

Many people think of the winter season on Long Island as a time when bird life has fled to warmer climes, leaving the island's wild places to a few, hardy survivors. In the case of dozens of species of migratory songbirds this perception is true. Few realize, however, that during this same time the island's bird life is supplemented by an influx of several species from more northerly regions. These birds range from the four-inch pine siskin to the rough-legged hawk with its five-foot wingspan; from the ubiquitous white-throated sparrow to the rare gyrfalcon.

Some of these birds, referred to as irruptive species, move south not to leave the bitter cold behind (being superbly insulated they can tolerate the cold), but to find a reliable food supply. If there is an adequate food supply, many irruptive species will not leave their northern haunts regardless of how cold it is. These species, including several owls, hawks, and winter finches, are not reliable on Long Island every winter. Other winter visitors turn up routinely here each winter.

The snowy owl is probably the most famous example of an irruptive species. When the owl's food supply of various species of lemmings and voles drops (most of these species have a multiyear cycle which swings from abundance to scarcity), the birds are forced to move south. This is particularly true for the immature "hatch year" birds (born earlier that year) that lack hunting experience.

With its striking white plumage and bright yellow eyes, this winter visitor from the north is one of the most impressive birds seen on Long Island, or, for that matter, anywhere in the world. One does not soon forget a view of a snowy owl sitting on the crest of a sand dune staring intently back with its piercing yellow eyes.

The number of snowy owls reported each winter on the Island varies from as few as three or four to as many as a dozen. Most of the birds are immature, identified by the numerous, black, crescent-shaped fleck marks scattered throughout the bird's plumage. Adult females are lighter but still have some flecking, and adult males, the rarest of the three, are virtually snow-white. These owls prefer open, treeless areas that are similar to their tundra breeding grounds.

The gyrfalcon and rough-legged hawk, raptors from the far north, routinely appear on Long Island during the winter, although in fewer numbers than the snowy owl. The gyrfalcon comes in several color-forms or morphs—white, gray, and black (or dark). Like the snowy owl it frequents open, windswept habitat.

The rough-legged hawk, so named because of the abundance of feathers that cover its legs, also exists in color-morphs: a light and a dark phase. It displays a characteristic hovering flight when hunting over fields.

A number of finches are also classified as irruptive. These include the common redpoll, pine siskin, red- and white-winged crossbills, and the evening grosbeak. Of these species, the evening grosbeak is the only one that will routinely feed at a backyard feeding station, and lucky is the homeowner who hosts a flock of these colorful black, white, and yellow birds.

The yellow-rumped warbler, so named because of its diagnostic lemon-yellow rump patch, is one of the more common winter visitors along barrier beaches. The splash of yellow it displays when flitting about provides an eye-catching contrast to the subdued tones of the winter coastal landscape. The yellow-rumped is common here because its primary winter food source, the waxy bayberry of bayberry candle fame, is abundant in coastal areas. This berry-eating habit is unusual among insect-eating warblers and is why the yellow-rumped can overwinter on Long Island and throughout the Northeast, while other warblers cannot. It is also a common spring and fall migrant, so keep it in mind when exploring the places described in Chapters 10 and 28.

The purple sandpiper and the harlequin duck, one a shorebird, the other a waterfowl species, share a fondness for the same type of overwintering habitat: rocky jetties and breakwaters. The harlequin duck is unmistakable with its rust-colored side, purple body and odd-shaped patches and dots. It prefers rough water, just the kind you find adjacent to jetties. Purple sandpipers play it a bit safer, preferring to stay on the rocks of the jetties where they scurry about in search of food brought in by the overwashing waves.

This chapter would be incomplete if we failed to mention the white-throated sparrow which breeds across the lower half of Canada and the northern United States. The white-throated is currently an abundant winter visitor, often frequenting bird feeders, but with established breeding populations as close as the Catskills, it may become a confirmed breeder on Long Island in the near future.



40-1. Snowy owls are common most winters at Long Island's coastal beaches (L).
40-2. A purple sandpiper, a common winter visitor to rock jetties and groins (R).

Almost any bramble or thicket will have overwintering sparrows which betray their presence with a penetrating “*tseet! tseet!*” call.

Where: The SNOWY OWL prefers open country and is most commonly reported from the south shore barrier beach. Owls are reliably reported from Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Floyd Bennett Field, Jones Beach and Robert Moses State Parks, Cedar and Overlook Beaches in Babylon, and Smith Point County Park. Snowy owls are also reported from Shinnecock East and West County Parks (the parks straddling the Shinnecock Canal) and from Shinnecock West County Park west along Dune Road for approximately three miles. The GYRFALCON and ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK also prefer open treeless areas and can be seen along the barrier beach. The rough-legged also can be seen hunting on occasion in large open fields somewhat inland from the coast.

The winter FINCHES are highly irregular in their movements and are difficult to find with predictability. CROSSBILLS and PINE SISKINS prefer the cones of evergreen trees, so groves of these trees can sometimes prove fruitful. EVENING GROSBEAKS often appear at backyard bird feeding stations, while REDPOLLS prefer overgrown fields and can be found along their edges. The YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER can be seen at Jones Beach and Robert Moses State Parks, the Tobay

Exploring the Other Island

Sanctuary east of Jones Beach, and other public parks on the barrier beaches and along the south shore mainland.

The PURPLE SANDPIPER and HARLEQUIN DUCK almost always associate with rock jetties. The jetties along each side of the inlets of the south shore bays such as Jones Inlet (particularly the Point Lookout side), Moriches Inlet, and Shinnecock Inlet are a good bet to see these species.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROWS are prevalent in winter and can be seen in overgrown fields and thickets in virtually every park mentioned in the book.

When: These winter visitors arrive by mid-November and depart usually by mid- to late March.