The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Alabama - Mississippi

By Lawrence Gardella and Cullen Brown, CBC Regional Editors – Alabama & Mississippi

Alabama conducted thirteen Christmas Bird Counts and Mississippi, eighteen. On the Gulf of Mexico, Alabama ran counts on Dauphin Island, Fort Morgan, and Gulf Shores, and Mississippi at Southern Hancock County and Jackson County. Near the Mississippi River, Mississippi had counts in Arkabutla Lake, Dahomey - Great River Road, Moon Lake (Lula), Natchez, Sidon, Vicksburg, and Washington County (South). In southern Mississippi counts were at Brooklyn – Camp Shelby and Hattiesburg. Alabama's Coastal Plain counts were in Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge (N.W.R.), Montgomery, and Tuscaloosa. In middle Mississippi, the circles were Jackson, Lauderdale, and Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge (N.W.R.). In Alabama's Mountain Region, they were Auburn, Birmingham, and Cullman. Alabama's Tennessee Valley circles were Guntersville, Waterloo, Wheeler Dam, and Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge ("N.W.R."). For north Mississippi, the counts were at Grenada, Sardis Lake, and Strawberry Plains. Four circles in Mississippi (Eagle Lake, Tupelo, Duck Hill, and Corinth) did not conduct counts this winter, with the absence of the Corinth and Tupelo circles leaving a good swath of the northeastern portion of the state without data.

As usual, several circles remarked on weather conditions (rain, fog, wind, particularly warm weather) as contributing to low numbers of several types of birds. Overall, the weather on count days themselves was not appreciably different from past years, however. Looking at a longer timeframe, in much of north Alabama, a profound drought since late spring left ephemeral streams and small creeks dry and even some large lakes and waterfall impoundments mostly empty, impacting ducks, shorebirds, wading birds, and others. Simultaneously, an abnormally warm early winter in areas such as Birmingham allowed some unexpected songbirds to persist.
The continuing conversion of fields into housing developments increasingly impacts counts. Once lost, fields rarely return. Most circles also have always had some habitat that is inaccessible or virtually impossible to reach by car or foot. One enterprising birder on the Fort Morgan circle used a kayak to reach some of this habitat and found many interesting birds, including a first for the circle.
A final factor explaining some low tallies is participation. At least one circle left an area uncovered because of the small number of participants. Time participants spend looking for birds is also a factor. At least four circles failed to do any nocturnal birding. During daylight hours, many participants left at noon instead of seeking additional species or numbers of individual birds in the afternoon. Is a drop in the numbers for many species in part due to reduced effort?
Unless otherwise specified, references in the text to minimums and maximums and numbers of records pertain to Christmas count day records unless otherwise specified.

Waterfowl

The Dauphin Island circle had its first 7 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks; Eufaula N.W.R. had them for the sixth time and now expects them; in Gulf Shores, 561 established a new maximum; unusual in middle Mississippi, one was in Noxubee N.W.R. during count week; and Southern Hancock County found them for only the second time, tallying a high 106. In Alabama, Birmingham found its second Greater White-fronted Goose, and Wheeler N.W.R. recorded all the other 153 found in Alabama; these geese are far more common in Mississippi, where Sidon tallied an all-time high 12412. In Birmingham, 6 Snow Geese provided a new maximum. The Waterloo count reported a Ross's Goose for the fourth time, and Noxubee N.W.R. had 2 for its twelfth record. Sidon found a Canada Goose for the thirtieth time in thirty-seven counts, but this time only one. In fifty-three counts, Eufaula N.W.R. had tallied up to 1250 American Wigeons, but it had an all-time low of 2. All 25

American Black Ducks were at Wheeler N.W.R. Low numbers of Mallard were found on Dauphin Island (6), Eufaula N.W.R. (13 – all time low), Montgomery (only count week), Tuscaloosa (0), Waterloo (5), Natchez (0), Sidon (5), and Washington County (South) (89). Dauphin Island had the only 9 Mottled Ducks. On Dauphin Island, 40 Blue-winged Teal set a new maximum. Guntersville had only 3 Northern Shovelers, far below its all-time high total of 1420. Dauphin Island tallied an all-time maximum 40 Blue-winged Teal, and Brooklyn – Camp Shelby and Sidon also had high numbers, but Washington County (South) found only 5, and Wheeler Dam had them only on count week.

The Mississippi Delta circles of Arkabutla Lake (10), Dahomey - Great River Road (0), Moon Lake (Lula) (10), and Washington County (South) (5) all reported few Green-winged Teal, while Sidon had a high 1012. It has been fifty years since Moon Lake (Lula) had its maximum of 1500 Canvasbacks, but its total of 3 was nevertheless low. From all the Alabama counts, there were only 57 Redheads. All 39 of Guntersville's counts have included Ring-necked Ducks, with up to 3747, but this year there were only 10; Vicksburg had none, and Washington County (South) just one. Wheeler Dam tallied a high 249 Greater Scaup; one during count week provided Noxubee N.W.R.'s eleventh record. Neither Birmingham nor Washington County (South) had any Lesser Scaup; Dauphin Island had a low 19, and Waterloo a low 9.

Dauphin Island (4), Fort Morgan (2), and Gulf Shores (6) all reported Black Scoters. Surf Scoters were found on Dauphin Island (one for its fifth record), Gulf Shores (2), and during count week at Wheeler Dam (second). The only White-winged Scoters were at Wheeler Dam (second) and Jackson County. Both Long-tailed Ducks were at Wheeler N.W.R. (third record). Moon Lake (Lula) had a low 5 Buffleheads, while Natchez set a high with 302. Dauphin Island counted a low 6 Common Goldeneyes. After usually seeing Hooded Mergansers on sixty-five of seventy-eight counts, Moon Lake (Lula) missed; Guntersville had a low of 4; and Sardis Lake a low 2; but in Jackson, Hooded Merganser was one of only two duck species without a low tally. Eufaula N.W.R. set a high with 56 Red-breasted Mergansers while Waterloo had none. Guntersville, which has had a maximum of almost 12,000 Ruddy Ducks, tallied only 24; Moon Lake's 6 was also low.

Bobwhites to Raptors

Wheeler Dam had Alabama's only Northern Bobwhites; Guntersville found some during count week; Mississippi had none. For the first time, Dauphin Island detected a Wild Turkey. Guntersville (653) and Wheeler Dam (62) had high numbers of Common Loons. No circle found either a Red-throated or a Pacific Loon. At Wheeler Dam, 253 Pied-billed Grebes established an all-time high, but seven other circles had low numbers of Pied-billeds. Wheeler Dam also reported 218 Horned Grebes, the only high count for the species; Gulf Shores had only 5, and Fort Morgan only one. Although Northern Gannets are typically rather common on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in winter, Mississippi did not find any, Dauphin Island had but one, Fort Morgan only 3, and Gulf Shores none except during count week, missing the species on count day for the first time. Wheeler Dam had a lone Neotropic Cormorant, and Washington County (South) had 3. While Guntersville saw an all-time high of 8153 Double-crested Cormorants, Wheeler N.W.R. had a low 13, Fort Morgan only 126, and Sidon failed to find any. Unusual at all four sites, single Anhingas were at Arkabutla Lake, Grenada, Jackson, and Vicksburg; Jackson County had 4. Montgomery noted their fifth American White Pelican; a high tally of 11 at Brooklyn – Camp Shelby provided its second record; and Noxubee N.W.R. saw a high 294.

Eufaula N.W.R. found all 6 of Alabama's count day American Bitterns; Dauphin Island and Gulf shores had sightings during count week; and 2 in Noxubee N.W.R. gave the circle its fifth record. With 73 Great Blue Herons, Guntersville exceeded its all-time low by only 2. Both Guntersville and Waterloo had all-time highs for Great Egret with 18 and 14, respectively. All of Alabama's Snowy Egrets were at Dauphin Island (39) or Fort Morgan (21); Mississippi's Jackson County tallied 56. The only Little Blue Herons were on the Gulf of Mexico at Fort Morgan (3), Gulf Shores (6), and Washington County (South) (2, for its third record). Dauphin Island found all 3 of Alabama's Tricolored Herons and all 5 of its Reddish Egrets; in Mississippi, Tricoloreds were also found on the Gulf of Mexico: 10 in Jackson County and 6 in Southern Hancock County. Only Gulf Shores and Hattiesburg spotted any Cattle Egrets, one each; the one in Hattiesburg provided its seventh record. The only Green Herons in the two-state region were 2 in Southern Hancock County. Black-crowned Night-herons were widespread in Alabama, appearing in five circles (Birmingham, Dauphin Island, Gulf Shores, Wheeler Dam, and Wheeler N.W.R.; a total of 6 were on two Mississippi circles: 5 in Jackson County and one in Southern Hancock County. Tuscaloosa recorded its first White Ibis; Fort Morgan, its sixth record; and Eufaula N.W.R. had an all-time high 70. The only Glossy Ibis was at Eufaula N.W.R. Natchez reported a Roseate Spoonbill for the fourth time, the only one for Alabama and Mississippi this winter.

Guntersville (1058) and Wheeler Dam (252) tallied all-time highs for Turkey Vulture. Tuscaloosa had a low 2 Black Vultures, and 3 provided Washington County (South) with its fourth record. For only the sixth time, Noxubee N.W.R. reported a Golden Eagle; Mississippi has found single Golden Eagles nineteen times, and in 1996 found 3, 2 of which were at Noxubee N.W.R. Brooklyn – Camp Shelby had a high 10 Northern Harriers. After finding Sharp-shinned Hawks on fifty of fifty-six counts with up to 19, Wheeler N.W.R. did not have any. Wheeler Dam's only Cooper's Hawk was during count week. Although overall Bald Eagle numbers were good, Waterloo had an all-time low of 4. Sardis Lake found only a single Red-tailed Hawk, an all-time minimum. Washington County (South) found its second Krider's Red-tailed Hawk, and Eufaula N.W.R. had one during count week. Arkabutla Lake documented a Harlan's subspecies Red-tailed Hawk, its third.

Rails to Skimmers

Alabama's only King Rails were 6 at Eufaula N.W.R. and one at Fort Morgan; Mississippi's lone King Rail was in Southern Hancock County. For the fifth time, Guntersville had a Virginia Rail; after finding them on forty-nine of the last fifty-two counts, Gulf Shores had none; Noxubee N.W.R. had one during count week. At Noxubee N.W.R. 24 Common Gallinules established a circle maximum. Jackson County tallied the only 4 Limpkins. Crane numbers continue to increase. Wheeler N.W.R. established an all-time maximum for Alabama with 19,945 Sandhill Cranes, and its 17 Whooping Cranes were one short of its all-time high.

Fort Morgan had Alabama's only American Oystercatcher, where it is unusual; Dauphin Island missed the species for the first time; Jackson County found 35, and Southern Hancock County 11. Dauphin Island (15) and Gulf Shores (2) found all Alabama's Black-bellied Plovers, but both tallies were low; in Mississippi, Jackson County tallied 9, and Southern Hancock County, 8. Neither Alabama nor Mississippi reported any Piping Plovers, as Dauphin Island missed the species for only the second time. Wilson's Plover at Gulf Shores showed up only for count week; none were reported in either state on a count day. The 9 Semipalmated Plovers for Gulf Shores set a new circle maximum; Southern Hancock County found only one. Auburn had one Spotted Sandpiper and Gulf Shores 4. Unusual for the circle, Grenada found 2 Lesser Yellowlegs. At Guntersville, 2 Greater

Yellowlegs gave the circle its third record. Alabama's lone Whimbrel provided Dauphin Island with its ninth record. The only 8 Ruddy Turnstones were in Gulf Shores, as Dauphin Island failed for the first time to find any. Dauphin Island's 65 Sanderlings were a low count, but not as low as the single one in Southern Hancock County. In Southern Hancock County, 27 Dunlin set a minimum. On Dauphin Island, 488 Least Sandpipers were a new high count, as were 49 at Moon Lake (Lula). At Washington County (South), 23 Long-billed Dowitchers provided a high count. Fort Morgan reported its fifth Wilson's Snipe, and Moon Lake (Lula) had an all-time high of 204; Waterloo only had one. Because they were found on six circles, Alabama totaled 11 American Woodcocks.

Eleven Bonaparte's Gulls gave Birmingham its seventh record and highest total; Gulf Shores had a low 52, Jackson only 6; and Fort Morgan failed to find any after having reported up to 620 on forty earlier counts. Southern Hancock County reported only a low 106 Laughing Gulls. Jackson found an all-time high 1060 Ring-billed Gulls, while Dauphin Island (73), and Gulf Shores (27) had very low tallies. Just barely exceeding its minimum, Dauphin Island reported 35 American Herring Gulls. The only Iceland Gull was at Wheeler Dam. Eufaula N.W.R., Guntersville, and Wheeler Dam each had a single Lesser Black-backed Gull. The sole Great Black-backed was in Guntersville. Dauphin Island found Alabama's only Caspian Terns, but 4 was its fewest ever. Fort Morgan's 6 Forster's Terns constituted its lowest number. With all 3 of Alabama's Black Skimmers, Dauphin Island still had a low count; Southern Hancock County has only missed skimmer in one of fifty counts and generally has them in numbers, but this winter it had only one.

Doves to Crows

Wheeler Dam found a high 103 Rock Pigeons, but Dauphin Island (6) and Gulf Shores (7) had low tallies. With past counts of up to 49, Cullman had no Eurasian Collared Doves, and Vicksburg had a low 29. On Dauphin Island, 2 Inca Doves established a third record; 8 gave Fort Morgan its fifth and highest total; 10 at Gulf Shores was also a maximum for the circle; 7 in Southern Hancock County provided the circle its eighth record. At Eufaula N.W.R., Common Ground-Dove is expected, but it was seen only during count week. Brooklyn – Camp Shelby (6), Vicksburg (7), Guntersville (64), and Wheeler N.W.R. (124) all reported very low numbers of Mourning Doves. All of Alabama's hummingbirds were found in Gulf Shores: 2 Ruby-throated, 2 Black-chinned, and 5 Rufous; Mississippi's only one was a Buff-bellied Hummingbird in Jackson County. Cullman found only a low 2 Belted Kingfishers.

In both Tuscaloosa and Moon Lake (Lula), only a single Red-headed Woodpecker was tallied; Jackson had a low 5. Waterloo's 29 Red-bellied Woodpeckers established a new minimum, and Sardis Lake a low 16. The Waterloo count of 13 Downy Woodpeckers was also very low. All the unusual counts for Hairy Woodpecker were in north Alabama: Three in Waterloo and one in Wheeler N.W.R. were low counts, while 7 at Wheeler Dam seems high. Gulf Shores (11) and Waterloo (29) found few Northern Flickers. For the first time, Gulf Shores failed to have any Pileated Woodpeckers on count day (count week only); Moon Lake (Lula) missed them for only the third time; but Guntersville was one short of its all-time high.

Dahomey - Great River found a high of 20 American Kestrels; Birmingham tallied only one. Moon Lake (Lula) found a Peregrine Falcon for only the second time; Alabama's only Peregrines were one on Fort Morgan and 3 at Wheeler Dam. Dauphin Island reported one of Alabama's only Vermilion Flycatchers (its third record), and Gulf Shores the other 2 (tenth record); Southern Hancock County found 3. Dauphin Island found a Western Kingbird for the nineteenth time, Fort Morgan its twelfth

(3), and Montgomery its first. Vicksburg's 5 Loggerhead Shrikes was its all-time minimum, and Guntersville's 2 Loggerhead Shrikes was one of its lowest counts; both Birmingham and Wheeler N.W.R. failed to find any. Single White-eyed Vireos were unusual at Wheeler Dam (first) and Wheeler N.W.R. Eufaula N.W.R. set a minimum with 14 Blue Jays, and tallies in Cullman (58) and Tuscaloosa (25) were also very low. Guntersville found an all-time high 581 American Crows, but Montgomery had a low count (35), and Vicksburg its lowest ever (9). Although Gulf Shores has had Fish Crow tallies of as high as 571, this year it had only 10.

Larks to Snow Bunting

The 4 Horned Larks at Wheeler N.W.R. marked one of its lowest tallies, and 14 at Washington County (South) was also quite low. Three Tree Swallows at Eufaula N.W.R. provided a third record for the circle, while Gulf Shores had an extremely low 2. For Fort Morgan 47 Carolina Chickadees constituted a high count; Waterloo had an all-time low 35; and Moon Lake (Lula) a low 6. Fort Morgan set a new maximum with 22 Tufted Titmice; Guntersville had an all-time low 62 and Waterloo an all-time low 37. Five Alabama circles reported Red-breasted Nuthatches, but only a total of 12; Brooklyn – Camp Shelby counted 10. Waterloo's tally for White-breasted Nuthatches was an all-time low 6, a small fraction of its maximum of 59. Tying an all-time low, Guntersville found only one Brown Creeper. Although Winter Wrens are regular in the Jackson Circle, they missed the species, while nearby Vicksburg had a high count of 4, only its eighth record for the species in 51 counts. At Sardis Lake, 51 Carolina Wrens set an all-time minimum.

Moon Lake (Lula) had a low tally of 3 Golden-crowned Kinglets. Cullman (1), Waterloo (45), and Washington County (South) (10) all provided new minimums for Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Vicksburg tallied an all-time low 24 Eastern Bluebirds, and Wheeler N.W.R. had a low 22. Guntersville found an all-time low 3 Hermit Thrushes, and Vicksburg an all-time low one. From year to year, numbers of American Robins in Alabama and Mississippi vary dramatically with thousands some years and few others, in part due to conditions well to the north. This CBC, the paucity of robins was dramatic. Cullman (51), Dauphin Island (2), Hattiesburg (1), and Vicksburg (2) had their fewest ever; Washington County (South) (28), Eufaula N.W.R. (12), Tuscaloosa (21), Arkabutla Lake (30), and Wheeler N.W.R. (65) all also had low tallies; Noxubee N.W.R. established a maximum with 4838, but only two other circles, Gulf Shores and Wheeler Dam, had more than 1000. Unusual but increasing well north of the coastal Alabama and Mississippi, single Gray Catbirds occurred in Vicksburg, Wheeler Dam, and Wheeler N.W.R.; most were in Fort Morgan (77) and Gulf Shores (72). For only the eleventh time in 78 CBCs, Moon Lake (Lula) went without a Brown Thrasher; Guntersville had a low 8, Montgomery only 7, Tuscaloosa an all-time low 3, Waterloo 5, and Washington County (South) but 3. At Sardis Lake, Northern Mockingbirds (2) were the fewest ever.

Three circles had all-time lows for European Starling: Cullman, 239; Guntersville, 29; and Jackson, 22; Vicksburg's count was a low 14; only Gulf Shores (3447) found more than 1000. Gulf Shores recorded only 8 American Pipits, its lowest number except for the two times it found none. For Eufaula N.W.R., 2 Cedar Waxwings set a new minimum; that and the 8 waxwings on Fort Morgan were the only Alabama counts in the single digits; Sardis Lake had a low 3. Wheeler N.W.R. got Alabama's sole Lapland Longspur. An amazing **Snow Bunting** on the beach at Gulf Shores showed up every day of count week except count day, when it presumably remained up in the dunes out of sight.

Warblers to Sparrows

Wheeler Dam found its first Black-and-white Warbler and Montgomery its fourth; Eufaula N.W.R. had a high 9; and Auburn and Fort Morgan also recorded singles; 2 at Noxubee N.W.R. provided a second record. For the fifth time, Noxubee N.W.R. found Palm Warblers (2). Fort Morgan had an all-time high 56 Orange-crowned Warblers, almost half of Alabama's 130. For the second time, Vicksburg failed to find any Pine Warblers; each of three Alabama circles (Cullman, Tuscaloosa, and Waterloo) found only 2; and 37 was low for Gulf Shores. Yellow-rumped Warblers usually come in bunches; 242 was low for Dauphin Island, and 12 was low for Moon Lake (Lula); Cullman tallied just 15. Birmingham located its first Yellow-throated Warbler, and Dauphin Island had its sixth; others were at Fort Morgan and Gulf Shores (2). A stake-out Wilson's Warbler continued in Birmingham to make it on the count.

Both of Alabama's Henslow's Sparrows were in Gulf Shores, as was its lone LeConte's Sparrow; Noxubee N.W.R. found one. As it often is, Dauphin Island was the place for Nelson's Sparrows (5 of Alabama's 6), but the other was Fort Morgan's first – found by kayaking along an otherwise inaccessible shoreline. Dauphin Island also continued its near monopoly on Seaside Sparrows, providing all of Alabama's 5. Natchez has failed to get a Chipping Sparrow once, but this season it had only one. Once again, Field Sparrows were somewhat scarce; Gulf Shores found only 4; Guntersville, 10; Jackson, 2; Sardis Lake., 2; Vicksburg, 2; and Natchez missed Field Sparrow for the twelfth time. Wheeler N.W.R. usually finds Fox Sparrows, having missed the species only once; this year it found just one. Rare throughout the two-state region, Sidon documented the only Lark Sparrow. Vicksburg reported 9 Dark-eyed Juncos, its fewest. Wheeler Dam counted a high 68 White-crowned Sparrows; Moon Lake (Lula) found its fewest ever with 1; Natchez missed the species, which it had recorded on 46 of 58 counts with a high of 64 in count 93; for the sixth time, Sidon missed White-crowned, and Arkabutla Lake only tallied 3. White-throated Sparrows were hard to find in lower Alabama; Dauphin Island had only 5; Fort Morgan, just 6; Gulf Shores, 21; Vicksburg had a low 78. Gulf Shores reported a low 3 Vesper Sparrows; Montgomery missed them after seeing them on thirty-nine of forty-three counts, with a high of 181. Birmingham found only a single Savannah Sparrow; Gulf Shores had a low 77; Natchez, 22; but Wheeler Dam had a high 323, and Washington County (South) a high 341. Song Sparrow numbers continued to be low; Dauphin Island had a low 3; Gulf Shores an all-time low 6; Brooklyn – Camp Shelby, only 12; Natchez, only 4; Sardis Lake, 11; and Sidon, 7; only Wheeler Dam and Wheeler N.W.R. had more than 100. Alabama's only Lincoln's Sparrows were one at Fort Morgan and 50 at Guntersville. Wheeler Dam reported a high 98 Swamp Sparrows; Moon Lake (Lula), a low 11; and Sardis Lake, only 25. Cullman (9); Waterloo (10); Grenada (7), and Jackson (4) all had low numbers of Eastern Towhees.

Cardinals to Munias

For the sixth time, Gulf Shores reported a Summer Tanager; for Montgomery, one for the fourth time. The same backyard in Gulf Shores also had the circle's first Western Tanager. Guntersville's 98 Northern Cardinals set a minimum; so did 71 for Vicksburg. The only **Blue Grosbeak** was seen and photographed on Dauphin Island, its first. The sole Indigo Bunting was Birmingham's second. The magic yard in Gulf Shores held Alabama's only Painted Bunting.

Sardis Lake was only able to tally 6 Red-winged Blackbirds. Arkabutla Lake found the only Western Meadowlark. Cullman's 18 Eastern Meadowlarks was an all-time low; Guntersville's 40 was low; Wheeler N.W.R. had fewer than its 2 only the four times it missed the species; and 7 for Vicksburg was low; but Dauphin Island's 256 (forty percent of all in Alabama this count period) set a circle

maximum. Four of the seven circles in Alabama with Rusty Blackbirds also reported Brewer's Blackbirds; Washington County (South) found just 2. Auburn tallied just 2 Common Grackles; Cullman, only 15; having recorded them thirty-six times out of thirty-nine with as many as 61,322, Waterloo missed Common Grackles. Waterloo also missed Brown-headed Cowbird, while Jackson set a maximum with 3430. The magic yard provided Gulf Shores with Alabama's only Bullock's Oriole, the circle's seventh. Birmingham found its sixth Baltimore Oriole. Brooklyn – Camp Shelby had only one House Finch. Fort Morgan (7), Tuscaloosa (3), Grenada (6), Moon Lake (Lula) (2), and Sidon (1) all had low American Goldfinch tallies. House Sparrows often congregate in areas with few other birds, and they may often be undercounted, but this year's low tallies appear to be legitimate; Dauphin Island with little House Sparrow habitat tallied a low 9; Wheeler N.W.R. had one; and Vicksburg an all-time low 49. Of Alabama's 165 Scaly-breasted Munias, 153 were in Gulf Shores, and 12 were on Dauphin Island.