

Waterbird Team Reports 2025

by Dave Youker

The CVWO Waterbird Team devoted the 2025 field work to documenting the volume and diversity of bird species frequenting Craney Island Dredged Materials Management Area (CIDMMA) in Portsmouth, Virginia. Breeding activity was focused mainly on three species: Black-necked Stilts, American Oystercatchers and Least Terns.

Overall 2025 Results

The final survey of 2025, completed on December 18, was the 42nd for the year. Nine weeks were missed due to holidays (2), personnel availability (3), weather (3) or Christmas Bird Count (1). This culminated the 18th year of documented surveys dating back to 2008. Survey data have been entered into the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's eBird database and breeding data have been shared with the Norfolk District Office of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

For 2025, a total of 178,167 birds, comprising 191 species, were documented during 245 observation hours over 42 weeks between January 9 and December 18. The average number of species per survey was 76 and the average number of birds was 4,242. The single-day high count for the total number of birds was 11,112 on May 22, totaling 93 species; the lowest single-day total was 1,319 on June 26 with 69 species.

Waterbird species included two rail species, three grebe species, two loon species, Double-crested Cormorant, two pelican species, 29 shorebird species, six gull species, eight tern species, Black Skimmer, nine heron-egret-ibis species and Roseate Spoonbill. **CIDMMA had Virginia's highest 2025 totals for seven waterbird species:**

- 1,098 Northern Shovelers (12/4)
- 685 Green-winged Teal (3/6)
- 144 Black-necked Stilts (7/10)
- 706 American Avocets (8/14)
- 23 Wilson's Phalaropes (8/28)
- 26 Red-necked Phalaropes (9/4)
- 9,040 Semipalmated Sandpipers (5/22)

Breeding Activity of Selected Species

Black-necked Stilt

The first Black-necked Stilts (six total) were observed on April 3. Breeding evidence was noted on May 15, with birds demonstrating nest building. Four downy young were observed on June 12. The highest number of nests was 10, and the largest number of young seen at one time was 12.

American Oystercatcher

The first American Oystercatcher (one) was observed on February 27 on the southernmost Elizabeth River expansion dike. However, there was no attempted breeding by American Oystercatchers at the CIDMMA facility during 2025.

Least Tern

On April 24, the Team observed the season's first Least Terns (seven). The first sign of

breeding was seen on May 15 with numerous birds sitting. Nests with eggs were observed on June 5, with the first young seen on July 3. The largest number of Least Terns observed was 187 on May 29. As has been the recent case, USACE staff have monitored the breeding activity once nesting areas become restricted.

Productivity for Black-necked Stilts, American Oystercatchers and Least Terns has suffered in recent years due to a combination of significant habitat change, predation, high-volume vehicular traffic and periods of excessive heat and dryness.

Bald Eagle

In January 2025, a pair of Bald Eagles was observed mating as well as carrying sticks at the southeastern corner of the facility. An eagle was observed sitting on the nest at this location on February 27. On April 3, two downy young were observed in the nest. The two young remained in or around the nest until May 29.

New Species for CIDMMA

There were no new avian species observed during 2025.



Merlin taken in September at Craney Island. We wonder if this same Merlin made the tally at Kiptopeke Hawkwatch as well! Photo by Bill Williams.

Motus Wildlife Tracking System Activity

The Motus wildlife tracking system has been installed on CIDMMA Spillway Six at the northwest corner of the facility since November 2018. A storm rolled through the area in July and significantly damaged the solar panel. The panel was replaced on September 4. There were no detections in 2025.

Additional CIDMMA Fauna

The Team keeps anecdotal records of non-avian species detected during surveys. There were five new species in 2025: two butterflies (Gulf Fritillary and Queen) and three dragonflies (Prince Baskettail, Fragile Forktail and Eastern Forktail). Recorded species for 2025 were as follows:

Mammals | coyote, white-tailed deer, atlantic bottlenose dolphin, nutria, mink, muskrat, river otter, cottontail rabbit, eastern gray squirrel, rat species.

Reptiles | yellow-bellied slider, painted turtle, diamondback terrapin, box turtle, snapping turtle.

Amphibians | green frog, green tree frog, squirrel tree frog, American/southern toad, bull frog.

Butterflies | common buckeye, cabbage white, red admiral, clouded sulphur, orange sulphur, cloudless sulphur, black swallowtail, eastern tiger swallowtail, sleepy orange, american lady, pearl crescent, american snout, summer azure, gulf fritillary, variegated fritillary, question mark, monarch, queen, tawny emperor, horace's duskywing, clouded skipper, fiery skipper, ocola skipper, zabulon skipper.

Dragonflies | widow skimmer, Needham's skimmer, bar-winged skimmer, great blue skimmer, golden-winged skimmer, slaty skimmer, Halloween pennant, four-spotted pennant, prince baskettail, common whitetail, eastern pondhawk, black saddlebags, Carolina saddlebags, blue dasher, wandering glider, common green darner, swamp darner, eastern amberwing, fragile forktail, eastern forktail.

Snakes | Black Racer, Rat Snake

Acknowledgement

The Waterbird Team wishes to express its sincere gratitude to the Norfolk District Office of the USACE and CIDMMA staff for their continued support of this field work, especially the efforts to monitor and document Least Tern, American Oystercatcher and Black-necked Stilt nesting activities. Members of the 2025 CVWO Waterbird Team included Bob Ake, Hugh Beard, David Clark, Lee Schuster, Bill Williams and Dave Youker.