The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Minnesota

By Steve Weston, CBC Regional Editor – Minnesota

The 126th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count was successfully run in 91 circles across Minnesota in 2025/2026, up one from last year and tying the record set two years ago. Similar to last year, December started cold with temperatures bottoming out on December 14, the first day of the count. The temperature bounced up to highs in the 40s and 50s, but by that time lakes were frozen throughout the state and waterfowl and other migrants had left. After that the nights were generally below freezing, the days were comfortable for Minnesota, and by the end of the count, in some parts of the state, days were above freezing. All, but one count, reported snow cover and all but two reported that the lakes were mostly frozen. Neither of these conditions have been experienced this early in the season in recent years. Despite adverse conditions on the first day, the otherwise good birding brought out almost record numbers of birders. But, despite all the observers, the birds were below last year's numbers.



Short-eared Owl

By Beth Siverhus



Mountain Bluebird

By Frank Nicoletti



Bohemian Waxwing

By Frank Nicoletti



Action at Meeker Co. Count

By Brad Nelson II



Eurasian Tree Sparrow

By Kevin Smith

Data in this summary is only for Minnesota and does not include participation and birds from outside the state in border counts. One count did not report data and apparently was not run. Additional review was required of 144 questionable, uncommon, and rare bird reports (vs. 139 and 178 in the previous two years). Nineteen of those were reviewed because of unusually high numbers. Seventeen sightings were not accepted because of inadequate or no documentation. Ten other sightings were withdrawn, as obvious identification errors or data-entry errors.
Total participation was 2215, 5.3% over last year and just below the record set two years ago. Nine counts had more than 60 total participants, compared to six in four of five previous years. St. Paul North with 144 participants, again the most.

The 233,689 total birds and the 127 species counted were lower than all but two of the last nine years, but not a surprise given the lack of open water. The two previous counts that had lower bird numbers also only had 78 and 82 counts back then, vs. 91 this year. The total bird count was 19% below last year's tally. Three species that almost annually are setting new records even had numbers down from last year (Trumpeter Swan – down 29%, Wild Turkey – down 13%, Bald Eagle – down 4%).

Waterfowl numbers were below the decade averages with the important Canada Geese numbers, which account for 97% of the Minnesota CBC total bird count variability, at the lowest level in nine years, at only 23% of the ten-year average. The exceptions to those low numbers included Trumpeter Swan, which has been experiencing decades of population explosion;

Common Golden; and Common Merganser. The numbers of the uncommon Long-tailed Duck and American Blackduck were also strong for the decade, but well down from historical numbers.

Gulls were absent this year in Minnesota. One Ring-billed Gull was found on the Minneapolis North count and a handful of Herring Gulls were found on Lake Superior. You have to go back forty years to find such a dearth of gulls. Other water dependent birds such as American White Pelican, Great Blue Heron, and Double-crested Cormorant were either almost or completely absent from the state. Wilson Snipe and Belted Kingfisher numbers were small, but above average.

Upland game birds had mixed results. Sharp-tailed Grouse numbers hit a record high. Pheasants hit the second highest number on record. Gray Partridge numbers were the highest seen in 20 years, although well below historical records before that. In contrast, Wild Turkeys were at the lowest level in the last six boom years. Ruffed Grouse and Prairie Chickens were well below the ten-year average and almost no Spruce Grouse were found.

This was a good year for eagles, hawks, and falcons with numbers above average. Common owls (Barred and Great-horned) were reported at expected levels. Less common owls (Eastern Screech, Short-eared, and Long-eared) were found at above average numbers although with most at no more than one or two on a count. Roosts of Long-eared Owls at two counts in Lyon County in western Minnesota accounted for more than 60% of the record 21 owls counted, shattering the former record of 12. The Long-eared Owl reported on the Two Harbors count was a first winter record for the county. Winter irruptive owl species were largely absent in the state. While Rock Dove numbers were about average, Mourning Doves had the highest numbers in almost 20 years, when there were only two thirds the number of counts and Eurasian Collard Dove, as with the five consecutive years, broke its former record as they continue to be found on more counts. Passerine bird counts were mostly down. Woodpecker numbers were generally below average. A poor acorn crop discouraged Red-headed Woodpeckers from staying and they were down 87% from last year. While Blue Jays were above average, other Corvids were down including Gray Jays down from last year's low, hitting the lowest numbers in over forty years when there weren't half of today's counts. Significantly, Black-capped Chickadees and White-breasted Nuthatches had their lowest numbers in seventeen years. Boreal Chickadees have become very scarce in Minnesota with numbers below anything seen in the last forty-six years with the exception of last year. Thrush numbers were high with American Robins breaking the record and Eastern Bluebirds at their second highest level. Waxwing numbers were up, while Eurasian Starlings and House Sparrows were down. Winter field birds (Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and Lapland Longspurs) all had low, non-irruptive numbers, as did most northern finches, including our non-migratory finches. Pine Grosbeaks, Red-winged Blackbirds, and our winter sparrows were reported at above average numbers.

The breakout highlight of this count was the Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Just two years ago it was classified as a 'casual' bird with records in eight or less of the previous ten years. Last year, with seven birds found on three counts it achieved 'regular' status. This year, though greatly undercounted, 28 birds were reported on five counts, including first winter county records for Olmsted and Steele counties. Other notable reports included first winter county records of a Wilson's Snipe and a White-crowned Sparrow on the Mankato count, a count week Glaucous Gull on the Fargo/Moorhead count, a Long-eared Owl on the Two Harbors count, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet on the Granite Falls count, Eastern Bluebirds on the Fairmount count, a count-week American Pipit on the St. Paul NE count, and a Swamp Sparrow on the Redwood Falls count. Four species were reported for only the third time in the last ten years in Minnesota: a

count-week Harlequin Duck on the Two Harbors count, Killdeer on three counts, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (see above), and Mountain Bluebird on the Grand Marais count. The most unusual bird was the first Prairie Falcon in eighteen years, a count week bird on the Fargo/Moorhead count.

A complete table of the results of the 126th Christmas Bird Count in Minnesota (includes data from outside of Minnesota from border counts) is available at:
https://moumn.org/CBC/coordinator_yearend_table.php?main&year=2025

For Minnesota data only, which was used in this summary:
https://moumn.org/CBC/coordinator_yearend_table.php?main&year=2025&mn

A table showing what sightings were reviewed, what documentation was received, eBird postings, and whether reports were accepted is available at:
https://moumn.org/CBC/documents/MN%20CBC%20126%20Birds%20for%20Review.htm

Images of birds submitted for documentation (and not on eBird) are available at:
https://moumn.org/CBC/recent.php?count_year=126&op=