



The Bulletin

January 2026
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Happy New Year!

I hope you all had a nice holiday break and were able to get out and do some birding amid all the hustle and bustle of December. While the Christmas Bird Count season is over, we follow right up with the first Jordan Lake Eagle Count of the year in January. Always the darkest and coldest of the quarterly counts, it is also the one where if you are lucky you might see some eagles pairing up for the breeding season.

January also brings back our membership meetings after the December break. Our next meeting is January 27 and I look forward to seeing you there.

Membership in the Chapel Hill Bird Club is on a calendar year basis. So it is time for us all to renew our [membership](#). Dues are a mere \$25. Please do consider joining this year. Membership is not required to attend our [meetings](#) or [field trips](#), but it sure does help.

I hope to see you soon at our meeting or at one of our field trips.

Cheers,

Bo Howes



Bo's pal, Howard, doing his best to stay dry this January.

January Program: Tessa Patton — *How Light and Noise Pollution Impact Songbird Physiology, Diet, and Microbiomes*



When: Monday, January 26, 2026 at 7:15pm (light refreshments served at 7:15, program to start at 7:30)

Where: [Binkley Baptist Church, 1712 Willow Drive, Chapel Hill, NC 27514](#) or on [Zoom](#).

RSVP: Let us know you are coming by responding to our [Facebook event](#). To attend by Zoom, register [here](#).

Human activities have transformed a majority of the Earth's land surface, resulting in unprecedented environmental challenges for species that inhabit these areas. An important consequence of land use change is the alteration of sensory landscapes. Sensory pollutants such as artificial light at night and chronic urban noise can disrupt biological processes ranging from individual behavior, fitness, and physiology to broader ecosystem

dynamics. Here, Tessa shares ongoing work to determine how several passerines respond to sensory pollutants at the physiological and behavioral levels, potentially affecting survival and reproduction. She is particularly interested in how light and noise pollution impact songbird diet and gut microbiota, and how these factors may affect fitness outcomes.

Tessa graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville with a BS in Biology and a minor in Climate Change and began working with birds as an avian monitor for the National Park Service piping plover monitoring program. She then joined the Lipshutz lab at Loyola University Chicago as a master's student in Bioinformatics studying whether mechanisms of female aggression and male parental care are reflected in gene expression in the brain. Tessa is currently a Ph.D. student in Biology at Duke University in the Lipshutz Lab, where she studies how light and noise pollution shape the avian diet and gut microbiome, as well as the molecular mechanisms that allow some birds to better cope with sensory pollutants. She says, “I love field work, lab work, and bioinformatics!”

Tessa Patton's field site is shown below.



CHBC Member Special Encounters

We hope you enjoy these brief write-ups from members who experienced some special avian visitors. **Did you see a noteworthy bird recently?** Send a photo (or a few) and a brief write up to [Kelly Mieszkalski](#) and have it included in a future newsletter!



Say's Phoebe, photo by Michelle Forte

November Surprise

By Michelle Forte

November is often a month that birders dread. The end of warbler season, the arrival of cold weather. For me however, it is a month of excitement and anticipation that I look forward to every year. So filled with optimism I headed out to Mid Pines Road in Raleigh on a cold but beautiful morning on November 18th. And a lovely birdy morning it was, but even the multitude of sparrows along the creek failed to yield a rare sighting. So after a few hours, ready to leave, I headed up the hill from the creek past the Agro Farm towards my car, when suddenly that Eastern Phoebe I had walked by several

times that morning (noting it's wagging tail) flew right in front of me across the gravel road and perched on the wire. Seen well, in direct sunlight, I immediately noted that the bird seemed slightly larger than an Eastern Phoebe. Next, I observed a nice warm Salmon wash on its belly, and it quickly dawned on me that I likely had a Say's Phoebe. After reviewing my photos to confirm, I got word of the sighting out to the local community via GroupMe as well as Ebird. In the subsequent hours a multitude of birders gave chase, but I was dismayed to hear that the bird could not be relocated. So when several days later a local couple reported the bird (with photos!) I was thrilled. After all, what is the fun of seeing a rare bird if you are unable to share it with your friends. As of this quiet Thanksgiving morning, many, many, birders have made the trek to Mid Pines to enjoy this gorgeous bird. It warms my heart to see so many people excited to see our special visitor to Wake County. A true Thanksgiving week blessing.

Early Christmas Gift

By Nan DeWire

She showed up on the 6th of December. I had just had surgery on the 2nd and was taking it pretty slow at home. I have a cylinder feeder by the dining room table that has some small bushes below it. I noticed the movement in the leaves of a Spirea bush and thought it was a kinglet or Pine Warbler but then got my binoculars out and saw an eye ring! She stayed until the 16th, and I haven't seen her since. I shot the photos through my not-so-clean window, but the warbler was less than 3 feet away and oblivious to being watched. Several folks came over and saw the bird. Kent Fiala called it a

western Nashville due to its tail bobbing behavior and coloration on back of neck and back being homogenous.

Nan's images are below.





2025 Chapel Hill Christmas

Bird Count Summary

By Will Cook, Compiler

The Chapel Hill Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, 21 December 2025, was a fantastic count, blessed with mild conditions, low Jordan Lake level (good for the shorebirds), and abundant bird activity. The count tied for our second highest species total in the 96 year history of the count, with 95 species (ten-year average 87.8). The record is 98 in 1983; we also had 95 in 2016. We counted 19505 individual birds, a bit higher than our 10-year average of 15743 and almost twice what we had last year! On a birds per party hour basis, it was a great count, with 142 versus an average of 109, with flocks of Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle pulling up the numbers. We missed Common Grackle last year; this year there was a flock of a thousand and one other lone individual.

Incredibly, two species were new to the count this year, both in unexpected places: 2 Sandhill Cranes that flew over Steve Graves at Carolina Meadows in Chapel Hill, and a Forster's Tern that flew over Phil Vignola at Sandy Creek Park in Durham. Both were quick flybys, but Steve was able to snap a cell phone pic. A Nashville Warbler in Nan DeWire's yard, beautifully photographed, would have been a first for the count, but it was last seen on December 16th, just missing the count week. The three Virginia Rails heard by Matt Spangler at the Bush Creek swamp provided our

third count record. They are likely there every year, though hard to detect without special effort.

Other goodies we usually miss included 5 American Black Duck (Matt Spangler, Don Pelly, Rick Wright), 16 Green-winged Teal (Jordan Lake, multiple observers), 1 Ring-necked Duck (Deb Fowler covering Durham neighborhood ponds), 2 Lesser Scaup (Fleeta Chauvigne and Mark Montazer, our first since 2007), 1 Rufous Hummingbird (at Carol Woods, banded by Susan Campbell, our 11th count record), 13 Least Sandpipers (Brian Bockhahn and Marc Ribaudo at the Jordan Lake mudflats, our 10th), 37 Wilson's Snipe (Jordan Lake and Sandy Creek, multiple observers), 1 Merlin (Alex Nickley, our 6th), 1 Common Raven (Montazer and Chauvigne, our 9th), 2 Black-and-white Warblers (Howlett family and Roger Shaw), and 4 Common Yellowthroats (Matt Spangler, Steve Backus).

We set an astounding number of record highs: Wood Duck (62, previous high 61 in 2011, average 14), Killdeer (231, 217 in 1998, avg 55), Red-headed Woodpecker (135, 88 in 2019, avg 55), Winter Wren (85, 71 in 2024, avg 48), Hermit Thrush (121, 104 in 2023, avg 70), Gray Catbird (12, 7 in 2020, avg 2.7), Palm Warbler (15, 5 in 1973 and 2024, avg 1.1).

Also in good numbers: 82 Great Blue Herons (average 36), 158 Yellow-shafted Flickers (avg 104), 169 Brown-headed Nuthatches (avg 141), 138 Purple Finches (avg 23, our highest since 1986), 434 American Goldfinches (avg 326), 1814 White-throated Sparrows (avg 1090), 554 Song Sparrows (avg 429), 2612 Red-winged Blackbirds (avg 992, our highest since 1988), 4 Common Yellowthroats (avg 0.8, highest since 1971).

The biggest miss this year was Blue-headed Vireo. There were several remarkably scarce species, the lowest counts in 15 years or more: Black Vulture (129, average 237), Brown Thrasher (18, avg 37), Northern Mockingbird (72, avg 94), House Sparrow (6, avg 34).

Top honors for highest number of species and individual birds this year goes to the team of Fleeta Chauvigne, Mark Montazer, and Matt Spangler, who found a remarkable 65 species and 3614 individual birds in the upper reaches of Jordan Lake. Of course 1000 of those birds were Common Grackles, but subtracting those, they'd still be in first place!

Weather: Temperature 35-58 F, wind NW 0-9 mph, fair to mostly cloudy, water open.
Effort: 50 observers in 24 field parties, 137.7 party hours (135 by foot, 2.7 by car) and 112.7 party miles (95.4 by foot, 17.3 by car), 2.6 hours and 2.6 miles owling, 5 people and 27 hours watching feeders.

Thanks to all the counters who helped make this one for the record books!

[Click here to see the full results in PDF format.](#)

Membership Renewal

You are invited to renew your membership to the Chapel Hill Bird Club for calendar year 2026. As a reminder, dues are \$25 per calendar year for individuals and families (and you can pay for two years at a time), and just \$10 for students. Please visit our [membership web page](#) for information about paying your dues by Paypal or check.

If you have a question about the status of your membership, contact [Do Hodgson](#) (Treasurer, CHBC).



CHBC Field Trip at Brumley South on January 3rd. Photo by Kent Fiala. For more information about our field trips [click here](#).

The purpose of the Chapel Hill Bird Club is to provide engagement and educational opportunities for area birders of all experience levels. We offer interesting educational programs, local birding field trips, Christmas and spring bird counts, and connection to other members via a Facebook group. Members have access to like-minded people including experts who can answer your questions. Whether you watch birds in your yard or travel to the ends of the earth to chase rarities, our club offers something for you. We are a friendly group and welcome all to join us, especially new birders! Our members are mostly from the Research Triangle area of North Carolina: Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh, Cary, Pittsboro, and surrounding towns.