

THE SEASON WINTER, 1970

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Alabama continues its cold, dry weather. Since at least January 1966 (50 months), we have had at Birmingham only 5 months with average temperature above normal. In 1968 and 1969 only one month, July 1969, was above normal, and barely so, +0.1. The last four years have averaged 3.4° below normal.

Precipitation is a little more difficult to assess because it is more erratic. When a period of near drought is broken by an excessively heavy rainfall, the statement of average precipitation fails to tell the whole story. For instance, the over 7 inches excess precipitation in May 1969 covered the succeeding monthly deficiencies with the story of an annual cumulative excess. If we still had the swamps and the forests to store this water, we would have been in fine shape. But we have channelized streams to make water run off faster, installed what may well be excessive pavement, and done other things to dry out our land. Even some of our forests marked for watershed protection are clear-cut, planted to a crop of pines, and lie drying out in the sun for 5 to 10 years before they can again soak up sufficient water effectively.

For the whole state, January 1970 shows an approximate average of -9.0 degrees departure from normal temperature and -2.5 inches in precipitation—both about half of normal (Birmingham, -8.6 degrees and -2.56 inches). January 9 was the coldest day of the winter, Valley Head had -6 degrees, Birmingham 5 degrees and the highest minimum was 17 degrees at Fairhope, Mobile, and Coden. Although no records were broken because we had colder periods in recent winters, the length of the freezing periods was unusual. These periods are, in my opinion, critical to the survival of many of our half-hardy wintering species that must have above freezing temperatures for effective feeding. These are mainly insectivores who can feed, probably inefficiently, on fruits and grains for brief periods. Three North Alabama stations reported below freezing temperatures for 5 consecutive days, and even in Montgomery this period lasted 88 hours. Birmingham had 20 days (including 1 through 11 Jan) with minimum temperatures below freezing, and 4 days (including 7-8-9 Jan) with the maximum temperature below freezing!

February was similar to January but much less severe. Birmingham averaged -4.2 degrees and -2.93 inches from normal temperature and precipitation. The lowest here was 11 degrees on the 4th, and 16 days had freezing lows. Days without fog, smoke, or haze in Birmingham—usually all three—were

9 in January and 6 in February. One saving feature, our "Southern Sun" produced at Birmingham a January max. of 72 degrees on the 27th, and a February max. of 70 degrees on the 18th, and 11 days in February with a max. over 60 degrees!

In spite of the severe weather, the birds seem to survive quite well, for it appears to be the abundance of food and the availability of proper habitat that have more bearing on the survival of most bird species. Ever more noticeable are the activities of man affecting the lives of birds—his agriculture, his pollution, his construction, his selfishness—and they are undoubtedly responsible for more variations in numerical abundance of birds than all the vagaries of weather.

Loons, Pelicanlike birds—Com Loons were reported common again in the Tennessee Valley (TZA) and on the Gulf Coast where 18 were counted at Gulf Shores on 30 Jan (RWS). White Pelicans noted migrating in early March were 20 on Dauphin Island on the 6th (LRT) and 150 at Fort Morgan on the 19th (LEG & WY). A few Brown Pelicans lingered through the winter near Dauphin, for instance 4 on 29 Jan (LRT). Observations of large numbers of Gannets this winter culminated in a highest-ever 200 on 30 Jan in the vicinity of Gulf Shores (RWS).

Hérons—The largest ever known winter concentration of Great Blue Herons was that of 448 at Eufaula Refuge on 22 Dec (JLDu et al). A Green Héron lingered to at least 14 Dec at Dog R., Mobile (LMcK); another was in Birmingham on 27 Dec (NGB & CL) for the first inland winter record. The second-week-in-March arrival of the Cattle Egret on the Gulf Coast was again reported—one on Dauphin on the 13th (LRT) and 6-8 near Daphne on the 14th (L&HC, T&AF). A peak of 242 Com Egrets was counted at Mobile on 20 Dec (JLD).

Swan, Geese—At Wheeler Refuge, geese peaked late—on 21 Jan—with 19,500 Canadas and 1500 Blues and Snows; a record 1538 geese were banded (TZA). Seven Whistling Swans, apparently a family group with adults and immatures, were present at Redstone Arsenal from 14 Nov through 12 Dec (JG); the species has now been reported every winter since 1964 and this is the largest number. A BARNACLE GOOSE was seen well on 20 Dec in Limestone Bay, Wheeler Refuge (JNC, KTK, et al). This first for Alabama is not surprising considering several recent East Tennessee records; nor is it

surprising that the bird was never spotted again for it was with thousands of its congener, the Canada Goose. The White-fronted Goose, another waterfowl reported annually in Alabama since 1964, was recorded this year on both sides of the state—Livingston about 1 Feb, a small flock evidently wandering from Noxubee N W Refuge, Miss. in extreme cold weather (fide DTR); and Eufaula Refuge, a flock of 8 from 2 to 22 Feb (GS).

Ducks—A BAHAMA DUCK showed up at a pond near Magnolia Springs on 28 February and remained at least through 1 April; a first for Alabama, the bird has been photographed in color (PFC). As with several other recent waterfowl records, this bird could be an escape; nevertheless its beauty, the interest it generates, and its impact on the local avifauna are virtually the same as a bona fide wild bird. Pintail and Am. Widgeon were reported more numerous at Wheeler Refuge (TZA) and in the Chattahoochee Valley (LAW). Redheads were reported scarce at Wheeler (TZA) and Birmingham (TAI) and Buffleheads at those two places plus the Coast (MAG). One thousand Com Goldeneye were reported from Eufaula Refuge on 22 Dec (JLDu). The second Harlequin Duck for Alabama was at the opposite end of the state, one shot near Decatur on 29 Dec (fide JG). Three to four White-winged Scoters were on Lake Oliver (near Phenix City) 31 Jan to 8 Feb (LAW).

Hawks—A Red-tailed Hawk, identified as the krideri race, at Wheeler Refuge on 20 Dec (JNC, RMB, WD) seems to be the first of this race for the Tennessee Valley. A belatedly reported Rough-legged Hawk at Wheeler Refuge on 23 Nov (JP, RM, ENW) is the second for November 1969. An adult Golden Eagle was seen at Sumter Farms near Geiger on 12 Jan (RWS). Two, possibly three, immature Bald Eagles were present at Wheeler Refuge from 18 Dec to 28 Jan (TZA, MLB, et al) and one immature was seen on 28 March at Gordon apparently migrating up the Chattahoochee Valley (JMI). Four Peregrines were reported this January, one on the 24th at East Lake, Birmingham (GC); one on the 29th at Atmore (RWS); and two at Fort Morgan on the 30th (RWS).

Turkey, Rail—A drove of 9 Turkeys was flushed in the Bankhead Forest near Bee Branch on 31 Jan (RDB & AKB). The Virginia Rail remained at Paradise Lake, near Birmingham, at least through 15 Feb (KTK et al.).

Shorebirds—March concentrations of Golden Plover were 100 + on the 14th at Magnolia Springs (PFC and Pensacola group); and 75 on the 21 st at Lakeland Farm near Marion (HHK, JNC, RDK, RJK); 4 more were at Birmingham on the 29th (KTK). A Spotted Sandpiper at Open Pond, Covington Co., on 13 Dec, 31 Jan, and 1 Feb (EGR and many) indicates the species wintered locally. Another at Bartlett's Ferry Dam on the Chattahoochee: R. on 18 Jan (JM) was at the same spot where one wintered last year. We now know of at least 9 records of this sandpiper inland in winter. A Solitary Sandpiper on 21 Feb at Loxley (CLK et al.) is by 6 days our earliest ever for the state. Another February record, many early March records in other years, plus local surveillance indicate this is a bona fide arrival rather than a wintering bird. The largest number of Greater Yellowlegs noted in winter in the Tennessee Valley was that of 14 at Wheeler Refuge on 19 Dec (MLB). A flock of 8 Knots on 31 Jan on Dauphin (LRT) points up the fact that we have no February records for the species. First Pectoral Sandpipers this year were 2 on 12 Mar at the Birmingham Airport (GBC, GC, KTK) and one on 14 Mar on the coast at Belforest (CLK et al.). Apparently the Least Sandpiper is not as rare in March as supposed; 2 were at Wheeler Refuge on 8 Mar (MLB & ROH) and 18 at the Birmingham Airport on 12 Mar (KTK, GBC, GC). Two Dunlins on 21 and 28 March at Marion Fish Hatchery (JNC, HHK and many) are our only known inland birds in spring. A Short-billed Dowitcher at Wheeler Refuge on 23 Nov (JP, RM, ENW) is the latest ever inland by a week. A Marbled Godwit on Dauphin on 28 Feb (JLD, REH et al.) is the first state winter record since 1956—the earliest ever migrant is 27 Mar.).

Terns—Unique inland in winter were a Forster's Tern on 12 Dec on the Chattahoochee R. just above Columbus (LAW) and a Caspian Tern on 22 Dec at Eufaula Refuge (JLDu).

Whip-poor-will, Hummingbird—A Whip-poor-will in the Bankhead Forest on 7 March (JDM) is by 6 days the earliest ever for the breeding range. Two Ruby-throated Hummingbirds on 10 Dec at Fairhope possibly wintered locally. Assumed migrants were one on Dauphin on 8 March (LPA & LRT), by one day earliest ever for the state; and another on 23 Mar in Birmingham (MAS), by 2 days earliest ever for the Mt. Region.

Woodpeckers—The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was especially plentiful

this winter at least around Birmingham where a record 38 was counted on 27 Dec (B.A.S.) The Red-cockaded Woodpecker was noted this winter in 2 places not usually checked by AOS members—one in the Bankhead Forest near Bee Branch on 6 Dec (TAI and many) and 3 on 31 Jan at Oakwood Lodge, Covington Co. (A.O.S.); both areas in National Forest.

Lark, Swallows, Crow—The total of 526 Horned Larks at Jacksonville on 23 Dec (REA) is the highest count for the species outside the Tennessee Valley. The first reported Rough-winged Swallow for the Birmingham area was on 11 March at Grant's Mill (GBC & GC). The earliest ever Barn Swallow for Alabama by 5 days was one at Fort Morgan on 10 March (LEG & WY); and 2 at Marion Fish Hatchery on 21 March (JNC, HHK, et al.) are earliest ever for the Upper Coastal Plain. Purple Martins were first noted on the coast on 25 Jan, 5 birds on Bear Fork Rd (DW) and 26 Jan, 2 at Spring Hill (MWG); first noted in Birmingham on 28 Feb (JRB). Forty Fish Crows were noted at Lake Oliver on 10 March (LAW).

Nuthatch, Robin, Waxwing, Vireo—Red-breasted Nuthatches were common and widespread throughout and are still present. Between 10,000 and 15,000 Robins, feeding mainly on hackberries, remained in the western section of Birmingham from about 15 Dec to 1 Feb. They were accompanied by at least 5000 Cedar Waxwings (TAI et al.). Solitary Vireos were reported common around Mobile by at least 6 observers (MAG et al.).

Warblers—The first reported migrant Black-and-whites were 10 on Dauphin on 13 March (MEM & REH). First-noted Prothonotaries were at Magnolia Springs on 16 Mar (PFC) and on the Cahaba R. near Birmingham on 28 Mar (GM). Orange-crowns, reported more numerous than usual this winter near Mobile (MAG), seem to have survived well even as far north as Birmingham where they were still noted on 26 Feb (TAI) and 27 Feb (AM & JL), 2 widely-scattered birds.

Blackbirds—The Baltimore Oriole continues well distributed at feeders in winter in Alabama—this year one was at Dothan 12-13 Feb (MLH). Blackbirds were again in the news this winter and control work in Cherokee County was well publicized. Although Birmingham seldom has very high concentrations because Jefferson County has little agriculture, a roost at Mineral Springs during most of January was estimated to hold 100,000 birds, mainly grackles, Starlings, and cowbirds (TAI, JDM & JMI). The birds, roosting in young pines,

took advantage of the prohibition of matches and firearms inside the explosives plant. No less than 250 Brewer's Blackbirds were still present on 21 Mar at Lakeland Farm near Marion (JNC, HHK, RJK, RDK), the latest ever inland record.

Finches—Dickcissels are being recorded in winter quite regularly on the coast—this January in Baldwin County on the 4th (LRT) and 21st (LMcK) and at Spring Hill 24th to 29th (SCH). Inland, a male at a Birmingham feeder on 18 Jan (HHK) is our farthest north winter record. It appears that Evening Grosbeaks may become as regular as Pine Siskins or even Purple Finches in winter in Alabama. Although establishing an earliest ever arrival date of 2 Nov (See Fall report) the species built up slowly and only 16 (by 3 parties) were recorded on the Birmingham Christmas Count. Later, they visited at least 6 feeders and a maximum of 63 was counted on the Cahaba Valley Rd. just south of Birmingham on 15 Feb (KTK). Considerable movement takes place in April and the Birmingham Spring Count on the 11th listed 116 birds by 8 of 10 parties. Away from Birmingham, birds were noted in the Bankhead Forest regularly December through March (HHW, TAI, JDM) with a maximum of 15 near Bee Branch in late February (JDM); at Horseshoe Bend, about 12 on 21 Feb (B.A.S.); at Guntersville, about 20 on 4 April (ELG). Purple Finches were numerous even near the coast where a peak of 24 was recorded in January at Spring Hill (MAG). Pine Siskins were widespread northward but concentrated in a few favored places southward, such as 300 in Mobile in January (TF). Early in the season the birds swarmed with goldfinches on sweetgum; in the Bankhead Forest it was mostly hemlock but also sourwood. On 2 Jan. near Bee Branch, 410 were closely estimated in Bankhead hemlocks (TAI et al.). In Midfield near Birmingham about 400 visited culled pecan meats from 15 to 31 March (TAI). On most lists this winter the Pine Siskin outnumbered the Purple Finch. Pine Siskins were still in Baldwin County on 14 Mar—5 at Silverhill (CLK et al.) and in the Tennessee Valley with few natural pines and few siskin records, the species was noted quite often this winter especially around Wheeler Refuge (TZA). Red Crossbills were seen in the Bankhead Forest on Brazier Creek Road, one on 13 Feb (TAI) and 7 on 21 March, (TAI & DCH); in Birmingham on 11 Mar one was killed and eaten by a female Sparrow Hawk and its head was retrieved as the only preserved specimen of the species for Alabama (MFP). Lapland Longspurs, regular but not often recorded in Alabama in winter, were seen at Wheeler Refuge, 7 on 20 Dec (JNC et al.)

Observers—(Local compilers in capitals)—Alabama Ornithological Society, Richard E. Ambrose, Lois P Archer, THOMAS Z ATKESON, J Russell Bailey, Naomi G Banks, Andrew K Bates, Raymond D Bates, Richard M Bays, Michael L Bierly, Birmingham Audubon Society, Greg Carlisle, G Bradley Carlisle, Jack N Carusos, P Fairly Chandler, Lloyd & Helen Clayton, Wallace Dreyfoos, Rev J L Dorn, Julian L Dusi, Tony Friedhoff, Ted & Amy Furnans, MARY A GAILLARD, M Wilson Gaillard, Joseph Gardjos, Lyman E Goodnight, Emmy Lou Grimley, Sybil C Hanks, Marion L Hanahan, R O Harshaw, RE (Tuck) Hayward, Dan C Holliman, John M Imhof, Thomas A Imhof, CURTIS L KINGSBERY, Helen H Kittinger, RICKY J KITTINGER, Ronnie D Kittinger, Kenneth T Knight, Christine Leake, John Lester, Robert Mann, James D Manasco, George Maynard, Louise McKinstry, Ann Miller, James Miller, Margaret E Miller, John Padgett, M F Prather, Elberta G Reid, David T Rogers, Gus Savile, Mary Alice Skelton, Robert W Skinner, Lib R Toenes, Emmett N Waldrep, L A WELLS, D Wyrosdick, Harriett H Wright, William Young.

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MIGRATORY BIRD KILL IN SHELBY COUNTY, ALABAMA

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An estimated 500 migratory birds comprising 25 species were killed or injured on top of Oak Mountain in Shelby County, Alabama during the night of October 14, 1969. The cause of death was attributed to an attraction of the birds to the mercury vapor lights surrounding a four-acre comfort station on U.S. Highway 280 approximately 20 miles southeast of Birmingham.

The caretaker of the comfort station contacted Conservation Officer Doyle C. Wood who investigated the area and immediately relayed the information to the Game and Fish Office in Montgomery. The author was requested to conduct an investigation as to what killed the birds. Upon my arrival the caretaker produced a wheelbarrow half full of dead birds that he had picked up that morning. Numerous other birds were found hopping about with apparent broken wings.

Four radio towers are located in a line about 250 yards apart on top of this mountain with the nearest tower located about 50 yards from the edge of the comfort station. It was first thought that the birds were "tower casualties" however, of the three towers visited only one dead bird was found. Since the dead and crippled birds were found in the vicinity of the lighted area it was obvious that the kill occurred only on the grounds of the comfort station. A cyclone-type fence, a few trees and light poles were located in this area. Undoubtedly, fog caused the birds to fly into these obstructions although the caretaker was not present during the night hours and could not verify as to whether or not the night was foggy.

A total of 280 birds were picked up around the fence, trees and light poles and many others could have been recovered if time had permitted. It is felt that a minimum of 500 birds were killed or injured during the night. A White-eyed Vireo was found impaled on a broken twig of a pine tree within the lighted area. The twig was pointed in a northerly direction which added emphasis to the theory that the birds were migrating and were killed in the small well-lighted four acre area.