

Guilford County's Best Birds – 2025

Despite their best efforts, Guilford County's birders had only one unusual bird to crow about during the winter of 2025, a Lark Sparrow at the County Farm. This dry spell continued until the end of March when two American White Pelicans were found and photographed from Lake Brandt's Palmetto Trail. It wasn't until early May that relatively unusual birds began to show up with some regularity. However, from May onward at least one unusual bird showed up in every month.

This year's 17 most noteworthy visitors are listed below. A subset of these, which have been reported five or fewer times from Guilford County, are the candidates for 2025's "Bird of the Year."

Candidates for Bird of the Year

Species	Date 1st Reported	Location
Lark Sparrow	01/26/25	Howerton Road, County Farm
American White Pelican	03/25/25	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Virginia Rail	05/07/25	High Point
Ruddy Turnstone	05/17/25	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Willet	05/20/25	Lake Townsend Marina
Olive-sided Flycatcher	05/31/25	Reedy Fork Trail Utility Cut
Olive-sided Flycatcher	06/04/25	Southwest Park, Guilford County
Limpkin*	06/21/25	Lake Higgins Shoreline
Lark Sparrow	07/26/25	Howerton Road, County Farm
Wilson's Phalarope*	08/29/25	Hamburg Mill Flats, Lake Brandt
Glossy Ibis	09/02/25	Hamburg Mill Flats, Lake Brandt
Lawrence's Warbler*	09/28/25	Haw River SP, Iron Ore Belt Access
Clay-colored Sparrow	10/18/25	Howerton Road, County Farm
Glossy Ibis	11/01/25	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Lark Sparrow	11/04/25	Green Hill Cemetery
Franklin's Gull*	11/07/25	Lake Brandt Marina
Short-eared Owl*	12/07/25	Howerton Road, County Farm

- Species with an asterisk have been reported five or fewer times.

It is interesting to note that three species (Lark Sparrow, Olive-sided Flycatcher, and Glossy Ibis) were reported on multiple occasions during the year. Given the physical separation of the locations where these birds were encountered, and/or the amount of time that elapsed between reports, we treat these birds as different individuals.

Meet the Candidates

Lawrence's Warbler (3rd report) – Among the most colorful warblers passing through Guilford County are Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers. The former species is relatively uncommon (14 reports) while the latter is reported more frequently. These two species occasionally hybridize producing two named hybrids – Brewster's Warbler and Lawrence's Warbler. We are unaware of any records of Brewster's Warbler in the county. This is the third report of Lawrence's Warbler. The bird was encountered in late September by Erica Muensterman who was birding in Haw River State Park along the Iron Ore Belt Access. Erica succeeded in taking several excellent photographs of this beautiful hybrid.

Short-eared Owl (3rd report) – After an absence of nearly two years, this species was again reported from large fields at the County Farm along Howerton Road in eastern Guilford County. After the initial report by Joe Donohue, birders flocked to the site to enjoy these crepuscular owls. Initial reports were of one owl but subsequent reports referred to as many as three owls. We don't know whether these are the same three individuals reported through early 2024. Future visits by these owls will probably depend on what crop rotation is planned for this area.

Franklin's Gull (2nd report) – Heather Buttonow struck gold at the Lake Brandt marina in early November. On this visit she got to the lake before there was much boat traffic. She noted only two gulls and they seemed to be traveling together. One was a Bonaparte's Gull but she was unsure about the second gull, which was about the same size as the Bonaparte's but had a lot of black feathering on its head. She took photos of the bird and these confirmed the bird's identity as a Franklin's Gull. This gull, which in some respects resembles a Laughing Gull, is found in the mid-west and farther west on ponds and lakes. The only other report of this species in Guilford County came from Lake Townsend in mid-October of 2015.

Limpkin (1st report) – In late June, Emily Madden, a Greensboro Parks and Gardens employee based at Lake Higgins, observed a small heron-like wader working along the lake's shoreline. She and a colleague identified the bird and then got alerts out to the birding community about the Limpkin's arrival. Having been duly alerted, many birders were able to get to the site and view Guilford County's first Limpkin. This species is normally associated with river and lake habitats in Florida but may be extending its range northward. (We only heard of one instance where a particularly zealous birder fell into Lake Higgins while attempting to get a better look and photographs.)

Wilson's Phalarope (1st report) – This is the first report of this species that typically is found in the northwestern regions of the US and Canada. This sighting completed the phalarope trifecta (i.e., Red, Red-necked, and Wilson's) for Guilford County. The bird was located on the Hamburg Mill mudflats, a portion of Lake Brandt that lies just west of US 220. The bird was located and first reported by Matt Wangerin. Matt's photographs revealed the presence of a second Wilson's Phalarope, a bird that soon left the flats for places unknown.

THE WINNER IS ...

Choice of a single bird as winner of the Best Bird contest is always difficult. This is especially true for 2025. Of our five candidates, I believe two deserve special consideration – the Limpkin and the Wilson’s Phalarope.

Limpkins apparently are extending their range northward from their stronghold in Florida. Breeding has been reported from South Carolina, there are several reports of this bird from eastern North Carolina, and a couple of summers ago one even spent several days in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley! These movements may be associated with climate change and/or the proliferation of Apple Snails, Limpkins’ favorite snack.

Wilson’s Phalaropes are most often found in the western US. Although they used to show up with some regularity in the eastern US during fall migration, they now are reported far less frequently giving rise to concerns about their future. Many birders “ticked” this Guilford bird and enjoyed seeing its Whirling Dervish feeding behavior.

I am casting my vote for the Wilson’s Phalarope as Guilford’s Best Bird of 2025. Let’s hope that someday we all have a chance to see the female in breeding plumage. It surely is one of the most beautiful shorebirds.

Best wishes to all of you for a happy and healthy New Year and I hope each of you finds a special bird in 2026.