous ice ridges on Lake Michigan’s beaches. On 1 February a major storm blanketed the Dunes with 15 inches of fresh snow. During the final two weeks of February multiple Arctic airmasses hammered the Midwest creating hundreds of record low temperatures that averaged 25-30°F below normal. The season ended with deep snow cover and no open water (except at warm water out-lets on Lake Michigan).

An explanation for abbreviations and conventions is appended.



Michigan City lighthouse and jetty on 7 January 2015, illustrating results of the brutal winter. The jetty is entirely covered with ice and the ice-ridge on the right is almost as high at the catwalk. Note the large slanting icicles clinging to the catwalk. Photo by KJB.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WATERFOWL

Ross' Goose:- On 20 December Beth Dixon obtained nice photos of one in Portage, providing the 13th Porter County record.

DUCKS

Dabbler numbers were good with only Black Duck and Shoveler below normal. It was a near average winter for bay ducks with four species above and three species reported in below average numbers. Sea Ducks fared poorly with only the White-winged Scoter above the TYM.

Gadwall:- Despite the frigid winter good Gadwall numbers lingered on the lakefront, primarily in the Roxana Pond area. Matt Kalwasinski logged the season's maximum count of (33) at Roxana on 1 January.

Harlequin Duck:- For the second consecutive year this sea duck went unreported on the lakefront (TYM=3.5). This is the first time in 22 years that back to back winters have yielded no Harlequins.

White-winged Scoter:- Numbers rose toward the end of winter yielding a season total of 146 birds (TYM=95.7). The high count was (15) that Matt Kalwasinski logged at the Hammond Marina on 23 February.

Common Merganser:- On January 20 Chicago birders Randy Shonkwiler and Jeff Skrentny reported (3000) on Lake Michigan off the Hammond Marina. This number ties the state's second largest count and effectively ties the state record of (3003).

Red-throated Loon:- An impressive season total of 287 birds was highlighted by Brendan J. Grube's count of (58) at Dunes S.P. on 31 January.



Adult male White-winged Scoters at Portage Lakefront Park on 28 February 2015. As the temperature was near zero the ghostly rear bird is partially obscured by rising vapor (Arctic sea smoke). Adult scoters of any species are rare on Lake Michigan. Photo by KJB.

Black-crowned Night-Heron:- This season the herons failed to winter along the Grand Calumet River near Roxana Pond. Indeed the season's only report consisted of (2) that Michael A. Topp logged at Roxana on 3 December.

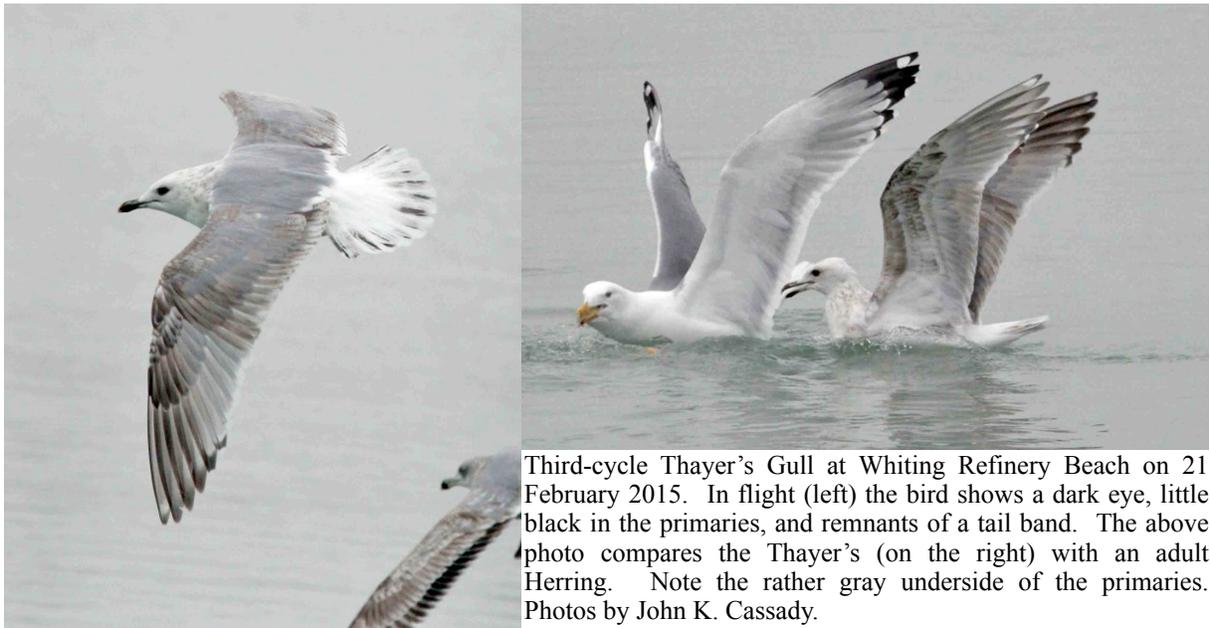
Rough-legged Hawk:- Lakefront numbers were up this year primarily due to observations from Reynolds Creek Gamebird Habitat Area. The peak count was (4) that Randy J. Pals logged at Reynolds Creek on 29 December. The season total of 22 is far above the TYM of 7.2.

GULLS

At the end of January winds deposited piles of aquatic vegetation and dead fish on Whiting Refinery Beach bringing vast numbers of gulls to feed on the debris. This event was similar to the one that occurred at Michigan City Harbor in December 2010. Unfortunately, within two days this bounty was entirely buried by ice.

Ring-billed Gull:- In very cold winters this small gull usually moves southward; consequently the late winter numbers provide a measure of the winter's harshness. This February only 77 were reported, which is one tenth the normal number.

WINTER LAKEFRONT GULL TOTALS										
	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15
Thayer's	13	5	11	16	10	44	8	33	25	23
Iceland	3	2	3	4	7	16	9	13	6*	10*
L. Black-backed	7	2	5	7	5	16	2	13	7	7
Glaucous	19	12	18	76	35	67	29	79	81	38
G. Black-back.	89	65	93	254	218	194	71	216	490	368
*Corrected to compensate for repeated reports of the Hammond Marina adult.										



Third-cycle Thayer's Gull at Whiting Refinery Beach on 21 February 2015. In flight (left) the bird shows a dark eye, little black in the primaries, and remnants of a tail band. The above photo compares the Thayer's (on the right) with an adult Herring. Note the rather gray underside of the primaries. Photos by John K. Cassidy.

Iceland Gull:- It was a fairly good winter for this gull with 10 reported (TYM)= 8.8). The well-known Hammond Marina adult first appeared 27 November (Carolyn A. Marsh), but subsequently proved more difficult to find until about mid-January, after which it was seen regularly.

Slaty-backed Gull:- While leading a Chicago Ornithological Society trip to Calumet Park, IL, Geoff Williamson photographed an adult that was seen 30 yards east of the pier (which is located south of the beach house). Geoff initially believed that the gull was over Indiana waters; however, an examination of the Google Earth map revealed that this location is 65 yards west of the Indiana state line. Close but no prize.

Glaucous Gull:- A large eastward gull movement occurred at Dunes S.P. on 9 February. Within the myriad of Herring Gulls Brendan J. Grube counted (13) Glaucous Gulls. This total ties Indiana's third largest count. Despite this impressive tally, it was only an average season for this large gull with just 38 reported (TYM=37.8)

Kelp x Herring (Chandeleur) Gull:- This hybrid, which was reported during the fall season, appeared regularly at Michigan City Harbor until 24 January (John K. Cassidy), but not thereafter.

Herring x Great Black-backed Gull (Great Lakes Gull):- An adult was seen and photographed at Whiting Refinery Beach on 24 January (John K. Cassidy et al.).



This interesting gull is believed to be a Herring X Great Black-backed Hybrid. It was found at the Whiting Refinery Beach on 24 January 2015. Note the medium-gray upper-parts, pink legs, and pattern on the outermost primary. Photo by John K. Cassady.

Snowy Owl:- Following last winter's record incursion, a smaller, flight occurred this season. As happened last winter the movement did not gain momentum until December (i.e., there were only two November reports). The monthly breakdown of Snowy Owl numbers was December 13, January 6, and February 2.



This pale Snowy Owl, one of 21 reported on the Indiana lakefront this winter, was photographed at the Port of Indiana on 3 January 2015. Photo by John K. Cassady.

Red-breasted Nuthatch:- Only 5 birds were reported for the entire season (TYM=11.2).

Brown Creeper:- The five reported this season ties the lakefront's highest winter total (TYM=1.6).

Carolina Wren:- Despite the brutal January and February temperatures, it was an above average season with a total of 11 reported (TYM=8.55). In Chesterton one hearty individual wintered in the Pals' backyard.

Winter Wren:- Steve Sass found (2) along the Great Marsh Trail (Beverly Shores) on 11 December, providing the lakefront's eighth December record.

Cedar Waxwing:- This charming passerine went unreported for the winter (TYM=353). The last time we were skunked was the winter of 2011-12.

WINTER FINCHES

Other than a cameo Pine Grosbeak appearance and mediocre Siskin numbers, winter finches were virtually non-existent on the lakefront this winter.

Pine Grosbeak:- Amazingly, on 10 December an exquisitely plumed adult male appeared at the Merrillville feeder of Bob Cotton (TYM=0.10). This is Indiana's first record in more than a decade.



Adult male Pine Grosbeak at the Merrillville feeder of Bob Cotton. This striking bird was present only on 10 December, but did linger long enough for photos. Prior to this individual's arrival the lakefront's last Pine Grosbeak was reported on 16 December 2004. Photo by Peter B. Grube.

Purple Finch:- Surprisingly scarce in the Dunes with only a single bird reported for the season (TYM=14.2).

Common Redpoll:- Only two reports of this dapper finch were made this winter; the largest consisted of a flock of (6) that Lynn Vernon logged at Reynolds Creek Gamebird Habitat Area on 13 February (TYM=146).

Pine Siskin:- This small finch was rather scarce on the lakefront with only 43 reported for the winter (TYM=123). The season's high count of (11) was recorded by Matt Beatty at the Dunes Learning Center (Porter Co) on 23 January.

Convention with numbers

To add clarity to the numerical chaos, bird numbers observed on a single day are contained within parentheses, (10). Season totals are written in numerals without parentheses.

Explanation of abbreviations

Season totals are frequently compared to average seasonal counts in the "Dunes area" (Calumet Region or lakefront) over the past 20 years, including the present year. This value is abbreviated "TYM" for Twenty Year Mean. The term "STYM" refers to the twenty-year mean for the entire state.

In considering the TYM and MI parameters keep in mind that observer effort has not been constant over the twenty-year interval, indeed observer effort has surely increased over the past decade. This means that negative MI's should be examined closely as they may reflect significant declines.