

Cape Charles Christmas Bird Count

By Daniel Cristol

On December 30, approximately 25 birders scoured the tip of the Eastern Shore during the 125th nationwide Christmas Bird Count. This was the 60th consecutive count for Cape Charles, and for at least one participant, this was approximately his 50th count.

Things have changed a lot on the shore in 60 years, Brown Pelicans and Bald Eagles are common and Northern Bobwhite and Loggerhead Shrikes are gone. While the count was probably shy of rival Cape May's total once again, we were above recent averages with 154 species. Highlights included a mature Golden Eagle, two Common Gallinules, four Blue-headed Vireos, a deeply cherished Mute Swan, but nothing wildly unexpected. We missed Bonaparte's Gull, Wilson's Snipe, Canvasback, Vesper Sparrow, Northern Bobwhite (of course), and the count week Baltimore Oriole and a hummingbird that were in the area. Ocean-going fish-eaters, in general, were extremely scarce (i.e., almost no loons or grebes, few gannets and gulls and no alcids. Woodcock on the refuge were way down because the big field on the refuge has essentially been plowed under, along with other weedy areas. Dunlin and waterfowl were found by the north boat party in good numbers, to the tune of 12,000 dunlin and many thousands of ducks—all of which were in short supply for the southern Smith Island boat party. There were over one thousand American Oystercatchers counted in the northern islands as well! The great boat coverage was funded by the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory and The Nature Conservancy, as it is every year.

Overall, a great tradition continues, and the many younger counters this year bode well for the continued strength of this important and exciting bird count.