

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

YEAR-END RARITIES

By Clive E. Goodwin

On the face of it you wouldn't expect too many rare birds to turn up between November and February. Peak migration is well over for most species, many kinds of food are scarce, and only the hardiest birds remain. It turns out, however, that year-end can be quite a productive time for rarer birds – it's certainly too early to hang up your binoculars until next spring!

This article will complete the look at rarities that I began in the November issue, and this month will concentrate on the occurrence of rarities through the year. As in November, we will use the group of species that each has fewer than 10 records in total in the dataset, but this time will examine the annual distribution of the records of these birds. There were 64 species with fewer than 10 records, and we have 184 records in all in this group.

The distribution of the records is surprisingly even through the year, and particularly so between August and January. October, with 17 records, is slightly higher than the monthly average of just over 15, while the other five months are all slightly below. What many of us regard as one of the best birding months of the year, September, is in fact the lowest of the five, with only 12. But the highest month was, as might be expected, May with 55. At the other extreme is July, together with – another surprise – March, with only 5 each. Even February – my own candidate for the slowest birding month of the year – was better, if only marginally, at 6. The full set is:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
13	6	5	22	55	9	5	13	12	17	14	13

I'm sure a statistician would tell us that these numbers are too small to draw any firm conclusions about them, although of course they're an accurate statement of when the very rarest species occurred in the county in the past. What happens if we move up a step, to the 10-20 records set? If you read the November article you may recall there were only 22 species in this group. But, because the number of records is higher [10 to 20 per species], we find a total of 292. Their monthly distribution is:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
17	6	11	18	85	26	6	23	35	25	24	16

You'll see this is a much more familiar pattern; highest at the time of spring migration when movement is so concentrated, with a second, less pronounced peak in the fall months when migration is a much more leisurely affair. Apparently the much smaller number of species together with considerably more records per bird already results in a more accurate picture of seasonal bird movements overall.

Is there, then, anything at all we can say about the information in the first set? I think perhaps there is. It's probably true that the extreme rarities of the next 20 years might yield a different distribution. But note two things about the results: first, the relative uniformity month to month; it does indeed look as though these rarities can pop up at just about any time and [as we saw in the November issue] anywhere. But conversely, it does seem that peak migration months, or very good places [think Presqu'ile] do have an 'edge', which is not at all surprising.

The other point about both sets of figures brings us back to our opening paragraph. November through February are by no means the unproductive months that might be assumed. There are over 100 records of 33 rare species that were recorded during this period.

So what kinds of birds would turn up at such an inhospitable time of year? In fact, migration is still under way in November and early December, and several late migrants appear in the November dataset. For example, a few young Northern Gannets find their way to Lake Ontario in most years, and we have three records. One such species that has lingered into December is Barrow's Goldeneye, a bird more familiar as a scarce spring migrant, but which formerly wintered in small numbers on Lake Ontario with some regularity. Gulls are another hardy group that appear later in the year. Most of our kittiwake records are from this period, as are all our Ivory Gulls and both our Mew Gull records.

But it's not just a period for late migrants. Winter is usually our only opportunity to see some of the rarest Ontario species. These are much sought birds, as they are both rare and unpredictable. Some are westerners – Townsend's Solitaire and Varied Thrush – and isolated birds of both species have a history of appearing in the east in winter. We have more records of the thrush, probably because they have a way of turning up at feeders, but there are only a handful of records in all. Other species come from the north: Gyrfalcons have a maddening habit of being seen once and then disappearing, but we have had nine over the years. We have only four Boreal Owl records, but unlike the large, conspicuous falcon, this is a species that is very easy to overlook.

A few of these early winter waifs – but only a few – fit the classic picture of some unfortunate little bird that has inadvertently ended up thousands of kilometers away from its wintering grounds, only to succumb to the rigors of an Ontario winter. The 2005 Yellow-throated Warbler at Chub Point was a recent example. It turned up at the feeder of Jan and Eric Bruton in November, only to perish – we assume – on December 14-15, on what proved to be one of the coldest nights of the winter. Perhaps the most outlandish of these misplaced species was the American Oystercatcher that turned up in Cobourg harbour on January 4, 1999 after a massive storm that swept up from the Gulf of Mexico and dumped a huge fall of snow on the county.

Whatever the background to their appearances, these birds – and the chance that one might appear – add real spice to the dreary days of winter.