The 126th Christmas Bird Count in New Jersey

By William J. Boyle, Jr., CBC Regional Editor – New Jersey

The 126th CBC was conducted under generally cold, but otherwise favorable conditions, with temperatures comparable to last year's chilly season and precipitation not an issue for most of the counts. A colder than normal early December may have been partly responsible for the reduced numbers of some species. Participation was again well above pre-pandemic levels, with the Lower Hudson CBC reporting 401 observers and Princeton a record 191. Following a generally lackluster fall migration, both species variety and numbers were down significantly, with many observers lamenting the lack of birds.

Thirty CBCs submitted data this year; Mizpah returned after a three-year absence and the Island Beach CBC was conducted, but failed to submit data. The total of 194 species recorded was one more than last season, but still below the 10-year average of 198. The only rarities of the season were New Jersey's first Short-billed Gull on the Sandy Hook CBC, the state's second Arctic Loon on the Barnegat Light count, the latter pending review by the New Jersey Bird Records Committee, and a Yellow-throated Warbler on the Lower Hudson count. Cape May led the state, as usual, with 152 species, up from last year's 145, while Barnegat had an excellent 130, followed by Long Branch (123) and Cumberland County (118). At total of nine counts topped the 100 species mark.

Thirty-seven species of waterfowl were detected, including a record 17 Greater White-fronted Geese on the Barnegat CBC plus four individuals on four other counts. Barnegat also produced a pair of Ross's Geese, while Great Swamp NWR had one. A **Trumpeter Swan** on the Barnegat CBC was at a new location for this species, which is still very scarce in the state. Four Eurasian Wigeon were found on three different counts but Cape May had the only two Blue-winged Teal. Barnegat tallied an impressive 165 Common Eider and 51 of the state's 63 Harlequin Ducks, but there were no King Eiders.

There were no reports of Ruffed Grouse for the eighth time in nine years and the 401 Wild Turkeys were the fewest since 1994. The 326 Red-throated Loons tallied was just a fraction of 2,426 encountered last year, but followed a spectacular fall migration. Most of them must have been wintering farther south. A well-documented **Arctic Loon** on the Barnegat CBC is just the second for New Jersey pending acceptance by the Records Committee. Twenty-six Pied-billed Grebes was the lowest total in sixty-two years. The only Red-necked Grebe was a count-week bird at Long Branch.

Marmora had two Brown Pelicans, only the fourth CBC report in the past 15 years, while the 24 Great Cormorants was the second lowest tally since 1977. Oceanville had the only American Bittern and the 27 Great Egrets recorded was the second lowest total in 15 years; by mid-January almost all egrets had moved south to avoid the frigid weather. Cape May and Oceanville each had a Snowy Egret. Oceanville had a Tricolored Heron and Barnegat had two. Marmora had 13 **White Ibis**, only the third record for a New Jersey CBC, but not unexpected given the massive invasion of the species into the state in recent years.

Both Vultures were present in reduced numbers from recent years, possibly related to avian flu. The Turkey Vulture total of 3,031 birds was the lowest in 30 years, while the 1,043 Black Vultures were the fewest since 2007. Cape May and NW Hunterdon County each had a Golden Eagle, a species not encountered every year, and Barnegat had an American Goshawk, another species often missed on the CBCs. Ten Rough-legged Hawks, eight of them at Barnegat, was the best total since

2020. The 127 Sandhill Cranes was just 10 short of last year's record total and included a new high of 94 birds in the Cumberland County flock.

Semipalmated Plovers were found at Belleplain (2) and Cumberland County (1), while Belleplain had the only Willet of the season. The numbers of wintering Western Willets have fallen dramatically in the past six years. Cape May had the only 3 Marbled Godwits, the lowest statewide total since 2002. Bellplain tallied 2 Western Sandpipers and Cape May had one plus a Short-billed Dowitcher.

The only alcids of the season were the 18 Razorbills at Barnegat and three more at Long Branch, but, as usual, there were many more Razorbills and other alcids later in the winter. Lingering Laughing Gulls were at Cape May (1) and Lower Hudson ((2), although the highlight of the season was New Jersey's first **Short-billed Gull,** discovered on Sandy Hook CBC and seen and photographed by many observers. Thirteen Iceland Gulls was a bit more than normal, but the total of 1,311 Great Black-backed Gulls was the lowest since 1964. Cape May had the only Forster's Terns (6) of the season.

All of the usual owls were found in typical numbers with Barnegat producing the only Snowy Owl in what was clearly an off year for that species. A **Rufous Hummingbird** at Lakehurst managed to stick around long enough to make the CBC, as did a single Ruby-throated Hummingbird in Cape May. The cold December and reduced amount of open water led to a low total of only 266 Belted Kingfishers, the fewest since 2000. The 40 Red-headed Woodpeckers was a big jump from last year's 6, but typical of the boom-and-bust cycle that this species regularly shows. Except for Red-bellied Woodpecker, the other woodpeckers were found in slightly diminished numbers.

American Kestrel numbers (84) were down slightly, but Merlin set a new record of 85 individuals, easily surpassing the 73 seen in 2021, Only nine Eastern Phoebes were located, the fewest since 2015. The Fish Crow tally of 3,184 was the lowest since 2013 (Cape May missed the species entirely), but the now ubiquitous Common Raven (380) was found on every count except Trenton Marsh. Carolina Chickadees (1,496) were down 30% from the 10-year average; more alarming was the low count of Black-capped Chickadee with 580 being the fewest tallied since 1944. This decline is part of a continuing trend for the species: the ten-year average for 2016 – 2015 was 1,008, while the ten-year average for 1996 – 2005 was 2,786.

Red-breasted Nuthatches made a good showing with 485 being the second highest in the past 20 years. Sedge Wren was missed for the first time in 15 years. The Carolina Wren total of 1,785 was the lowest since 2003 and it will be interesting to see what effect this year's severe winter has on numbers of this species. Golden-crowned Kinglet numbers (379) dropped by 70% from last year's near record high of 1,123. A **Swainson's Thrush**, the first state CBC record in almost 30 years, was well-photographed on the Long Branch count; it appeared to be in good health, but was repeatedly harassed by a Hermit Thrush. Mizpah produced an impressive 43,162 American Robins, but that number pales in comparison to their record 213,195 recorded in 2017.

Good numbers (174) of Gray Catbirds were tallied, but the Brown Thrasher total (40) was the lowest since 1989. The 671 American Pipits found on 11 CBCs was the highest total since 2007, while an excellent tally of 6 Lapland Longspurs included 3 in Cape May, 2 in NW Hunterdon County, and one at Sandy Hook. The eight species of wood warbler detected included 3 Nashville Warblers, a Common Yellowthroat in Sussex County, a Cape May Warbler on the Raritan Estuary count and the

long-staying **Yellow-throated Warbler** on the New York City side of the Lower Hudson CBC. The Yellow-throated Warbler was the first ever for the Region and for the Lower Hudson CBC.

Among the good variety of sparrows on the Region's CBCs were a Grasshopper Sparrow at Cape May, which also hosted a Clay-colored Sparrow and a Lark Sparrow. Assunpink also had a Clay-colored Sparrow and Long Branch had a Lark Sparrow. Cape May and Cumberland County each reported a Vesper Sparrow; Raritan Estuary had 2 Lincoln's Sparrows and Princeton one. A long-staying male **Painted Bunting** was on the New Jersey side of the Lower Hudson count.

An encouraging total of 1,474 Rusty Blackbirds were reported, the highest count since 2006. A record total of 37 Baltimore Orioles, one more than the 2023 count of 36, included 23 on the Cape May CBC, most of them at just a couple of feeders. It was yet again a poor year for winter finches with just 7 Pine Siskins and an equal number of Evening Grosbeaks.