The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Texas

By Brent Ortego, Ph.D., CBC Regional Editor - Texas

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) season approached with mostly mild dry weather. Scouting along the central *Texas* Gulf Coast showed lower waterfowl and raptors numbers. Most of the waterbirds from the fall had left for "wetter pastures". Sparrows were in small numbers. Migrating passerines in late fall were hard for me to locate. Conditions looked like a below average CBC season which made my stomach queasy. I kept asking myself "Is this the year another CBC will report more species than Matagorda County"?

The ***Texas*** CBC season started on Sunday 14 December 2025 at 10 CBCs and finished on Monday 5 January 2026 at 3 sites. Most CBCs were conducted on the 1st Saturday with 24 sites being active, and the last Saturday produced the 2nd most CBCs with 13 being active. The 121 total CBCs were a little lower than last season with 5 sites choosing not to participate. Marfa in far West ***Texas*** was a new CBC and it produced 78 species which included highest tallies of 9 species and the only **Baird's Sparrow** of the season. We look forward to seeing more reports of Baird's Sparrow and other West Texas specialties in the future from this CBC.

Texas reported 383 **species** (+ 2 others in Count Week) which was the 4th most in the last decade

The 3916 **Birder-Days** was a record for ***Texas*** and the **7656 Party-Hours** used was 3% below average for the last 10-years. Another hour per birder-day might have found us

pushing **400 species**.



Pacific Wren found at **Guadalupe Mountains CBC** was the 1st for a ***Texas*** **CBC. Photo: Jeff Sexton/Christmas Bird Count.**



The **Yellow-headed Caracara** lingered at **Galveston CBC** for another year**. Photo 2025: Greg Whitaker/Christmas Bird Count.**



An American Flamingo spent the winter at Port Aransas CBC. Photo: Scott Holt/Christmas Bird Count.

Read the rest of the article to learn about more exciting reports from *Texas* CBCs.

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CBC TALLIES

Fifteen of the 121 CBCs had at least 150 species. **Matagorda County–Mad Island Marsh** led ***Texas*** and ***United States*** CBCs with 239 species. **Guadalupe River Delta-McFaddin Family Ranches** was 2nd with 221 and **Jackson-Calhoun** was 3rd with 192. **Freeport CBC** had 187 species, **Galveston** reported 180, **Corpus Christi and San Bernard N.W.R.** 178, **Bolivar Peninsula** 167, **Powderhorn** 164**, West End Galveston** 163**, Brownsville** and **Harlingen** 159**, Port Aransas** 158**, Brazoria-Columbia Bottomlands** 154**,** and **Laguna Atascosa N.W.R.** 150**.**

Individual Species: Seventy-nine of the 121 CBCs had the highest tally of at least one of the 383 species in ***Texas***. **Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh** led the **State** with the highest tallies for 52 of those species. **Guadalupe River Delta** had highest tallies for 32 species, Cypress Creek and Davis Mountains 14 each, and Harlingen 13. All other CBCs had the highest tally for 9 species or less.

RARITIES



Valley Specialties are frequently rarities in the rest of *Texas* and are sometimes reported without photographs.

Texas reported 37 species which were found only on one of the 121 CBCs. Congratulations are extended to **Matagorda County – Mad Island Marsh** for another banner year of uncommon species. It reported the only **Short-tailed Hawk**, **Pectoral Sandpiper**, **Lesser Nighthawks**, and **Prairie Warbler**. **Davis Mountains** reported 20 **Montezuma Quail** and a **Williamson's Sapsucker**. **Falcon Dam** had **Mottled Owl** for the 2nd year in a row, **Rose-throated Becard** and 8 **Brown Jays**. **Anzalduas-Bentsen S.P.** had **Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** and **Hook-billed Kite**. **Freeport** had **American Redstart** and **Bullock's Oriole**. **Buffalo Lake N.W.R.** had a **Ring-necked Pheasant**. **Attwater's Prairie-Chicken N.W.R.** had 23 **Attwater's Greater Prairie-Chickens**. **Balmorhea** had a **Red-throated Loon**, **Tascosa-Seyffert** had a **Rough-legged Hawk**. **Powderhorn** had a **jaeger**. **Kenedy County Wind Turbines** had 6 **Least Terns**. **Big Bend N.P. (east)** had 2 **Western Screech-Owls**. **Guadalupe River Delta** had 2 **Common Nighthawks**. **Victoria** had the only **Calliope Hummingbird**. **Spring Creek** had 7 **Red-cockaded Woodpeckers**. **Corpus Christi–Flour Bluff** reported an **Eastern Kingbird**. **El Paso** had a **Plumbeous Vireo**. **Chisos Mountains** had **28 Mexican Jays**. **Love Creek** had 1 **Louisiana Waterthrush**. **Brownsville** had a **Tennessee Warbler**. **West End Galveston Island** had a

Western Tanager. **Brazoria-Columbia Bottomlands** had an **Orchard Oriole**, and **Westcave Preserve** reported 2 **Scott's Orioles**. **Guadalupe River Delta-McFaddin Family Ranches CBC** had 2 **Dickcissels** (highest *U.S.* tally).



Calliope Hummingbird spent the winter in Victoria County (TXVI). Eight *Texas* report for decade. Photo: Dora Ann Ortego/Christmas Bird Count.

MISSED

I always do a self-evaluation at the end of a CBC. Did I miss species or were they just not there? Looking at how many species on the count which were represented by one individual might provide an index to the likelihood you **Missed** species with the higher % indicating species more likely have been missed. As an example, at **Guadalupe River Delta CBC** 10% of the 221 species were represented by 1 individual on 18 December and at **Matagorda County CBC** 8% of their 238 species were represented by 1 individual during 15 December with similar weather.
Texas CBCs **individually averaged 14% of their species** tally being represented by one bird. The **Long-tailed Duck** was the only species not reported this season that was reported in the previous 9 CBC seasons. **Pacific Loon, California Gull**, and **Long-eared Owl** were missed this year, but were found 8 of the last 10 years. **White-winged Scoter, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Greater Pewee, American Tree Sparrow and Rose-breasted Grosbeak** were found in 6 of the last 10 seasons, but not this one.

How can we tell if we missed? It is speculative to say we missed unless we have before and after data for the areas surveyed. For "grins" I looked at 97 species which we had during the past decade that was not found this season and tallied how many times they were reported in the decade. Forty-two were only reported once, 21 twice, seven 3-times, five 4-times, seven 5-times, six 8 times and none 9 times.

THE COUNT SEASON

EFFORT

Total CBCs – Marfa was the only new CBC this year bringing our total active **CBCs** up to 121. **Birder-Days – 3916** (21% above avg.), **Party-Hours – 7656** (- 3% of past 10-years average), and **Party-Miles – 24,004** (3% below 10-yr average).

Austin (113), **Trinity River Audubon Center** (103)**, Matagorda County** (93), **Buffalo Bayou** (88), **College Station** (78), **San Marcus** (77), and **Harlingen and Spring Creek** (75) had the most field birders for ***Texas***. ***Texas*** averaged 32 field birders per CBC

Dora Ann, and I managed to participate in 8 CBCs during the 1st 10 days. It was a Great Experience on the Coast being able to participate in many of the CBCs with the highest number of species. We recommend you try it.

WEATHER

Texas rain dancers, holders of weather charms and focused wishes to the Weather Makers might have kept most of the rain away, but not other adverse weather. Weather during the counts hampered 42% of the CBCs for part of the day (fog, rain, <32 - >80°F, wind 21+mph). Freezing temps occurred on 4% with the 12°F at **Buffalo Lake N.W.R. CBC** being the coldest. Hottest temperature was 89°F at **Santa Ana N.W.R. CBC**. Fog occurred on 14% of the counts and rain on 8% of the CBCs with only 1 having heavy rain. The Winds 20+ mph occurred on 12% of the counts with the strongest at 42 mph at **Pineywoods CBC.** Weather was mostly reported as pleasant and occasionally too warm. This past winter was again reported as one of the hottest on record. Mosquitoes became a nuisance along the Coast with the above average temps.

SPECIAL ASPECTS

At the end of each CBC report, there is a section labeled "**SPECIAL ASPECTS**". The compiler is provided this space to discuss issues related to their CBC. I read every one. Compilers from 35 of the 121 CBCs provided some meaningful comments/information in the Special Aspects Section. The main topics were drought in the West, development near urban areas and the occasional bad weather.

POPULATION TRENDS (Where Have All The Birds Gone?)

[Population trend section will compare number of individuals of a species tallied this season to the tallies adjusted for effort from the last 10-years in *Texas*. Population changes indicated will be for those reports which deviated by more than 1 standard deviation from that species 10-year average unless otherwise indicated. Percent decreasing is underrepresented because missed birds are not part of the % decreased. National avian trend data for > 50 years can be found at (https://www.audubon.org/conservation/where-have-all-birds-gone)].

Table 1. Percentages of species increasing or decreasing by CBC season in *Texas*.

SEASON	INCREASING	DECREASING	NO CHANGE	
109th	**19%**	16%	65%	Hurricane Ike
110th	**24%**	14%	60%	drought
111th	**30%**	4%	66%	
112th	**26%**	22%	52%	drought
113th	19%	**24%**	57%	drought
114th	13%	**21%**	66%	drought
115th	**25%**	15%	60%	
116th	**21%**	16%	63%	
117th	**20%**	15%	65%	warm
118th	17%	**20%**	63%	Hurricane Harvey
119th	15%	**27%**	58%	wet fall
120th	17%	**24%**	59%	dry fall
121st	20%	**24%**	55%	drought
122nd	13%	**34%**	53%	wet summer
123rd	18%	**22%**	60%	drought
124th	17%	**20%**	63%	drought
125th	25%	17%	58%	drought
126th	23%	13%	64%	drought

Species with increasing populations occurred at >10% than those decreasing on ***Texas*** CBCs for the 2nd time in 9 years. **Ninety-eight** (23%) **were above the past 10-year average** this season**.**

[Species tallies in this section will be shown in (parenthesis) when a species is discussed.]

GEESE: 5 species stable and 2 decreasing. G. White-fronted Goose well below average.



Part of Snow Goose roost at Eagle Lake within TXAP CBC: Photo: **Brent Ortego**/Christmas Bird Count.

PUDDLE DUCKS: 7 species stable and 4 below average. **Gadwall (11,704)** at lowest level in decade.

DIVING DUCKS: 9 species stable and 5 declining. **Redhead** (31,495) and **Red-breasted Merganser** (1043) at lowest level for decade.

UPLAND GAME BIRDS: 7 species stable and the **Scaled Quail (705)** was reported at its highest level for the decade. This might have been in part due to a high population in the new **Marfa** CBC.

LOONS THRU GREBES: 3 species were stable, and 5 were below average. **Horned Grebe** (130) and **Eared Grebe** (134) were at their lowest levels for decade.



Large # of eBird reports this fall enhanced the likelihood of a record # (39) of Brown Boobies reported at 10 CBCs. Photo: David Sarkozi/Christmas Bird Count.

STORK THRU SPOONBILL: It was a good season for this group. We had **Am. Flamingo** followed by record high counts of **Brown Booby** (39), **Northern Gannet** (65), **Reddish Egret** (2017) and **Green Heron** (116). **Neotropic Cormorants** started nesting early with over 2000 pairs at the **Guadalupe River Delta CBC**. **Black-crowned Night-Heron** and **White-faced Ibis** were the only species below average.



Coastal Tip CBC has set all-time high records for Reddish Egret 2 years in a row. Photo: Justin LeClaire/Christmas Bird Count.

DIURNAL RAPTORS: 5 species increasing with 2 at record high levels for decade: **Black Vulture** (26,507) and **Bald Eagle (**499); 5 decreasing with 2 at record low levels (**Sharp-shinned Hawk** 163, and **Red-tailed Hawk** 2257) and 10 stable.



Nesting Bald Eagles have fascinated me ever since I saw my first nest in Panola County during a snow event in 1983. The Texas CBCs have shown continued population increases from 122 in 2003 to 499 in 2025. Photo: Skip Cantrell/ Christmas Bird Count.

RAILS THRU CRANES: 5 species increasing, 4 decreasing and 3 stable. **Purple Gallinule** (3) and **Limpkin** (125) were at record levels. **American Coot** (51,255), and **Sandhill Crane** (12,348) were at their lowest levels in the decade. **Whooping Cranes** were reported at 6 counts but only had 72 birds due to bad weather at **Aransas N.W.R. Guadalupe River Delta** had its highest tally of **Whoopers** with 36,



Yellow Rail photographed during the traditional midnight rail survey at Matagorda County CBC. Photo: Rich Kostecke/Christmas Bird Count.

SHOREBIRDS: Have been reported as "***The Wind Birds***" by Peter Matthiessen in his book "*The Shorebirds of North America"*. They demonstrated their affinity to move with the wind daily/seasonally (105,473 shorebirds were tallied in the 123rd season, 207,000 in the 124th, 130,390 in the 125th and 102,773 in the 126th) chasing food and seeking protection with the changing tides. Eight species were increasing, 5 decreasing and 18 stable this season. **Long-billed Curlew** (3001) was at it highest level for the decade.



The **Laguna Madre** is a major wintering area for the **Western Sandpiper. Photo: Justin LeClaire/Christmas Bird Count.**

JAEGER THRU SKIMMER: Four species increased, 10 were stable and one decreased. **Laughing Gull** (45,177), **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (55), and **Least Tern** (6) were reported at record high levels for the decade. **Black Skimmer** was 50% above average.



Gulls and **Terns** resting on the beach at **Matagorda County CBC** were in above average numbers**. Photo: Hank Arnold/Christmas Bird Count.**

PIGEONS THRU ANI: Two species increasing, 2 decreasing and 5 stable. Greater Roadrunner (317) was reported at its highest level in the decade, and Rock Pigeon (24,470) at its lowest.



Burrowing Owl is a popular species in coastal counties that can be a challenge to locate. General rules I follow are to stay away from trees, power lines and fences. Search in areas of open ag fields and grasslands that have small diameter culverts, rip-rap, jetties, sand dunes, animal burrows and dense rows of round bales of hay. Photo: Stephen Biles/Christmas Bird Count.

OWLS THRU NIGHTJARS: 4 species increasing and 9 stable. **Barred Owl** (330), **Lesser Nighthawk** (2) and **Common Nighthawk** (2) had record high tallies for the decade. Warmer temps helped locate night birds at dawn.



Which Species is It? Correct Answer is **Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird**. My Research in V**ictoria** indicated about 8% of this type of hummer on the ***Texas* Coast** were **Allen's**. We should not assume that all ***Selasphorus*** are **Rufous**. Photo: Brent Ortego/Christmas Bird Count.

SWIFT THRU HUMMINGBIRDS: Three species increased, 1 declined and 5 were stable. **Anna's Hummingbird** (5) had its lowest tally for the decade.



Reported numbers of **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** have declined from an average of 49 per season in the 1st half of the decade to 28 in recent years. **Photo: Hank Arnold/Christmas Bird Count.**

KINGFISHERS THRU WOODPECKERS: Three species increasing, 2 decreasing and 11 stable. **Red-cockaded Woodpecker** (7), **Northern Flicker** (958) and **Ladder-backed Woodpecker** (1566) had their highest tallies for the decade.

FALCONS: Two species increased, 2 decreased and 3 were stable. **Peregrine Falcon** declined by 35% in the last 15 years.



Crested Caracara (2825) had its highest tally for the decade. Photo: Hank Arnold/Christmas Bird Count.

Parrots: **Monk Parakeet** has isolated populations in several urban areas in Texas. **Red-crowned Parrot and Green Parakeet** are maintaining their populations in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. They are joined by 6 or more species of exotic parrots and parakeets with smaller populations.

FLYCATCHERS: Six species increasing, 8 stable and 2 species declining. **Western Flycatcher** (2) and **Great Kiskadee** (1434) had their highest tally for the decade.



Couch's Kingbird consistently overwinters in its highest numbers (112 of 304 in *TX*) in the Guadalupe River Delta CBC. Photo: Hank Arnold/Christmas Bird Count.

SHRIKE THRU VIREOS: 5 species had average numbers.

CORVIDS: Two species increasing, 2 decreasing and 6 stable. **Common Raven** (605) had its highest tally for the decade. **Brown Jays** were present for their 2nd year in a row.



Green Jay stayed throughout the summer near the coast and was reported 50% higher state-wide (1724) than last season. They entertained many people on the eastern side of their range. Photo: Brent Ortego/Christmas Bird Count.

HORNED LARK THRU SWALLOWS: Barn Swallow (88) increased and 6 other species were average.
CHICKADEES THRU CREEPER: Five species above average, 1 below and 5 average. **Pygmy Nuthatch** was at its highest level for decade.

WRENS THRU KINGLETS: Three species increasing, 1 decreasing and 10 average. **Pacific Wren** (1) was new for a ***Texas*** CBC at **Guadalupe Mountains**. **Bewick's Wren** (1272) was at its highest level for the decade and the 6258 **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** was its lowest..



Marsh Wren tallies in previous seasons generally averaged about **1000,** but they dropped closer to **700** during the last **4 Seasons. Photo: Thomas Johnson/Christmas Bird Count.**



Clay-colored Thrush (114) continues to expand its population. **Photo: Ken Butler/via eBird.**

BLUEBIRDS THRU THRUSHES: Two species increasing, 1 decreasing and 5 stable. **Clay-colred Thrush** (114) increased by 50% over last year.
CATBIRD THRU MOCKINGBIRD: Three species increasing and 4 stable. The 411 **Curve-billed Thrasher** was its highest tally for the decade.
STARLING THRU LONGSPURS: The **Smith's Longspurs** (78) was the only species in this group increasing. Three species were decreasing and 5 were stable. **Phainopepla** (10) numbers were below average.
WARBLERS: *Texas* reported 27 species of warblers of which 4 species were represented by 1 individual each. Twelve species of warblers exceeded or tied the highest count for the decade, and 14 other species were average in abundance. **Black-throated Green Warbler** was the only warbler below average. High count records were made for **Ovenbird** (7), **Northern Waterthrush** (12), and **Yellow-rumped Warbler** (22,095).



Northern and Tropical Parulas have been averaging nearly equal abundance (3.8 vs. 2.5) over the past decade. **Tropical Parula Photo: Clay Taylor/Christmas Bird Count.**

Guadalupe River Delta and **Matagorda County** had 15 warbler species each, **Brownsville** 14, **Victoria** 11 and **Harlingen** 10. All other CBCs had 9 or less species of warblers.

SEEDEATER THRU TOWHEES: Tallies for 4 species increased, 11 decreased and 18 were stable. The CBCs with the most species for this grouping were **Davis Mountains & Matagorda County** (19 species), **Balcones Canyonlands, Marfa & Fort Hood** (18), **West Cave Preserve** 17, **Jackson-Calhoun & White River** (15), **El Paso & Guadalupe River Delta** (14). **Baird's Sparrow** at **Marfa** was the 2nd record this decade. **Le Conte's Sparrow** (113) had very low numbers. **Olive Sparrow** had a high tally of 325. The 1756 **Song Sparrow** was considered low, as was the 110 **Canyon Towhee** and 87 **Eastern Towhee**.
TANAGERS THRU DICKCISSEL: The 8 **Summer Tanagers**, 1 **Western Tanager**, 18,992 **N. Cardinals**, 807 **Pyrrhuloxias** and 32 **Indigo Buntings** were considered normal numbers. The 5 **Black-headed Grosbeak**, 9 **Painted Buntings** and 3 **Dickcissels** were above average. Two **Black-headed Grosbeaks** and 2 **Dickcissels** are the highest individual CBC tallies for these species this year.
BLACKBIRDS THRU ORIOLES: Five species were above average, 1 below and 14 normal. **Eastern (Lilian's) Meadowlark** (41) and **Bronzed Cowbird** (6170) had record high counts for the decade. ***Texas*** does not frequently winter many millions of blackbirds anymore because lack of irrigation water suppresses availability of rice crops.

FINCH THRU MUNIA: Two species were above average, 1 below and 4 other species were at normal levels.

MOST WIDESPREAD SPECIES

People like talking about the rarest (**26 species with 1**) and the most abundant (**Red-winged Blackbird 1,825,089**). What about the most widespread (Can't go home without at least one!) Twenty-three species occurred on at least 100 of the 121 CBCs. **Mourning Dove**, **American Kestrel** and **Yellow-rumped Warbler** occurred on every CBC. **Northern Mockingbird** occurred on 119, **Great Blue Heron** and **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** 115, **Red-tailed Hawk** 114, **Savannah Sparrow** 113, **Northern Cardinal** 112, **Killdeer, White-winged Dove, Eastern Phoebe** and **European Starling** 110, **Red-winged Blackbird** and **House Sparrow 108, Orange-crowned Warbler** 107, **Pied-billed Grebe** 105, **Cooper's Hawk** 104, **Loggerhead Shrike and House Finch** 103, and **Great Egret** and **Lincoln's Sparrow** 101.

TOTAL BIRDS

Texas reported 3,607,044 birds with blackbirds representing 58% of the total. The 2 million blackbirds was 10% above its 10-year average and the 1.5 million of other birds was 50% above their10-year average. **Red-winged Blackbird** made up 55% of the bird population counted this season, and the other 382 species made up 45%. Selection of roost sites that approach millions in size by blackbirds can greatly influence the totals of birds on a CBC if it happens to be within the circle and subsequently the total birds for the State.

PHOTOGRAPHS

There was a 17% decrease of photographs (531) received to document over 269 species. I used 19 of these photos from 25 photographers on 22 CBCs in this report. I encourage compilers to submit photos of birds reported on their CBC. I need more photos for documenting unusual species. I also use photos of common species like **Rock Wren**, **Eastern Bluebird** and **Pine Warbler** to help tell the story of population trends of many species that are not rare.

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We reported this season on 64 species whose populations were declining and 94 increasing at rates different from last decade. What will happen next year? Join us during the next CBC Season to find out.



Keep Your Pencil Sharp and Your Batteries Charged. We will See You Next Season. Photo: Sydney Walsh/Christmas Bird Count.

Brent Ortego, Ph.D.
brentortego@hotmail.com