The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Virginia-Washington DC

By Rexanne Bruno, CBC Regional Editor – Virginia & Washingon DC

Fifty-four Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) were conducted in Virginia for the 2025-2026 season which is one less than last year as the Chatham CBC is no longer active. The total number of species tallied on the 2025-2026 counts was 215 which is a bit higher than 212 in the 2024-2025. But the total number of individuals in 2025-26 was 895,257 which is below the 2023-2024 season total of 919,005.

There were several compiler changes in 2025-2026. Mario Balitbit has assumed Wachapreague compiler duties from Victor Klein. Kurt Gaskill who compiled the Fort Belvoir count since 1999, has turned it over to Luke Holian. Doug Levey has taken over compiling Manassas-Bull Run from Phil Silas. Evelyn Parks is now compiling Nokesville after Terrell Worrell did so last year. Donna Finnegan turned over compiling Lake Anna to Annie McEntee. Allen Hale who compiled the Warren count since 2007 has handed the duties over to Dan Bieker.

These counts broke their records for the Total Number of Species:

- Washington's Birthplace with 112 Total Species
- Highland County with 56 Total Species
- Glade Spring with 83 Total Species.
- Cedars Preserve-Jonesville with 62 Total Species

Chincoteague tallied 148 Total Species which was the most for any count in Virginia this season. Cape Charles was a close second as they counted 147 Total Species. But these didn't set local records as Chincoteague's record Total Number of Species is 172 and Cape Charles record is 181 Total Species. By coincidence, both of these records were set in 1972.

A few counts set records for the Number of Observers in the Field:

- Washington's Birthplace with 30 Field Observers
- Rappahannock with 51 Field Observers
- Rockingham County with 36 Field Observers
- Blacksburg with 70 Field Observers

Temperatures were colder than usual during this CBC season. The Virginia CBCs with the lowest temperatures were Cedars Preserve-Jonesville and Highland County that both endured low temperatures of 10°F on their December 14, 2025 CBCs. Other counts with low temperatures in the teens were: 16°F for Brooke and The Plains and 19°F at Augusta County and Calmes Neck. Back Bay and Wise County enjoyed a balmy 66°F as the highest temperature reached on any Virginia CBC this season.

There were two new birds reported on this year's counts:

- 6 Indian Peafowl (5 Nansemond River & 1 Calmes Neck), although this is not a countable species in Virginia.
- 1 Gray Flycatcher in Cape Charles is a new species for Virginia CBCs.

These species are interesting as they are unexpected or not found every year:

- 1 Red-necked Grebe (Nansemond River), although at least one is seen most years, it is often during Count Week.
- 1 Western Grebe (Fort Belvoir), has only been recorded four times in the last ten years.
- 1 Manx Shearwater (Chincoteague), first time reported since 2 were detected at Back Bay in 2012.
- 2 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Chincoteague), last recorded when 1 was seen in 2019.
- 1 Glossy Ibis (Chincoteague) has only been spotted four of the last ten years.
- 1 Common Gallinule (Hopewell), seen five times in last ten years.
- 2 Sandhill Crane (Hopewell), although recorded eight of the last ten years, still an exciting bird to find on a count.
- 1 Little Gull (Chincoteague), last documented in 2013.
- 1 Snowy Owl (Nansemond River), hasn't been seen since 1 at Nansemond River plus a count week bird at Chincoteague, both in 2020.
- 1 Long-eared Owl (Fort Belvoir), hasn't been observed since one was recorded all but one year from 2015 to 2019 on Northern Shenandoah Valley CBC.
- 1 Allen's Hummingbird (Manassas-Bull Run), hasn't been recorded since 1 in Williamsburg in 2016.
- 2 Ash-throated Flycatcher (Little Creek and The Plains), this species has been seen seven of the last ten years, so maybe it's not as rare as once considered.
- 1 Northern Parula (Cape Charles and count week ones in Little Creek and Hopewell), this species has only been discovered twice in the last ten years and one of those sightings was count week.
- 1 American Redstart (Hopewell), this is the second sighting, plus two others during count week, in the last ten years.
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler (Rappahannock), was only first discovered on a Virginia CBC in 2022 at Fort Belvoir and seen there again in 2023.
- 1 Yellow-breasted Chat (Walkerton), becoming more expected as this is seventh record in past ten years.
- 1 Lark Sparrow (The Plains), eighth record in last twenty years.
- 1 Western Tanager (Williamsburg), reported eleven times in past twenty years. Seven of the ten older records were of what is thought to be the same bird returning to feeders in the same Williamsburg yard seven years in a row. The bird this year is not in the same Williamsburg yard!
- 1 Painted Bunting (Little Creek), now recorded five of the last ten years.
- 1 Dickcissel (Highland County), recorded four times in last ten years.

These unusual birds were only seen during Count Week:

- Lapland Longspur was reported Count Week at Washington's Birthplace but has been found on counts four times in the last ten years.
- Louisiana Waterthrush observed at Little Creek during Count Week was last reported on a Virginia CBC in Waynesboro in 2013.
- Evening Grosbeak was seen during Count Week in Washington DC. Although this species has become more likely, of late, as it has occurred on Virginia-Washington DC CBCs every other year since 2018, but has only been recorded six times in the last twenty years and even then in low numbers with the exception of 467 tallied during an irruption of them in 2020 and 170 in 2024.

It was a good year for waterfowl with these high numbers:

- 28 Ross's Goose (2 Chincoteague, 1 Cape Charles, 2 Back Bay, 8 Hopewell, 1 Washington's Birthplace, 5 Northern Shenandoah Valley, 1 Blacksburg, 7 Glade Spring, 1 Washington DC, & CW Banister River) is a record high count.
- 78 Cackling Goose (1 Mathews, 1 Williamsburg, 19 Hopewell, 4 Walkerton, 1 Northumberland-Lancaster, 19 Washington's Birthplace, 3 The Plains, 3 Sandy River Reservoir, 1 Lynchburg, 3 Augusta County, 1 Blackford, & 22 Washington DC) is a new record high count.
- 2,789 Northern Pintail is highest since 3,109 in 2010.
- 5,329 Hooded Merganser is a new record high count.
- 2,040 Common Merganser is more than double last year's 999 and the highest since 2,102 in 2010.

These other species had notably high numbers:

- 1,917 White Ibis is a record high.
- 9,086 Turkey Vulture is a new high count.
- 161 American Avocet (all at Nansemond River) is a record high number.
- 126 Lesser Yellowlegs is not only highest number seen this century, it's the first time the number has exceeded two digits in this century.
- 3 Black-headed Gull (Chincoteague), ties for record high with 2005.
- 17,942 American Herring Gull is highest since 34,496 in 2008.
- 6 Iceland Gull (1 Chincoteague, 1 Little Creek, 3 Central Loudon, & 1 Washington DC) is a record high.
- 216 Eastern Screech-Owl, number hasn't been over 200 since 239 in 2017.
- 10 Loggerhead Shrike (1 Tazewell, 1 Mount Rogers-White Top Mountain, 4 Glade Spring, & 4 Blackford) is most seen since 12 in 2018 and most of those years in between have been sightings in the single digits.
- 797 Common Raven is a record high as they continue to expand their range eastward in the state with winter reports in the last five years as far east as Newport News and Portsmouth.
- 9 Nashville Warbler (2 Cape Charles, 1 Newport News, 3 Hopewell, & 3 Washington DC) is a crazy record high for a species that is considered a rarity in winter but is being seen almost yearly on CBCs in Virginia and the Washington DC area now.
- 5 Lincoln Sparrow (2 Back Bay, 2 Fort Belvoir, & 1 Banister River), last time at least 5 were located was in 2011.
- 18 Brewer's Blackbird (17 Back Bay & 1 Augusta County) is highest since record high of 36 in 2002.

It was a shock to see numbers down for all wren species:

- 39 Northern House Wren is lowest in over ten years since 38 in 2014.
- 461 Winter Wren is lowest since 336 seen in 2018 and 406 in 2019. Their numbers were encouraging for the last two years with 606 observed in 2023 and 592 in 2024.
- 10 Sedge Wren is lowest in over ten years when only 6 were seen in 2015.
- 14 Marsh Wren is lowest since 4 identified in 2010 and numbers have been in 20s, 30s, 40s, & 50s in between these years.
- 5,495 Carolina Wren is lowest since 4,564 seen in 2015.

Numbers were surprisingly low for these other species:

- 830 Brandt, their 5-year average continues to decline; the 5-year average is now 1,205 which is about half of what it was 5 years ago, as in 2021 it was 2,332.
- 4,752 Ruddy Duck, the lowest since 4,594 in 2009.
- 622 Wild Turkey, the lowest since 616 in 2008.
- 6 Virginia Rail (1 Chincoteague, 1 Nassawadox, 1 Cape Charles, 1 Williamsburg, 1 Walkerton, & 1 Lynchburg), hasn't been this low in forty years since 6 were heard in 1986.
- 13 Marbled Godwit (12 Chincoteague & 1 Wachapreague), lowest since none were seen in 2003.
- 734 Sanderling, their numbers have been over 1,000 every year since 2018 and haven't been this low since had 707 in 2010.
- 3 Least Sandpiper (1 Chincoteague & 2 Wachapreague), hasn't been this low in nearly forty years, since 2 seen in 1987.
- 828 Great Black-backed Gull, the lowest in over fifty years since 349 recorded in 1964.
- 7,659 Rock Pigeon, the lowest number reported since 6,457 in 2009.
- 2,476 Northern (Yellow-shafted) Flicker, hasn't been this low since 2,237 observed in 2009.
- 6 Blue-headed Vireo, the lowest since none were seen in 2014.

There are always species that are disappointing misses like these this year:

- Ruffed Grouse was last missed entirely in 2020. Polling the CBC compilers where Ruffed Grouse have been found in the past for explanations, resulted in these comments. There is only one remaining "habitat for grouse and I don't think the population is that high to see them every year. I also believe the growing deer populations are detrimental to the grouse. The whitetail deer will eat the eggs." according to the compiler for the Blackford CBC (R. Riggs, personal communication, April 7, 2026). The Glade Spring compiler commented, "it may have to do with lower effort on our part; and much lower number of birds. Over the years some of us would get out of the car and walk through habitat likely to have Ruffed Grouse. With notable exceptions, our teams now don't usually stray too far from the car; or if walking, [do] not enter the likely habitat off the road." (R. Harrington, personal communication, April 7, 2026). The Highland County Compiler had these thoughts, "I would guess snow/ice blocking higher elevation roads and the rapidly decreasing temperature throughout the day were both factors that led to our counters covering less ground than usual this past season. The grouse were also probably hunkered down due to the snowy weather." (E. Spears, personal communication, April 9, 2026). So habitat loss, predation, coverage of CBC territory, snow and ice blocking roads, cold temperatures, etc. are potential reasons for missing Ruffed Grouse this year.
- Royal Tern was missed despite being seen every year since 2019.
- Black Skimmer had been found seven of the last ten years.
- Rufous Hummingbird although it has been seen seventeen of the last twenty years.
- Red-cockaded Woodpecker was found three of the last five years at Dismal Swamp NWR. One of the compilers for Dismal Swamp where Red-cockaded Woodpecker has been observed six of the last ten years, said, "Sadly, the team did not see any RCWs [Red-cockaded Woodpeckers]. It was the same team that counted that sector the year before." But that doesn't mean the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers aren't there as she also said, that in May 2025, they were heard and a nest was observed "with 2 eggs and two others that seemed to be nests (too early for eggs)." (L. Mae, personal communications, April 6, 2026). So, at least we know the Red-cockaded Woodpecker colony at Dismal Swamp is surviving.

- Red Crossbill has been seen every year for almost ten years as it was last missed in 2017. According to the Mount Rogers-White Top Mountain compiler, he blames the weather for crossbills being missed as eight had been seen about two weeks before the count (A. Boynton, personal communication, April 18, 2026).

Rexanne



Black-headed Gull on Chincoteague CBC December 29, 2025 - photo by Will Burgoyne



Gray Flycatcher on Cape Charles CBC December 30, 2025 - photo by Mario Balitbit



Long-eared Owl on Fort Belvoir CBC January 4, 2026- photo by Evan Pannkuk

These and the previous ones are in no particular order



Louisiana Waterthrush Count Week on Little Creek CBC - Photo on January 1, 2026 by Rob Bielawski



Northern Parula Count Week on Little Creek CBC December 31, 2025- Photo on January 2, 2026 by Rob Bielawski



Western Tanager on Williamsburg CBC December 14, 2025 - Photo by Jennifer Tierney on December 16, 2025