

2025 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count

Chris Edwards

The 75th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held Sunday, December 21, 2025. It was originally scheduled for December 14, but bitterly cold weather led to a postponement. The count area is a 15-mile diameter circle centered on Hwy. 965 and Penn Street in North Liberty, encompassing North Liberty, Coralville, Solon, Tiffin, and portions of Iowa City, as well as Lake Macbride and most of the Coralville Reservoir. Temperatures on count day ranged from 11-36° F, with mostly sunny skies and light southeast winds of 0-9 mph. Rivers and streams were mostly frozen, and still bodies of water were frozen. There was 1-2" of old snow cover.

Results

This year we found 68 species, just below the ten-year average of 69. The record high for the count is 81 species found in 2012. The species count has been trending up in recent years due to the presence of lingering waterfowl, but this year after the cold weather there were very few waterfowl species left in the area. However, we saw more lingering passerines this year than usual (and many of these species subsequently lingered through the winter). This year we tallied 113,243 individual birds, the third straight year over 100K thanks to an estimated 100,000 Red-winged Blackbirds.

As a fitting celebration for our 75th year, Mark Brown, Tom and Ian Bootsmiller, and Kegan Smith-Nichols found the first Townsend's Solitaire ever recorded on our count. It was in a rural area with an abundance of red cedars along Blain Cemetery Road, and it stayed long enough for many other people to see it that afternoon or on subsequent days. Townsend's Solitaire breeds in coniferous forests of the west as far north as Alaska, and is a rare but regular winter visitor to Iowa. Notably, one spent the winter of 2007 among cedars near the DNR headquarters along Amana Road, not far from this year's bird.

Other statistically rare species found this year were Killdeer, Short-eared Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Winter Wren. Other nice finds included American White Pelican, Merlin, Northern Shrike, Hermit Thrush, Fox Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

There were many species recorded in significantly above-average numbers this year. They included Ring-necked Pheasant, Northern Harrier (tied ten-year high), Sharp-shinned Hawk (tied ten-year high), Cooper's Hawk (all-time high), Eastern Screech-Owl (ten-year high), Barred Owl (ten-year high), Red-headed Woodpecker (ten-year high), Northern Flicker (all-time high), Blue Jay (ten-year high), Horned Lark, Winter Wren (all-time high), Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush (all-time high), American Robin, House Finch, Purple Finch (ten-year high), White-throated Sparrow (all-time high), Red-winged Blackbird (tied all-time high), and Yellow-rumped Warbler (all-time high).

Species recorded in significantly below-average numbers were Mallard, Mourning Dove (lowest count since 1985), Ring-billed Gull, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Great Horned Owl, American Crow, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Brown Creeper, Cedar Waxwing, Pine Siskin, American Tree Sparrow, and Common Grackle. Expected species that were missed entirely this year were Cackling Goose, Gadwall, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Hooded Merganser.

For the third straight year, an immense gathering of Red-winged Blackbirds was observed coming to roost at dusk in the miscanthus fields near the University of Iowa Hawkeye Commuter Lot, estimated at 100,000 birds. All field parties reported only two other Red-winged Blackbirds throughout the day, making one wonder where the other 99,998 birds spent the day!

Some Trends

The increasing population of Cooper's Hawks in Iowa is an amazing success story. Historically, they were persecuted by early settlers and farmers because they were seen as a threat to poultry. Their populations were further reduced in the mid-twentieth century by DDT, and they were listed on the Iowa Endangered Species List until 1994. On the Iowa City CBC, from 1951 to 1990 they were seen only ten times, always one or two birds. There was a slight increase in the 1990s, and since 2001 they have been recorded every year, and in increasing numbers. This year's 15 birds smashed the previous high count of 9 birds seen in 2022. Much of the species' success is due to its ability to adapt to human-altered landscapes. Traditionally a forest dweller, it is now frequently seen in urban and suburban neighborhoods. It is a bright spot among the many avian population declines.

On the other end of the spectrum, the long-term declines of Long-eared and Short-eared Owls are discouraging. It is thought that changing habitat conditions, especially the conversion of grasslands to row crops, is a primary factor in their decline in the Midwest. On the Iowa City CBC, both species were found nearly annually through the early 1980s, sometimes in double-digit numbers, with high counts of 28 Long-eared Owls in 1958 and 18 Short-eared Owls in 1960. We can only dream about those numbers now. Over the last 40 years, Long-eared Owls have been found on the Iowa City CBC only seven times, the last time in 2009. During the same timeframe, Short-eared Owls have been found eleven times, including one bird this year at Hawkeye Wildlife Area. In Iowa, Long-eared Owl is now listed as Threatened and Short-eared Owl is listed as Endangered. Sadly, given current land-use trends, it doesn't appear this will change in the foreseeable future.

Count Effort

This year there were 32 field participants in 13 parties, including six first-time participants. Combined, they spent 73 total party-hours in the field, below the 10-year average of 78 hours. Several additional people had signed up but were unable to participate due to the postponement. Two parties spent a total of 3.5 hours owl watching, just below the ten-year average of 3.8 hours. Field participants were Kyle Belcher, Becky Benson, Ian Bootsmiller, Tom Bootsmiller, Fawn Bowden, Mary Bowler, Brian Broderick, Mark Brown, Chris Caster, Gerry Denning, Aaditya Deshpande, Chris Edwards, Julie Englander, Laura Harwood, Jim Kettelkamp, Mark Madsen, Jamie McCoy, Ramona McGurk, Jason Paulios, Eli Perencevich, Marko Perencevich, Linda Quinn, JoAnn Riecke, Deb Rolfes, Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, Janet Seiz, Kegan Smith-Nichols, Sharon Somers, Maria Story, Jim Trepka, and Eliza Willis.

There were 16 feeder watchers in 10 locations, which is below the ten-year average of 11 locations. Feeder watchers were Barbara Beaumont, Kaci Carolan and Ed Kuhrt, Anne Edwards, Rick and Jan Hollis, Bill Madden, Kathy Martensen, Jenny Miller, Amy Shuttleworth and Ben Traschsel, Jane Shuttleworth, Sharon Somers, Cindy Spading, and Jim and Terri Stoner.

We met at the North Liberty Community Center for a mid-day meal and compilation. We collected \$45 in donations for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count program.

Nationally, this year marked the 126th consecutive Christmas Bird Count. The results of all counts from 1900 to the present are available at www.audubon.org/community-science/christmas-bird-count. A table showing the results of every Iowa City count from 1951 to the present is available at iowacitybirdclub.org/christmas-counts/.

Thanks to everyone who participated this year!

SPECIES LIST

Canada Goose 1492
Mallard 212
Common Goldeneye 1
Common Merganser 6
Wild Turkey 15
Ring-necked Pheasant 21
Rock Pigeon 137
Eurasian Collared-Dove 4
Mourning Dove 17
Killdeer 2
Ring-billed Gull 2
American Herring Gull 2
American White Pelican 3
Northern Harrier 5
Sharp-shinned Hawk 5
Cooper's Hawk 15
Bald Eagle 54
Red-tailed Hawk 38
Rough-legged Hawk 1
Buteo sp. 1
Eastern Screech-Owl 4
Great Horned Owl 3
Barred Owl 10
Short-eared Owl 1
Belted Kingfisher 3
Red-headed Woodpecker 88
Red-bellied Woodpecker 102
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 3
Downy Woodpecker 117
Hairy Woodpecker 31
Northern Flicker 102
Pileated Woodpecker 7
American Kestrel 16
Merlin 1
Northern Shrike 3
Blue Jay 229
American Crow 162
Black-capped Chickadee 159
Tufted Titmouse 41
Horned Lark 13
Cedar Waxwing 99
Red-breasted Nuthatch 3
White-breasted Nuthatch 118
Brown Creeper 2
Carolina Wren 3
Winter Wren 5
European Starling 7462
Eastern Bluebird 56
Townsend's Solitaire 1
Hermit Thrush 4
American Robin 209
House Sparrow 715
Eurasian Tree Sparrow 62
House Finch 180
Purple Finch 24
Pine Siskin 7
American Goldfinch 99
Fox Sparrow 1
American Tree Sparrow 113
Dark-eyed Junco 463
White-crowned Sparrow 24
White-throated Sparrow 181
Song Sparrow 11
Swamp Sparrow 2
Red-winged Blackbird 100,000
Brown-headed Cowbird 33
Common Grackle 2
Yellow-rumped Warbler 14
Northern Cardinal 222