

## LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2009-10

Kenneth J. Brock  
Chesterton, Indiana

An Ancient Murrelet, which appeared at the Port of Indiana during a 23 December ice storm, provided the season's most spectacular birding highlight. Other rare or unusual birds included Eared Grebe, Western Grebe, American White Pelican, Townsend's Solitaire, Gray Catbird, and Red Crossbill.

Winter was inaugurated in fine style on 9 December when a powerful system passed just north of Indiana, bringing bitter cold and howling winds to the lakefront. The anticipated enormous duck flight that failed to appear in late fall, followed this storm. On the 10th Beverly Shores lake-watchers estimated that 10,000 ducks flew past, though only about one-fifth were identified due to the presence of dense steam rising from the lake's warm surface waters.

The winter of 2009-10 was harsh with low temperatures and heavy snow; in Chicago it ranked among the coldest third of all winters and was among the snowiest 4 percent. On New Year's Day an Arctic airmass brought subzero temperatures; it then snowed on each of the next nine days, with some locations reporting accumulations of 24 inches. Average January and February daily temperatures were only slightly below normal, but the highs almost never exceeded the norm. Warmer than average night temperatures elevated the monthly mean. As a result above freezing temperatures were rare, resulting in extensive ice development on Lake Michigan. Indeed, vast ice fields were still visible on 1 March.

\*\*\*\*\*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to Susan R. Bagby for her careful proof reading and helpful suggestions.

### WATERFOWL

Canada Goose:- On 5 Dec Brad Bumgardner counted (1145) on the LaPorte Lakes in the nearby town of LaPorte. One of these birds had a neckband, which Brad reported to the banding lab. This adult male had been banded northeast of Attawapiskat, Ontario (Lat 53.40° N and Long. 82.10° W) on 23 July 2002.

Cackling Goose:- One accompanied a large Canada Goose flock that flew over the Port of Indiana on 10 Dec (J.K. Cassady, J.J. McCoy, & KJB).

Trumpeter Swan:- A small group (up to 4 adults and 3 immature birds) were seen on the Grand Calumet River near Roxana Pond on 10 and 16 Jan (J.J. McCoy, J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, & KJB).

Canvasback:- A flock of (24) spring migrants spent the morning off Whiting Refinery Beach on 20 Feb (J.J. McCoy, J.K. Cassady, m.ob.).

This count was the lakefront's sixth largest winter tally.

Redhead:- It was a good winter for this bay duck on the lakefront with a season count of 585 birds, a number exceeded only by last winter's 898.

Greater Scaup:- At least (707) migrants were counted during the large 10 Dec flight at Beverly Shores (J.K. Cassady, J.J. McCoy, & KJB). The season's peak tally was 1050 off the Hammond Marina on 16 Jan (J.J. McCoy et al.).

Lesser Scaup:- Among the migrating *Athya* flocks of 10 Dec were (726) Lesser Scaup (J.K. Cassady, J.J. McCoy, & KJB).

Eider species:- A female flew past Beverly Shores leading a flock of scaup on 12 Dec (J.J. McCoy & J.C. Kendall).

Harlequin Duck:- An ad. male was discovered at the Hammond Marina on 22 Dec (C.A. Marsh); it lingered for several days and provided the season's only record.

Surf Scoter:- Males were reported at the

Hammond Marina and at Whiting Refinery Beach on several occasions (J.K. Cassady & J.J. McCoy).

Black Scoter:- Highlighted by counts of (17) on 5 Dec (J.J. McCoy) and (11) on 26 Dec (R.J. Pals) on the Beverly Shores lakefront, a record winter total of 50 birds was logged (all in December).

Common Merganser:- Though numbers were down from last winter's record counts, the season total was the third highest on record. The peak count consisted of (1500) at the Port of Indiana on 2 Jan (E.M. Hopkins).

Red-throated Loon:- The 91 reported this season is the second highest winter total behind the 104 logged in 2007-08. The peak daily total was (20), observed off the Beverly Shores lakefront on 12 Dec (J.C. Kendall).

Eared Grebe:- While searching for the Ancient Murrelet on 23 Dec B.J. Grube came across an Eared Grebe at the Port of Indiana. It lingered for several days.

Red-necked Grebe:- The season's only report consisted of a Miller Beach flyby on 3 Dec (J.J. McCoy, J.K. Cassady, J.C. Kendall et al.).



This remarkable photo, which shows a Western Grebe (left) and Eared Grebe, is most unusual for Indiana. Both species are quite rare in the state. The photo was taken at the Port of Indiana on 23 December by J.C. Kendall.

Western Grebe:- One was discovered at the Port of Indiana on 21 Dec (Ryan J. Sanderson, Steve Nawrocki, & Ryan Hamilton). Two birds were seen here 26 Dec (J.C. Kendall et al.) and three

(tying the state's highest count) were observed on 30 Dec (J.C. Kendall & J.J. McCoy). Photos were obtained.

American White Pelican:- Steve Nawrocki, Ryan Hamilton, and R.J. Sanderson found (1) standing on the Hammond Marina beach, 22 Dec. Perhaps this same bird flew past Portage Lakefront Park on 27 Dec (B.J. Grube, P.B. Grube, Josh Grube, & Kris Grube). This photographed bird documented the lakefront's third December record.



American White Pelican sailing past Portage Lakefront Park on 27 December. This is the lakefront's first winter record since 1999. Photo by P.B. Grube.

Great Egret:- A new late fall record was set 12 Dec when one was photographed on the Grand Calumet River in the Roxana area; adjacent to the Hammond filtration plant (KJB). Two were present at this site on 15 Dec (C.A. Marsh).

Black-crowned Night-Heron:- Once again a handful wintered on the Grand Calumet River near the Hammond filtration plant warm water outlet. Three or four were reported regularly at that site. Singletons were also reported on Wolf Lake and at Whiting Refinery Beach.

## GULLS

The below gull table indicates that most of the lakefront's winter gulls occurred in typical numbers; however, the Iceland Gull was an exception, as that species made the best showing in five years.

As has occurred in many recent years, most of

the winter gulls occurred along the western lakefront. The best numbers were seen at the Whiting Refinery Beach. However, a nice movement occurred across the entire lakefront on 6 Feb, which included seven gull species and more than 1000 Herring Gulls.

Oddly, among the Arctic nesting gulls (Thayer's, Iceland, and Glaucous) second- and third-cycle individuals were more prevalent than

first-cycle birds. In previous years first-cycle birds comprised about 40 percent of all observed plumages; this percentage dropped to 27 in 2009-2010. This pattern might reflect a poor 2009 breeding season in the high Arctic; a contention that is also consistent with last fall's poor showing by juvenile jaegers, Sabine's Gulls, and kittiwakes.

#### WINTER LAKEFRONT GULL TABLE

	09-10	08-09	07-08	06-07	05-06	04-05	03-04	02-03	01-02	00-01
<b>Thayer's</b>	10	16	12	5	13	18	10	9	42	29
<b>Iceland</b>	7	4	3	2	3	7	4	4	15	7
<b>L. Bl-backed</b>	5	7	4	2	1	19	7	6	33	8
<b>Glaucous</b>	34	76	17	9	21	38	22	25	22	41
<b>G. Bl-backed</b>	218	224	74	55	87	125	111	28	45	54

Thayer's Gull:- An unusually cooperative second-cycle bird that appeared at Whiting Refinery Beach on 6 and 13 Feb (S.R. Bagby, J.K. Cassady, J.C. Kendall, J.J. McCoy, and R.J. Pals), provided excellent flight photos.



A second-cycle Thayer's Gull at Whiting Refinery Beach on 6 February. This photogenic individual yielded some fine flight shots of the rarely photographed second-cycle plumage. Photo by J.K. Cassady.

Iceland Gull:- The 7 birds reported this winter comprise the lakefront's best numbers in five years.

Lesser Black-backed Gull:- An interesting third-cycle bird was observed at Whiting Park on 27 Feb (S.R. Bagby, J.K. Cassady, J.C. Kendall, and R.J. Pals). Excellent photos were obtained. The bird appeared to be a Lesser Black-backed

in every respect, except that the legs and feet were bright pink.

Great Black-backed Gull:- A count of (29) on 23 Jan (including 19 at Whiting Refinery Beach) tied the state record (J.K. Cassady, J.C. Kendall, J.J. McCoy, & KJB). This total was obliterated on 6 Feb when (39), including (28) at the Whiting Refinery Beach, were tallied on the lakefront (J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, J.C. Kendall, J.J. McCoy, & KJB).

Ancient Murrelet:- Remarkably, J.C. Kendall discovered this tiny alcid as it swam almost 700 yards away at the Port of Indiana on 23 Dec to provide Indiana's third record. It is quite plausible that this is the same individual that thrilled birders at St Joseph, MI, back in November. The last report at that location, which is about 45 miles away, occurred 24 Nov (*fide* Jon Wuepper). During its stay at the Port this alcid was seen by scores of observers, including: S.R. Bagby, Brad Bumgardner, Lee Casebere, J.K. Cassady, B.J. Grube, P.B. Grube, Nila Grube, R.L. Hedge, Lynea Hinchman, Ed Hopkins, J.J. McCoy, R.J. Pals and many others. The bird lingered until 28 Dec.

Snowy Owl:- Rich Sheerer (a taxidermist) reported seeing one at the U.S. Steel landfill about 10-15 days prior to 27 Dec (*fide* Brad Bumgardner).

Northern Saw-whet Owl:- Not reported in the Dunes area this winter.

Red-headed Woodpecker:- Prior to this winter juvenile Red-headed Woodpeckers had been reported only three times in February. This season S.R. Bagby had one or two juveniles visiting her Furnessville feeder throughout the late winter. On 21 Feb, for example, two juveniles and an adult visited the Bagby feeder. One also appeared on 28 Feb, providing the all-time latest date for a juvenile in the state.

Red-breasted Nuthatch:- The lakefront's season total of five, is strikingly low for a winter following an odd-numbered year. The last time numbers this low occurred was in the winter of 1991-92.

Brown Creeper:- This species is rarely reported on the lakefront in winter; consequently, the (2) observed by Michael Topp in Highland on 20 Feb were noteworthy.

Townsend's Solitaire:- J.C. Kendall found (1) at the Ogden Dunes "Spotted Towhee" site on 9 Dec. It was subsequently observed by several others in the general area; the last sighting occurred 20 Feb (S.R. Bagby, J.K. Cassady, Andrea Neumann, Landon Neumann, E.M. Hopkins, R.J. Pals, Michael Topp, & KJB) and provided Indiana's second February record.

Gray Catbird:- On 12 Dec J.J. McCoy observed (3), two in Beverly Shores and one at Ogden Dunes, to establish a record winter count for the lakefront. This result also ties the state's maximum winter tally. On the morning of 13 Feb, P.B. and Nila Grube found (1) in Beverly Shores to provide the lakefront's first February record (and the state's fourth February record). Surprisingly, on the afternoon of that same day J.K. Cassady observed the lingering Ogden Dunes bird.

Northern Mockingbird:- An unusually cooperative bird appeared at Ogden Dunes 20 Feb (E.M. Hopkins, S.R. Bagby, J.K. Cassady, m.ob.). This is only the sixth February record for the lakefront. The bird lingered for several days (J.C. Kendall).

American Tree Sparrow:- The 686 reported on the lakefront this winter is the second highest

winter total on record (the winter of 2006-07 had 720). The peak daily count was (235) at several lakefront sites following the season's first major storm on 10 Dec (J.K. Cassady, J.J. McCoy, & KJB).

Fox Sparrow:- Record numbers were logged on the lakefront this winter with 23 reported for the season. The previous winter maximum was 13 in 1993-94. This winter's peak count was (5) in Whiting Park on 12 Dec (C.A. Marsh). The latter ties the third highest winter count for the lakefront.

White-throated Sparrow:- A singing bird was heard in Beverly Shores on 16 Jan (S.R. Bagby & J.J. McCoy).

Lapland Longspur:- An impressive flock of (100), observed on the Beverly Shores lakefront 12 Dec (J.C. Kendall), tied the lakefront's ninth largest all-time maximum count.

## **WINTER FINCHES**

Based on established migration patterns irruptives usually appear during the autumns of odd-numbered years; consequently, the winter of 2009-2010 was expected to yield an abundance of winter finches. However, that did not occur.

Purple Finch:- Reported in below average numbers. Four were reported in December, but none thereafter; the TYM is 12.9.

Red Crossbill:- On 16 Jan Bob Zaremba found a flock of (8) just south of the Lake St. lot at Miller Beach. This is the lakefront's first January report since 1884.

Common Redpoll:- No reports for the winter of 2009-2010.

Pine Siskin:- Remarkably scarce on the lakefront, especially considering that 2009-10 is a winter following an odd-numbered year. Only 7 Siskins were reported this season.