

January

January is the month when it all starts over again – the year list, COMAL 2004, just seeing what birds are around. The Christmas Counts are done. The holiday festivities are finished. School and work have resumed. It's time to take a new look at everything – including the birds.

January is, in one sense, the depth of winter. The coldest cold snap usually comes in January. Its mean temperature is the lowest of any month of the year. But in another sense, January is the very earliest part of spring. The days are now getting longer. Great Horned Owls are courting. Their duets of deep hooting can be heard on any clear, still night. By the end of the month, the female will be laying her eggs. If the lakes are open, drake American Goldeneyes are attracting mates with strange head bobbing motions. It is all the beginning of a process of preparing for longer, warmer days ahead. The young Great Horned Owls will be at their largest and hungriest in April and May, when food is most abundant. By the time the American Goldeneye move north in late February, the pair bond will be cemented.

Birds move both north and south in January. A few birds – especially water birds – are still being forced south by freeze-ups. Stopover refuges like Squaw Creek and Swan Lake freeze up, usually in early or mid-December, and the geese move on. Bald Eagles, which have feasted there on crippled geese, exhaust that temporary bonanza and range further south along the open rivers and to the open lakes in search of their usual food, fish. Some northern wanderers, like Snow Buntings and Common Redpolls, which reach the southern extremities of their ranges in Missouri, often disappear soon after they are discovered. Seemingly, they realize that they have come too far and quickly retreat back north.

Many birds just move around in January. This is especially true of some of the irruptive species, like Pine Siskins and Red Crossbills. Unless held by bird feeders, they clean out the natural food in one location. Then they may move to another.

A birder has to decide what he or she wants to do with January. What is the objective? Rarities? Maximum progress on the year list? Just observing the process of seasonal change? Whatever the objective, a lot will depend upon the weather. A totally-frozen lake will usually have a small hole of open water in it somewhere in which a few ducks and geese are still holding out. But that is all you are likely to find there. Some January birding opportunities may turn on whether snowy and/or icy roads block access to favorite birding spots.

Birders who want to find rarities and/or to maximize the new year list, usually concentrate on gulls in January. They look for them where there is open water, as at Smithville Lake, REDA or Stockton Lake. January is usually the best month to find a Glaucous or Thayer's Gull, or perhaps something even more rare like a Great Black-backed, Iceland, California or Lesser Black-backed Gull. Then there are the ultra-rare gulls, like Ross', Mew, Glaucous-winged, Slaty-backed, Little and Black-headed Gull, plus Black-legged Kittiwake, all of which have shown up in Missouri in January.

REDA, by the Mississippi near St. Louis, has been the best location for finding rare gulls over the years, but other locations should not be overlooked. One year, both a Little Gull and a Black-

headed Gull wintered at Gravois Mills. Black-legged Kittiwakes have appeared at Lake Jacomo in Jackson County a couple of times, and I once saw one at Smithville Lake. I am sure that rare gulls would also be reported regularly from Truman Lake, Stockton Lake, Table Rock Lake and Bull Shoals Lake if they were birded more often.

The usual way to look for rare gulls is to scope a flock of loafing gulls. Most large lakes have a sand bar or point which collects them. Another way to find a rare gull is to watch the evening flight at a large lake, where a large flock of gulls roosts regularly at night. (This can be frustrating because many gulls continue to arrive after it has become too dark to identify them). I am not aware of any landfills that harbor large numbers of gulls in Missouri. If any exists, it would be a wonderful place to look for rare gulls.

The very best time to find gulls is when the water is partly frozen and partly open. Those conditions usually mean that gulls are being driven south by complete freeze-ups to the north or that they are taking advantage of a thaw to return north again. Be especially keen to scope any flocks of gulls that are loafing on ice.

In addition to being the month to find rare gulls, January is one of the best months for western strays, like Varied Thrush, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire or Golden-crowned Sparrow. These zooties usually show up at somebody's feeder or in a grove of evergreens. It is good to check evergreen groves in January. In addition to Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatches and the like, they often hold owls and some times produce western strays. If they have an active cone crop, they may yield crossbills.

February is the best month to search for owls, but January is nearly as good. Likewise, it is a good month for hawks like Rough-legged, Prairie Falcon and, in a winter like this one, Northern Goshawks.

January is one of the most rewarding months in which to bird. Not only is every new species an addition to the Year List, many rarities show up in January.

Bob Fisher