The 126th Christmas Bird Count in North Carolina

By Ricky Davis, CBC Regional Editor – North Carolina

The 126th CBC in North Carolina consisted of 55 counts, with only one (Wayne County) not being run. Continuing the trend started last season, the weather averaged slightly warmer temperatures and less precipitation. There were nine counts that had highs above 60 (Pee Dee had a balmy 76!), and only one with a low below 20 (Brevard's 17). Snow was practically non-existent during the entire count period. Frozen water was present on just a couple of counts. Only three counts (Central Beaufort, Morehead City, and Southern Pines) had heavy rain, luckily for only part of the day. High winds, which are always more of a problem than rain, hampered a handful of western counts (Highlands, Grandfather Mountain, Franklin) and several eastern counts (Mattamuskeet, Morehead City, Pettigrew, Rocky Mount, Southern Lake Norman). During this year's Count 1,748,270 individuals of 228 species, 5 Count-Week only (Golden Plover sp., White-winged Dove, Chuck-Will's-Widow, Say's Phoebe, and Northern Waterthrush) birds, and 4 forms (Blue Goose, Eurasian Green-winged Teal, Oregon Dark-sided Junco, and Ipswich Sparrow) were reported. Top Coastal species totals included Wilmington's 169, Southport's 157, Morehead City's 149, Bodie-Pea's 145, Kitty Hawk's 131, and Cape Hatteras' 127. Tidewater counts were led by Lake Mattamuskeet's 149, Pamlico County's 127, New Bern's 123, and Alligator River's 102. Coastal Plain counts were led by Pettigrew with 123, Greenville with 95, and Rocky Mount with 89. Leading Piedmont counts had totals of 107 at Raleigh, 98 at Southern Lake Norman, 95 at Chapel Hill, 94 at Charlotte and Kerr Lake, and 93 at Jordan Lake. Mountains counts were led by Brevard's 80, Henderson County's 76, Buncombe County's 72, Balsam's 69, and Stone Mt.'s 67.

Three **Greater White-fronted Geese** were found, with singles at Balsam, Upper Yadkin River Valley, and Morehead City. Snow Geese numbers were up; as were Ross's Geese (6 at Pettigrew, 4 at Brevard, 2 at Mattamuskeet, and singles at Bodie-Pea and Henderson County). Brant numbers increased, with 143 at Cape Hatteras and 150 at Ocracoke. It is possible that these Counts reported the same wintering flock, which does tend to move around! Five **Cackling Geese** were recorded with two at Pettigrew, and singles at Mattamuskeet, Greenville and Winston-Salem. A **Trumpeter Swan** was a good find at Pettigrew. This area probably has one or more Trumpeters each year. The number of Tundra Swans was comparable to last year. Puddle duck numbers were close to last year, with a few exceptions. Wood Duck and Green-winged Teal numbers were up, while American Wigeon and Northern Shoveler numbers were substantially down. Five **Eurasian Wigeons** were noted with four at Mattamuskeet and one at Pettigrew. Two **Eurasian-Green-winged Teal** included one on the Pettigrew Count and one Count Week at Bodie-Pea. Diving duck numbers were comparable to last winter – but Canvasbacks were slightly up, while Redhead numbers were down. Nine Common Eiders on three counts were slightly up from last year. Three **Harlequin Ducks** were noted on the Wilmington count this year. Scoter numbers were comparable to last year, but the total of 34 White-wingeds on six counts was impressive. Common Mergansers were noted on 11 counts; highlighted by the record total of **1,031** at Pettigrew! Obviously, the wintering flock on Lake Phelps continues to increase. Red-breasted and Hooded Merganser numbers were slightly up this year. Northern Bobwhite numbers were way down again, with only 24 on 5 counts. Always a good find on a Christmas Count, a Ruffed Grouse was located at Franklin. Red-throated Loons were comparable to last year while Common Loon numbers were substantially up. Two **Pacific Loons** were found with singles at Wilmington and Holly Shelter. These could possibly be the same bird, as they are with a large wintering Common Loon flock that moves between the two Count Circles. Horned Grebe numbers were up this year, while Pied-billed Grebe numbers were like last year. Rare grebes included two **Red-necked Grebes** at Wilmington and an **Eared Grebe** at Cape Hatteras. A

Manx Shearwater at Cape Hatteras was a very good find. Very rare for the state in winter were two **Wood Storks** found on the Wilmington and Southport Counts. These two could easily be the same individual, as the locations in these two counts are not very far apart; as the stork flies! Northern Gannets were down again, possibly a sign that avian flu is still a problem at the species' nesting grounds. Double-crested Cormorant and Brown Pelican numbers were comparable to last year; and American White Pelicans were way up with 601 on six counts (but 400 at Bodie-Pea could involve double counting!). Anhinga numbers were way down with only 14 being found on six counts. Long-legged wader numbers were generally comparable to last year. Single Green Herons were noted at Greensboro (where very rare that far inland) and Wilmington. Very rare in winter, a **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** was located on the Morehead City count. Osprey numbers totaled 55 on 16 counts, with the farthest inland being three on the Gastonia count. Three were on last year's count – could they be the same individuals? Vulture numbers were relatively stable this year, as were hawk and Bald Eagle numbers. The rarest bird of prey was the **Golden Eagle** found on the Mount Jefferson count. All rails were down this year, inexplicably so! American Coot numbers were down again, continuing a steady decline for the last four years! **Sandhill Cranes** continue to increase as winter visitors, and this year **166** were found on five counts - Rocky Mount (110), Pettigrew (42), Morehead City (10), Chapel Hill (2), and Pee Dee (2). The Rocky Mount number was a record total for the state! Shorebird numbers presented a mixed bag this count season. Semipalmated Plovers numbers rebounded nicely from last year, but Least Sandpipers, Western Sandpipers, and Wilson's Snipe numbers decreased substantially. Twenty-eight Piping Plovers on five counts provided a most welcome increase from last year. Six Spotted Sandpipers on 5 counts were slightly down from last year. The rarest shorebird was the count week **golden-plover sp**. found at Ocracoke. Jaeger numbers were way down compared to last season with 5 Parasitics on four counts. Razorbills included 18 at Wilmington, 7 at Southport, 5 at Bodie-Pea, 1 at Cape Hatteras, and 1 at Kitty Hawk. Gulls of note included 1 **Little Gull** at Wilmington, 1 Iceland Gull at Cape Hatteras, and a record count of **1,341** Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Holly Shelter. Royal and Forster's Tern numbers were about the same as last year. Black Skimmers lingered in excellent numbers this season, with 930 at Morehead City being exceptional.

One of the best birds this count season was a **White-winged Dove** at Morehead City, unfortunately it was Count Week only! Very rare for the state were the single **Long-eared Owls** heard well at Cape Hatteras and Alligator River. One wonders just how many individuals of this very secretive species are in the state during the winter season. Short-eared Owls were again in very short supply, with only singles being found at Cumberland County and Bodie-Pea. Two Northern Saw-whet Owls were detected, with one at the usual Bodie Island pines area, and one at Pilot Mountain. Another Count Week bird, **Chuck-Will's-Widow**, was found at Ocracoke and provided a very rare winter occurrence. Ruby-throated Hummingbird numbers were about average, with most along the coast as usual. Western hummingbirds wintering at feeders included Rufous at Chapel Hill and New Bern, and **Calliope** at New Bern. All species of woodpeckers were in comparable numbers compared to last year. Numbers for Kestrels and Merlins were down slightly this season, while Peregrine numbers were up slightly, with a total of 8 singles from eight counts Western tyrannids of note included a Count Week **Say's Phoebe** at Raleigh, 2 **Ash-throated Flycatchers** at Alligator River, and 3 **Western Kingbirds** at Pettigrew, Wilmington, and Southport. Amazingly, Raleigh's Say's Phoebe was seen for a considerable period before and after count day! Numbers for Loggerhead Shrike, Blue Jay, and both crows decreased slightly while Raven numbers increased. Blue-headed Vireos and Horned Larks were found in considerably smaller numbers this season, not sure why. Tree Swallow numbers were down slightly again from last year. Red-breasted Nuthatch numbers were very similar to last year, with 123 being found on 28 counts. All wrens, except Winter and

Carolina, were found in smaller numbers this year. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and both Kinglets were present in similar numbers to last year. Thrush and mimic thrush numbers were comparable to last season. Cedar Waxwing numbers improved slightly when compared to the last several years. Thirteen species of warbler were found this count season! Of the less common regulars, two Ovenbirds were found (1 at Raven Rock, 1 at Cape Hatteras), but Black-and-whites, Yellow-throateds, and Prairies were found in usual numbers. The most noteworthy warblers were a Count Week **Northern Waterthrush** at Mattamuskeet, **5 Nashville Warblers** (3 at Southport, 1 at Cape Hatteras, and 1 at Raleigh), an **American Redstart** at Morehead City, and a **Northern Parula** at Greenville. Also of note was one **Yellow-breasted Chat** on the Morehead City count. Bachman's Sparrow is a regular winter resident in the pine woods of the Coastal Plain but is very secretive and hard to find. Thus 13 on three counts (7 at Holly Shelter, 1 at Camp Lejeune, and 5 at Southport) was commendable. The three marsh sparrows (Nelson's, Saltmarsh, and Seaside) were found in good numbers this year, no doubt due to calm conditions on many of the coastal counts. A **Lark Sparrow** on the Bodie-Pea count was a good find. Numbers of Dark-eyed Juncos were down this winter. But of note was the **"Oregon" Dark-sided Junco** on the Falls Lake count. This western form is rarely reported in the state. No Clay-colored Sparrows were found this year, but nine **Lincoln's Sparrows** were highlighted by 4 at Pettigrew; and singles at Mount Jefferson and Gastonia being rare far inland. An impressive six **Western Tanagers** were found this season (Raleigh, Kitty Hawk, Pamlico County, New Bern, Holly Shelter, and Wilmington). A **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** was photographed at Alligator River, providing a rare winter occurrence. This year's Painted Bunting numbers were the same as last year. Blackbird numbers were slightly down this year for most species, except for the million Red-winged Blackbirds at Mattamuskeet! Six **Brewer's Blackbirds** were at Roanoke Rapids, for the second year in a row. Wintering Baltimore Oriole numbers were down slightly with 145 from 16 counts! The best totals were 27 at Wilmington, 22 at Greenville, and 20 at New Bern. **Bullock's Oriole** is becoming an annual winter visitor in the state, all frequenting feeders. This year two were present, with singles at Morehead City and New Bern. Purple Finches were up again with 727 on 48 counts, while Pine Siskins were still down with 53 on 12 counts. American Goldfinch numbers were up this year; as were Red Crossbills with 49 on five counts. As usual, no Evening Grosbeaks were found this count season.