

Cape May: Fall Migration

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



October 13 – 20, 2019

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Cape May is considered the top birding destination in North America to witness fall migration, especially for birds of prey. This trip is timed for peak land and sea birding diversity. Common and Red-throated Loon, hawks and falcons, scoters and gannets are all migrating along the eastern seaboard. Cape May's unique location, situated on the peninsula where the Atlantic seaboard meets the Delaware Bay, make it a geographic migrant trap. Far from the metro areas of northern New Jersey, the Cape May peninsula is home to forests, farmland, wetland meadows, and salt marshes. Cape May itself is a national historic site and offers incredible examples of Victorian architecture and charm, as well as some of the best seafood dining on the east coast.

Visit Cape May Bird Observatory, Cape May Point Hawk Watch, Forsythe (formerly Brigantine) NWR, and many fresh and saltwater habitats. There's a reason they hold the World Series of Birding here every year! Our lodgings for the week are at a classic hotel in historic Cape May. Each morning begins with optional sunrise beach walks in search of shorebirds and endangered Black Skimmer. Daily trips range from exploring one of the world's best examples of tidal salt marshes by boat to visiting one of



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the most successful beach restorations in the United States. We explore habitats and locations ranging from coastal beach towns to well-known natural areas and parks along the Delaware Bay.

The Cape May Fall Birding Festival begins on the Friday of our trip — we register you so we can take in a bird walk or evening presentation.

Tour Highlights

- Enjoy a one-stop, unpack, and relax tour
- Watch for thousands of Sharp-shinned Hawk, hundreds of Northern Harrier, and dozens of Peregrine Falcon and Merlin at the Cape May State Park Hawk Watch Platform
- Spend an afternoon at The Nature Conservancy's Cape May Bird Refuge, one of the most successful habitat restorations on the Atlantic seaboard
- Look for Common, Black, Roseate, Arctic, Gull-billed, and Sandwich Terns at Stone Harbor Point
- Search for elusive Diamond Back Terrapin, America's only saltwater turtle, aboard a salt marsh pontoon cruise
- Stop at the Avalon Sea Watch, one of the country's longest-running seabird watch/counting sites
- Board Lewes Ferry for a pelagic ferry crossing of the Delaware Bay to the state of Delaware
- Watch hundreds, if not thousands, of warblers and other passerines at Morning Flight, an morning watch/count of returning birds that were pushed out to sea on their evening migration

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Cape May Migration Tour with Dan Donaldson

\$2490, from Philadelphia

Airport is Philadelphia International (PHL)



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Itinerary



Sun., Oct. 13 Arrival

Arrive at the Philadelphia International Airport (PHL) where we assemble at 2:00 PM at the Continental Airlines baggage claim area. Your guide, Dan Donaldson, is wearing binoculars and meets you there. We travel about 2.5 hours, that includes a quick lunch stop, to our lodgings in Cape May, New Jersey. We take a bit of time to freshen up for dinner and get to know our fellow travelling companions.

Accommodations in Cape May, (D)



Mon., Oct. 14 Cape May State Park | Cape May Bird Refuge

Those who wish can enjoy an optional sunrise (6:30 AM) beach walk before breakfast at the hotel (typically each day at 8:00 AM). Today we orient ourselves to the Cape May Island and head straight to the Cape May Bird Observatory headquarters and gift shop to orient ourselves to the area and get the local birding news. Then we're off to the Cape May State Park Hawk Watch Platform, nature center, and light house. There we enjoy a morning of hawk watching. A good day on the hawk watch platform can be marked by the passing of 2000 – 3000 Sharp-shinned Hawk, hundreds of Northern Harrier, and dozens of Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. More than 1000 Osprey have been counted in a given day. Walking the nearby beach can produce sightings of Parasitic Jaeger, all three scoters, loons, and many species of gulls. Walks around the park can push up nearly any late migrating eastern passerine this time of year.



We spend the afternoon at the Cape May Bird Refuge, aka "the Meadows." Owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, this important coastal birding area is one of the most successful habitat restorations on the Atlantic seaboard. Fall migration in the Meadows is nothing short of spectacular. It's also famous for evening Merlin and Peregrine flights as they work the meadows to catch that last dragonfly snack before settling in for the evening.

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Many of the hawks counted at the Cape May Hawk Watch pass directly over the Meadows or hunt in it. Peregrine, Cooper's Hawk, and Merlin can put on a spectacular show from mid-September through late October, along with scads of Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and even the occasional Bald Eagle circling overhead. Beach areas can offer a good selection of shorebirds often sitting inland to get out of the wind.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)



Tues., Oct. 15

Stone Harbor Point | Salt Marsh Boat Tour | Nummy Island

After breakfast we head to Miss Chris Marina at Stone Harbor Point where many of the shorebirds and waterfowl in the area can be found. Common, Black, Arctic, Gull-billed, and Sandwich Terns; Roseate and Royal Terns are also possible. Look for chasing the terns and gulls, attempting to steal their food. Monarch butterflies are common in the brush, as are migrant songbirds.

We board the *Osprey*, a large pontoon tour boat, to explore the salt marshes along the Intracoastal Waterway. We have a chance to see many shorebirds and migrating waterfowl and get to walk out onto the sea grass islands of the Saltmarsh. We should also get to see the elusive Diamondback Terrapin, America's only saltwater turtle.

After lunch we're off to further explore the salt marshes as we drive the intracoastal areas with stops at Nummy Island, which is famous for nesting Black-crowned Night-Heron and flyby terns of various species. Tides may require that we rearrange the activities today. We catch the sunset at Sunset Beach back in Cape May and then return to our hotel to freshen up before dinner at a local restaurant.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)

Wed., Oct. 16 Forsythe NWR | Avalon Sea Watch

We bird our way through the vast salt marsh areas north of Cape May as we make our way up the coast to Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (aka Brigantine), a 43,000-acre natural area with both

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fresh and saltwater marshes. Here we have great opportunities to see Clapper and King Rails, bitterns, migrating shorebirds, and waterfowl, as well as Peregrine Falcon hunting the marshes. All the East Coast waterfowl and wading birds can be found here, and Brant and Snow Geese should be just arriving. Watch as Peregrine and Merlin push around shorebirds that take flight in waves of motion. Osprey is common and we may even tire of seeing them! There are thousands of acres of both fresh and salt marshes here and almost any East Coast water bird is a possible find.

On the way back to Cape May we stop at the Avalon Sea Watch, one of the country's longest- running seabird watch/counting sites. Birds we likely see at the Sea Watch include: Double-crested Cormorant (200,000 per year), Red-throated Loon (50,000 per year), scoters (100,000-200,000 per year; mostly Black and Surf), Northern Gannets (50,000 per year), and uncountable numbers of gulls.

A good day for scoters can amount to a count of 20,000 birds. There is also a steady flow of Common Loon, terns of various species, Green-winged Teal, Long-tailed Duck, Bufflehead, Black Duck, scaup, and many other species. New Jersey Audubon counters are there to help with identification and information.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)

Thurs., Oct. 17 Delaware Day

Delaware is the smarter little brother to Cape May. Best known for its spring migration of Red Knot and Horseshoe Crab, Delaware offers fantastic birding opportunities and some more diverse habitats than Cape May. It could have been the birding destination on the east coast if it weren't for its big brother New Jersey.

Today we board the Lewes Ferry for a pelagic-birding ferry crossing of the Delaware Bay to the state of Delaware. This ferry trip can be very productive for sea birds and scoters that either spend the night afloat or fly in at sunrise to feed. Once in Delaware we spend the day exploring the Historic District of Downtown Lewes, Cape Henlopen State Park,



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Prime Hook NWR, local hawk watch sites, and other fall birding hotspots on the Delaware side of the bay. Our late afternoon return ferry gives us a chance to catch the “fly out” of birds that visit bay areas during the day.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)

Fri., Oct 18 Morning Flight Bird Count

We're off for an early start to Morning Flight, an ongoing morning watch/count of returning birds that were pushed out to sea on their evening migration. This is a chance to see hundreds, if not thousands, of warblers and other passerines making their way back to land.

We spend the rest of the morning exploring nearby Higbee Beach on the Delaware Bay. All the hawks and warblers are regularly seen at Higbee Beach in very large numbers, especially early in the morning. Birds often get pushed out to sea during nocturnal migratory flights and return exhausted to the mainland at dawn. Trips this time of year have often produced incredible shows of Merlin, as well as large movements of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, other woodpeckers, and Seaside Sparrow.



After lunch we explore another local natural area or take time to relax a bit or explore downtown Cape May in daylight hours. We take in an early dinner to accommodate an evening presentation at the Cape May Fall Festival. Dinner is at another favorite local restaurant.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)

Sat., Oct 19 Local Birding

Today we spend the morning birding local patches away from the scheduled festival groups at sites the winds, weather, or tides may have kept us from visiting earlier. We visit the birding festival areas in the afternoon and perhaps join a local guide for an afternoon trip. Later we take a break before our last dinner together at the famous Lobster House restaurant. We finish up our bird lists for the trip and reflect on the great week we've just shared.

Accommodations in Cape May, (B,L,D)

Sun, Oct. 20 Departures

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After breakfast, we depart for Philadelphia airport, where we should arrive by 11:00 AM. (B)

Please keep in mind that the weather and tides play an important role in the migration along the coast and while we visit all the great birding sites, we may rearrange the day's and week's activities accordingly.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

The cost of this journey is \$2490, DBL / \$2990 SGL, plus festival registration fee (an estimate of \$120 based on 2017 pricing) from Philadelphia. This cost is based on double occupancy and includes all accommodations; meals as specified in the itinerary, group airport transfers, professional guide services, local park and other area entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses. The cost is based on a minimum number of 8 participants, with fewer a small group surcharge (typically \$100 – \$300) may apply. The cost does not include transportation to or from your home to Philadelphia or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, portage, maid gratuities or beverages from the bar.

Travel Information

A good number of airlines service Philadelphia. Plan to arrive at Philadelphia International Airport no later than 2:00 PM on Oct. 13, and plan to depart after Noon on Oct. 20. If you arrive early or stay on after the trip in Philadelphia, there are a number of motels close to the airport.

Pace of the Journeys

This is a relaxed-pace journey with minimal early mornings. Most locations are just minutes from our hotel and while we spend full days in the field, there are ample opportunities for breaks or an afternoon off on your own. Most birding locations are short walks on flat ground, easy on the exertion level.

Photo Credits

Double-crested Cormorant, Greg Smith (GS); Osprey at Nest, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Cape May Warbler, NJS; Cape May Birders at Dawn, Dan Donaldson; Black Skimmers, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Tree Swallow (CS); Broad-winged Hawk, CS; Sandwich Terns, NJS; Black-crowned Night Heron, Peg Abbott; Clapper Rail, CS; Green-winged Teal, Tom Dove; Northern Harrier, GS; Ruddy Turnstones, NJS.

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