

Hartland Christmas Bird Count 2025

The Hartland Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on December 27, 2025. It was the fifteenth consecutive year that this CBC was run, bringing the total years conducted to eighteen. The weather facilitated bird finding, although it was extremely cold. Hardy souls walked but total vehicle time (37) far exceeded time on foot (24). Overall, however, favorable low wind and precipitation-free conditions enabled counters to find 49 species, nearly matching the record high of 50 found in 2021. The high species count was possible thanks to a good influx of irruptive northern finch which offset the fact that nearly all water in the circle was completely frozen. For the second year in a row, the summer and fall drought prevented Sebasticook Lake from refilling after its annual summer drawdown. The low water level resulted in the outflow below the dam barely trickling water to the floodplain below. Mallards and a few American Black Ducks were the only waterfowl located, with most of these in Newport, packed wing to wing in a 500 square foot patch of open water below the dam in the Sebasticook River. They appeared to be keeping the water in the hole in the ice open with their movement as the mercury hovered near five degrees! The total number of birds recorded this year (3688) nearly matched the average over the last four years (3704). No additional species which were not seen on count day were located during count week.

The Sebasticook Regional Land Trust (SRLT) acted as the local sponsor for the count as it has done since the count was resurrected in 2011. A total of 27 birders contributed through field birding (15) or by watching their feeders (12). There were several species located that were new to the count. Surprisingly neither Red Crossbill nor Red-winged Blackbird had been previously recorded until this year. More unusual for central Maine was an adult Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Newport village which was observed eating crab apples to survive. There has been a regional trend for these woodpeckers to winter north to southern New England, but over the last couple of years, they have been pushing the envelope even further and staying in small numbers in southern, and now central Maine.

The big story of the count was the influx of northern birds. The cold winter was certainly a factor, but a lack of cones and seeds in their breeding habitat was more likely the determinant. Northern finch “irrupt” southward in search of food in years when the staples in their breeding range are in short supply. As a result, for the first time in several years, redpolls, siskins, and Pine and Evening grosbeaks were all found by counters in the northern sectors. In fact Evening Grosbeak attained a high count record (68). Along with the northern finch, Purple Finch (27) and goldfinch (309) matched or exceeded previous Hartland high counts. The latter two species, which are familiar to all Mainers during the summer months, also move in mass in search of food during the colder months. It’s likely that numbers of all the finch species were even higher because many (153) unidentified finch were tallied. Record high counts were also posted for turkey (292), Hairy Woodpecker (49), Red-breasted Nuthatch (73) and titmouse (80). The nuthatch count last year was only eight! These conifer-loving mites also irrupt to areas which are rich in their favorite seed containing cones. Last year their favorite local conifer crops failed. Titmice nearly doubled the 2020 previous high (48). The first three years that the count was run (2002-4), not a single titmouse was found. Christmas bird counts like this provide a measure of how climate change is rapidly affecting the ranges of our native birds. Exciting mammal sightings included an otter and two red fox.

Thanks to all who participated. SRLT greatly appreciates the volunteers who turn out to support this citizen science effort. Results provide critical information on how bird distributions change by contributing to the National Audubon Society’s CBC database which now extends over 125 years. Hope you’ll join us again next year. Please consider making a donation to support SRLT’s conservation efforts by going to our website at www.sebasticookrlt.org. Happy New Year!