

Backyard Winter Bird Survey



2024 Report

by Dr. Pamela Hunt, Senior Biologist

Long-term Weather Trends 1987 to 2024

As usual, I'll start this report by reviewing the winter leading up to the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS). Weather patterns can greatly influence what birds are seen on the survey. This time I decided to go back in time to when the current version of this project started. Figure 1 shows the average February temperatures for New Hampshire from 1987 to 2024.

From this, two things stand out. First, there's a lot of variation (anyone remember the major cold snap of 2015?), which can make it hard to detect clear trends. Second, despite the fluctuations, there's a slow but steady rise in temperature over time. February 2024 was the second warmest February in over 100 years. Temperatures reached the 60s on the first day of the survey. Overall, we've seen an increase of 3-4°F since the late 1980s. Since the midpoint of this data set (2005-06), three-quarters of Februarys have been at or above the 38-year average, compared to only half from 1987 to 2005. **As a number of birds have been telling us for decades, our winters are getting warmer.**

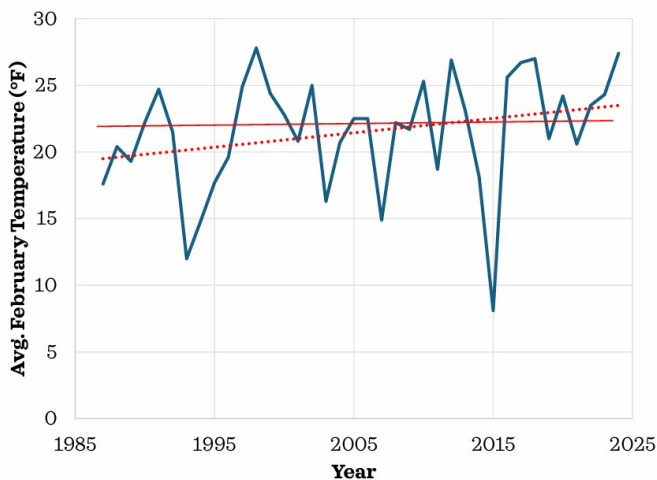


Figure 1: Average February temperatures (°F) in NH from 1987-2024 (blue line). The solid red line is the average temperature across the time period, while the dashed line shows the overall trend. Data from the National Weather Service.



Not your typical backyard winter bird! A record number of Pine Warblers were recorded during the 2024 Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS). Keep reading to learn why this might be. Photo by Rebecca Scott on her 2024 BWBS.

A Warm Winter with Less Snow

The winter of 2023-24 was also relatively wet, particularly in December and January. As is becoming typical, December's precipitation was almost entirely rain across most of the state, although January saw average snowfall. In contrast, February was exceptionally dry, with most of the state receiving one to two feet less snow than usual. The combination of low snowfall and warm temperatures meant plenty of bare ground where birds could feed, even in the north. Snow didn't arrive until April, long after most people—and birds—presumably thought winter was over.

Southern Invaders Thrived

As befits a warm winter with little snow cover, several species with ties to southern climates had a strong showing in 2024. This eclectic group includes “southern invaders” like the Red-bellied Woodpecker and Carolina Wren, both of which have stabilized after steadily increasing over the past two decades. The third BWBS record of Fish Crow further highlights this trend of non- or partially-migratory species slowly expanding northward. The Turkey Vulture is perhaps the most visible example of this shift, setting another record high this year. Most were observed at a single roost in Exeter, although a few were spotted elsewhere in the

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southeastern part of the state. Joining them at the Exeter roost were four Black Vultures—a new species for the BWBS. Like their Turkey counterparts, Black Vultures are increasing rapidly in the Granite State and may already be breeding here.

Half-hardies Set New Records

The other group of species with a strong showing in 2024 was the “half-hardies.” These birds typically winter south of New Hampshire but may linger here if conditions allow. The term “half-hardy” refers to their ability to tolerate winter better than species that migrate to the tropics but not as well as species like chickadees, which endure sub-zero temperatures with ease. This year, a group of nine half-hardies that I have been tracking regularly (Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Towhee, Winter Wren, Gray Catbird, Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Brown Thrasher) set a new cumulative record of 24 individuals. This included high counts for Winter Wren (four), Eastern Towhee (five), and Pine Warbler (12—we’ll come back to this one shortly). Other notable sightings included our sixth-ever Gray Catbird, the third-ever Swamp Sparrow, and strong showings of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Fox Sparrows. High counts of Red-tailed Hawks and White-throated Sparrows likely resulted from the large areas of snow-free ground, which facilitated foraging.

While not typically considered a half-hardy, the Common Grackle deserves mention for setting a new record high of 1,141 individuals. Over the last 30 years, we’ve rarely surpassed 100 grackles in a count, with totals under 50 being far more typical. The 2024 survey saw several large groups scattered across the southeastern part of the state. It’s likely there were two to three large roosts in the region, with grackles dispersing each morning to forage in the surrounding countryside. Grackles can start migrating north by mid-February, so the flocks observed on the 2024 BWBS could reflect either early migrants or larger numbers wintering farther north than usual.

Unprecedented Pine Warbler Numbers

Now, back to the Pine Warblers. This species has only been recorded 12 times in the history of the BWBS, typically with reports of one individual. Pine Warblers are usually in New Hampshire from April until October, nesting in pine woodlands and eating insects. They typically winter in the southeastern US south of Virginia. The winter of 2023-24’s tally of 12 during the BWBS is one of the most extreme departures from “normal” I’ve seen in all my years of analyzing this dataset. Even more interesting, this phenomenon wasn’t limited to the BWBS. I searched eBird for Pine Warblers and found almost 90 records in New Hampshire’s four southeastern counties from December 2023 to February 2024 (see Figure 2b). For comparison, the total for the previous five winters was only 25 (Figure 2a). This means the winter of 2023-24 saw roughly 20 times more Pine Warblers than usual. A little-known fact about this species is that it regularly eats seeds, including those from pines. The massive pine seed crop of 2023, combined with minimal snow cover and warm temperatures, presumably set the stage for this remarkable avian event.

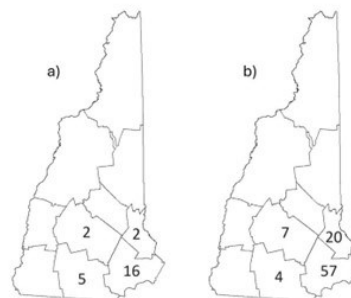


Figure 2. Distribution of winter (Dec-Feb) records of Pine Warbler in a) five previous winters combined (2017-2023) and b) the winter of 2023-24. Numbers represent the approximate number of distinct reports in each county. Data from eBird (www.ebird.org).

Unusual Winter Visitors

In addition to the half-hardies mentioned earlier, each winter there are a few less hardy songbirds that find a feeder and manage to survive the cold. The standout for 2024 was a Yellow-throated Warbler from Exeter, a new species for the survey—along with the Black Vultures (both in Exeter, what are the chances?!). The Yellow-throated Warbler typically nests no farther north than New Jersey and usually migrates to southern Florida or the Caribbean.

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A Painted Bunting in Manchester was another delightful surprise, marking only the second time this species has been recorded on the BWBS. Both the bunting and the warbler may have exhibited “reverse migration,” where a bird’s internal compass malfunctions, sending it in the opposite direction of where it should go. Many of these lost individuals likely wouldn’t survive the winter unless they find a reliable food source. A Baltimore Oriole in Hollis rounds out this year’s list of species that should have been spending February in the tropics.



*The first-ever Yellow-throated Warbler on the BWBS!
Photo by Lois Semrau.*

Also new to the survey in 2024 was Barrow’s Goldeneye. This is a more western species but a few typically winter in New Hampshire particularly on the Merrimack River in Manchester, Great Bay, and Lake Winnisquam. A survey participant lived close enough to a lake to see one in Laconia.

Fewer Wild Turkeys

While most of the species discussed so far benefitted from the unusual weather, one species didn’t fare as well: the Wild Turkey. After reaching a high of over 4,000 birds in 2023, the turkey count dropped to less than half on the 2024 BWBS. The most likely cause of this steep decline was the unusually wet weather during the spring and summer of 2023. Turkey poults (chicks) are vulnerable to cold and persistent rain, which can lead to exposure-related deaths. Nests in low-lying fields are also prone to flooding. As a result, 2023 was a poor year for turkey reproduction, which was reflected in the low numbers recorded during the

following winter and in lower-than-average numbers of poults per hen compared to 2022 and 2021 in New Hampshire Fish and Game’s 2023 Summer Brood Survey.

A Quiet Year for Pine and Evening Grosbeaks

Now, onto the perennial topic of winter irruptives. The winter of 2023-24 was generally quiet in terms of species coming from the north. As predicted, both Pine and Evening Grosbeaks were scarce, with the latter setting a new record low. Despite expectations, Redpolls also failed to arrive in significant numbers for the third year in a row. Speaking of Redpolls, you may have noticed that the “common” part of the name is missing from this report (and your data form). Ornithologists have determined that what we previously considered three species (Common and Hoary Redpolls in North America and the Lesser Redpoll in Europe) are actually just variations of a single species. Genetically, they are nearly identical and the differences between the forms are due to a cluster of genes inherited together, rather than through the typical mixing of genes. This change should simplify things for birders, as we no longer need to closely scrutinize Redpoll flocks for the elusive “Hoary” (although it is still fun to find one).

Red Crossbills: Nomads of the Pines

The finches that did move south were Red Crossbills (as I predicted) and Pine Siskins (which weren’t even on my radar). The crossbills were responding to a bumper crop of White Pine cones produced in the summer of 2023. They moved into the state starting in June, stayed around to breed, and remained common through the fall. As pine seeds were depleted these nomads wandered north and became scarce south of the mountains. However, early in 2024, they returned to the south, found the remaining cones, and bred a second time. The BWBS occurred during this second nesting period. Although crossbills are not typical feeder birds, there were enough of them around to get reported in record numbers by participants. Never a species to sit still, crossbills wandered north again in June and seem to have bred a third time (in just

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over a year) in the wilds of Coos County. A few remained into the fall of 2024, but for the most part they dispersed widely across the Northeast. When they return is up to them—and the pines.



Pine Siskin by Caitlin McMonagle during her 2024 BWBS.

Pine Siskins Make a Strong Return

The other finch invasion of 2023-24, and the one far more noticeable at backyard feeders, was that of Pine Siskins. Unlike the crossbills, siskins tend to move out of their northern habitat (irrupt) every two years but this migration is typically very erratic in both timing and destination. On the BWBS they show a pattern of low abundance interrupted by massive irruptions at irregular intervals (see Figure 3). While the 2024 winter invasion wasn't record-breaking, it was the first time in nearly a decade that BWBS observers saw large numbers of these energetic little birds. Like the crossbills, many remained in southern New Hampshire through the spring and successfully produced young in areas where they don't typically breed.

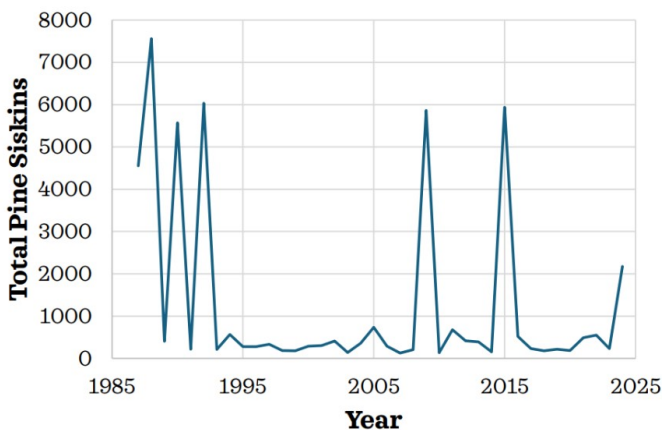


Figure 3. Total number of Pine Siskins counted on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (1987-2024).

Where Are All the Chickadees?

*by Grace McCulloch,
Survey Coordinator*

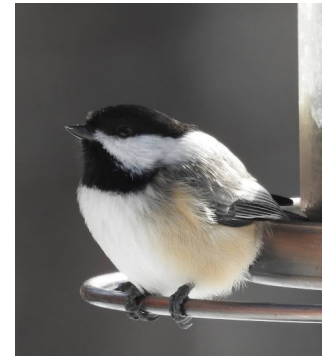
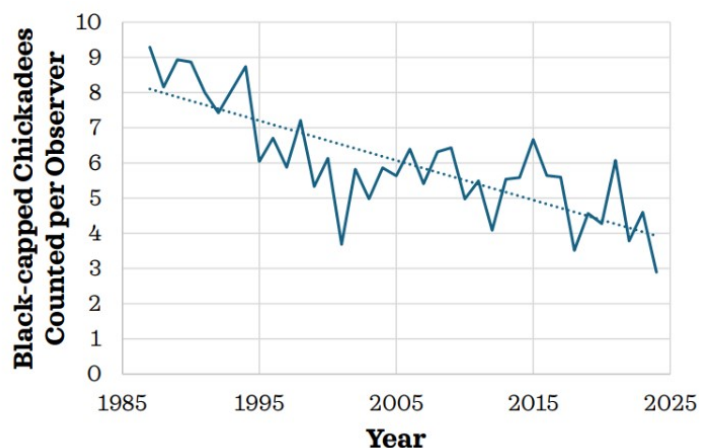


Photo by Stephanie Tinker.

On the 2024 Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS), many of you noted fewer chickadees in your backyards and at your feeders. A look below at over 30 years of BWBS data shows a slight decline in the number of Black-capped Chickadees counted per observer. In 2024, we recorded the lowest average count since the expanded survey began in 1987, with each observer reporting only about three chickadees per survey, compared to a historical high of nine. eBird Status and Trends data from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology tell a similar story, showing a decrease in relative abundance across much of New Hampshire and New England during the breeding season (data from 2012-2022). Population numbers naturally fluctuate, as seen below, which is why long-term datasets are crucial—they help us look through natural variation and identify real trends.

To learn more about why these declines might be visit our webpage nhaudubon.org/bwbs to read the full article.



Average number of Black-capped Chickadees counted per observer (1987-2024) on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (solid blue line). The dashed blue line represents the overall trend.

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Dr. Hunt's Predictions for 2025

My predictions are usually based on two things: extrapolating ongoing trends (e.g., the increasing number of Red-bellied Woodpeckers) and tracking regional bird movements (e.g., winter finches). The latter are also informed by observations from other biologists about food crops in northern regions. For more insight into how this works, I recommend checking out the Finch Research Network (finchnetwork.org).

Before even looking at this winter's forecast, I had already settled on two predictions related to Red-breasted Nuthatch and Evening Grosbeak. Back in June and July 2024 I noticed large numbers of nuthatches in the White Mountains and North Country, which is usually a sign that some will move south in search of food as northern supplies dwindle.

As I've noted in several recent summaries, Evening Grosbeaks have a two-year cycle as well as being tied to populations of spruce budworm. The ongoing

budworm outbreak in Quebec is responsible for the gradual increase in grosbeaks over the last decade, and every two years the number coming south is a little higher. Thus, after last winter's record low I fully expect a rebound by the time everyone is counting for the BWBS. With the exception of Red-breasted Nuthatch and Evening Grosbeak, it looks to be slow on the irruptive front. There is apparently a lot of food (both seeds and fruit) in the boreal forest, and observations through mid-October 2024 suggest few northern species were on the move into southern Canada.

Weather forecasts for the upcoming winter are leaning toward it being—unsurprisingly—warmer than usual. It also might be a little wetter, although the proportions of snow versus rain will vary along with temperatures. The warmth alone may still allow for another good showing of half-hardies, but in the absence of a large cone crop, I wouldn't expect another record year for Pine Warblers. Otherwise, I expect good showings from perennial favorites like Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, and Eastern Bluebird.

2024 Backyard Winter Bird Survey Donors

Thank you to everyone who donated to the Survey. Contributions are the sole source of funding for this Survey and make it possible for us to collect and analyze this valuable data. The following list includes donations of \$10 and higher, but please know that we appreciate every gift.

—Grace McCulloch, *New Survey Coordinator*

Owl (\$500 - 1,000):

Nancy Ekola Carl and Karen Nydegger

Bluebird (\$100-499):

Anonymous (3)

Peg Ackerson

David Ackley

Nola Aldrich

Nancy and Blake Allison

Donna Anthony

Jen and Brendan Armstrong

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Continued Bluebird (\$100-499):

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Winslow and Susan Carr	Glenda Fischer	Denise Jeffery	Christina D. Mentus	Linda Samson	Denise Woodman
Larry and Doris Cate	Michelle Fischer	Deborah Jensen	Kelly Meyer	Carol Sattley	Margaret Worthen
Madeline Cattabriga	Jill E. Fleming	Lynn Jessee	Anita Fernandez and Dave Miller	Brant and Louise Sayre	Kay Yeagley
Ruth Ann Cave	Carol N. Flitton	Mary T. Johnson	Nanci and Charlie Mitchell	Sandra Scagliotti	Gloria Yennaco
Jon and Susan Celen	Betsy Forsham	Corinne S. Joly	Denise Montminy	William Scanzani	Evangelina Yiannacopoulos
Kathleen Cerutti	Lucille Fortin	Scott Judd	Nancy J. Moody	Brenda Schaefer	Stephanie Yost
Elizabeth Chadwick	Gary Fournier	Peter Keefe	Jim Kegley	Margaret C. Schoene	Craig and Kathy Zamoida
Linda M. Charron	Mary G. T. Fowler	Jim Kegley	Kathleen Kelley	Dianne S. Schroeder	George E. Zedalis
Loring Cheney	Beth Fox	Joseph Kellihier	Judy Kenison	Charlene Schrom	Matching gifts were received from: Hewlett Packard Enterprise
Mike Choukas	Ann Fredette	Judy Kenison	Robert Kennedy	Kristin Schuller	
Gale R. Christensen	Patricia Frisella	Barbara Kfoury	Alice Morris	Barbara and Thomas Schulte	
Denise Cingolani	David Fritz		Helga Mueller	Sarah T. Schwaegler	
Kathleen Clark	Darlene Furbush Ouellett		Jean M. Mullen	Leslie Searles	

Backyard Winter Bird Survey



2024 Species Totals

Species at participants' backyards on February 10 & 11, 2024

Species with record high totals (or ties) are in **bold**.
New species for the Survey are denoted by an *

Canada Goose	701	Carolina Wren	385
Mallard	328	European Starling	3714
American Black Duck	188	Gray Catbird	1
Northern Pintail	3	Northern Mockingbird	79
Green-winged Teal	4	Eastern Bluebird	2821
Bufflehead	21	Hermit Thrush	1
Common Goldeneye	63	American Robin	732
Barrow's Goldeneye	1*	Bohemian Waxwing	133
Hooded Merganser	20	Cedar Waxwing	233
Common Merganser	43	House Sparrow	2247
Red-breasted Merganser	4	Evening Grosbeak	14
Merganser sp.	1	Pine Grosbeak	3
Duck sp.	7	House Finch	2243
Ring-necked Pheasant	1	Purple Finch	404
Ruffed Grouse	9	Finch sp.	1
Wild Turkey	1823	Redpoll	49
Rock Pigeon	398	Red Crossbill	39
Mourning Dove	4695	White-winged Crossbill	3
American Woodcock	1	Pine Siskin	2173
Ring-billed Gull	41	American Goldfinch	9925
Herring Gull	49	Snow Bunting	28
Great Black-backed Gull	1	Chipping Sparrow	4
Common Loon	6	American Tree Sparrow	498
Great Blue Heron	3	Fox Sparrow	4
Black Vulture	4*	Dark-eyed Junco	9665
Turkey Vulture	93	White-throated Sparrow	806
Sharp-shinned Hawk	14	Song Sparrow	68
Cooper's Hawk	27	Swamp Sparrow	1
Cooper's/Sharp-shinned		Sparrow sp.	190
Hawk	13	Eastern Towhee	5
Bald Eagle	58	Baltimore Oriole	1
Red-shouldered Hawk	3	Red-winged Blackbird	359
Red-tailed Hawk	135	Brown-headed Cowbird	29
Eagle sp.	2	Common Grackle	1141
Hawk sp.	51	Blackbird sp.	26
Eastern Screech-Owl	1	Pine Warbler	12
Great Horned Owl	2	Yellow-throated Warbler	1*
Barred Owl	43	Northern Cardinal	2646
Belted Kingfisher	2	Painted Bunting	1
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	5		
Red-bellied Woodpecker	824	Total Confirmed	
Downy Woodpecker	1992	Bird Species 87	
Hairy Woodpecker	1183		
Pileated Woodpecker	172	Red Squirrel	487
Northern Flicker	41	Gray Squirrel	3972
Woodpecker sp.	1		
Canada Jay	15	Observers (by county):	
Blue Jay	4373	Belknap	84
American Crow	3010	Carroll	87
Fish Crow	1	Cheshire	105
Common Raven	227	Coos	35
Black-capped Chickadee	4395	Grafton	131
Tufted Titmouse	3064	Hillsborough	385
Golden-crowned Kinglet	43	Merrimack	267
Kinglet sp.	4	Rockingham	338
Red-breasted Nuthatch	225	Strafford	90
White-breasted Nuthatch	1624	Sullivan	57
Brown Creeper	111		
Winter Wren	4	Total Observers: 1575	

Please include details or photographs of unusual birds.

As always, there were a few reports of unexpected species submitted without additional descriptive information. It can be difficult for our biologists to confirm these sightings without documentation. These include rare species like Chipping Sparrow, Winter Wren, and Red-headed Woodpecker. To maintain data accuracy we require documentation, whether detailed notes on key field markings or photos.

Need help identifying a bird?

Check out our free digital guides.



nhaudubon.org/bwbs

Email photos to bwbs@nhaudubon.org.

We love receiving your submissions and are excited to feature them in our summaries or announcements.

Not sure about a bird?

Snap a photo! We're happy to help you with identification.



Former Survey Coordinator Rebecca Suomala spotted this Eastern Screech Owl during her 2024 survey. Becky has been a dedicated leader of this project. We are grateful for her amazing efforts. Though, we must admit—we're a little jealous that she always seems to attract the coolest birds!
Photo by Eric Conte.

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Participate online: nhaudubon.org/bwbs