

LAKEFRONT BIRD REPORT: WINTER 2016-2017

Kenneth J. Brock
Chesterton, Indiana

It was a balmy winter. The season's first snowfall brought 4 inches of wet snow to Chesterton on 4 December. Two weeks later freezing rain and drizzle greeted Indiana Dunes CBC participants on 17 December. Numbing cold (-13°F) then arrived on the 19th, depositing a 9-inch snowfall on Chesterton. Thereafter the winter mellowed, yielding a 64°F high on 20 January, followed by record-breaking 70° highs during the late February "heat wave."

Departure from Normal: Chicago		
	°F	Precip. Inches
Dec	-2.7	-0.48
Jan	+5.0	+1.14
Feb	+10.3	-0.27

Accompanying the unusually warm weather Indiana's winter birds were quite extraordinary. Across the state many of the semi-hardy species were recorded in record numbers. These included American Woodcock, Eastern Phoebe, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Orange-crowned Warbler, Palm Warbler, Pine Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow. A word of caution, a larger than normal number of birders contributed to the above records; it is impossible to know exactly how much increased observation contributed to these high totals.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is indebted to Susan R. Bagby for her meticulous proof reading of an early draft. Thanks also to Matthew Bowman, John K. Cassady, John Harley, and Ryan J. Sanderson for sharing their fine photographs.

WATERFOWL

Greater White-fronted Goose:- The best winter numbers ever were recorded on the lakefront occurred this season. A total of 1066 was reported (TYM=75.5). The peak daily count was (363), which was logged at the Green Tower site on 20 February (Brendan J. Grube). The latter also ties the lakefront's third largest count.

Snow Goose:- It was also a record winter for this goose with 80 reported for the season (TYM=9.4). The peak count was the (29) tallied by Kristin Stratton in northern Porter County on 25 January.

Tundra Swan:- Lakefront birders enjoyed a good winter for this swan with 76 reported (TYM=33.6). The peak tally was (60) that Jeffrey J. McCoy logged off Miller Beach on 13 December.

DUCKS

Puddle ducks fared well this winter with the numbers of every species above average except the American Black Duck (see below). Among the diving ducks only the Canvasback, Greater Scaup,



Flight shot of a White-winged Scoter and a first-cycle male Surf Scoter at Michigan City Harbor on 11 February 2017. This remarkable photo was taken by John W. Harley.

and Bufflehead were below normal, and they were only down slightly. Harlequin Duck went unreported, but all other sea ducks were tallied in above average numbers. Common Merganser numbers were down marginally, but the other two species were above normal.

Gadwall:- It was an excellent winter for this duck with 332 reported (TYM=88.5). The season's peak tally was (41) that Matt S. Kalwasinski logged in Hammond on Christmas Day.

American Black Duck:- This season 62 were reported, which is the best winter total in four years (TYM=72.1). The season's maximum count of (8) was logged at the Port of Indiana on 24 December (John K. Cassady et al.).

Green-winged Teal:- On 7 January Matt S. Kalwasinski photographed a flock of (23) at the Beemsterboer Tract (n. Lake Co), which constitutes the lakefront's largest January count.

Long-tailed Duck:- Highlighted by a 9 December count of (15) at Michigan City Harbor (Joseph Kurtz), the lakefront experienced the best flight since the winter of 2001-02, with 39 reported (TYM=13.6).



John W. Harley's magnificent flight shot of male Common Mergansers perfectly captures the beauty of these winter visitors. This photo was taken at Michigan City Harbor on 11 February 2017.

Common Loon:- For the twelfth consecutive year winter Common Loon numbers were well below normal with only 66 reported (TYM=81.9). The season's peak count was (34) that John K. Cassady and others logged at Michigan City Harbor on 3 December.

Wild Turkey:- A new lakefront maximum count was set 28 January when Amy Hodson and Don Gorney counted (44) as they individually walked across Broadway at Beverly Shores.

Great Egret:- The lingering Cowles Bog bird, which was last reported on 3 December (Kim Ehn), provided the lakefront's third latest record.

Northern Harrier:- The (6) that Michael A. Topp logged at the Hammond Sanctuary on 13 December tied the lakefront's largest winter count.

Killdeer:- This plover lingered later than normal with 21 December birds (TYM=2.55); the largest count consisted of (7) that Kim Ehn logged at Reynolds Creek G.H.A. on the 8th.

Purple Sandpiper:- Don Gorney did it again. In 2015 Don found the year's first Purple Sandpiper on 31 December and this year he nailed the season's first at the Port of Indiana on 24 December.

American Woodcock:- A new early arrival date was set on 18 February when Matt S. Kalwasinski recorded (2) at Hoosier Prairie. Brad Bumgardner also logged (1) at Cowles Bog the following day. Both preceded the lakefront's previous earliest date of 26 February.

GULLS

It was an unusually poor season for gulls; indeed several river sites in St Joseph Co yielded much better gulls than did the lakefront. Numbers in the Gull Table tell the story— every species except Lesser Black-backed occurred in below normal numbers. A consensus among laird birders is that the warm weather allowed the gulls to remain farther north.

Black-legged Kittiwake:- The winter's only record occurred 8 December when Brendan J. Grube logged (1) at the Dunes S.P. Green Tower site (TYM=2.2).



This hybrid Laughing X Ring-billed Gull joined the Michigan City Harbor gull flock on 3 December. It perplexed the birders until a photo was sent to Amar Ayyash who made an immediate identification. Many other hybrids of this type have been observed in the Hammond area. Photo by John K. Cassady.

Laughing x Ring-billed Gull:- A bird of this heritage was at Michigan City Harbor on 3 December (John K. Cassady, Ryan J. Sanderson, Lynn H. Vernon, and many others). Photos of this individual were examined by Amar Ayyash, who identified the bird. Amar also suggested that the pale mantle of this bird might be explained as a backcross (F2 hybrid) of the darker backed Lake County bird (see photo on p.5 of the Spring 2011 Lakefront Report) with a Ring-billed Gull. A different individual, of this hybrid combination,

was photographed at Whiting Park on 11 February (Ma Martin).



The darker backed gull in the center of the flock is believed to be a hybrid Great Black-backed X Herring Gull. Note that it is larger than the adjacent Herring Gulls, but the mantle is much paler than that of a Great Black-backed. John K. Cassady photographed this interesting laird at Whiting Refinery Beach on 4 February 2017.

Thayer's Gull:- The 4 birds reported this winter constitute the lowest season total since 1992 (TYM=21.1).

Iceland Gull:- The winter of 2016-17 brought the lakefronts poorest Iceland Gull flight in more than two decades (TYM=8.15) with only two birds reported.

LAKEFRONT: WINTER GULL TOTALS												
	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Thayer's	13	5	11	16	10	44	8	33	25	23	19	4
Iceland	3	2	3	4	7	16	9	13	6*	10*	4	2
L. Black-backed	7	2	5	7	5	16	2	13	7	7	11	11
Glaucous	19	12	18	76	35	67	29	79	81	38	22	13
G. Black-backed	89	65	93	254	218	194	71	216	490	368	204	178
*Corrected to compensate for repeated reports of the Hammond Marina adult.												

Kelp x Herring (Chandeleur) Gull:- This regular winter resident was absent between 14 December and 19 January, lingered through the season at Michigan City Harbor (Randy J. Pals et al.).



Perhaps the winter's most unusual sighting was this Northern Saw-whet Owl that was discovered perched in a leafless deciduous tree in the Hammond Sanctuary on 19 February 2017. This second site record was found and photographed by Matthew Bowman.

Long-eared Owl:- Matt S. Kalwasinski discovered (3) in the Hammond Sanctuary on 4 January. The number at this site increased to (4) on 11 January (Kimberly Ehn).

Northern Saw-whet Owl:- Amazingly, one was found perched on a bare branch in the Hammond Sanctuary on 19 February (Matthew Bowman). This is the second sanctuary record.

Northern Shrike:- The difficult to locate Cowles Bog bird wintered and was last reported on 19 February (Annie Aguirre).

Red-breasted Nuthatch:- Lakefront birders enjoyed the best winter numbers in four years with 20 reported (TYM=10.9).

Hermit Thrush:- On 17 December Matt S. Kalwasinski logged (1) near the old LaPorte Co Landfill (on the Dunes CBC) and on 19

December Nick Kiehl relocated the Ogden Dunes bird reported earlier by John C. Kendall. These two reports yielded a season total well above the TYM of 0.90.

Gray Catbird:- Jeffrey J. McCoy found (1) at Beverly Shores on 28 January, which provided the lakefront's fifth record for the first month.

Brown Thrasher:- John C. Kendall found (1) at Ogden Dunes on 13 December; this individual lingered until 22 December (Don Gorney). The lakefront's winter TYM for this species is only 0.50.

Yellow-rumped Warbler:- In winter this species is quite rare on the lakefront (TYM=1.5); consequently, the singleton that Michael A. Topp logged in Highland on 19 February is noteworthy.



When did you last see a Le Conte's Sparrow standing on freshly fallen snow? This dapper individual provided the lakefront's first winter record. Ryan J. Sanderson took this stunning photo at Michigan City Harbor on 12 December 2016.

Le Conte's Sparrow:- The lakefront's all-time late record was set on 12 December when Ryan J. Sanderson and Nick Kiehl photographed (1) at Michigan City Harbor (in sparse grass between the beach and the yacht basin). The previous latest Le Conte's occurred on 8 November 2013.

Fox Sparrow:- Thanks to the Hammond Sanctuary feeders, it was a fine winter on the lakefront for this handsome sparrow. A total of 19

were reported (TYM=4.2) and the peak count was (3), recorded three times at the sanctuary.

Summer Tanager:- On 13 December John C. Kendall found (1) at Ogden Dunes. This is the first winter record for the lakefront.

WINTER FINCHES

It was not a good season for winter finches; indeed they were quite scarce.

Purple Finch:- The season's only report consisted of (3) that Kristin Stratton found in Beverly Shores on 17 January (TYM=12.8).

Common Redpoll:- The season's only report consisted of a singleton that John C. Kendall found at the Ogden Dune pinery on 3 December.

Pine Siskin:- It was a poor winter for this small finch with only 19 reported (TYM=122). The Peak count was (10) that John C. Kendall logged at the Ogden Dune pinery on 3 December.