The 126th Christmas Bird Count in South Carolina

By Matt Johnson, CBC Regional Editor – South Carolina

This summary is dedicated to the memory of Bryan "Lex" Glover, longtime CBC compiler and participant, who passed away in 2025.

The 2025-2026 season was the 126th year of Audubon's Christmas Bird Count (CBC), the longest running wildlife census in the world! In South Carolina, there were 30 individual counts across the Palmetto State that took place between December 14th, 2025 and January 5th, 2026. No new count circles were added in 2025-2026, but I'm happy to report that the Lake Wateree CBC, which hadn't run in several years, was started up again.

Overall, both participation and effort were about the same as last year. There were a total of 1,409 participants across all counts. Of these, 1,174 were field participants and 235 watched birds at feeders. Participation spanned from counts with 175+ participants (Hilton Head Island had 204 and Sun City-Okatie had 184), to counts with as few as five participants.

The 1,174 field participants covered quite a bit of ground this year – some 955 miles on foot and 3,907 miles by car. Combined with other modes of transportation (boat, bicycle, golfcart), the total effort for this year's count covered 5,375 miles over 2,028 hours.

The weather this year was accommodating overall, with only a few counts being impacted by adverse weather conditions. Most of these were counts that had field parties covering territories accessible only by boat.

These 1,409 counters found a total of 502,400 individual birds across 223 species. This is down a bit from last year, but still an impressive total. The bird species with the highest number tallied this year were Red-winged Blackbird (58,494), followed by American Coot (37,769) and Ring-billed Gull (26,625).

Once again, the McClellanville CBC continued as the individual count with the highest species total, documenting 168 species this year. Close behind was the Winyah Bay CBC with 166 species, and then the Sea Islands CBC which reported 162 species.

The 126th CBC was a notable year for rarities, with lots of unusual birds being reported across the state. Below are some of the interesting birds found this year.

Rare waterfowl this winter included **Ross's Goose** and **Greater White-fronted Goose**, along with a single **Common Eider** and two **Common Goldeneyes**. An impressive 12 **Common Mergansers** were found on the Clemson CBC. There were also a huge number of **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks** found this year as this species continues expanding north; 718 were documented across 5 counts!

Least Bitterns were found on the McClellanville and Lewis Ocean Bay CBCs. The birders in Clemson also found a **Red-necked Grebe** this year.

Among uncommon shorebirds, a total of 9 **Long-billed Curlew**s were reported this year across two counts – Edisto Island (8) and Sea Islands (1). For the first time in a while, no Purple Sandpipers were reported on a count.

Among seabirds, a single **Parasitic Jaeger** was found on the Sea Islands CBC. An **Iceland Gull** was a nice find on the Lewis Ocean Bay CBC.

For raptors, **Golden Eagles** continue to be seen on the Savannah River Site CBC. In addition, a **Broad-winged Hawk** was found by birders on the Columbia CBC.

Two **White-winged Doves** were reported this year, one each on the Hilton Head Island and McClellanville CBCs.
A total of 47 **Ruby-throated Hummingbirds** were reported across 7 CBCs; this is up from the 39 reported last year. For the third year in a row, there was a ***Selaphorus*** hummingbird (either Rufous or Allen's) on the Lower Saluda CBC.

Perhaps the rarest bird of the entire count season was the **Burrowing Owl** found during the James Island CBC. This bird spent a few months at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, much to the delight of hundreds of birders!

The Litchfield-Pawleys Island CBC found this year's only **Western Kingbird**. This was the first year in a while that no counts reported an Ash-throated Flycatcher. A **Purple Martin** was documented on the Sea Islands CBC, which is an excellent find for January.

There were several rare songbirds found on CBCs in South Carolina this year. Notable species include:

- A **Swainson's Thrush** photographed on the Pee Dee Area CBC.
- An **Ovenbird** on the ACE Basin CBC.
- Two **Northern Parulas** – one each on the ACE Basin and Sun City-Okatie CBCs.
- Two CBCs also reported **Yellow-breasted Chats** – one each on the Sea Islands and James Island CBCs.
- A pair of **Western Tanagers** were found as well, one each on both the Lowcountry and Lower Saluda CBCs.
- Two **Bobolinks** were found on the ACE Basin CBC.
- It was a great winter for sparrows: multiple **Grasshopper**, **LeConte's** and **Henslow's Sparrows** were all documented, and a few rarer sparrows were found too, most notably **Clay-colored Sparrow** and **American Tree Sparrow**. **Lincoln's Sparrows** were also found in good numbers this winter in South Carolina; for the CBC, we documented a total of seven across five counts.

As for irruptive species documented during the 126th CBC in South Carolina, there were good numbers of **Purple Finches** seen across the state – we had 148 across 22 counts. A total of 13 **Red-breasted Nuthatches** were found across 8 CBCs and only 7 **Pine Siskins** (all of which were found on the Keowee CBC).

Lastly, **Baltimore Orioles** continue to be seen in high numbers during the winter in South Carolina. We've set consecutive records for this species over the last few years, and the 126th CBC was no exception. Last year's record was 103 orioles found on 11 counts. But this year, we had 114 orioles across 15 counts!

Thanks so much to all the participants that gave their time for the 126th CBC. In particular, many thanks to all the compilers that organized their respective counts and submitted all their data.

We hope to see you all again for the 127th CBC, which will take place from December 14th, 2026 – January 5th, 2027. In addition, the team at National Audubon is busy overhauling the entire CBC system, from recruitment to data entry to summarizing results. I know I speak for the whole team in saying how excited we are to share these updates with you later this year!