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Bird Records During the Past Winter, 1916-1917, in Northwestern Iowa

T. C. Stephens
Morningside College

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BIRD RECORDS DURING THE PAST WINTER, 1916 - 1917,
IN NORTHWESTERN IOWA.

T. C. STEPHENS.

The winter of 1916-1917 has shown a number of uncommon things concerning the avifauna of the region under consideration, of which Sioux City is the central station. The notes will be presented in the form of an annotated list of the birds found, but account will not be taken of a number of late migrating species which were seen within the limits of time hereinafter adopted, such, for example, as the Pipit, and others. Winter visitors and summer stragglers only will be listed.

Some writers regard November, December, January and February as the winter months, and confine their winter records to such a period. However, there is very good ground for opening the books of the ornithological winter with the first arrival of the winter visitors from the north, and continuing this season until the same birds finally depart in the spring. Then our season will be based, not so much upon the calendar, as upon the actual movement of the birds whose habits we may wish to study. Upon such a basis our records may include October and March, and thus cover fully half of the year. The following account will cover this period. Little need be said about the topography of the region. The Missouri valley is an important highway of migration for the birds of passage. Whether it serves in such a way for the movement of our winter visitors, probably has not been determined. The Missouri valley is bordered on both sides by rather high "bluffs," which are cut at frequent intervals by ravines and gullies. These sheltered depressions are usually more or less wooded, and furnish cover and food for many of the winter birds. In some localities also on the river bottoms there are patches of rather heavy timber, which are identical with the ravine woodland insofar as they form a bird habitat.

The open fields and prairies also form a habitat for certain winter species. There seems to be little difference in the distribution of the winter birds in the uplands and lowlands.

The terms *woodland* and *prairie* may be used here to designate these two general winter habitats. The prairie habitat might very properly be subdivided to distinguish the habitat of the Horned Lark, which requires no shelter, from that of the Tree Sparrow, Junco, etc., which do require some low cover. So we may distinguish the Field, or Meadow, habitat, and the Fence row, or Weed thicket.

Some of the woodland birds seem to be confined to the dense woods because of their shy and timid natures, while others are not so limited by temperament, and will be found among trees more sparsely located. There may be some slight distinction here in habitat grouping, but I suspect that the chief factor would be a temperamental one, and will not attempt to carry it out.

The following listing shows the usual winter habitat of the birds of our list:

In the Woodland: Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Cardinal, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Flicker, Brown Creeper, Bluejay, Golden-crowned Kinglet, the Crossbills, the Waxwings.

In the Fence rows and Weed Thickets: Tree Sparrow, Slate-colored Junco, Song Sparrow, Pine Siskin, Redpoll, Goldfinch.

In the open Field: Prairie Horned Lark, Short-eared Owl.

The particularly uncommon occurrences for the Sioux City territory might be summarized as follows: the flight of Goshawks, the fall abundance of Red-breasted Nuthatches, and the great flocks of Redpolls. In addition the winter records of the Golden-crowned Kinglet, Towhee, Carolina Wren, Red Crossbills and large numbers of Cedar Waxwings, are noteworthy.

That the occurrence of certain species in large numbers was not purely a local matter is indicated in the following notes communicated by Prof. M. H. Swenk, of the University of Nebraska, at Lincoln: "The flight of Goshawks reached all over Nebraska (I have over a dozen records) as well as parts of Kansas, Missouri, Iowa and South Dakota. About New Year's Redpolls were more numerous about Lincoln than I have ever seen them before—literally thousands of them in flocks on New Year's day. Red-breasted Nuthatches also have been unusually numerous and we have more records for this winter than for all years previously. Crossbills and Pine Siskins have been un-

commonly numerous and the latter bird has been breeding commonly about Lincoln during the past few weeks. Several nests have been found, two with full sets of eggs. The Golden-crowned Kinglet has been wintering with us this year. No Evening Grosbeaks or Pine Grosbeaks have been noted, but the Bohemian Waxwing has been seen."

It may be well also to note the absence of certain species. The Snowy Owl, for instance, in former years was received by Mr. Anderson for mounting in considerable numbers. This winter he did not receive any. Snowflakes and Longspurs have never been recorded here. Evening Grosbeaks have been reported here in some winters on good authority, but not during 1916-1917. The Northern Shrike was not seen, and it seldom is found in this locality. So far as I know the Bob-white was not seen here during this winter, though it probably did winter with us. The absence of records, however, tells its own story. Purple Finches have never been recorded here. No Magpie records were obtained in this season.

For eight years without intermission a Christmas Day bird census has been taken in this locality, and the results have been published in *Bird-Lore*. All of these reports have been made by Walter W. Bennett, although companions have been with him usually. A tabulation of these reports covering eight winter seasons is of interest and is here given. The totals in the right hand column give a very fair idea of the relative abundance of the different species, while the regularity of occurrence may be judged by the frequency of enumeration in the vertical column. The number of Tree Sparrows noted in 1909 and 1910 is probably somewhat exaggerated, though there can be little doubt that this species properly heads the list at this season.

THE BIRD-LORE CENSUS.

	10th 1909	11th 1910	12th 1911	13th 1912	14th 1913	15th 1914	16th 1915	17th 1916	Total
1. Tree Sparrow.....	200	400	30	30	30	15	30	150	885
2. Crow.....	13	100	15	50	40	5	15	0	238
3. Chickadee.....	19	30	12	25	10	6	18	25	145
4. Slate-colored Junco.....	7	15	0	25	2	10	16	60	135
5. White-breasted Nuthatch.....	1	5	5	3	4	4	10	9	41
6. Downy Woodpecker.....	0	10	2	4	5	2	12	1	36
7. Pine Siskin.....		4							27
8. Brown Creeper.....	2	8	5	2	2	1	3	2	25
9. Prairie Horned Lark.....		5	8		2	7		1	23
10. Hairy Woodpecker.....		3	1	6	2	1	4	3	20
11. Redpoll.....		6							12
12. Goldfinch.....		1			2		12		15
13. Prairie Chicken.....			12						12
14. Flicker.....	6	2		2					10
15. Bluejay.....	2	3	2		3				10
16. Cardinal.....						2		6	8
17. Red-tailed Hawk.....				2			1	1	4
18. Bluebird.....								4	4
19. Magpie.....							2		2
20. Screech Owl.....		1					1		2
21. Northern Shrike.....			1						1
22. Great Horned Owl.....					1				1
23. Snowy Owl.....	1								1
24. Winter Wren.....					1				1
25. Goshawk.....								1	1
26. Golden-crowned Kinglet.....								1	1

No attempt will be made to relate the bird life of the past winter to any set of weather conditions. While such a relationship no doubt existed, one would need to have access to very complete and detailed weather records, and the problem would then consume a great amount of time. In a general way, however, it may be recalled that the winter was a long and continuous one, with very few warm spells. Late in December there was a slight thaw which melted the snow, only to be frozen again into a solid sheet of ice which then remained on the ground for at least a couple of months. It may be interesting to note that the northern Indians early in the winter predicted a mild season, and later on some of the South Dakota farmers joined in this prophecy on the basis of seeing musk rats migrating from one pond to another in the winter.

There follows a list of the birds found during the past winter with some field observations.

1. Goshawk. *Astur a. atricapillus*. One of the most noteworthy occurrences in the winter bird life was the flight of Goshawks. Nearly all of the records mentioned here were obtained through Mr. A. J. Anderson, taxidermist, who receives specimens from a considerable radius of territory. In all of his previous experience, covering nearly twenty years, Mr. Anderson received only two specimens of the Goshawk, both in 1907, and one from Woodbury county, the other from an unknown source. Following are the data of the specimens reported to me by Mr. Anderson for the winter of 1916-1917:

(a) A male which had been shot by a farmer near Badger Lake (Monona county), on October 4, because it had been "robbing the chicken yard" for some time. Now in the Anderson collection.

(b) October 8. Field record. A. J. Anderson saw an adult about a mile above the Stony Point on the Big Sioux.

(c) October 15. A female, locality unknown, but believed to have come from Ponca, Nebraska. Mounted for a customer.

(d) October 16. Field record. Mr. Anderson saw a Goshawk on this date near the mouth of the Big Sioux river, on the Iowa side.

(e) October 27. A male killed near Conway's at Riverside Park, Woodbury county. Mounted and retained in the Anderson collection.

(f) October 29. A male from Le Mars, Plymouth county. Length 21.75 inches. This seems to be an immature bird, showing two or three cordate markings on the thighs. There is also some rufous color in the dorsal plumage. Mounted for O. W. Remer, of Le Mars.

(g) November 17. An immature specimen sent to Mr. Anderson from Freeborn, Minnesota. Length 22 inches. Sex not distinguishable. Much brown in dorsal plumage. Tarsi dull yellow-green, yellow predominating. Iris is vermilion, but when the eyeball is fully distended the apparent shade is more nearly a carmine.

All five of the collected specimens have a fairly distinct broad white line over the eye, and a more or less irregular white patch on the nape. The general shade of color on the back was about the same in all adults, viz., plumbeus, tending to bluish, without any blackish. Each specimen was carefully compared with the

description in Ridgway's Manual, and other authorities, and we concluded that none of them could properly be referred to the subspecies *striatulus*.

2. Red-tailed Hawk. *Buteo b. borealis*. This large hawk was seen in Stone Park by different observers on December 25 and 26. I believe it often remains in this locality throughout the winter.

3. Golden Eagle. *Aquila chrysaetos*. Six specimens of this eagle were received by Mr. Anderson for mounting, as follows:

(a) October 22, 1916. One from Nacora, Nebraska.

(b) October 29, 1916. One from Waukee, Iowa.

(c) November 10, 1916. One from an unknown point in South Dakota.

(d) December 2, 1916. A male from Chamberlain, South Dakota.

(e) December 6, 1916. One from Orchard, Nebraska.

(f) December 15, 1916. A female killed at Norman (or Gorman), Nebraska.

4. Short-eared Owl. *Asio flammeus*. One was noted in the South Ravine on January 28, 1917 (Eiffert) and a pair were seen in the same locality on February 24 by several observers.

5. Screech Owl. *Otus a. asio*. A common winter resident. This winter it occupied an artificial nesting box on the premises of Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Currier, and was frequently observed by members of the Bird Club. W. R. Griffith also saw another specimen in Peter's Park on December 29.

6. Hairy Woodpecker. *Dryobates v. villosus*. Not as numerous as the Downy, but is regularly found in certain localities. It is usually very wary, and not so easy to see for that reason. Specimens have not been taken, and the status of *leucomelas* is uncertain.

7. Downy Woodpecker. *Dryobates pubescens medianus*. This is one of the most generally distributed woodland birds of the winter season, and seems to be able to withstand the severest weather. Present this winter in about the usual number.

8. Northern Flicker. *Colaptes auratus luteus*. This is not a common winter species. Three were seen on January 7, in different localities (Mr. Allen, Mrs. Bailey). It was seen on three other dates in January by other observers. On February

13 Mr. A. J. Anderson saw four Flickers in the possession of a squatter, who had shot them along the Missouri river.

9. Prairie Horned Lark. *Otocoris alpestris praticola*. Noted on December 25 by Arthur R. Abel, who found a flock of ten. The same observer saw these birds frequently during January and February.

10. Bluejay. *Cyanocitta cristata*. This bird was heard almost daily throughout the winter in Morningside. However, it is only an occasional straggler that remains over the winter.

11. Crow. *Corvus brachyrhynchos*. The Crow is very abundant at all seasons. Its winter roosts in this vicinity have not been located. They begin to fly in certain lines early in March, and are then seen in large flocks; by the first of May the flocks have almost completely broken, no doubt because of domestic duties.

12. Red Crossbill. *Loxia curvirostra minor*. Early in November, 1916, a flock of fifteen to twenty were seen in a pine tree in Morningside. They were again seen on the 28th in about the same number. Throughout December the birds were occasionally seen, but the flock had scattered. A single individual was seen on January 20, which was the last record. They probably left the vicinity after consuming the limited supply of pine seeds.

13. Redpoll. *Acanthis l. linaria*. This is one of the erratic species, whose movements must form an interesting problem. In the winter of 1910-1911 the Redpolls were noted in this locality by several observers, and there may have been a fairly general visitation by them at that time. On January 10, 1915, Mr. W. J. Hayward reported a flock of eight at Crystal Lake. Aside from this record the writer has no knowledge of this species occurring in our region since 1910 until 1916.

The first record of this winter was a single male noted at McCook Lake by Mr. A. F. Allen on October 29. On November 5 Mr. G. O. Ludeke saw a flock of about twenty near Crystal Lake. Two males were seen by Edwin Hickman on December 21. Mr. Wier R. Mills wrote me of seeing a flock of about twenty Redpolls in the town of Pierson, Woodbury county, and that they were seen intermittently for some time afterward.

During January they became much more numerous, and were seen oftener and by more observers. The same condition pre-

vailed throughout February, but, as before, they were seen in small flocks containing eight to twenty, and occasionally thirty to forty. The writer was later satisfied of the identity of several large flocks of about fifty individuals which flew over, giving their, then unfamiliar, call notes. During March, however, they began to appear in larger flocks. On March 4 Mr. Paul Eiffert reported a flock of about a hundred Redpolls in the South Ravine. On the same date Mr. G. O. Ludeke saw large numbers of Redpolls in the fields near Logan Park cemetery, and estimated the number to be between four and five hundred. He noted his observations as follows: "Never have I seen so many birds together at one time. A five-acre corn field was alive with them. I made considerable noise just to see them take wing, but they seemed loath to leave this particular field. When I would shout or whistle they would appear confused and fly all around me."

Mrs. H. M. Bailey saw "hundreds" of Redpolls in Grandview Park on March 10. On the same day another observer reported a "flock of two thousand flying north." On March 23 Mrs. H. J. Taylor reported a flock of about five hundred near Leeds. And on March 25 Mrs. Bailey saw a flock of about one hundred go to roost in a large patch of wild sunflower in Grandview Park. This seems to be the latest record of them in this vicinity.

Some facts were obtained on the winter food of the Redpoll in this region. In various localities here we find large patches of the wild sunflower (*Helianthus annuus* L.), most often on the open hillside and along the fences. The Redpolls frequented these patches, probably for the seeds in the heads, as they always alighted and remained in the tops of these tall weeds. In fact, Mrs. Bailey states that she saw them picking the seeds out the heads, just as do the Goldfinches and Pine Siskins. On March 4 I saw several Redpolls picking and eating winter buds from an unrecognized tree along the Big Sioux river.

On February 18 Mr. A. F. Allen and I followed a small flock of eight or ten Redpolls on a hillside, and found that they were flying from one stalk to another of a weed which carried many dried seed receptacles, from which the birds were extracting and eating the seeds. A stalk of this plant was sent to Professor L. H. Pammel, who found it to be the Evening Prim-

rose (*Oenothera biennis*). This plant is very abundant on the hills and prairies throughout this region, and may form an important food of this group of birds, since it stands well above the snow and retains its seeds throughout the winter.

14. Pine Siskin. *Spinus pinus*. The Pine Siskin was seen only twice through the winter, incidentally confirming its reputation for irregularity. In 1914 large numbers were continually about throughout March, April and the greater part of May. In that year a pair even nested in Sioux City.¹ The writer is inclined to think that the bulk of the Siskins pass south of this station for the winter, and that we see them here in the early spring on their return northward.

15. Goldfinch. *Astragalinus t. tristis*. This species was quite common through October. Eight were seen on November 5, and one on December 26. They were seen on six different days in January, and may be considered as a tolerably common winter bird.

16. Tree Sparrow. *Spizella m. monticola*. This is one of our most common winter visitors, and it arrived this winter on the 22d of October. It is often found in good sized flocks, which linger until the first of April. After the middle of this month only stragglers are seen. On January 21, in company with Messrs. A. F. Allen and G. O. Ludeke, I watched a small flock of these birds feeding on the seeds of Squirrel-tail grass (*Hordeum jubatum* L.), which projected above the deep snow. They picked the seeds from the heads within reach. Sometimes they would hop, or even fly, up to those just beyond reach. But what surprised us most was to see several birds deliberately hop onto the weak grass stem and bring it down to the snow, where the seeds could then be easily got at. At other times it seemed as if the birds simply flew against the grass heads, thus shaking out the seeds on to the snow, where they were readily picked up. I have not seen any previous mention of this interesting behavior, and have since regretted that I did not give more time to the observations.

Even by field observation there is an apparent wide range in the plumage color of this species; many are noticeably paler, and I have suspected that these may be the Western Tree Spar-

¹See Wilson Bulletin, XXVI, Sept., 1914, pp. 140-146.

row, *S. m. ochracea*. An effort will be made in the future to determine this point.

17. Slate-colored Junco. *Junco h. hyemalis*. This is another of our very common winter visitors, and was especially numerous this year. They appeared in volume during the first week of October; and by the third week they seemed to be everywhere, invading the whole residence district of the city. But this seemed to be a "wave," for by the middle of November few were seen in the city. Throughout the winter a few were seen on nearly every trip to the field, but by the third week in March a wave was again apparent, and large numbers were now observed on all trips until the middle of April. From the latter date onward they decreased in numbers, and the last record was on May 6. But on the spring northward movement there was no such invasion of the city yards and parkings as occurred in the fall.

18. Song Sparrow. *Melospiza m. melodia*. Ordinarily the Song Sparrow does not arrive at this point until the middle of March. This winter two were seen on January 7 (Allen and Stephens). They were among a flock of English Sparrows beyond the city, and may have wintered.

19. Cardinal. *Cardinalis c. cardinalis*. This beautiful and picturesque bird is a permanent resident, and is increasing in numbers in this locality. It is frequently observed in the woods along the Big Sioux river, in the wooded ravines east and south of Morningside, and in the thickets across the river in Nebraska. On January 7 Mr. Allen and I counted nineteen (nine males and ten females) up along the Big Sioux. All but two of these were in one neighborhood, and evidently associating together in a flock such as described by Nuttall.² When a flock of Cardinals moves about the flight is characteristic; the movement is in single file, so that the group does not present the appearance of an ordinary flock of birds. The peculiar dippy, and irregular flight of the Cardinal probably is an acquirement which has protective value, making a much more difficult target in motion, as well as enhancing his beauty as he flits through the bare trees, and over the snow-blanketed earth.

The Cardinals on this date were not singing but frequently uttered a short, incisive call which sounds like "peet, peet," etc.

²Popular Handbook of Birds of the Eastern United States and Canada. By Thomas Nuttall. Revised edition, 1911, part I, page 363.

Some of these birds were feeding upon the oats from some straw that had caught on the trees from a passing load. Much might be learned of the winter food of our common birds by patient field observation, affording at the same time the incentive and the reward for the winter study of birds.

On February 18 in the same locality we found only one Cardinal, a male who made a few feeble attempts at song. Not more than three notes were uttered at a time, and these were not loud. The performance was such as to give one the impression that the bird was tuning up and getting his vocal cords under control. Mr. Allen has published his impression of this same song in the following words: "It was a hesitating and limping song that came from his throat, showing that he was sadly in need of practice, that his vocal chords had grown weak and husky from disuse, or that he had not complete confidence as yet in his equipment for the great adventure which he was about to undertake."³

On March 4 Mr. Ludeke covered the same territory and found eleven Cardinals, most of whom were in full song. After this date the birds were usually singing, and by the last of March many of them seemed to be mated. There is some ground for suspecting, however, that the Cardinals occasionally remain mated throughout the winter. A very full account of the song of the Cardinal, and its winter habits, is given by Nuttall⁴ which should be read by every one who is interested in this species.

20. Towhee. *Pipilo e. erythrophthalmus*. Although an early spring arrival this species is never thought of as forming part of the winter fauna in this region. However, a female was found in the thickets along the Big Sioux river on December 26, being seen by myself and Arthur Abel. It flew from the ground ten feet in front of us and alighted in a bush within twenty yards of us, where we had a full view for some time. We saw it again in the same place on January 2, but not afterward, and it may have succumbed to the very severe weather of January.

21. Bohemian Waxwing. *Bombycilla garrula*. This species was not as plentiful this winter as in some previous years. A few were seen from time to time during March in Grandview

³Notes of a Nature Lover, by A. F. Allen. Sioux City Journal, February 25, 1917.

⁴Loc. cit., pp. 362-367.

Park by Mrs. Bailey, when they were associating with *B. cedrorum*. Mrs. Bailey informs me that they were nearly always in the Russian Olive trees, which are very numerous in the park, and that she had observed them eat the fruit. None were seen after March 19.

22. Cedar Waxwing. *Bombycilla cedrorum*. This waxwing is rather a common winter species, but is not usually seen before February, and then frequently during March, April and May. No record of its nesting in this vicinity is known, however. This winter the first seen were a flock of twenty in Peters Park by W. R. Griffith.

In February they were seen by many observers, and in large flocks. In Grandview Park during March they were, on different dates, estimated at numbers varying from one hundred to two hundred and fifty; the largest number being noted on March 19. Small numbers of this species also frequented the yard belonging to Mrs. W. S. Warfield, being attracted, probably, by the large variety of berry fruit planted there for that purpose. They may have fed to some extent on the wild Russian Olives, though I am not sure that they were actually observed to do so. They were, however, observed to eat the red fruit of the native Wahoo tree. Mrs. Warfield also saw them eat the berries of the Purple and Japanese Barberry.

The bulk of the flock in Grandview did not remain after March 19, though a few were seen throughout the month.

23. Chickadee. *Penthestes* subsp.? The writer is unable to state whether *atricapillus* or *septentrionalis* is the common winter form here, but probably both occur. But whichever it is, it is exceedingly abundant and very generally distributed, and seemed to be about as plentiful as usual this winter.

24. Golden-crowned Kinglet. *Regulus s. satrapa*. These kinglets were noted on October 8, and were seen a number of times during that month and up to the middle of November. A few, however, remained later, for one was reported by Walter Bennett on December 25, six were noted on January 7 (Allen and Stephens), and two on January 14 (Allen and Ludeke). I believe this is the first time the kinglets have been recorded here at this season of the year. The winter call of the Golden-crowned Kinglet closely resembles that of the Brown Creeper, and either might be mistaken for the other.

25. Brown Creeper. *Certhia f. americana*. Brown Creepers occurred in about the usual numbers during this winter, but appeared earlier than usual in the fall. Two were seen on October 9 (Stephens and Abel); three were reported on the 10th by Mrs. E. A. Fields; three on the 12th (Eiffert); and so on, throughout October, November, December and January. In February and March none were seen (and their absence during this period is apparent in the records of other years); two records are given during April by Mr. Himmel, and several records during the last two or three days of April and first of May, the latest being May 6, by Mrs. H. J. Taylor.

26. White-breasted Nuthatch. *Sitta c. carolinensis*. This species was seen frequently during the winter, and in about the usual numbers. Possibly *S. c. nelsoni* also occurs here.

27. Red-breasted Nuthatch. *Sitta canadensis*. The numerous fall records of this species provide one of the unusual ornithological notes of the year. Two specimens were secured by Mr. Eiffert on October 9. On the 16th one entered the house of Mrs. W. P. Manley and posed before a considerable number of observers. Another one visited the suet box in Mrs. F. W. Marshall's yard occasionally from the 20th to the 26th of October, and was then driven away by a White-breasted Nuthatch. The bird was also seen by at least three other observers on different occasions in the early winter. It was seen again on January 14 (Allen and Ludeke), on January 21 (Allen, Ludeke and Stephens) and on April 22 (Stephens). Mr. Wier R. Mills at Pierson, Iowa, saw one specimen almost daily from December 24 to January 15. This gives more records for one season than the writer has known of for the past eight years.

28. Carolina Wren. *Thryothorus l. ludovicianus*. Early in October Mr. G. O. Ludeke captured a strange bird on his premises and caged it. It was later examined by himself and Mr. A. F. Allen, who compared it with pictures and descriptions, and concluded that it was the Carolina Wren. Upon measurement it was found to be longer than any other species of wren. The color of the plumage tallied with the pictures and descriptions and they were both fully satisfied with the diagnosis. The bird was then liberated. Inasmuch as the species has never been observed here before, the specimen should have been pre-

served; but there can probably be no doubt as to the identification. It is not a rare species in Minnesota, according to Hatch's catalogue.

29. Bluebird. *Sialia s. sialis*. Four individuals were seen by Messrs. Walter Bennett and A. W. Lindsey near Stone Park on December 26. The Bluebird is by no means a common winter bird, but a few late November records have been obtained in other years.

DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY,
MORNINGSIDE COLLEGE.