

LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2010-11

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In keeping with the global warming enigma, Hoosiers enjoyed an old fashion winter with low temperatures and lots of snow. Although the thermometer rarely dropped below zero, it seemed stuck well below normal. Lake Michigan was choked with pack ice and virtually all inland water was frozen—just like the good old days. Lakefront gulls also appeared as they did in the old days, in great numbers and with a sprinkling of rarities.

Winter 2010 arrived early and hard. December temperatures were 4.9°F below average with normal precipitation. The month's first 20 days brought temperatures 9°F below normal, freezing all inland water. A powerful 12 December storm was accompanied by northerly 40 knot winds. This blow generated enormous waves that stirred near-shore bottom sediment creating extensive debris piles on the beaches and a major kill of aquatic animals (fish, mud puppies, and crayfish). These piles of food-rich rubble became magnets for gulls; by 16 December thousands had accumulated along the shoreline from Michigan City to New Buffalo. The milling gull cloud attracted a Pomarine Jaeger, which provided superb photo opportunities at the Harbor.

By the 18 December Christmas Bird Count (CBC), Michigan City Harbor was frozen with both the yacht basin and Trail Creek iced over, a nascent ice ridge on the beach, and football size chunks of ice floating offshore. These brutal conditions kindled fond memories of the days when the LaPorte landfill attracted legions of gulls to the lakefront. CBC birders at the harbor had the best count day in years (perhaps ever), logging: Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck, Black Scoter, Ruddy Duck, seven gull species, and a Pomarine Jaeger. However, the winter's best bird appeared 29 December when an adult Slaty-backed Gull was discovered at the power plant near the Hammond Marina. On the year's final day a Purple Sandpiper was discovered at Michigan City Harbor. The weather mellowed during the last few days of the month and ironically, the warmest day of the month occurred on 31 December.

For the month January temperatures were 1.4°F below normal and precipitation was typical. Early January delivered a Purple Sandpiper to the warm-water outlet at Whiting Refinery Beach (Lake County lakefront) and an American Pipit to Portage Lakefront Park. Reappearance of the Slaty-backed Gull, along with eight other gull species, rendered a bitterly cold 22 January one of the all-time best gull days ever recorded. The Slaty-backed lingered for several days, brightening the dead of winter for many Hoosier birders. Surprisingly, 29 January brought another nine-gull day (including the Slaty-backed), along with 18 duck species.

February temperatures averaged -0.8°F below normal and was accompanied by heavy snow. The month began with forecasts of an enormous mid-nation storm that the media pundits referred to as the "Beast." This frontal system, which extended from New Mexico to Boston, was accompanied by two feet of snow, freezing rain, and 40-60 knot winds. As a result Groundhog Day in northwest Indiana brought blizzard conditions that closed schools, interstates, and birder outings. Not only did Punxsutanwey Phil fail to see his shadow, he was hopelessly buried in a snowdrift. February's second week was bitterly cold, with temperatures well below zero. The ice ridge along Lake Michigan beaches became the highest in memory. At Michigan City Harbor it was almost as high as the catwalk and near the lighthouse the ridge spilled over the jetty entirely covering the walkway. Then, just as Hoosiers were convinced that winter would last forever, a mid-February thaw arrived bringing 60°F temperatures. Latter days of the season were highlighted by a Snowy Owl at the Westville Correctional Facility. Birders are indebted to the Westville administrators who kindly allowed birders access to the south perimeter road (from which the bird was visible) on 26 and 27 February. Thanks also go to Patrick Krueger who worked out details for the Snowy Owl observation and was present both days to help birders observe this rare and beautiful bird.

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WATERFOWL

Snow Goose:- In the season's eleventh hour Brad Bumgardner logged the lakefront's only Snows: on 27 Feb a high northbound flock of (26) was seen over Dunes S.P.

The early freeze eliminated habitat, resulting in low puddle duck numbers for the season. Among the divers only the Redhead appeared in significantly above normal numbers. Sea ducks were near average except for unusually high Black Scoter counts. Mergansers were near average, but the lakefront experienced a record winter for Ruddy Ducks.

Redhead:- A count of (400) at two lakefront sites on 22 Jan (J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Tracy Duncan, and Dave Fox) constituted a record winter count for the lakefront.



Adult male Harlequin Duck on the Hammond lakefront 3 January 2011: the ninth full adult ever reported in the state. This handsome bird was first discovered by Jeff Gerbracht et al. on 12 December and reappeared sporadically thereafter. Photo by J.C. Kendall.

Harlequin Duck:- A first-cycle male was photographed at Michigan City Harbor on 12 Dec (J.C. Kendall). It lingered in the harbor area until at least 28 Dec. An ad male was seen off Whihala Beach on 27 Dec (Jeff Gerbracht, Doug

Gerbracht, Sharon Fullingham, & Whitney Wiggins). The following day (28 Dec) J.C. Kendall found a female at Port of Indiana. The ad male was not seen again until 2 Jan when Janet Creamer and Andrew Mertz found it at the previous location; it then briefly reappeared off Whiting Park 9 Jan (P.B. Grube & B.J. Grube) and again in late February (m.ob.).

Black Scoter:- A winter record 55 birds (85% were in Dec) was reported this season (TYM=17.8). The peak tally was (18) on 3 Dec off the Beverly Shores lakefront (J.C. Kendall).

Surf Scoter:- A rarely seen ad male was found off Whihala Beach on 1 Jan (Amy & Noah Kearns). The following day it was seen at the nearby Whiting Refinery Beach (J.K. Cassady).

Common Merganser:- On 22 Jan J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Tracy Duncan, and Dave Fox counted (3003) at five lakefront sites to establish a record high count for Indiana (previous maximum was 3000 on 11 January 1953).

Ruddy Duck:- The 71 reported this winter constitutes an all-time high (TYM=10.4).

Red-throated Loon:- Perhaps as a result of the early December freeze, there was a precipitous drop in numbers reported on the lakefront; however, the season was saved by a late February influx. J.C. Kendall photographed an adult at Port of Indiana on 16 Feb; three adults were present at that location on the 19th (J.J. McCoy et al.) and three more were off Beverly Shores on 26 Feb (J.M. McCoy).

Western Grebe:- The (2) birds reported at the Port of Indiana in fall, reappeared there 2 Dec (P.B. Grube). On 20 Dec Jim Spier found (1) at Michigan City Harbor and a singleton was also seen at the Port of Indiana on 26 Jan (J.C. Kendall).

Black-crowned Night-Heron:- Once again Black-crowneds wintered along the Grand Calumet River near the Hammond filtration plant.



This juvenile Purple Sandpiper was discovered at Michigan City Harbor on 31 December by Steve Sass. It lingered into the new year and delighted scores of birders. Note the rarely seen iridescent purple sheen on the back feathers. Photo was taken 3 January by P.B. Grube.

Purple Sandpiper:- On 31 Dec Steve Sass photographed a first-cycle bird at Michigan City Harbor, providing the lakefront's first December record since 2006. Unaware of Steve's

discovery, Kathy Kendall relocated the bird along the southern edge of the yacht basin the following day, where a dozen others subsequently saw it. This is the lakefront's first January record since 2000. On 2 Jan J.C. Kendall observed the bird dining on zebra mussels. Michael Topp photographed a young Purple Sandpiper on 7 Jan near the warm water outlet at the Whiting Refinery Beach. This individual, which provided the first January record for Lake Co, was still present 15 Jan (R.L. Hedge, m.ob.).

GULLS

Thanks, in part, to a major storm-kill along the eastern shores of Lake Michigan, lakefront birders enjoyed an exceptional gull winter. The season got underway following the 12 December gale when vast numbers of Herring Gulls appeared on the lakefront. In subsequent days thousands of gulls visited the beach debris piles, which were ripe with dead fish, mud puppies, and crayfish deposited by the storm.

WINTER LAKEFRONT GULL TOTALS

	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11
Thayer's	42	9	10	18	13	5	12	16	10	44
Iceland	15	4	4	7	3	2	3	4	7	16
L. Bl-backed	33	6	7	19	1	2	4	7	5	16
Glaucous	22	25	22	38	21	9	17	76	34	64
G. Bl-backed	45	28	111	125	87	55	74	224	218	192

The season's best day occurred 22 Jan, when lakefront birders logged nine gull species. The day was highlighted by return of the Slaty-backed plus several noteworthy counts, including a Kittiwake, 4200 Herring, 5 Thayer's, 2 Iceland, 2 Lesser Black-backed, 11 Glaucous, and 29 Great Black-backed Gulls. Remarkably, another nine-gull day occurred on 29 January.

Black-legged Kittiwake:- A record number of kittiwakes was reported this winter. On 13 Dec a winter record tying (3) were seen by J.C. Kendall. These included a perched juv at Miller Beach and another juv, plus an adult/second-cycle (the only non-juvenile reported), at the Port of Indiana. The latter juv was still present the following day (B.J. Grube, P.B. Grube, & KJB) and was seen again 23 Dec (Wes Homoya, et al.). Two juvs were at the latter site on 27 Dec (Jeff Gerbracht, Doug

Gerbracht, Sharon Fullingham, & Whitney Wiggins) and were observed by many the following day. Another juv was at Michigan City Harbor on 7 Jan (Leland Shaum, Perry Miller et al.). On 22 Jan R.J. Sanderson obtained point-blank photos of a juv off the state line power plant (the shots were sufficiently close that Ryan was able to determine that Black-legged Kittiwakes have red tongues).

Bonaparte's Gull:- It was a dismal season for this small gull with only 5 reported (TYM=38.5).

Herring Gull:- Thanks to a fine December showing and the large January flock at the state line power plant, the season count was the highest since the winter of 2001-02. The peak tally was an estimated 6000-8000 at the power plant on 23 Jan (P.B. Grube).

Thayer's Gull:- This was the lakefront's best winter ever. The season's first report involved a first-cycle bird at Miller Beach on 12 Dec (J.C. Kendall). The winter total of 44, more than doubles the TYM of 19.5.

Iceland Gull:- The 2010-11 season was the best since the winter of 1996-97, with 16 reported (TYM=6.4).



Adult Slaty-backed Gull near the power plant at the Illinois state line on 30 December 2010. Although the bird spent virtually all morning in Indiana, this photo was actually taken in Illinois, where it was briefly attracted to chum. It was discovered by J.J. McCoy the previous day and constitutes Indiana's second record, and the first with physical confirmation. Photo taken by R.J. Sanderson.

Slaty-backed Gull:- Indiana's second occurrence of this Siberian gull appeared 29 Dec and was observed and photographed at the power plant just west of the Hammond Marina (J.J. McCoy, Amar Ayyash, J.C. Kendall, & Michael Topp). This adult was present the following day near the Coast Guard Station in Calumet Park, IL, but remained offshore in Indiana most of the time. On 31 Dec it was found near the warm water outlet at Whiting Refinery Beach (Brad Bumgardner et al.). Surprisingly, after a three-week absence the bird reappeared at the power plant on 22 Jan (J.C. Kendall). It was still present the following day and was confirmed by B.J. Grube, P.B. Grube, Cloyce Hedge, Roger Hedge, and J.J. McCoy. It lingered through the 29th (J.C. Kendall, J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Gary & Lisa Bowman, et al.).

Glaucous Gull:- A fine tally of (11) on the Lake Co lakefront (22 Jan) tied the state's third highest daily count (J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Tracy Duncan, and Dave Fox). This count contributed to the lakefront's second best winter with 64 reported (TYM=30.1).

Great Black-backed Gull:- A lakefront count of (29) on 22 Jan (J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Tracy Duncan, and Dave Fox) tied Indiana's second highest count.

Possible Great Black-backed X Glaucous Gull hybrid:- J.C. Kendall et al., studied and photographed this adult at the Port of Indiana on 28 & 29 Jan. The bird's upper parts were as dark as a typical Great Black-backed (direct comparison), but the primaries lacked any black near the tips and the underwing was entirely white. Fascinating bird.

Kelp X Herring Gull hybrid (Chandeleur Gull):- Remarkably, two of these birds were recorded this winter. An adult was seen and photographed at Michigan City Harbor on 14 and 16 Dec (KJB & P.B. Grube). Marshall Iliff saw it on the 19th and independently identified the bird as a Kelp X Herring hybrid. A second adult was photographed at the same site on 26 Dec (J.C. Kendall, J.K. Cassady, & J.J. McCoy) and again on 28 Dec (M.R. Brown).

The birds were the size of large male Herring Gulls, but had longer and heavier bills. Above, they were almost as dark as a Great Black-backed, but the wing patterns and head mottling eliminated the possibility of a runt of that species. The eyes were yellow and the legs were cadaver gray. These features are inconsistent with any known black-backed gull; however, they do match the Kelp X Herring hybrid, which is also known as the "Chandeleur Gull."



Juvenile Pomarine Jaeger at Michigan City Harbor on 18 December 2010, which happened to be the Dunes Christmas Bird Count day. This bird was first seen on the 16th and reappeared periodically over the next two days. Note the under-wing pattern, barred tail coverts, and heavy body. Photo by J.K. Cassady.

Pomarine Jaeger:- A juv appeared at Michigan City Harbor on the evening of 16 Dec (J.C. Kendall obtained photos.). The bird was attracted to the gull hoard feeding on the dead fish in the beach debris piles; on several occasions it briefly landed on the beach. This is Indiana's seventh winter record. The bird was still present on the 18 Dec CBC and was observed (and photographed) by scores of birders.



This fine Snowy Owl, affectionately dubbed "Artie" by Westville Correctional Facility inmates, frequented the prison grounds from 21 February, when it was discovered by officer Douglas Hinchman. Plumage characters suggest the bird is an adult female. Photo by Brad Bumgardner.

Snowy Owl:- On 21 Feb prison officer Douglas Hinchman observed a fine Snowy perched on a

tall light pole in the central area of the Westville Correctional Facility (an area not open to the public). The bird was reportedly first seen on 19 Feb. Patrick Krueger, also a prison employee, confirmed the sighting and obtained photos the following day. On the 24th Brad Bumgardner obtained close range photos; based on these, the bird was determined to be an adult female. The owl became a favorite of the inmates, who nicknamed it Artie. It lingered through the end of the period.

Long-eared Owl:- After getting skunked during the fall flight, Michael Topp saw (1) in Beverly Shores on 29 Dec. This is the lakefront's first December record in seven years. Sam Plew also found a singleton at the West Beach pinery on 29 Jan.

Northern Shrike:- It was a record winter for this species on the lakefront (14 reported compared to the TYM of 5.1). There were likely three winter territories along Beverly Drive. A young brownish-breasted bird was seen regularly near the "s-curve" in west Beverly Shores. A second bird was observed a mile east of the s-curve, near Constance Street. The third shrike was seen near Montana Street, which is 1.4 miles farther east. Two birds, separated by only a few hundred yards, were seen calling to each other at Beverly Shores on 22 Jan (J.K. Cassady, S.R. Bagby, Tracy Duncan, and Dave Fox).

Brown Creeper:- On Christmas Eve R.J. Pals found (1) near the Tremont Saw-whet pinery. This is the lakefront's first December record in three years. Michael Topp observed another at his Highland home on 29 Jan.

Northern Mockingbird:- One was observed feeding on berries along Beverly Drive near the North Church on 28 Dec (R.J. Pals & KJB) and 15 Jan (J.K. Cassady et al.). Most surprising was another at Whihala Beach on 7 Jan (Michael Topp), which constituted a first January record for the Lake Co lakefront.

Brown Thrasher:- One seen in west Beverly Shores on 26 Feb (L.S. Hinchman, S.R. Bagby, J.K. Cassady, & KJB) provided the lakefront's first February record.

American Pipit:- The lakefront recorded a record winter flight with nine reported (TYM=0.9). On

12 Dec J.C. Kendall identified flying singletons at both Michigan City Harbor and Beverly Shores. These are only the seventh and eighth December records for the lakefront. The ninth record was logged at Whiting Refinery Beach 28 Dec (R.J. Sanderson et al.). Even more remarkable was (1) on the Portage Lakefront Park beach 9-14 Jan (P.B. Grube, B.J. Grube, & J.C. Kendall) that provided the lakefront's second January record. Finally, a single bird at Whiting Refinery Beach 22 Feb (KJB), constituted the lakefront's first February record.



This handsome Lapland Longspur, photographed 22 December 2010 at Miller Beach, was part of the lakefront's second largest December flight on record (a total of 336 birds). Photo by Michael Topp.

Lapland Longspur:- Quite unusual for the lakefront was the observation of two flocks (90 birds) at the Port of Indiana on 14 Dec (P.B. Grube & B.J. Grube). This is the lakefront's eighth largest winter count. On the same day KJB had a flock of (45) fly past Miller Beach and J.C. Kendall counted (65) in a Michigan City Harbor flock.

WINTER FINCHES

It was a mediocre winter for this group. Among the rarer species, both crossbills and the Evening Grosbeak went unreported and only a handful of redpolls were reported. Low to modest numbers of Purple Finch and siskins rounded out the winter report.

Purple Finch:- Rather scarce with only 5 reported for the season (TYM=12.6).

Common Redpoll:- Three were reported at the Mohar feeders in northern Porter Co on 17 & 18 Dec; this was Indiana's first report for the year 2010.

Pine Siskin:- The 140 reported in the Dunes area was slightly above the TYM of 124.8.