

## INDIANA LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2012-2013

Kenneth J. Brock  
Chesterton, Indiana

Winter birding on the shores of Lake Michigan often consists solely of gulls and a few hardy ducks; however, the 2012-13 season was blessed with a more diverse menu. Highlights included record Shoveler, White-winged Scoter, Red-throated Loon, Western Grebe, and Mockingbird numbers, plus a fine Redpoll incursion. Rarities included Slaty-backed Gull, Clay-colored Sparrow, Bohemian Waxwing, and Hoary Redpoll. Also of note the unusually warm and dry weather over the past few years has taken a toll on Lake Michigan. A recent PBS newscast reported that the lake is at a historic low level; indeed, many harbors are becoming inaccessible to boats. This explains the remarkably wide beaches along the lakeshore.

It was a generally mild winter. A powerful storm arrived with the Winter Solstice on 21 December; winds were WNW at 35-50 knots and the temperature was near freezing. This blow produced a Cackling Goose, a fine movement of large white-headed gulls, a few Red-throated Loons, plus one unidentified jaeger. Despite this Gale, December was a surprisingly mild month, with temperatures averaging 8°F above normal. January's coldest weather occurred in the last week of the month. On the 21<sup>st</sup> the lake was still virtually ice free, but a 26 January outing revealed that a large portion of southern Lake Michigan was covered with pack ice. Despite this cold snap January's temperature averaged 2.8°F above normal. Indiana's true winter arrived in February, with temperatures 1.6°F below average along with most of the season's snowfall. February's birding highlight was an unprecedented White-winged Scoter flight.

\*\*\*\*\*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many thanks to Susan R. Bagby for her careful proofing of an early version of this manuscript.

### WATERFOWL

The rather cold February kept most ponds covered with ice, thereby limiting available habitat for early spring migrants.

Greater White-fronted Goose:- Brad Bumgardner recorded a fine lakefront count of (21) at Hitchcock Road Pond on 18 February. This is the lakefront's fifth largest winter count.

Cackling Goose:- This small goose, which is surprisingly rare on the lakefront, was observed off Dunes State Park during the 21 December blow (Brendan J. Grube).

Tundra Swan:- A total of (38) was seen in two groups at the Port of Indiana on 25 December (John C. Kendall). An even larger flock of (60) birds flew past Miller Beach on 29 December (KJB). These tallies combined to provide the lakefront's best December numbers since 1985.

### DUCKS

The duck flight was better than normal, with a strong dabbling presence, slightly below average bay duck numbers, a mixed sea duck flight, and some fine Merganser counts.

Gadwall:- Perhaps the open water in December and January allowed many birds to linger, as the season total was an impressive 155 birds (TYM=63).

Northern Shoveler:- A record winter count of (160) was logged at Wolf Lake on 11 January (Carolyn A. Marsh). This fine tally contributed to a record season total of 679 Shovelers.

Green-winged Teal:- The 2 December tally of (142) at the Cline Avenue Marsh (Matt Kalwasinski), constitutes a record daily count for the winter season.

Harlequin Duck:- Indiana's first "Harley" of 2012 (a first-cycle male) occurred near the U.S. Steel breakwall at Miller Beach on 13 December (Michael Topp). It was seen irregularly through 19 January (John K. Cassady et al.).

White-winged Scoter:- A heavy mid-February east to west migration on Lake Michigan generated a record winter flight, with 291 birds reported (TYM=47.8). The movement got underway on 9 Feb when 87 birds were reported along the lakefront. Highlights included (51) off the Green Tower site (Brendan J. Grube) and (31) at the Port of Indiana (Steve Lima, Randy Jones, and Peter Scott). The flight peaked on 19 February when (69) birds were observed swimming at Michigan City Harbor (Brad Bumgardner).

Black Scoter:- The four birds reported provided the lowest winter count since 1996-97, when only two were logged.



John C. Kendall discovered this interesting male Long-tailed Duck at the Port of Indiana on 25 January. John K. Cassady photographed it the following day and determined that the bird was a second-cycle male.

Long-tailed Duck:- The winter flight was below average (again) with only five birds reported (TYM=18.6). Brendan J. Grube logged the peak count of two on the 15 December CBC.

Red-breasted Merganser:- The fall flight, which normally occurs in November, peaked in December this year. On 15 December John C. Kendall observed an enormous flock of (6400) flying eastward past Portage Lakefront Park (and into the Dunes CBC count circle). This tally constitutes Indiana's second highest daily count. On 14 December Jeffrey J. McCoy also counted (1740) during a three hour lakewatch at Michigan City Harbor.

Red-throated Loon:- The large multiple counts listed below contributed to a whopping record winter total of 542 Red-throateds (TYM=52.8). Jeffrey J. McCoy logged (69) on 14 December (39 at Michigan City Harbor, 29 at Beverly Shores lakefront, and one at Portage Lakefront Park). The Indiana Dunes CBC occurred on the following day and during the count (93) were seen migrating westward past Michigan City Harbor (John K. Cassady & Jeffrey J. McCoy). On 9 February Brendan J. Grube tallied a phenomenal (139) flying westward past Dunes State Park. Brendan's count included individual flocks of 40+ and of 35. The latter is a record daily count for Indiana.

Hared Grebe:- Michael Topp and Edward M. Hopkins found (1) at Miller Beach on 14 December.

Western Grebe:- This elegant grebe was present in unusually large numbers with 17 reported for the season (TYM=2.1). The crescendo occurred 30 December when Jeffrey J. McCoy established a record count of 4 birds, (two at the Port of Indiana and two more off Dune Acres). Indiana's previous maximum count was three.



Brad Bumgardner captured this marvelous Merlin flight-shot at Dunes State Park on 8 February. This individual apparently lingered near the Green Tower site throughout the winter.

Bald Eagle:- On 26 January John K. Cassady spotted an adult feeding in a snow covered field near Brummitt Road Pond. This large raptor is rarely observed on the ground in the Dunes area.

Virginia Rail:- Brad Bumgardner found (1) in the west Beverly Shore marsh on 7 January to provide the lakefront's first January record since 2009.

**GULLS**

One of the season's better gull days occurred 20 January when Amar Ayyash and Matt Kalwasinski observed three Thayer's, two Icelands, and two Lesser Black-backed at Michigan City Harbor. However, the season's best day was 9 February; on that occasion Amar used 30-40 loaves of bread to attract 7 Thayer's,

3 Kumlien's, 2 Lesser Black-backed, 6 Great Black-backed, and 3 Glaucous Gulls at the Whiting Refinery Beach.

Herring Gull:- At least three of the "white-winged" Thayer's look-alikes were reported on the lakefront this winter.

Iceland Gull:- Thanks to Amar's chumming (it is amazing what 30 loaves of bread can produce) 2012-13 yielded the second best season total of the decade.

**WINTER LAKEFRONT GULL TOTALS**

	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13
<b>Thayer's</b>	10	18	13	5	12	16	10	44	7	26
<b>Iceland</b>	4	7	3	2	3	4	7	16	9	13
<b>L. Black-backed</b>	7	19	1	2	4	7	5	16	1	15
<b>Glaucous</b>	22	38	21	9	17	76	34	64	26	71
<b>G. Black-backed</b>	111	125	87	55	74	224	218	192	60	168

Slaty-backed Gull:- Kirk Roth watched (1) at Whiting Refinery Beach for 15 minutes on 13 February. This is Indiana's third record.

Great Black-backed X Glaucous Gull hybrid:- The adult reported in previous winters appeared at Miller Beach on 12 January (John K. Cassady, Susan R. Bagby Lynea S. Hinchman, & KJB), marking the third consecutive year that it has been observed on the lakefront. It was also seen at the Port of Indiana on 20 January (Amar Ayyash). An immature was photographed at the Whiting Refinery Beach on 16 February (Dan Duso, John C. Kendall, and Michael Topp).

Kelp X Herring Gull hybrid (Chandeleur Gull):- The adult reported last fall lingered at Michigan City Harbor where it was irregularly seen through 19 January (KJB).

Snowy Owl:- The winter's only report consisted of a singleton reported at the Hammond Marina on 16 January (*fide* Brad Bumgardner).



Presumed Great Black-backed x Glaucous Gull hybrid (on the left) at the Whiting Refinery Beach on 16 February. Note that the bird dwarfs the Herring Gull on the right. Also note the white primaries. Photo by Michael Topp.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird:- The lingering late November bird at the Michelle Summers' residence (Dyer) remained through 28 December, constituting an all-time late date for the lakefront.

**American Robin:-** On 26 January Peter B. and Brendan J. Grube counted (200) along Burns Ditch near Portage Lakefront Park. This is the lakefront's largest January count.



This Clay-colored Sparrow was first discovered in western Ogden Dunes back in October. It lingered in the area, but was seen only occasionally. John C. Kendall saw the bird on 1 December. On 27 December Geoff Williamson and Ken Wysocki found it in a mixed flock of American Tree Sparrows and Juncos. This is the lakefront's second winter record and the first in 50 years. Photo by Geoffrey A. Williamson.

**Northern Mockingbird:-** The winter of 2012-13 yielded a record number of Mockingbirds with 15 birds reported (TYM=3.3) at six different locations. The largest daily counts, also winter records, involved three singletons at Portage Lakefront Park, Burns Ditch, and near Howe Road on 26 January (Brendan J. Grube & Peter B. Grube) and three more at Beverly Shores and Portage Lakefront Park on 2 February (Lynea S. Hinchman et al).

**American Pipit:-** Once again this species was recorded on the lakefront during the dead of winter. On January 12<sup>th</sup> Michael Topp observed (1) on the ground at Miller Beach, marking the third consecutive year in which January Pipits have been reported on the lakefront.

**Bohemian Waxwing:-** Following last autumn's incursion, single birds appeared at the National Lakeshore Headquarters on 1 December (Mike Brattain, KJB et al.) and at Ogden Dunes on 22

December (John C. Kendall). Also, as a dozen waxwings flew over Dunes State Park on 29 January and Brad Bumgardner heard the distinctive call of at least (1) Bohemian in the flock.

**Clay-colored Sparrow:-** The lingering fall bird at Ogden Dunes was seen by John C. Kendall on 1 December, providing Indiana's third record for the twelfth month. It was photographed on 27 December (Geoffrey A. Williamson and Ken Wysocki). This is the first winter record for the Dunes area since 1962.

### WINTER FINCHES

This was a fine season for winter finches with the best Common Redpoll and Evening Grosbeak numbers in years.

**Red Crossbill:-** During a heavy 5 February snow squall, a female appeared at the Brock feeders in Chesterton. In 39 years of feeding, this is the first crossbill to ever visit the feeders (KJB).

**Common Redpoll:-** During the 15 December CBC Eric Lundquest counted (205) in the Reynolds Creek Gamebird Habitat Area (formerly the Prison Farm). Although this tally is only Indiana's 13<sup>th</sup> highest count, it happens to be the largest in the state since 1994. For the season some 551 Common Redpolls were reported on the lakefront (TYM=184).



On 17 January Susan R. Bagby found this brilliant male Redpoll at the Dunes State Park feeders. The bird was initially believed to have been a Giant (or Greenland) Redpoll (*A.f. Rostrata*); however, a study of photos ultimately led to the conclusion that it was just a mega-Common Redpoll. Brad Bumgardner claimed that the ground shook when the bird hopped. Photo by KJB.

**Hoary Redpoll**:- On 31 December a male accompanied a flock of 12 Common Redpolls in the Brock's backyard (Chesterton). Brad Bumgardner photographed another at the Dunes State Park Nature Center feeders on 3 January. On 9 January Brad noted the bird's sluggish behavior and captured it by hand. A number of in-the-hand photos were taken and the bird was banded. The bill was measured at 7.7 to 7.9mm; Pyle (1997) lists the bill measurement of *A. h. exilipes* (the form that most often occurs in the Midwest) as ranging from 5.9 to 7.4mm.

**Pine Siskin**:- In view of the winter finch irruption, Siskins were surprisingly scarce. Only 76 were reported for the winter and most of these occurred in December. The TYM is 123.6.

**Evening Grosbeak**:- A variable sized flock, containing up to one male and eight females, irregularly visited a west Beverly Shores feeder from late December through mid-January. This flock was seen on Christmas Day (Jeffrey J. McCoy ) and lingered in the area through at least

21 January (John K. Cassady & KJB).



This male Hoary Redpoll, one of several reported in the fall-winter season, visited the Brock residence feeders on 31 December. Photo by KJB