

SOUTHWEST REGION

/ Janet Witzeman and Kenn Kaufman, Scott Burge and John P. Hubbard

The season averaged colder and wetter than normal; but as usual "winter" held off until January, allowing half-hardy species to linger for the Christmas Bird Counts. The Region saw widespread movements of bluebirds, longspurs and Lawrence's Goldfinches.



Mountain birds were noticeably absent in the lowlands (unusual numbers of Goshawks, Brown Creepers and both kinglets notwithstanding: specimen records from the past indicate that a major percentage of these birds come from the north, rather than from the local mountains).

The season raised interesting questions concerning ravens, towhees and marsh wrens. On the local level, Bitter Lake had blackbirds, Nogales had Fringillids, Phoenix had warblers; and Davis Dam on the Arizona-Nevada border had birders from two Regions excited over rare ducks and gulls. Read on for details.

LOONS THROUGH IBIS — Single Com. Loons, rare in New Mexico, were at Conchas L., Dec. 10 (JPH) and L. McMillan Feb. 14 (MW). A Horned Grebe was studied at Empalme, Sonora Mar. 1 (DZ); the species is a casual visitor to n.w. Mexico. Somewhat less unusual were two at Conchas L., Dec. 10 (JPH) and one near Cliff, N. Mex., Jan. 3 (DZ *et al.*). Adding another episode to the Olivaceous Cormorant's recent spread into s. New Mexico, an adult was seen at Bill Evans L., Grant Co., from late Dec. to early Mar. (JPH, DZ *et al.*). White-faced Ibis are rare in the Region in winter. Eight at Painted Rock Dam near Gila Bend (SB *et al.*) spent the entire winter; the one on the Roswell CBC apparently did not.

WATERFOWL — Whistling Swans are scarce winter visitors to the Region; two were at Bosque del Apache N.W.R., N. Mex., Dec. 5 (R. Teuber *et al.*). A **Black Brant**, one of very few records for Arizona, was shot by a hunter 40 mi. w. of Phoenix Jan. 6 (*fide* Tom Stejskal). A pair of ducks wintering at Bitter Lake N.W.R., N. Mex., were apparently Mallard x Mexican Duck hybrids (DB). There was a "major trickle" of Greater Scaup, with a female s.w. of Phoenix Dec. 21 (SB), a male at Tucson Jan. 14 - Feb. 3 (DSz, m.ob.), and a female n.e. of Phoenix Mar. 25 (ST). These records were almost certainly valid; the status of this bird in the Southwest is still poorly known. The biggest duck news came from Davis Dam, on the Colorado R., where the season saw an invasion of **Barrow's Goldeneye**. Two were found there Nov. 30 (JO), and by Dec. 17 the number had grown to 57, including 12 males (CL, GM). Four were still present Feb. 20. Photos by CL made this the first documented record for Arizona. It's difficult to guess which direction the birds came from; normally they winter on the n. Pacific coast, inland in the Northwest, and the n. and c. Rockies, all some distance away. Of more likely oceanic origin was a **Surf Scoter** at Davis Dam Nov. 30 - Dec. 12 (JO, VM; photos by CL). Downriver from Davis Dam was a ♂ **Oldsquaw** Jan. 23 to end of the period (photos, CL).

RAPTORS — A Turkey Vulture, rare in New Mexico in winter, was at Bosque del Apache N.W.R., Jan. 19 (J. Durrie); one at Mesilla Feb. 23 (*fide* BP) was probably an early migrant. Reports of Goshawks in the lowlands numbered four in New Mexico and five in Arizona, slightly more than usual. A **Broad-winged Hawk** was seen n.e. of Phoenix Mar. 16 (ST *et al.*). The bird may have overwintered; two of the four previous Arizona occurrences were Feb. records, and migrant Broad-wingeds generally don't move into Texas until late March. Rough-legged Hawks are peripheral at the n.

edge of Mexico, so of interest was one near El Sueco, Chih., Mar. 8 (DZ). Several observers commented on numbers of Bald Eagles. Wintering populations of the northern race vary considerably in the Region, so the real significance of fluctuations here is hard to judge. Also difficult to interpret was the number of Merlin reports, six in New Mexico and ten in Arizona, far more than normal.

GALLINULES, SHOREBIRDS — Up to four Com. Gallinules again wintered at Kirtland, extreme n.w. New Mexico (APN); this is exceptionally far north.

Because of its low elevation (and resulting warm temperatures), coupled with much artificial habitat, Phoenix generally reports the most diverse wintering shorebird population in the Region. Notable there this season were two to four Pectoral Sandpipers for most of Jan., plus 20+ Am. Avocets and a lone Long-billed Curlew throughout the period; all three species are quite rare in winter. A Semipalmated Plover, Arizona's first winter record, lingered at Phoenix through Feb. 5. The Region's first Ruff, first reported Nov. 10, remained at Phoenix through Feb. 17. Though Lesser Yellowlegs normally desert the Southwest from November to March, a few overwinter regularly at Phoenix. Eight were present through this December, but evidently no more than three remained past mid-Jan.; this pattern of decline generally occurs, the excess birds probably moving s.w. to the Gulf of California. Another hot spot this season was the vicinity of Salt Lake, e. of Loving, N. Mex., where Snowy Plovers — one on Jan. 9, two on Jan. 27 — were the first winter records for the state (JPH, CGS). Up to 30 Dunlin, usually rare in New Mexico at any season, were recorded e. of Loving during Jan. (JPH, CGS).

JAEGERS, GULLS, ANIS — An ad. Parasitic Jaeger was observed at Puerto Peñasco, Sonora Dec. 28 (DSj). Jaeger records for the Gulf of California have been few, but this is probably due in part to lack of coverage. Since the Parasitic is now a regular fall stray to the Salton Sea (McCaskie, 1974, *Am. Birds* 28:108), it would seem the logical species to turn up in the northern Gulf.

Davis Dam produced gull records for Arizona and Nevada, with two first-year **Thayer's** (second and third Arizona records) Dec. 12 - Feb. 18, a first-year **Glaucous-winged** (fourth Arizona record) for the same period, and an imm. **Black-legged Kittiwake** (third Arizona record) Feb. 17-20 (all by CL, VM, JO *et al.*). These followed the expected pattern for vagrant gulls from the Pacific, being immatures and occurring in mid-winter. In a different category was an ad. **Laughing Gull** (fourth Arizona record) downriver at Havasu L., Mar. 15 (JO), an early-spring stray that must have arrived via the Gulf of California. Scarcity of records for coastal gulls on the Colorado R. reservoirs correlates to a paucity of recent coverage; during Monson's intensive fieldwork along the river in the 1940s-50s, he had records of Glaucous-winged, Western, Laughing, and Heermann's Gulls as well as other salt-water species.

An ani was reported n. of Las Cruces Dec. 7 (W. Iselin, *fide* BP). Grooves were not seen on the bill; but reference to a two-noted call, as well as geographic logic, suggest the Groove-billed Ani which is a rare straggler to the Region.

HUMMINGBIRDS — Allen's Hummingbird is extremely difficult to identify in the field, so sight records are open to question and the range of this bird in the Region is still poorly known. Of interest, therefore, is a reliable record from Somerton, Yuma Co., extreme s.w. Arizona: an adult male that arrived at a feeder Feb. 17, was later found injured and studied in hand by Susan & Steve Liston *et al.* Though the winter range of Allen's is not fully established, it could be vaguely defined as western Mexico. Since migrant Allen's move north into California during Jan. and Feb., and some should pass through s.w. Arizona on the way, this record fits the expected pattern of time and place. The only 'spring' specimen for Arizona was also in Yuma Co.: one in the Sierra Pinta, Feb. 18, 1955. Observers hoping to identify Allen's are referred to Stiles, 1972 (*Condor* 74:25-32).

TROGONS THROUGH SWALLOWS — A **Coppery-tailed Trogon** below L. Patagonia, Ariz., Dec. 14 - Jan. 6 (JM, R. Glinski) was only the third winter record for the U.S. Rare but regular in winter, a Green Kingfisher straggled north to Nogales Feb. 9 (BH). Possibly only the fourth record of **Red-bellied Woodpecker** in New Mexico was one near Roswell Dec. 21 (MW *et al.*). A Purple Martin near Tucson until Dec. 22 was by 1½ months the latest record for Arizona (GM).

CORVIDS THROUGH THRASHERS — The only Blue Jay reported was one at Las Vegas Dec. 5 - Mar. 3 (WH). Although many CBC compilers blithely report all ravens as identified to species, the identification and ranges of the two forms are not yet well understood. Observers should beware that both ravens wander to untypical habitats; calls vary; size is a poor field-mark; and the white neck of the White-necked is rarely visible. Complicating the picture in New Mexico were careful reports of Commons on the prairies near Clayton and Tucumcari (JPH), and White-necked at relatively high elevation near Glenwood (JPH, CGS). There were very few reports of Clark's Nutcrackers or the montane jays. Because of the excellent piñon pine cone crop in n. Arizona, Pinyon Jays were nesting by Feb. 23 (a month earlier than usual) despite below-normal temperature (RPB).

A Dipper was in the Organ Mts., e. of Las Cruces, Jan. 19 (C. Dimeff, BP); there are few records so far south in New Mexico. Winter Wren (rare anywhere in the Region) showed up in numbers this winter. In Arizona were three in the Tucson area (GG, GM), two near Phoenix (RRJ, RN), and one near Flagstaff (RPB, JH); New Mexico had two at Las Vegas (WH), one at Elephant Butte L. (CAH), and one near Cliff (WB). Bitter Lake N.W.R. produced sightings of Short-billed Marsh Wrens during the winters of 1970-'71 and '71-'72, and did the same this year (DB) — but by late winter, it was believed that 20 or more might be present, which would be remarkable for a species marginal to this Region. The situation should be investigated next year. In addition to the two Brown Thrashers on CBCs, one was below Patagonia L., Feb. 6 (GM).

THRUSHES THROUGH VIREOS — Arizona recorded the usual scattering of Rufous-backed Robins, with two near Patagonia (JM), two at Phoenix (ST, S.

Hedges), one at Tucson (S & SB) and one at Ramsey Canyon (C. Peabody). A Varied Thrush, now considered a rare winter visitor to n. Arizona, was at Flagstaff Feb. 1 (RPB). Western and Mountain Bluebirds were scarce in n. Arizona, but ranged widely over the rest of the Region. Mountain Bluebirds in particular were abundant both in s. Arizona and across New Mexico. The Carlsbad area reported E. Bluebirds for the third consecutive winter; up to 25 there at Rattlesnake Springs in January (JPH, CGS) was an exceptional number. Townsend's Solitaires were scarce in n. Arizona and continued to be abundant in the Upper Sonoran Zones of s. Arizona as they were in the fall. Last autumn's small numbers of Golden-crowned Kinglets continued to be found in the lowlands of s.w. New Mexico and s. Arizona; this was the first such invasion since the winter of 1969-'70.

Sprague's Pipits were found in all four states in the Region; up to seven at Phoenix throughout the period (K.K., m.ob.); two at Rattlesnake Springs, Carlsbad N.P., during Jan. (JPH, CGS); three at Cananea, Son., Feb. 28 (DZ); and one at El Sueco, Chih., Mar. 8 (DZ). All were solitary, the Phoenix birds avoiding Water Pipit flocks in the same fields. Perhaps the species is consistently overlooked throughout the Southwest. An imm. N. Shrike near Elgin, s.e. Ariz., Dec. 15 - Mar. 22 (S. Mills *et al.*) and an adult near Phoenix Jan. 1 (ST) were the first convincing sight records for s. Arizona. The only definite report in New Mexico was one near Springer Feb. 15 (JPH). The Gray Vireo winters regularly in extreme s.w. Arizona, but one near Tucson Dec. 31 (GM) was only the third winter record for the s.e. part of the state.

WARBLERS — As usual, the "winter warbler" situation involved several distinct elements.

Late fall movement: In this Region, the CBCs come too early to sample the true winter populations of insectivores. Striking evidence this season came from the Salt River migrant trap s.w. of Phoenix. There an incredible 14 species of warblers remained through the first week of January, with all the regularly wintering species seen in unprecedented numbers and several rarities found. The number of species and individuals present had declined drastically by mid-January, indicating that this must have been an unusually late movement of fall migrants. Possibly as a residue from this final flight, numbers of Audubon's (Yellow-rumped) Warblers remained higher than usual throughout the winter in s.w. New Mexico and near Gila Bend. Probably to be classed as exceptionally late migrants were a Hermit Warbler near Phoenix Jan. 3 (ST) and two Nashvilles there in December (PN, RN); one Nashville Warbler in Phoenix Feb. 17 (BB) was among the few genuine winter records.

Eastern strays: Last fall, some parts of the West had their greatest season ever for eastern warblers. (See *Am. Birds*, Feb. 1975.) Many birders in s.e. Arizona knew of this at the time, but despite much fieldwork they somehow failed to cash in on the general abundance. Obviously something happened; we don't know what, but some good clues come from the discussion by DeSante *et al.* (*Am. Birds* 29:118, Feb. 1975), which shows how weather patterns could have brought a stream of vagrants at a southwestward diagonal across

the Rockies and Great Basin to c. California. This pattern would have merely grazed the n.w. corner of Arizona, and in fact several vagrants were found there at Kaibab and Pipe Springs, not to mention the enviable assortment at nearby Las Vegas, Nevada. Southern Arizona was outside the mainstream. This consideration puts a different light on records of three eastern warblers which had been recorded less than ten times previously in Arizona: **Palm Warbler** Dec. 6 near Phoenix (ST), **Chestnut-sided Warbler** Dec. 21 - Jan. 6 near Phoenix (ST, m.ob.), and **Prairie Warbler** Dec. 31 - Jan. 5 at Tucson (P. Burr, RN, PN). While we hesitate to assert that these eastern species arrived *from the west*, it seems quite possible that they were stragglers from a vagrancy pattern which passed, in general, to the north and west of Arizona.

Sparse visitors: Several species occurred which, though fairly regular, still merit some mention. Black-and-white Warblers were in three locations near Phoenix between December and March (BB, ST *et al.*). The N. Parula was once considered "casual" in Arizona but increased coverage shows it to be regular. There were four this season: two near Phoenix Dec. 21 - Jan. 7 (KA, SB, SM, RW); one near Florence, Ariz., Mar. 29 (SB, RW); and one at Arivaca Jct., Ariz., Mar. 29-30 (J. Vernon, H. Richard). Probably all were migrants rather than wintering birds. Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warbler records came from s. Arizona and s.e. New Mexico; this form should occur in small numbers throughout the Region. Two Am. Redstarts were near Phoenix Dec. 21 - Jan. 15 (GB, RB, ST *et al.*).

Mystery bird: Past observers wondered why the Ovenbird, with breeding populations directly north (B.C., Alberta) and wintering areas directly south (Sinaloa, Nayarit), should be accidental in Arizona. But it can be thought accidental no longer: the species was recorded at Phoenix for the third winter in a row, and this time *three* were found in separate locations (RN, SM, KA, A. Higgins). Most sightings have been in the cottonwood-willow-saltcedar jungle along the Salt R.; possibly this area has the habitat, and the climate, to qualify as an Ovenbird wintering ground.

Early spring movement: Returning Painted Redstarts appeared in the lowlands more than usual; DZ suggested that the birds might have been displaced by heavy snow in the mountains in March. One at Elephant Butte L., Mar. 23 (CAH), was somewhat east of its normal range in New Mexico.

ICTERIDS — The general proliferation of blackbirds, which seems to be a continent-wide phenomenon, made news in New Mexico this season. A concentration of *over a million each* of Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds roosted in phragmites on the Bitter Lake N.W.R. (DB, J.C. Corrie). JPH commented on increased wintering populations of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds in various parts of the state, and noted that Great-tailed Grackles wintered in several areas which they have invaded only recently. A Com. Grackle at Farmington Mar. 15 (J. Parker, *vide* APN) was the second local record. Scott's Orioles, always rare in winter, included one at a Silver City feeder Jan. 13 to end of period (M. O'Byrne, *vide* DZ) and an aged male, a banded bird, that returned to BH's feeder in Nogales for its eighth winter.

FRINGILLIDS: THE NOGALES INTERPRETATION — In the Southwest, where conditions for plant growth are subject to wild extremes of weather, wintering populations of seed-eaters are mobile — they go where the seeds are in any given year. The CBCs are starting to reveal how widely numbers fluctuate on the local level. As an example, Nogales "had it all" this winter — their CBC recorded better-than-average numbers of nearly all Fringillids; six of them established new local highs. The immediate explanation was that the Nogales area had an excellent seed crop as a result of late summer and early fall rains. This must have accounted for record totals of Blue Grosbeaks, Lark Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows. To show how drastically certain species respond to local conditions: last year, when the seed crop there bombed out, the Nogales CBC had no Lark Buntings, nine Brewer's Sparrows, and 77 Chipping Sparrows; this year, totals for each exceeded 3000.

But the seed crop couldn't explain everything. Two of the Fringillids found in record numbers at Nogales were Lawrence's Goldfinch and Chestnut-collared Longspur; during another good 'sparrow winter,' 1969-'70, both were absent there. This season the goldfinches were superabundant in just three counties of s.c. Arizona, while the longspur invasion covered much of the Southwest. Doubtless both enjoyed the Nogales seed supply; but the abnormal numbers of both species in the Region must have been due at least partly to conditions elsewhere — and of course the two arrive here from opposite directions. A confusing note on the Nogales CBC: in marked contrast to the abundance of migrant Fringillids, the resident Brown Towhees were in low numbers. They were also scarce during the good 'sparrow winter' of 1969-'70; among their better scores have been last year and 1965-'66, both of which were poor for most Fringillids. Perhaps the same weather patterns that produce good seed crops have an adverse effect on nesting Brown Towhees.

GENERAL FINCHES — Two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, always a surprise, were in Tucson mid-December to mid-January (M. Paulsen, DSz). Evening Grosbeaks, which usually winter in small numbers in n. Arizona, went unrecorded there until March (RPB, JH, RRJ). The only New Mexico reports were a few at Farmington and Santa Fe; the only lowland report was one at a Tucson feeder in March. In a winter when mountain birds are mostly absent in the lowlands, it is unusual to find Purple or Cassin's Finches there; so 12 Purples and 6 Cassin's at scattered points in s. Arizona were considered good finds (SD, BH, ST *et al.*). Four Purples at 7100 ft. in the Santa Catalina Mts., Feb. 20 constituted the first highland record for s. Arizona (GM). Cassin's in small numbers were more widely reported in New Mexico, s. to Las Vegas, Cedar Crest, and Silver City. A few Pine Grosbeaks appeared in the Sandia Mts. near Albuquerque, as they have the last two winters; there is a small resident population of this species in the higher mountains of New Mexico. Pine Siskins were notably fewer and less widespread than usual in the Region. Red Crossbills, which were scarce in n. Arizona last winter, were found to be locally abundant this season on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and near Payson, Ariz. (RRJ, SM). Three wan-

dered to Phoenix in Feb. (DSj); in New Mexico the only reports were of a few near Silver City and in the Santa Fe - Española area.

After being virtually absent last winter, Lawrence's Goldfinches swarmed in s.c. Arizona, staging their largest invasion since the winter of 1961-'62. Strangely, New Mexico reported none, although a few trickled east to within miles of the state line at Portal (SS). New Mexico has had a dearth of Lawrence's in recent years; during the 1940s and 50s, there were several invasions that spread across southern New Mexico and into Texas. The erratic wanderings of this bird seem to rival those of the traditional "winter finches" of the Northeastern states, but the goldfinch has received less study.

SPARROWS — Lark Sparrows may winter regularly in s.e. New Mexico, but 40 at Carlsbad N.P., Dec. 14 (K. Elers *et al.*), was a notable concentration. Single Cassin's Sparrows, irregular in winter, were singing in two locations n. of Tucson in early March (S & SB, GM). Tree Sparrows occurred w. to Albuquerque (CAH) and s. to Bitter Lake N.W.R. (MW); the species winters commonly in extreme n.e. New Mexico. This winter there was the usual sprinkling of Harris's Sparrows in the Region; four Golden-crowned Sparrow reports in Arizona were only slightly more than normal; but White-throated Sparrows were far more numerous than usual, records including a remarkable 25 at Rattlesnake Springs, Carlsbad N.P., in January (CGS) and at least 26 at scattered points in Arizona. Fox Sparrows are generally scarce in the Region, but there were three near Glenwood, N. Mex., during the period (*fide* JPH); the ten recorded in Arizona included five in the Mazatzal Mts. the last week in March (GB, RN).

Previously, Swamp Sparrows have been considered uncommon in New Mexico and rare in Arizona, but this winter we were swamped with them. A score or more were seen at scattered localities in New Mexico (JPH, WB); seven were banded in two days n.w. of Tucson (S.M. Russell *et al.*); at least six were found along the effluent channel in s.w. Phoenix (SB, SD *et al.*); and singles were at Patagonia (*fide* BH), Portal (*fide* SS), and Scottsdale, Ariz. (RN). It is interesting to note that this species also appeared in unusual numbers "next door" in Inyo Co., California, last fall. Whether this season's Swamp Sparrows represented an unusual winter, or a general increase in their Southwestern wintering population, remains to be ascertained.

LONGSPURS — As noted last fall, Chestnut-collared Longspurs continued to be abundant on the high-elevation grasslands of s. New Mexico and s.e. Arizona, with flocks numbering in the hundreds in many areas. This general abundance extended at least 150 miles s. into Chihuahua (DZ), and in Sonora a few flocks got as far west as the Gulf of California near Puerto Peñasco (DSj). The less common McCown's Longspur was detected among the flocks at several points in s.w. New Mexico and s.e. Arizona. In an area n.e. of Deming where there were thousands of longspurs in December, the ratio of McCown's was possibly as high as one in six (V. & W. Howe, *fide* DZ). That sounds like a lot of McCown's — but sample

counts from other points are lacking, and the Regional status of the bird is not really known. Careful examination of all longspur flocks would be a most worthwhile winter pastime for Southwestern birders.

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