

LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2015-2016

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How was that for a halcyon winter? The 2015-16 season was remarkably mild until mid-January when winter finally arrived bringing slightly below zero temperatures (-4°F on 18 January). During this brief cold spell ice formed on Lake Michigan, but was pretty much gone by month's end. A late February storm deposited 9.5 inches of dense wet snow on the lakefront and that was the winter of 2015-16. Overall the winter was pleasingly warm with little snow.

Departure from Normal: Chicago		
	°F	Precip. Inches
Dec	+11.3	+2.62
Jan	+0.9	-0.89
Feb	+2.7	-0.56

Statewide, the winter avifauna was characterized by an unusually large number of lingering species that took advantage of the mild winter. Highlights included an Orchard Oriole and a Magnolia Warbler, both of which provided first winter records for the state. Other unexpected species included Spotted Sandpiper, White-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, Black-and-white Warbler, Lark Sparrow, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Interestingly, a whopping eight warbler species were reported for the season. Additionally, a number of uncommon to rare winter passerines (e.g., Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, and both Kinglets) were reported in record numbers.

Unfortunately, all of the above goodies were reported downstate, not on the lakefront. This winter's best lakefront birds included: King Eider, Slaty-backed Gull, and Townsend's Solitaire.

In the following narrative the abbreviation TYM (lakefront twenty-year mean) gives the average number of birds reported in Indiana over the past 20 years.

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WATERFOWL

Greater White-fronted Goose:- The flock of (33) that Brendan J. Grube observed at the Dunes State Park observation platform on 18 February tied the lakefront's maximum winter record. It was surpassed two days later when Brendan logged (272) flying past the platform. The latter tally is the lakefront's all-time second largest daily count.

DUCKS

Ducks fared quite well this winter. Dabblers appeared in near normal numbers and bay ducks were recorded in average to above average numbers. Sea Ducks and mergansers were unusually plentiful with all well above normal

except Long-tailed Duck, which was near average.

American Wigeon:- On 21 February Matt S. Kalwasinski logged (14): seven at the Grant Street Wetland and seven at the Gordon and Faith Greiner Nature Preserve. This total is the lakefront's third largest winter tally and the largest February count ever.

Redhead:- Redheads appeared in record numbers this winter primarily due to a build up at the Port of Indiana. For the season 2355 were logged (TYM=444). The peak daily tally was the (500) that Ryan J. Sanderson counted at the Port of Indiana on 6 February. The latter constitutes the lakefront's fourth largest count.

Harlequin Duck:- A female was discovered at Jeorse Park (East Chicago lakefront) on 3 January (Don Gorney, Becky Heck, & Doug Vine). This bird lingered until 23 January and was seen (and photographed) by many. On 20 February Jeffrey J. McCoy discovered an immature male at the Port of Indiana.



Female Harlequin Duck discovered at Jerose Park (East Chicago Lakefront) on 3 January and lingered for almost three weeks. She was often seen feeding with Coot right along the shoreline. Photo (taken 5 January) by John K. Cassady.

Surf Scoter:- Unusually common on the lakefront this winter. John K. Cassady logged a record winter count of (51) in a swimming flock off Beverly Shores Lakefront on 12 December. A marvelous group of (3) at Michigan City Harbor on 5 January included an adult male, a first-cycle male, and an adult female (John K. Cassady et al.). For the season a record 111 were tallied (TYM=20.0).

White-winged Scoter:- A late season build up occurred on the lakefront bringing the season total to 659 (the lakefront's second largest winter total). The peak daily count was a state record (167), logged at five lakefront sites on 27 February (John K. Cassady et al.).

King Eider:- A female was observed in a small Black Scoter flock off Dunes State Park on 11 December (Brendan J. Grube). This buffy duck was larger than the scoters, displayed a short dark bill, and a line was visible behind the eye. In flight downy white patches were visible on the axillaries.

Hooded Merganser:- On 24 January Matt S. Kalwasinski logged (70) at three n. Lake Co sites, establishing a new winter maximum for the lakefront.

Red-throated Loon:- This loon was remarkably scarce until 23 February when Brendan J. Grube logged (53) off the observation tower. This tally more than doubled the season's previous total. The final season's total was 117 (TYM=76.2).

Western Grebe:- Don Gorney et al. found (1) on Indiana waters off Calumet Park, IL on 30 January. It lingered in the area until 5 February (Matt S. Kalwasinski) and was seen by many.

Black-crowned Night-Heron:- Once again a few wintered along the Grand Calumet River in the Roxana Pond area. The peak count of (5) was reported on 16 January (Matt S. Kalwasinski) and 3 February (Maricela Aviles & Jaime Golba).

Rough-legged Hawk:- A small number wintered at Reynolds Creek G.H.A. For the season 27 Rough-leggeds were reported on the lakefront (TYM=8.45).



This beautiful adult male dark-morph Rough-legged Hawk was photographed over the Hammond Sanctuary on 2 January. Across the state an average of about 2.7 light-morphs are seen for every dark-morph. Photo by Michael A. Topp.

Killdeer:- In late February this plover arrived on the lakefront in force with a winter record (75) that Brendan J. Grube counted at the Dunes State Park observation tower on the 28th. This tally is almost double the lakefront's previous winter maximum of (39), which was logged on 29 February 2004.

Purple Sandpiper:- Indiana's only 2015 record arrived at Michigan City Harbor on 31 December (Don Gorney) and lingered until 4 January (Brad Bumgardner et al.). In recent years this shorebird has proven difficult to find.

American Woodcock:- Brad Bumgardner found (2) at Cowles Bog on 28 February provided the lakefront's second earliest record.



This sly Purple Sandpiper, Indiana's only record for 2015, was discovered at Michigan City Harbor in late December and lingered into early January (the above was taken on the 4th). Peter B. Grube captured this stately pose.

GULLS

It was generally a poor season for lakefront gulls. The buildup that occurred at the Whiting Refinery Beach (BP) in recent winters did not take place this year. Indeed, the Arctic nesting species were logged in below normal numbers throughout the season. However, the winter was saved by the appearance of an adult Slaty-backed at the Port of Indiana.

Black-legged Kittiwake:- See table (Season total=2 ; TYM=2.05).

Black-legged Kittiwake Records			
No	Date	Location	Observer
1	19-Dec	Dunes State Park	B. Grube
1	27-Dec	Miller Beach	D. Gorney

Iceland Gull:- The famous adult that regularly wintered at the Hammond Marina since February 2010, failed to return this season.

LAKEFRONT: WINTER GULL TOTALS											
	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15
	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Thayer's	13	5	11	16	10	44	8	33	25	23	19
Iceland	3	2	3	4	7	16	9	13	6*	10*	4
L. Black-backed	7	2	5	7	5	16	2	13	7	7	11
Glaucous	19	12	18	76	35	67	29	79	81	38	22
G. Black-backed	89	65	93	254	218	194	71	216	490	368	204
*Corrected to compensate for repeated reports of the Hammond Marina adult.											

Slaty-backed Gull:- Indiana's fourth record, an adult, spent 20 February at the Port of Indiana where it was seen and photographed by many. The bird was discovered setting on the outer breakwall by Jeffrey J. McCoy, but was identified an hour or so later after it flew (Jeff McCoy, John K. Cassady, KJB, David Crouch, Don Gorney, Gary Langell, Randy Pals, Aidan Rominger, Lynn Vernon, and later Michael Topp, Amar Ayyash, and a group of Amos Butler Audubon Society field trippers). Photos reveal that this Slaty-backed was identical to one that Amar Ayyash photographed 70 miles away in Wilmington, IL (Will Co), on 19 February. According to Peter B. Grube, Mark Derloshon, and Daniel Eastman observed the

bird the following day, but it was not subsequently seen.

Kelp x Herring (Chandeleur) Gull:- The adult reported last fall frequented Michigan City Harbor until 5 January, but then disappeared until 20 February. On 19 February this individual, or another, was photographed 70 miles away in Wilmington, IL (Amar Ayyash).

Odd Gull:- Although Great Black-backed Gull numbers were down this winter, weird examples of this species appeared once again. On 27 February John K. Cassady spotted a pale first-cycle bird at Whiting Refinery Beach. Photos of this strange gull are appended.



This adult Slaty-backed Gull (Indiana's fourth record) was found at the Port of Indiana on 20 February. Note the wide white secondary bar and the "string of pearls," in the primaries. Photo by John K. Cassady.

Snowy Owl:- An unusually dark individual was discovered perched on the Whiting Park breakwall (Jeffrey J. McCoy) on 2 January. It lingered for a few days and then disappeared. Following a month-long hiatus this bird, or more likely another, was reported at Whiting Park on 31 January (Richard Katz).



Snowy Owl perched atop the harbor rocks at Whiting Park on 2 January 2016. This heavily marked bird, very likely a first-cycle female, was discovered by Jeffrey J. McCoy on 26 December 2015 and was seen by scores of birders. Photo by Michael A Topp.

Long-eared Owl:- On 30 January Jeffrey J. McCoy found (2) at the Hammond Sanctuary and Matt S. Kalwasinski counted (3) there on 5 February.

Northern Shrike:- Despite intensive searching, this was the first winter since 2001-02 in which shrikes were not reported on the lakefront (TYM=6.9).

Red-breasted Nuthatch:- This dapper nuthatch went unreported on the lakefront. Indeed, for the third consecutive winter Red-breasted numbers were down across the entire state.

Townsend's Solitaire:- The bird that arrived in November wintered in the West Beach – Ogden Dunes area. It was last reported 5 February (Michael A. Topp, Chris Newman, et al.).



Peter B. Grube perfectly captured this elusive Townsend's Solitaire on 22 January 2016. Although this individual frequented the West Beach - Ogden Dunes area since late November, it was frustratingly difficult to find. Some birders reportedly did not see the bird until their seventh trip to the site.

Eastern Bluebird:- On 26 December John C. Kendall logged (18) along Burns Ditch. This tally constitutes the lakefront's fourth largest winter count.

Fox Sparrow:- This large sparrow was more prevalent than normal with 13 reported (TYM=3.2). The peak count was (5) at Roxana Pond and the Hammond Sanctuary (Matt S. Kalwasinski) on New Years Day, which tied the lakefront's third largest winter count.

Eastern Meadowlark:- In late winter Brendan J. Grube initiated watches from the Dunes State Park observation platform. One good find that he logged on 29 February was (3) unctuous meadowlarks (Brendan's unpronounceable adjective), which are quite rare on the lakefront in winter (TYM=1.25).

WINTER FINCHES

This was clearly not a winter finch year. Although Purple Finch numbers were typical, everything else was rare to non-existent.

THE PECULIAR GULL



This aberrant gull was found and photographed at Whiting Refinery Beach on 27 February. This Great Black-backed-sized gull was thought to be a Great Black-backed X Glaucous hybrid, but leucism cannot be positively ruled out. In the field it looked like a washed-out first-cycle Great Black-backed with pale primaries and Thayer's-like under wings. The tail was whitish with a few fine dark bars. A truly extraordinary plumage. John K. Cassady's flight photographs show the bird from above and below.

Common Redpoll:- A distinct, but modest flight occurred along the lakefront in December; the peak count consisted of a flyby flock of (11) at the Hammond Sanctuary on 15 December (Michael A. Topp). Thanks to Carolyn A. Marsh's well stocked feeders one or two lingered at the sanctuary feeders through much of the winter.

Pine Siskin:- Surprisingly scarce on the lakefront with only three reported (TYM=121).

