The 126th Christmas Bird Count in California

By Dessi Sieburth, CBC Regional Editor – California

The 126th Christmas Bird Count period took place from December 14th, 2025, to January 5th, 2026. 6674 observers across 133 completed counts reported a grand total of 391 species in accordance with the official California Bird Records Committee checklist (CBRC Official California Checklist). It was a wet winter overall, especially in Southern California. Several early January counts including Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz Island, and Orange County (coastal) experienced heavy rain, which hampered totals. December weather was generally more mild and did not significantly affect most counts. The highest count in terms of number of species was again San Diego, with 218 species.

The quality and quantity of rarities did not quite match last year's incredible results, but there were still many highlights. The rarest of these included a Red-headed Woodpecker in Death Valley, 3 Cave Swallows in Salton Sea (south), a Kentucky Warbler in Bishop, and a Prothonotary Warbler in Carpinteria. Species recorded in unusually high numbers included Neotropic Cormorant, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Cocos Booby, and Tennessee Warbler, while species recorded in unusually low numbers included Glaucous Gull, Gray Flycatcher, and Lapland Longspur. A full summary of rare species is below.

A hybrid Cackling x Greater White-fronted Goose was photographed in Sacramento, just the third time this hybrid combination was recorded on a California CBC. No Eurasian Green-winged Teal were found for the first time since 2021. A Tufted Duck was found during count week in Crystal Springs, and a King Eider, originally found in August, was still present in Morro Bay. The only Harlequin Ducks south of Del Norte were in San Francisco and a long-staying bird in Crystal Springs. A Surf Scoter in Bishop provided a very unusual inland winter record. 256 White-winged scoters was a typical count, and indicated a rebound from last year's poor total of just 19. Long-tailed Ducks had a nice winter with 15 individuals reported, including rare inland records at Clear Lake, Red Bluff, and Mount Shasta.

A Yellow-billed Loon found in Oakland was the first found on California CBC since 2022. A rare inland Red-necked Grebe was present in Redding. The only storm-petrel found during the count period was a Fork-tailed seen from a seawatch in Monterey Peninsula. A remarkable concentration of 21 Cocos Boobies in San Diego was the highest state CBC total since 2016. The Pacific's only Northern Gannet, present since 2012, was found in Crystal Springs. The expansion of Neotropic Cormorants into Southern California showed no signs of slowing down; 315 individuals were detected, smashing the record of 62 set last year. 289 Yellow-crowned Night-Herons also set a new state high count, breaking the record of 199 set in 2023. A remarkable 5 Tricolored Herons, all in Southern California, was the highest state CBC total since at least 1979. A Roseate Spoonbill at Salton Sea (south) provided the first California CBC record since 2008.

10 Swainson's Hawks were found at the traditional wintering location in Sherman Island, and 8 were scattered elsewhere. 5 Zone-tailed Hawks, all in Southern California, was a typical count for recent years, though well above the historical average. 93 Rough-legged Hawks was much higher than last year's paltry total of 35, but still well below historical averages.

11 Pacific Golden Plovers, all coastal, was a nice total. 108 Mountain Plovers were reported in Sherman Island and Panoche Valley. 5 Solitary Sandpipers, including 3 in San Fernando Valley

alone, matched last year's record total. Rock Sandpipers had a poor showing, with just 2 individuals in Arcata. The Little Stint was present both before and after, but not during, the San Diego CBC, indicating the bird did successfully return for its ninth winter. A Little Gull was found during count week in San Diego; however, it was eaten by a Peregrine Falcon shortly after being found. 4 Lesser Black-backed Gulls was a typical count. Glaucous Gulls had their lowest total since at least 1972, with the long-staying adult at Hayward-Fremont providing the only individual of the count period.

A Ruddy Ground-Dove in Death Valley provided the first California CBC record since 2007, as the species has become much rarer since it peaked in the early 2000s. The only Northern California Costa's Hummingbird was at a feeder in Red Bluff. A male Rufous Hummingbird in Escondido was remarkable and provided one of very few confirmed winter records for California. A male Broad-billed Hummingbird was visiting a residential feeder in Carpinteria. Perhaps the most remarkable record of the count period was a juvenile Red-headed Woodpecker foraging in date palms in Death Valley; this provided just the eighth California record, and second winter record. 3 Williamson's Sapsuckers were found outside of their typical high-evelation areas, with one each in Tehachapi, Pasadena-San Gabriel Valley, and Lake Henshaw. 7 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers was a slightly below-average total, and a Crested Caracara was found in Thousand Oaks.

3 Greater Pewees were recorded, one returning for its third winter to Carpenteria, one in its first winter in Pasadena-San Gabriel Valley, and one in its first winter in Rancho Santa Fe (count week only). A Least Flycatcher in San Diego provided just the third record for that count. 4 Hammond's Flycatchers was an average total, but just one Gray Flycatcher was the lowest total since 1998. 4 Western Flycatchers was also well below the recent 11-year average of 9.6. 4 Eastern Phoebes was just below the recent 11-year average of 4.9. 242 Vermilion Flycatchers was a nice total, though a bit short of the record of 253 set last year. The only Dusky-capped Flycatcher was one returning for its third winter to Pasadena-San Gabriel Valley. 14 Tropical Kingbirds was a typical count for recent years, and the only Thick-billed Kingbird was one returning for its fourth winter in Claremont. 4 Western Kingbirds, quite rare in winter, was the highest total since 2011. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was missed entirely for the first time since 2016.

14 Plumbeous Vireos was an above-average total (recent 11-year average is 9.5), as was 6 Cassin's Vireos. The famous Warbling Vireo that returned to Santa Barbara for 12 winters unfortunately did not return this winter. A well-photographed Blue-headed Vireo in Oceanside was remarkable and established the first California CBC record since 2016. A Bank Swallow at Salton Sea (south) provided an unusual winter record, and 3 Cave Swallows were present in the same swallow flock, providing just the second California CBC record. It was determined at a later date that at least 24 Cave Swallows were present in the flock– by far the highest total ever recorded in the state. An additional Cliff/ Cave Swallow was seen poorly in Thousand Oaks, but was probably a Cave, as one was confirmed nearby at a later date. A Winter Wren was heard and seen well in Rancho Santa Fe, and another was heard at Pt. Reyes where they have proven to be somewhat regular. A Swainson's Thrush photographed in Rancho Santa Fe established one of very few confirmed winter records for the state. It was an exceptionally poor year for Lapland Longspurs; the only one was during count week in Salton Sea (south). Chestnut-collared Longspur was missed entirely, but 3 Thick-billed Longspurs were present at Tejon Ranch, and one was present during count week at Salton Sea (south).

It was overall an excellent year for rare warblers. An Ovenbird, always rare in winter, was found in Long Beach-El Dorado. A Louisiana Waterthrush returned for its second winter to Rancho Santa Fe; this provided the first confirmed instance of a Louisiana Waterthrush returning for multiple winters in California. 4 Northern Waterthrushes was a typical count, as was 15 Black-and-white Warblers. A Prothonotary Warbler in Carpinteria was remarkable, and established just the fourth California CBC record and first since 2003. 21 Tennessee Warblers was the highest total ever recorded during a California CBC period, breaking the previous record of 17 from 1982. 37 Nashville Warblers was also an excellent total, including one in Woodfords in Alpine County that established a remarkable Sierran winter record. The only Virginia's Warbler was one returning for its third winter to Arcata. 2 MacGillivray's Warblers were reported– one in San Francisco, and one returning for its second winter to Long Beach-El Dorado. A Kentucky Warbler in a community garden in Bishop was just the sixth California CBC record, the first since 1996, and was especially remarkable given the inland locality. 9 American Redstarts was a typical count, while 8 Northern Parulas was the highest total ever recorded during a California CBC period. The only Magnolia Warbler was one in San Francisco. 31 Yellow Warblers was a bit below average. 3 Chestnut sided Warblers– one each in Thousands Oaks, Orange County (coastal), and Salton Sea (north) was a nice total. The only Pine Warbler was one during count week in Pasadena-San Gabriel Valley. 6 Grace's Warblers set a new state high count, with one each in Carpenteria, in Puente-Chino Hills, in San Diego, in San Francisco returning for its second winter, in Ventura returning for its third winter, and in Rancho Santa Fe returning for its seventh winter. 50 Black-throated Gray Warblers was a typical total, as was 20 Hermit Warblers. The only Black-throated Green Warbler was in San Diego, and the only Painted Redstart was in Claremont. 60 Wilson's Warblers was an excellent total.

3 wintering Nelson's Sparrows were found in Marin County (southern), possibly the first time they have been found in this region in over a decade. The only Clay-colored Sparrow was one photographed in Morro Bay. Dark-eyed Juncos of the "Gray-headed" subspecies were found in Escondido, Idyllwild, and Palos Verdes Peninsula. 2 Harris's Sparrows in Morro Bay and China Lake was a typical count for recent years, though well below historical counts as the species has declined significantly in California. Following last year's poor winter for the species, Swamp Sparrows rebounded with 108 individuals reported, one of the highest totals since the 1990s. A Rufous-crowned Sparrow in San Francisco was remarkable for such a sedentary species, and established just the second record for mainland San Francisco.

The only Hepatic Tanager was one returning for its third winter to Santa Barbara. 27 Summer Tanagers was a nice total, though 40 Western Tanagers was well below average. Three each of Rose-breasted and Black-headed Grosbeaks was a typical count. The only Indigo Bunting was one photographed in Salton Sea (south). A hatch-year Painted Bunting was found at a residential feeder in Monterey Peninsula. 5 Orchard Orioles was slightly below the recent average, though 12 Hooded Orioles was slightly above average. 33 Bullock's Orioles was below average, and the only Baltimore Oriole was in Monterey Peninsula. Wintering Scott's Orioles were reported in Morongo Valley and Escondido.

No California Christmas Bird Count summary would be complete without a brief discussion of the many introduced species that now call California home. Swinhoe's White-eyes continued what feels like an exponential increase through Southern California– 2853 reported individuals shattered last year's high count of 1915. On the other hand, just a single Northern Red Bishop was recorded– a far cry from the 55 reported just 15 years ago. Pin-tailed Whydah, after a significant expansion, had by far its lowest total since 2021– whether this indicates a genuine decrease in population, or a

simple sampling issue, remains to be seen. The Whydah's host species, the Scaly-breasted Munia, seems to be doing just fine– the 2185 individuals reported this year were the highest ever for a California CBC period. As always, there were several one-off escapees found during the count period– this year's haul included a Red-crested Cardinal, a flock of 24 Rosy-faced Lovebirds, 2 Yellow-collared Lovebirds, and 2 American Flamingos.

A huge thank you to all who participated in a California Christmas Bird Count, and to all the compilers. Collecting this data would not be possible without your effort, and we hope you will join us again next year!