

Backyard Winter Bird Survey



Where Are the Chickadees?

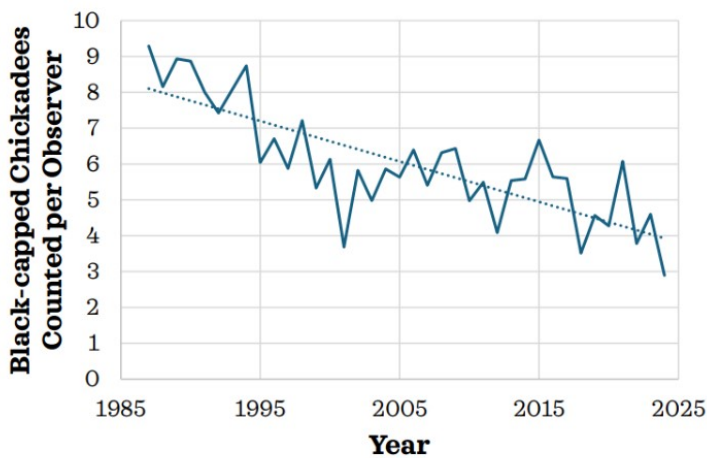
by *Grace McCulloch, Survey Coordinator*

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



Photo by Stephanie Tinker.

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.



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.

There could be several reasons for lower Black-capped Chickadee counts on the Backyard Winter Bird Survey. Mild winters often lead to plentiful wild food for chickadees, reducing their need to visit feeders and the likelihood of us counting them. As you have likely noticed, New Hampshire winters are warming. Climate change is likely to impact this species. Increased bird feeding across neighborhoods also means that chickadees now have more options, potentially reducing feeder counts in any one yard. Conversely, when food is scarce, chickadees may move in search of food, causing local populations to temporarily decline.



Did you know that the number of “dees” at the end of a Black-capped Chickadee’s call signify the level of danger out there? Black-capped Chickadees use this system to alert other birds of near by threats. The more “dees” the greater the threat. Photo by Grace McCulloch.

We will continue to gather data on Black-capped Chickadees and other winter birds to better understand these trends. Like many New England bird species, chickadees face threats from habitat loss, predation by outdoor cats, and window collisions. In the Backyard Winter Bird Survey, every bird counts—even those we think of as “common” have a story to tell. Thank you for helping us monitor our state’s bird populations and continue to tell these stories!