The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Oregon

By Alan Contreras, CBC Regional Editor – Oregon

Oregon held 51 Christmas Bird Counts during the 2025-2026 season and welcomed HOOD RIVER back to the active list after several fallow years. HART MOUNTAIN was back after taking last year off owing to severe wildfire damage in the circle.

As the CBC season began, horrible weather was imminent. The first day of the count period, though breezy on the coast (especially at PORT ORFORD and COLUMBIA ESTUARY) was generally benign. BURNS compiler Rick Vetter noted that the weather was "unseasonably warm and dry, which allowed access to high-elevation sites never birded before. [It was] one of the few years we missed **Greater Sage-Grouse** due to fall-like conditions."

The weather stayed warm for a while, but the "dry" part lasted about 36 hours. Brutal rainstorms; winds locally reaching hurricane intensity; and flooding sufficient to take out trees, utilities, roads, and bridges occurred from mid-day December 15 through about December 19. Two coastal counts, LINCOLN CITY and TILLAMOOK BAY, were postponed until later in the period owing to unsafe conditions and impassable roads on their original dates.

By December 20, weather started shifting into a cooler, more typical winter pattern, with significant montane snow arriving a month later than expected. Counts held between December 20 and January 1 had birdable weather with the usual mix of local rain and fog in western Oregon, and modest snow and freezing east of the Cascades. The last few days of the period experienced a return to southerly airflow that continued into mid-January, with high temperatures locally close to 60°F in the interior and on the south coast.

Warmer than usual weather for the first half of the period likely contributed to many late-fall stragglers and semi-hardy winter holdovers. Although this pattern probably helped many of the late birds hang around, it may also be partly responsible for low numbers of many species that either stayed at higher elevations, remained dispersed owing to flooding, or dawdled in leaving more northerly locations. Whether this delayed-and-shortened winter pattern is the new normal remains to be seen. By April, 2026, very little precipitation had fallen and montane snowpacks were below 50% of normal.

Species Variety

The highest species variety was found, as usual, on the outer coast, where COQUILLE VALLEY's 146 species slightly exceeded COLUMBIA ESTUARY's new record of 141; the former high for that long-standing count was 139. TILLAMOOK BAY came in at 140 and FLORENCE tied its recent high with 139. The western interior valleys showed good species variety as well, with SAUVIE ISLAND at 133, its all-time best by one. EUGENE was close behind at 132, one below its recent average. OAKRIDGE got a good weather window and some experienced observers and found 78, its highest since the count was restarted in 2010. East of the Cascades the highest tally was a record-tying 113 at KLAMATH FALLS, one of the state's oldest counts, where a number of warm-weather holdovers appeared.

State Rarities

The period got off to a fast start on December 14 as three counts turned up first state CBC records. FLORENCE produced the first **Cocos Booby** ever for an Oregon CBC. Ten years ago Oregon had just 11 records of this species and today it has more than 30. COLUMBIA ESTUARY claimed the first state CBC record of **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** with an individual that had been present for a couple of days before the count. A Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was also found the same count day at NEAH BAY, Washington, where it, too, was a first state CBC record. And PORT ORFORD, the southernmost active count on the Oregon coast, turned up a first Oregon CBC **Indigo Bunting**.

TILLAMOOK BAY's postponement resulted in a lighter turnout and a somewhat low species tally, but also generated a count first **Painted Bunting** (Oregon's 13th). This was also the first count-day record for Oregon; Coos Bay once had a count-week bird. YAQUINA BAY managed two count firsts, the state's third CBC **Black-headed Gull** (Oregon's 12th overall) and its sixth CBC **Franklin's Gull**.

The south coast, where counts and observers are few, supported several wintering rarities and unseasonable birds, including COQUILLE VALLEY'S first count record of **Summer Tanager**, a species also found at PORTLAND and present elsewhere on the southern Oregon coast. In addition to its Indigo Bunting, PORT ORFORD delivered an overdue first record of **Tennessee Warbler**, well-documented with photos. Tennessee Warbler is now understood to be a rare but regular wintering bird on the southern half of the Oregon coast, with occasional birds elsewhere west of the Cascades.

Local Rarities and Happenings

Another year of unfrozen water early in the period had significant impacts in eastern Oregon, but water levels were low in some areas, while MALHEUR NWR and the Warner Valley segment at HART MOUNTAIN had plenty. Unheard-of winter birds like flocks of **Great Egret** and **White-faced Ibis** were still present at Malheur's Narrows (outside the count circles) in January, where high waterfowl and grebe numbers reflected unfrozen water. SUMMER LAKE also had good counts of birds using open water, setting a new record for total number of birds, with **American Avocet** a first count record. **American Tree Sparrow** was also found at SUMMER LAKE — this is the southwesternmost point in Oregon where it is fairly regular on a CBC; HART MOUNTAIN also had one. **Soras** were found at six cold-side counts, where none would be expected.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker occurs in Oregon most winters; this year they were picked up at PRINEVILLE (a count first) and COQUILLE VALLEY. Great Egret is a standard bird in western Oregon but TILLAMOOK BAY's **409** set an all-time count record. TILLAMOOK BAY also had its first-ever **Lesser Yellowlegs**.

Barn Swallows appeared at many western Oregon counts, sometimes in small flocks. They were east of the Cascades at KLAMATH FALLS, BEND, and PRINEVILLE on count day and at SUNRIVER and MCNARY-HERMISTON for count week. This appears to be the most widespread array of Barn Swallow ever for Oregon CBCs, although 22 at FLORENCE in 2003 remains the single-count record.

Vesper Sparrow was a first count record at GRANTS PASS, as was **Sagebrush Sparrow** at PINE VALLEY. An astonishing first record **Lark Sparrow** was found in a flock of juncos on the WALLOWA COUNTY count. This species is very rare in winter outside the Rogue Valley, where small flocks can sometimes be found. One of the "at last" records that has been expected for a while is ROSEBURG's first count record of **California Towhee**, a species that seems to be slowly expanding northward. TILLAMOOK BAY set all-time count records for both White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrow. TILLAMOOK BAY also found a Black-throated Gray Warbler, as did PORTLAND.

ROSEBURG had a local record high count of **Acorn Woodpecker**, as did SILVERTON, TYGH VALLEY, and DALLAS, a good sign for this somewhat patchy species. SILVERTON also found its first **Sandhill Cranes**, **Wrentits** (possibly indicating range expansion), and **Band-tailed Pigeons** — the latter a species that seems to be hanging around in winter more often. Occasional birds winter in the Rogue Valley and in Portland's West Hills.

AIRLIE-ALBANY noted its first **Yellow-headed Blackbird** and **Pacific Loon**; the latter was also a first at WALLOWA COUNTY. SALEM had a second record **Western Tanager**, its second **Turkey Vulture** (the first was last year), and first **Barrow's Goldeneye** — a regular bird 40 miles east in the Cascade foothills. Barrow's seem especially site-selective, routinely appearing on one lake, bay, or river while ignoring apparently identical habitat a few miles away. EUGENE had its second-ever Barrow's, a regular bird 25 miles east on the Willamette, but apparently not on the McKenzie. Perhaps this

species was affected by major drawdowns of montane reservoirs just east of the SALEM and EUGENE circles, though it often prefers fast rivers.

In the Columbia Gorge, HOOD RIVER found its first-ever **Say's Phoebe**. East of the Cascades, KLAMATH FALLS found its first-ever **Surf Scoter**. MADRAS, which is not a major gull area, found three species including its first **California** and **Short-billed Gull**. GRANTS PASS found its first-ever **American White Pelican**.

Biggest Change

If there were a prize for the biggest change from previous counts, it would have to go to HART MOUNTAIN, which has operated most of the last 47 years. The pine-aspen stand known as Blue Sky Hotel — the only stand of pine (or any other evergreen besides juniper) within 40 miles — largely burned in a wildfire in the summer of 2024. In winter 2024-2025 the area could not be reached and the count was not held.

HART MOUNTAIN had never recorded **Black-backed Woodpecker** before. How did this year's two birds know to fly all the way there across the vast sagebrush flats? The same question might apply to the **16 Hairy Woodpeckers** and the four **Downy Woodpeckers** at Blue Sky, as the surrounding miles are made up almost entirely of sage steppe and spotty juniper. These two woodpeckers and Northern Flicker set all-time count records, but small birds that had been reliable at Blue Sky may largely disappear from this count.

Open water also allowed HART MOUNTAIN, which includes a portion of the Warner Valley lakes, to find a first count-day record for an astonishing eight species, including three grebes. On the downside, the count found no Sage-Grouse, a very unusual result.

Notable Highs and Lows

New state all-time highs were set for **Trumpeter Swan** (1,175, SAUVIE ISLAND), **Sandhill Crane** (6,688, SAUVIE ISLAND), **Snow Goose** (38,786, MCNARY-HERMISTON), **American Avocet** (3, SUMMER LAKE), **White-breasted Nuthatch** (162, PORTLAND), **Brown Creeper** (246, PORTLAND), **Nashville Warbler** (3, COQUILLE VALLEY), **Sagebrush Sparrow** (2, PINE VALLEY, tying Summer Lake in 2023) and **Great-tailed Grackle** (14, KLAMATH FALLS). **Great-tailed Grackle** now breeds near Klamath Falls, as well as at Ontario and at least occasionally in the Medford area. Some of these birds have begun wintering.

It was an "up" year for **American Kestrel** in much of northwestern and central Oregon. TILLAMOOK BAY found a record 48 kestrels; its recent averages have been less than half as many. Thirteen other counts also had record highs, including WAHKIAKUM, based on the Washington side of the Lower Columbia but with 60% of its land area in Oregon. At least eight additional counts noted that their kestrel tally was higher than usual. See the map figure for a look at what happened with American Kestrel counts. This increase was confirmed by nearly simultaneous record counts of kestrels on standardized winter "raptor route" surveys. Northwestern California had a good number, too, while Idaho numbers were average in the panhandle and a bit above average in the Snake River plain.

British Columbia regional editor David Scott notes (pers. comm.) that "kestrel breeding numbers are way up on southern Vancouver Island in the past few years. Some have suggested the population explosion of invasive European Wall Lizards [*Podarcis muralis*] may be a factor, as nest monitors have noted this is a primary prey item now. This could help explain why coastal AMKE numbers are increasing in fall/winter."

Other common winter species that appeared in unusually high numbers on multiple counts included **California Gull**, **Brown Creeper**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**, **Pacific Wren**, **Spotted Towhee** (but very low in some locations), and **Bufflehead** (new records for these species in a few

circles). **Yellow-rumped Warbler** set new all-time records at GRANTS PASS and ASHLAND; perhaps these were birds hanging around in mild conditions, as some did in eastern Oregon. Mild conditions may also have accounted for **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** numbers in east-side regions where they are often absent in winter.

Chipping Sparrow was present at various locations in western Oregon during winter, yet was found only on the EUGENE and SAUVIE ISLAND counts. Although numbers of **Swamp Sparrow** were not high in any given circle, many counts found one or two, with four at FLORENCE the high. Other unusual sparrows appeared here and there, with **Harris's Sparrows** at CORVALLIS, TYGH VALLEY, and UNION COUNTY.

A unique flock of **White-throated Sparrows** has been using the same farm feed-pile (left intentionally for wildlife by the farmer) in the EUGENE circle for at least three years. This year there were an amazing **24** White-throats at the pile, perhaps the largest group ever found in Oregon. The last few years have had smaller but often double-digit numbers. ROSEBURG found a count record 41 White-throated Sparrows this year, suggesting that more than one feed-pile is affecting numbers.

American Robins were generally very low in number at eastern Oregon concentration sites where they usually feast on juniper berries. REDMOND, in the heart of the juniper zone, had an all-time low. MEDFORD seemed to have acquired all those robins, with over 73,000. **Varied Thrush** had anemic numbers almost everywhere, perhaps because of the exceptional lack of snow cover in the whole region until mid-December. **Pine Siskins** were largely absent and **Red Crossbills** in low numbers. **Palm Warbler** was not very obvious this fall and mostly absent on CBCs, with an exception of eight at their traditional stronghold in PORT ORFORD, where they winter on large Cape Blanco ranches, often around buildings.

Expansions

Cinnamon Teal used to be a very local species in winter, regular only on the south coast and the lower Columbia. It has slowly become a semi-regular and fairly widespread bird on CBCs. This year it was found on 12 counts, mostly west of the Cascades. **Turkey Vulture** is expanding in all directions from its modern winter roost in the EUGENE circle. SALEM has now found it for two consecutive years, having never had it before last year. Eight counts reported vultures this year. **California Scrub-Jay** continues to increase and expand into far eastern Oregon. BURNS had a record 60 and MCNARY-HERMISTON had 176. BAKER CITY's 17 seem likely to increase rapidly; the first birds were found only four years ago.

Contractions

Rock Sandpiper continues its slow fade from Oregon. *None* were found on an Oregon count day (TILLAMOOK BAY managed a count-week bird) for only the second time since the 1960s, though a few were wintering from Lincoln County northward. As far as I know there are now no regular wintering sites in Oregon south of Seal Rock in central Lincoln County. **Surfbird** numbers, which have seemed shaky in recent years, seemed to be up a little.

Ring-necked Pheasant is now merely a relict population in much of western Oregon, sustained in part (or entirely) by ongoing reintroductions. EUGENE found only one; last year its 13 was one-third of the count in all of western Oregon. It is still regular in moderate numbers in the farm belt along the upper Columbia River, which is where almost all Oregon CBC birds now come from. The absence of counts in northern Malheur County make it hard to judge the status of that population, but BAKER CITY, which had 400 in 1963, had none this year. I suspect that a combination of clean farming, less frequent reintroductions, steady predation, and perhaps some less obvious habitat changes are the cause of this change, but I really don't know.

Count-Week Teasers

As usual, some remarkable birds carefully avoided count days in order to frustrate counters by showing up a day or so before or after the count. Among the more exciting were **Black-footed Albatross** and **Sabine's Gull** at COLUMBIA ESTUARY, **Clay-colored Sparrow** at FLORENCE, **Tennessee Warbler** at YAQUINA BAY, **Barn Swallow** at MCNARY-HERMISTON and SUNRIVER, and **Bullock's Oriole** at DALLAS. CORVALLIS had its first-ever **Long-billed Curlew** during count week.

Changing of the Guard

Special thanks are due to COLUMBIA ESTUARY'S long-time compiler Mike Patterson, who retired from that role after fulfilling it from 1989 through 2025. Mike handed the count back to its original compiler, Dave Irons.

Next Year

The 2026-27 count period has a calendar that may disrupt traditional schedules: the count period starts with the 14th on a Monday, which also puts Christmas on a Friday. The first Saturday of the period is the 19th. Count organizers are encouraged to discuss dates with organizers of nearby counts. As of this writing no new counts are planned for Oregon, though with luck some inactive counts will restart. Someday maybe we'll have the TREASURE VALLEY count we need in the Payette-Ontario area.

In general, CBCs ought to welcome new participants. That is especially true if the traditional coverage drops below the 10 observers recommended by National Audubon as a minimum turnout. If your count has fallen below 10 regular observers (and a few Oregon counts have), please make an effort to recruit more people.

My other suggestion for all counts next year is to make a special effort to count owls. On counts with enough observers, consider treating owling as a special activity on count day, with someone organizing it. This year AIRLIE-ALBANY did particularly well with owls, ROSEBURG and PORTLAND had a good variety, and SAUVIE ISLAND set an example for everyone: it found **75** owls of six species. They are out there.