

2025/26 Alberta Christmas Bird Count Summary

By David Scott

Another Christmas Bird Count season is behind us, and once again, Albertans participated in droves, tallying fauna of the feathered sort from backyard feeders to city parks, montane forest, windswept prairie, boreal bogs, and anywhere else we might find our avian quarry. Counts were completed in fifty-eight circles this year, where, collectively, 1,365 field participants and 710 feeder watchers counted 207,476 birds of 113 species—two more than last year. Over 3,300 party hours and 19,000 kilometres were logged. Edmonton claimed top spot for numbers of participants, at 567. Calgary and Lethbridge placed second and third with 265 and 119, respectively.

Though much of western North America experienced an unseasonably warm winter, December in Alberta saw temperatures on par with the thirty-year average in southern parts of the province, and below average further north. Fort McMurray, for instance, didn't see the mercury rise above -10 after December 4, and it bottomed out at -37 on the solstice. On average, our 58 counts reported lows of -18 and highs of -11—seven degrees cooler than last year. Beaverlodge, west of Grande Prairie, was the chilliest count with a high of -24. Lethbridge, my hometown, enjoyed the warmest count at +11. (Please don't hate me.) The windiest count, unsurprisingly, was Waterton's, where gusts of 85 km/h were endured. Only Lethbridge and Manyberries reported no snow on the ground, while 13 counts reported it actively snowing on count day. Some of the more northerly counts were particularly impacted by inclement weather, having participants forced to cancel or abandon the circle early. Where fresh snow obscured the edges of roads, not all vehicles managed to stay on them! Fortunately, I've received no reports of injuries. The most plentiful species in the province were Canada Goose (58,402), Mallard (21,647), House Sparrow (20,639), Bohemian Waxwing (12,786), Black-billed Magpie (12,624), Rock Pigeon (11,572), Snow Bunting (11,504), Black-capped Chickadee (11,215), Redpoll (6,873), and Common Raven (6,493). Among these, Bohemian Waxwing was furthest below the ten-year average (62%), while Snow Bunting was highest above it (134%).

At the other end of the spectrum, fourteen species were represented by only one individual province-wide: Ross's Goose (Medicine Hat), Canvasback (Calgary), Long-tailed Duck (Banff-Canmore), Great Blue Heron (Lethbridge), Osprey (Medicine Hat), Cooper's Hawk (Edmonton), Western Screech-Owl (Lethbridge), Gyrfalcon (Sylvan Lake), Steller's Jay (Pincher Creek), Northern Mockingbird (Calgary), Hermit Thrush (Edmonton; second year running!), Spotted Towhee (Priddis), Western Meadowlark (High River), and Northern Cardinal (St. Albert). The Western Screech-Owl was a first-ever for any Alberta Christmas Bird Count, though we've known them to be lurking in a couple of haunts in recent years. The Steller's Jay count, on the other hand, was the lowest since last millennium. Glaucous Gull (Bow Kan), Horned Grebe (Waterton Lakes National Park), Eastern Screech-Owl (Medicine Hat), and Red-winged Blackbird (Lethbridge) were only found during count weeks.

At 69, Calgary again took top spot for species count. In a not-so-distant second, Lethbridge tallied 60, and Medicine Hat placed third with 50. Edmonton and Banff-Canmore had 48 and 43, respectively.

Apart from Western Screech-Owl, we set nine all-time records for the province. Last year saw a record 45 Trumpeter Swans; this year's 122 shattered it! Other waterfowl all-time highs included Bufflehead (97% of which were in Calgary) and Ring-necked Duck. Northern Flicker and Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed Hawks narrowly broke previous records, while Ring-necked Pheasant, Bald Eagle, and American Crow surpassed previous highs by wider margins.

Birds that were tallied in unusually high numbers—more than double the prior ten-year average—but which did not set records include Barrow’s Goldeneye (19; compare last year’s 1), Hooded Merganser (24), Gray Partridge (2215), Short-eared Owl (19), Northern Saw-whet Owl (19), American Robin (450), and American Goldfinch (49). Conversely, Snowy Owl (11), Great Gray Owl (5; compare last year’s 89), American Three-toed Woodpecker (16), Black-backed Woodpecker (3), Horned Lark (246), and American Dipper (14), were among those species tallied at less than half the previous ten-year average. Noteworthy misses include Tundra Swan, Greater Scaup, Wilson’s Snipe, Lapland Longspur, Harris’s Sparrow, and Rusty Blackbird.

While this report offers some highlights of the season, it is important to underscore that all data collected through our CBCs is valuable, and the contributions of every participant are appreciated. If you played a role in one or more of our counts this last season, thank you; the CBC wouldn’t be possible without our many participants generously volunteering their time and energy. I’d especially like to thank our dedicated count compilers, extending a warm welcome to first-time compilers Val and Neil Carleton, Roseanna Gullekson, and Karin Lindquist, and recognizing our many returning compilers: Robin Alexander, Jody Allair, Heather Aussant Roy, Norm Cameron, Ann Carter, Patti Campsall, Bruno Canadien, Doug Collister, Irene Crosland, Iris Davies, Heather Dempsey, Doug Faulder, Linda Foster, James Fox, Sheldon Frissell, Rob Gardner, Christine Godwin, Javan Green, Shelley-Anne Goulet, David Grinevitch, Art Hughes, Ted Hindmarch, Glen Hvenegaard, Joan Kerr, James Lange, Nikita Lebedynski, Doug Macaulay, Beth MacCallum, Shane Mascarin, Genevieve Mathieu, Gavin McKinnon, Ken Orich, Dianne Pachal, Kirsten Pearson, Jamey Podlubny, Danna Schock, Brook Skagen, Angela Specht, Andrew Tait, John Thurston, Pam Tyas, Briana Van Den Bussche, Suzanne Visser, Matthew Wallace, Asher Warkentin, and Caitly Zimmermann.

If you’re interested in perusing the CBC data yourself, you can access the database here: <https://netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation/>

If you’d like to participate in a count during the coming season, you can find count circles and compilers on Bird’s Canada’s website: <https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/christmas-bird-count>

And if you’d like to learn more about what serving as a count compiler looks like, I’d be happy to chat with you. Feel free to send me an email at alberta.cbc@gmail.com