The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Iowa

By Chris Caster, CBC Regional Editor - Iowa

The 2025-2026 CBC included 38 Iowa counts reporting to Audubon. The count period began with a wintry blast. The 14th saw below zero temps at Saylorville, Decorah and Davenport.. The 15th was not much better as even Keokuk experienced a low temperature of 3 degrees. Conditions generally warmed after this though. Seventeen counts reported highs in the 40s, beginning with Westfield on the 16th. Twenty-two counts reported snow: Saylorville reported 14 inches, Ames and Davenport 7, Fayette, Mason City, and Union Slough NWR 6. The total species count was 131, which is thirteen species below the 10-year average and the lowest total since '14-'15. Despite poor weather, Saylorville had the high count with 90 species. Other high counts were Davenport and Keokuk (86). DeSoto NWR (79) led the western counts. NW Clayton County (67) led the northern counts.

Sixteen regular species were found in record numbers. Frugivores and diurnal raptors had excellent counts. Gallinaceous birds, owls, woodpeckers, and sparrows were also in good numbers. Finches and icterids were in fair numbers. Waterfowl and gulls counted relatively poorly with just a few exceptions. Canada Geese were in fair numbers, but Cackling and Greater White-fronted's were about a quarter their usuals. Snow Geese numbers were very low. The only Ross's Goose was at Westfield. Trumpeter Swans were in good numbers, but Tundra Swans had their lowest count in twelve years. Mallards were about half their average. All the other dabblers were in very low numbers. Nothern Pintails had their lowest count in sixteen years. Common Goldeneyes were slightly above their average, while Canvasbacks had their lowest count in nine. Redheads had their lowest count in fifteen. The other divers were also in very low numbers. Mergansers faired better. Common Mergansers counted extremely well. Red-breasted Mergansers had their best count in thirty-five years. Hooded Mergansers were in average numbers. No scoters were reported. A lone Long-tailed Duck was at Saylorville. Pied-billed Grebes were on three counts. No other grebes or loons were reported. Northern Bobwhites were on five counts. Ring-necked Pheasant numbers were quite good, while Wild Turkey were in just fair numbers. Gray Partridges were on five counts. Saylorville had twelve and Lost Nation eleven. The only Ruffed Grouse was at NW Clayton County. All three doves were in average numbers. Double-crested Cormorants and Am. White Pelicans were in good numbers. No Sandhill Cranes were reported, which had not occurred in thirteen years. Great Blue Herons, Killdeer, and Wilson Snipes had average counts. Ring-billed and Herring Gulls were in relatively low numbers. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were on three counts. No other gulls were reported. Northern Harriers established a new high count for the fourth year in the last five. Cooper's Hawks also had a new high and Sharp-shinned Hawks also counted very well. The only Am. Goshawk was at Yellow River Forest. Golden Eagles were on four counts. Bald Eagles established a new high count and over 1200 were at Keokuk. Red-shouldered Hawks established a new high, more than twice their average. Red-tailed Hawks rose to average numbers this season and Rough-legged Hawks neared record numbers. American Kestrels were plentiful, and Merlin were in record numbers. Peregrine Falcons were on three Mississippi River counts. Barred and Short-eared Owls were in record numbers. The other regular owls were in average numbers. No Snowy Owls were reported. Belted Kingfishers were in good numbers. Red-headed Woodpeckers had a good count as their numbers have been increasing over the past four seasons. Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers also had an extremely good count, more than twice their previous high. Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy, and Pileated Woodpeckers all had good counts. Northern Flickers had a record count. Northern Shrikes had their lowest count in twenty and no Loggerhead Shrikes were reported. Blue Jays counted well, but Am. Crows were below average. Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings were all in low numbers. Black-capped Chickadees and Tufted Titmice numbers were abysmal, their lowest in forty

years. It was an irruption year for Red-breasted Nuthatches as they had their best count in seven. White-breasted Nuthatches were typical. Brown Creepers, Winter Wrens, Carolina Wrens, and Golden-crowned Kinglets all had good counts. Ruby-crowned Kinglets were on four counts. Cedar Waxwings had their best count in six years. For a third straight year, Eastern Bluebirds set a new high. American Robins smashed their previous high by 15,000. Hermit Thrushes were also in record numbers, thrice their average. A Northern Mockingbird was at Burlington. Gray Catbirds were at Green Island, Jamaica, and Neal Smith NWR. Brown Thrashers were at Davenport and DeSoto NWR. European Starlings were nearly twice their average. Yellow-rumped Warblers had a very good count. House Finches counted well. Purple Finches had a record count. Am. Goldfinches and Pine Siskins had fair counts. Redpolls were on four counts. Red Crossbills were on five counts. Single White-winged Crossbills were at Clinton and Ida County. Towhees had another exceptional year. Eastern were on seven counts. Ten Spotted were at DeSoto NWR and another was Sioux City. It was a record year for Fox Sparrows. Am. Tree Sparrows were in fair numbers, while Dark-eyed Juncos were more typical. White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows had record counts. Harris Sparrows dipped below their average after three good years. Song Sparrows were in fair numbers. Swamp Sparrows tied last year's lowest count in fourteen. Lincoln Sparrows were on three counts, Field Sparrows were on four, and Savannah Sparrows were on six. Eastern and Western Meadowlark numbers were good. Red-winged Blackbirds were found in large numbers. Common Grackles had their lowest count in nine. Brown-headed Cowbirds were in fair numbers. Rusty Blackbird numbers were low. A Brewer's Blackbirds was at Taylor County. Eurasian Tree Sparrows continue their expansion north to Mason City and west to Boone County.

The best bird of the count was undoubtedly a Parasitic Jaeger on the Saylorville count. This bird is rare in Iowa and more likely to be seen in Sep-Oct. This bird was a first for the Iowa CBC and likely represents a record-late date for Iowa. Ringgold County, which does not report to Audubon, had an American Barn Owl for the second straight year. Other notable birds include Turkey Vultures at Keokuk and NE Madison County. Townsend's Solitaires at Mason City and Iowa City. Lastly, an Orange-crowned Warbler was at Davenport.