

Beaverhill Bird Observatory
Fall Report 2026

by Willow Zilliox

November 2026

Introduction

After record-setting rainfall in the region disrupted the majority of our summer M.A.P.S. (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) program and prime Tree Swallow nestling banding, the floodwater politely receded just in time for our fall season to commence. A mesmerizingly different landscape was left in its wake; beavers staked claim over our trails near Lister Lake, frogs, snails, and Tiger Salamanders could be found throughout the forest, and Yellow Rails, Soras, and an abundance of waterfowl and shorebirds revelled in the new pockets of water on Beaverhill Lake's long-dried bed. As with all good things, it did not last forever and we soon found ourselves bidding farewell to the final flocks of southbound geese.



Enjoying the rainy year, this Tiger Salamander greeted us on our net loop one morning!

Spanning from July 20th to October 27th, our 2026 fall season was a testament to how much can fit into a mere 99 days. Our incredible team consisted of Jana Teefy, Head Biologist, Jon Van Arragon, Assistant Biologist, and Field Biologists Emelie Dykstra, Xavier Quantz, and Willow Zilliox. We were also joined by several fantastic long-term volunteers: Calvin Bonn (California, USA), Aaron Gomperts (California, USA), Christian Lunn (Cold Lake, Alberta) Jacob Mendonca (Edmonton, Alberta), and Eleanor Whitby (Salisbury, England). Tansi, our ambassador Great-horned Owl, lived at the station and never ceased to enchant and engage visitors. Another animal temporarily entered our care this fall, a late-born Northern Flying Squirrel from WILDNorth who we helped undergo a "soft release", a semi-monitored and supported transition from captivity to the wild.



Keith striking one of his classic poses!

Tragically, our beloved Red-tailed Hawk, Keith, passed away of natural causes on October 7th after an impressive 12 years of education ambassadorship at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory and Salt Haven West, a wildlife rescue in Saskatchewan. He will live forever in our hearts.

Fall Migration Monitoring

Migration Monitoring of songbirds occurred from July 21st to October 20th. Weather permitting, we opened our nets 30 minutes before sunrise and kept them open for 6 hours daily. We operated 17 passive mist nets that snake through various habitats amongst the aspens, poplars, and willows to the north of the station. During these 3 months, throughout 5965.08 net-hours, we caught 1930 individual

birds across 74 species (32.35 captures/100 net-hours; Table 3).

Compared to 2025's fall season, this autumn yielded substantially fewer captures (1930 versus 2958). There appear to be a few culprits of this discrepancy. Last fall accumulated 912 more net-hours than this fall, through virtue of better weather, and hindered the amount of birds we could capture. A standout species we caught far fewer of this year (either in addition to or as a consequence of fewer net-hours), was the Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Myrtle* ssp.), who accounted for 1261 (42.6%) of last year's captures and only 480 (24.8%) of this year's captures. Nevertheless, the Myrtle Warbler remained our most frequently-encountered bird this fall, followed by Least Flycatchers (388 captures, 20.1%) and Northern Yellow Warblers (293 captures, 15.2%) (Figure 1). Despite a smaller capture count, we still had some exciting high-volume days! August 17th saw 73 captures, September 15th saw 86, and September 21st and 23rd each saw 106!

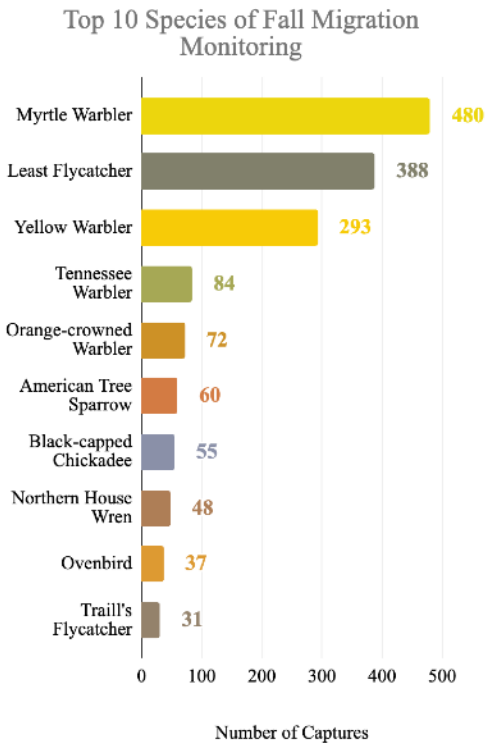


Figure 1. The 10 most abundant species caught during fall songbirdMigration Monitoring.

Luckily, this gap in quantity was made up in spades by the diversity we witnessed! We captured 74 species this fall whereas 2025 only saw 60 species. Of these included two enormous Pileated Woodpeckers and a Cooper's Hawk, claiming the titles of largest birds caught during songbird banding! We also had some rarities grace our nets, such as a Nelson's Sparrow (one of only 12 records at the BBO), Winter Wren (one of only 6 records at the BBO), and Varied Thrush (one of only *two* records at the BBO)! Not typically found this far east, we were also pleasantly surprised by a member of the Dark-eyed Junco's *Oregon* subspecies!



A few captures from this fall (L to R): a Cooper's Hawk, Fox Sparrow, and Golden-crowned Kinglet!

During Migration Monitoring, a daily 40-minute census is conducted to paint a more holistic picture of the bird diversity at the BBO. Observations throughout the day are also logged. This autumn was very generous, decorating our checklists with a Townsend's Solitaire, Lark Sparrow, Black-bellied Plover, and White-winged Crossbills! One particularly magical set of days in August featured more than 600 Tree Swallows in the grassland!

Slowly but surely, our local breeders departed and northern migrants stopped checking in. Fortunately, our sadness at seeing them leave only bolsters our excitement for spring!

Owl Migration Monitoring

Beginning on September 1st, our Owl Migration Monitoring program ran nightly until October 26th, with nets opening 30 minutes after sunset. Nets were kept open for 6 hours in September and 7 hours in October. In total, the BBO uses 10 mist nets for owl banding, with nets targeting Northern Saw-whet Owls (n = 7) and Long-eared Owls (n = 1) being operated throughout September and October, and nets targeting Boreal Owls (n = 2) operating on September 25th, September 26th, then nightly after October 1st. Our nets are configured around 5 species- and sex-specific audio lures. Two play the breeding call of a male NSWO (*NSWO Male Lure #1* and *#2*), one plays the breeding call of a female NSWO (*NSWO Female Lure*), one plays the breeding call of a Boreal Owl (*Boreal Owl Lure*), and one plays the breeding call of a Long-eared Owl (*Long-eared Owl Lure*).



One of the Northern Saw-whet Owls banded this fall. Doesn't get much cuter than these guys!

This fall, we totalled 232 Northern Saw-whet Owls and 5 Long-eared Owls across a combined 1316.5 lure-hours, making for an average of 18.0 captures/100 lure-hours (Table 4). This was a satisfying improvement from last year's owl banding season, where we caught only 179 NSWO and 4 LEOW (Table 1). Unfortunately, no Boreal Owls have been caught at the BBO since 2024.

A higher capture volume this fall meant we were occasionally treated to a "big night"! Our biggest took place on September 30th, where we caught 22 NSWO! Runners-up were a 15-owl night on October 3rd and a 12-owl night on September 29th!

Sudden snowfall in the final days of October necessitated we shut down the station to ensure we did not get snowed in. To say the staff were disappointed by this is quite an understatement, as we were hoping for at least a few more weeks spent catching owls.



Two beauties! Long-time volunteer, Irene Crosland, with a Long-eared Owl!

Although, given all the weather calamities we faced this year - a blizzard in the spring, flooding in the summer, and wind storms throughout - there really couldn't be a more on-theme conclusion to the season.

Table 1. Owl Migration Monitoring captures for the past three years.

Species Name	2024	2025	2026
Boreal Owl	5	0	0
Long-eared Owl	9	4	5
Northern Saw-whet Owl	295	179	232

Events & Workshops

Throughout the fall, over 500 visitors joined our biologists for mornings and evenings of banding. Weekly ticketed banding events, *Supper & Saw-whets*, and a sprinkling of workshops and bookings kept us doing one of our favourite things: celebrating the love of birds!

Songbird banding events took place on Saturdays and Sundays from August 30th to October 4th, and owl banding events ran on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from September 12th to October 18th. As many as 22 guests per event were welcomed to learn about the banding process and purpose, accompany us on census (if at a morning event), and take in our abundance of displays, scenery, wildlife, and refreshments. Our largest autumn event, *Supper & Saw-whets*, welcomed 50 guests both evenings of September 25th and 26th. In addition to usual banding demonstrations, volunteers and staff cooked a full vegetarian dinner and set out activity sheets, crafts, and a face-painting station run by our lovely Emelie. Both evenings were scored by the highly talented harpist, Mikayla Bortscher! While we only caught 3 NSWO throughout the event, our ambassador birds Tansi and Nina ensured that our guests got to admire plenty of beautiful owls. Dr. Medina, an ornithologist integral to the study of the Unspotted Saw-whet Owl endemic to Central America, volunteered at numerous owl events and presented on his research.



Supper & Saw-whets *is always such a delightful way to spend an autumn weekend!*

Two training workshops, one focused on aging and sexing and the other on net extractions, were held on August 29th and September 5th. Attendees of these workshops watched a presentation on the relevant material and were given a chance to hone their skills under the guidance and supervision of our biologists.

A handful of private bookings further extended our outreach. Groups from nearby high schools, colleges, and universities made their way out to the station to learn about our work. Our staff (plus ambassador owls Tansi and Nina) were also invited to a book release celebration at the Royal Alberta Museum for *A Field Guide to the Birds of Alberta* by David Scott and Gavin McKinnon. We are very grateful to the organizers at Backyard Birds Nature Shop and the Royal Alberta Museum for the highly educational and enjoyable evening! As an autumn edition of the Snow Goose Festival was snowed out in April, our Chair, Geoff Holroyd and Red-tailed Hawk, Keith, presented at two mornings at the Strathcona Wilderness Center to 6 buses full of new Canadians and Girl Guides organized by Nature Alberta



Something caught everyone's attention during a visit from one of the University of Alberta's field schools!

Acknowledgements

We are beyond fortunate to be surrounded by an amazing community of people and organizations fundamental to our success as a banding station! We extend our gratitude toward everyone at WILDNorth for their constant support and collaboration through the season, as well as the Backyard Birds Nature Shop and Royal Alberta Museum for hosting us at the aforementioned book release.

Thank-you to our excellent board Geoff Holroyd, Helen & Phil Trefry, Ruth & Ron Ball, Sian Ford, Darren McGregor, Emily MacLellan, Glen Hvenegaard, Alyssa Bohart, Julianne Hayes, Richard & Willa Hedley, Peter & Christine Campbell, and Carmen Patry; and staff members Jana Teefy, Jon Van Arragon, Emelie Dykstra, Xavier Quantz, and Willow Zilliox.



Thank you all for an awesome field season! Sincerely, the BBO staff of 2026.

Our work would be far more challenging without our wonderful volunteers. A heartfelt thank you goes to this season's volunteers: Calvin, El, Christian, Aaron, Jacob, Irene & Bob, Stefanie, Emily, Jay, Adam, Bannor, Quinn, Kelsey & Leif, Gabby, Adara, Kalia & Jordyn, Savannah, Shayda, Emily, Ava, Elyse, Kasha, Rachel, Hazel, Yohana, Erica, JP, Sarah, Dahlia, Dani, Liam, Emelie, Ellen, Nikolas & Patrick, Angela, Matthew, Carmen, Ron, Ken, Sue, and Brenda.

Table 2. Banding totals for the fall Migration Monitoring season.

Species Name	Banded	Repeat[1]	Return[2]	Unbanded[3]	Grand Total
Alder Flycatcher	6				6
American Goldfinch	2				2
American Redstart	24	1			25
American Robin	1				1
American Tree Sparrow	57	1		2	60
Baltimore Oriole	1				1
Bay-breasted Warbler	4				4
Black-and-white Warbler	5				5
Black-capped Chickadee	18	33	3	1	55
Blackpoll Warbler	11				11
Blue Jay	1				1
Blue-headed Vireo	1				1
Brown Creeper	1				1
Brown-headed Cowbird	2				2
Canada Warbler	3				3
Cedar Waxwing	4				4
Chipping Sparrow	1				1
Clay-colored Sparrow	11			1	12
Common Yellowthroat	21		1	1	23
Cooper's Hawk	1				1
Downy Woodpecker	1				1
Eastern Phoebe	1				1
Eastern Warbling-Vireo	17	3	1		21
Fox Sparrow	1				1
Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow	9	3		1	13
Golden-crowned Kinglet	3				3
Gray Catbird	7				7
Gray-cheeked Thrush	1				1
Hairy Woodpecker			1		1
Hermit Thrush	1				1

Least Flycatcher	326	25	5	32	388
LeConte's Sparrow	1				1
Lincoln's Sparrow	14				14
Magnolia Warbler	12				12
Mourning Warbler	6				6
Myrtle Warbler	468	8		4	480
Nelson's Sparrow	1				1
Northern House Wren	35	9	1	3	48
Northern Waterthrush	8				8
Orange-crowned Warbler	71	1			72
Oregon Junco	1				1
Ovenbird	36			1	37
Philadelphia Vireo	1				1
Pileated Woodpecker	2				2
Red-breasted Nuthatch	10				10
Red-eyed Vireo	6				6
Red-winged Blackbird	1				1
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	1	1			2
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	17			1	18
Ruby-throated Hummingbird				5	5
Ruffed Grouse				1	1
Savannah Sparrow	1				1
Slate-colored Junco	18	2			20
Song Sparrow	20		1	1	22
Swainson's Thrush	18				18
Swamp Sparrow	3				3
Tennessee Warbler	65	11		8	84
Traill's Flycatcher	31				31
Unidentified Empidonax				1	1
Unidentified Warbling Vireo	20	2	3		25
Unspecified Yellow-rumped Warbler	2				2
Varied Thrush				1	1

Veery	1				1
Western Palm Warbler	8				8
Western Warbling-Vireo	1				1
White-breasted Nuthatch	2				2
White-throated Sparrow	18				18
Wilson's Warbler	8	1			9
Winter Wren	1				1
Yellow Shafted Flicker	1				1
Yellow Warbler	245	35	6	7	293
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	3				3
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1				1
Yellow-headed Blackbird	1				1
Grand Total	**1701**	**136**	**22**	**71**	**1930**

[1]Banded 90 or fewer days ago, at the BBO
[2]Banded more than 90 days ago, at the BBO
[3]Caught but not banded (e.g. escaped)

Total net-hours: 5 965.08 hours
32.35 captures/100 net-hours

Table 3. Banding totals for the Owl Migration Monitoring season.

Species Name	Banded	Foreign[1]	Repeat[2]	Return[3]	Grand Total
Long-eared Owl	5				5
Northern Saw-whet Owl	226	1	2	3	232
Grand Total	**231**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**237**

[1]Banded at a location other than the BBO
[2]Banded 90 or fewer days ago, at the BBO
[3]Banded more than 90 days ago, at the BBO

NSWO Male Lure #1
300.0 lure hours
142 captures
47.33 captures / 100 lure-hours

NSWO Male Lure #2
302 lure hours
66 captures
21.85 captures / 100 lure-hours

NSWO Female Lure
290 lure hours

17 captures
5.86 captures / 100 lure-hours

Long-eared Owl Lure
268.5 lure hours
4 captures
1.49 captures / 100 lure-hours

Boreal Owl Lure
156 lure hours
8 captures
5.13 captures / 100 lure-hours