

Cape May: Spring Migration

with Naturalist Journeys



May 18 – 24, 2022

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Tour Summary

7-Day / 6-Night Cape May Migration Tour
\$2690, from Philadelphia
Airport is Philadelphia International (PHL)

Experience the ultimate spring bird migration at America's quintessential beach town. Historic Cape May in May is considered one of the top birding destinations in North America to witness spring migration, especially for songbirds and shorebirds. Timed for peak diversity and quantity, we visit famous New Jersey birding locations and little-known local patches up and down the coast, including the Cape May Bird Observatory's nature center and hawk watch platforms, Delaware Bay beaches, and fresh and salt-water wetlands. Tour the world's largest contiguous salt marsh by boat, explore Higbee Beach WMA's forests and fields, bird the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, and participate in the Cape May Spring Birding Festival.

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 on the east coast. Our lodgings for the week are at a classic beachside hotel in historic Cape May. Each morning begins with optional sunrise beach walks in search of shorebirds and beautiful Black Skimmers. Daily trips range from exploring the many examples of tidal salt marshes by boat and van, to visiting one of the most successful beach and dune restorations in the United States.

It's Cape May's unique location, situated on a south facing peninsula where the Atlantic seaboard meets the Delaware Bay, that makes it a geographic migrant trap. Birds, both land and sea flyers, sometimes by the thousands, follow the coastline north and once they cross Delaware Bay find themselves in the forests, fields, salt marshes, and wetlands of Cape May; the perfect spot to stop and fuel up before heading to their breeding grounds. Far from the metro areas of northern New Jersey, the Cape May peninsula is home to forests, farmland, wetland meadows, and salt marshes. We watch migrating eastern warblers and experience the larger songbird migration, which peaks while we visit. Famous for its hawk migration too, we spend time at the Cape May Point hawk watch, nearby boardwalk trails, and freshwater ponds. Large numbers of shorebirds and seabirds are also in migration and they use the vast saltmarsh flats to feed on horseshoe crab eggs and invertebrates to refuel and rest. The Cape May Spring Birding Festival begins while we're here—we register you so we can participate in a bird walk with a world renowned leader/author or an evening presentation.

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

Tour Highlights

- Enjoy a one-stop, unpack, and relax tour at a beachside hotel
- Watch for migrating raptors like Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, and Merlin
- Spend an afternoon at The Nature Conservancy's Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge, one of the most successful beach habitat restorations on the Atlantic seaboard
- Look for Common, Forster's, Royal, and Caspian Terns and multiple shorebird and heron species at Nummy Island and Stone Harbor Point
- Climb aboard for a salt marsh pontoon boat cruise as we search for migrating ducks, shorebirds, saltmarsh sparrows, herons, and Diamondback Terrapin, America's only saltwater marsh turtle
- Search for colorful spring plumage warblers and other Neotropical songbirds as they cross Delaware Bay and arrive in Cape May to refuel and rest
- Visit Delaware Bay Shore beaches where Red Knot, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and other shorebirds and gulls feast on horseshoe crab eggs
- Learn about ongoing shorebird conservation efforts in NJ from a Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ field biologist

Itinerary

Wed., May 18 Arrivals

Please plan to arrive today at the Philadelphia International Airport (PHL) where we assemble as a group at 2:00 PM at the United Airlines baggage claim area. Your guides are wearing binoculars and meet you there. Then, we load up and travel about 2.5 hours, that includes a quick snack stop, to our lodgings in Cape May, New Jersey. If time permits we visit the Cape May Point State Park to see what's around and then take a bit of time to freshen up before dinner and get to know our fellow traveling companions.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (D)

Thurs., May 19 Cape May Point State Park | Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Today we get to know Cape May. We stay close to this pretty beach town and familiarize ourselves with the island and the local spots that we visit throughout the week. We start at the Cape May Bird Observatory headquarters and gift shop to orient ourselves, get the local birding news, and pick up any birding necessities. Then we're off to the Cape May Point State Park with its hawk watch platform and trails, nature center, and light house. There, we spend the rest of the morning birding and exploring the state park. Walking the nearby beach can produce sightings of Parasitic Jaeger, all three scoters, and many species of gulls and terns as well as nesting American Oystercatcher and the endangered Piping Plover. Walks around the park can push up nearly any migrating eastern passerine this time of year and multiple duck species as well. Lunch is at one of our favorite cafes.

This afternoon we explore Cape May Bird Migratory 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. Almost anything can turn up in spring migration at the Meadows including Merlin and Peregrine as they work the meadows to catch that last dragonfly or shorebird snack before settling in for the evening. Multiple shorebirds, herons, egrets, rails, and American and Least Bitterns all can be found here in spring. The beach areas can offer a good selection of shorebirds, some like Piping Plover nesting on the protected beaches. We then dine at a local restaurant where we also get a presentation on shorebird conservation by a Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ field biologist.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (B,L,D)

Fri., May 20 Stone Harbor Point | Nummy Island | Salt Marsh Boat Tour

After breakfast we head to Stone Harbor Point where many of the shorebirds, herons, and waterfowl in the area can be found. Common, Forster's, Caspian, and Royal Terns are all possible. Monarch butterflies are common in the brush, as are migrant songbirds. We're then off to further explore the salt marshes as we drive the intracoastal areas with stops at Nummy Island, famous for nesting Black-crowned Night-Heron and search for the ever-present Clapper Rail. Here we also stop at a local patch where Nelson's, Saltmarsh, and Seaside Sparrows may frequent. Tides may require that we rearrange the activities today.

After a local lunch we head to Miss Chris Marina where we board the *Osprey*, a large pontoon tour boat, to explore the salt marshes along New Jersey's Intracoastal Waterway. Here we have a chance to see many shorebirds and migrating waterfowl that utilize the sea grass islands and constantly changing tidal creek mudflats of the saltmarsh. We watch for the elusive Diamondback Terrapin, North America's only saltwater marsh turtle. American Bottlenose Dolphin are also a possibility. We end today at Sunset Beach in Cape May Point to watch for terns, various gull species, cormorants, and scoters in Delaware Bay and of course enjoy a fabulous sunset. We then return to our hotel to freshen up before dinner at a local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (B,L,D)

Sat., May 21 Cape May Spring Festival | Delaware Bay Shorebird Viewing

This morning after breakfast we join a NJ Audubon Spring Festival bird walk led by a local Cape May expert birder/author. After the walk we visit the festival displays and informational booths where there is opportunity for shopping as well as birding and optics demonstrations.

We then head northwest towards Cooks Beach and Norbury's Landing in search of large flocks of migrating shorebirds like Red Knot, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Ruddy Turnstone feasting on recently laid horseshoe crab eggs. These birds need to double their body weight in just a few days to successfully continue their migration north to reach their breeding grounds in peak condition. Their thousands of mile migration north is intricately timed with the horseshoe crab egg-laying. We may get back to Cape May in time for an evening festival workshop followed by dinner at a local restaurant.

Sun., May 22 Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Belleplain State Forest

We bird our way through the vast salt marsh areas north of Cape May today 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 fresh and saltwater marshes. Here we have great opportunities to see Clapper Rail, bitterns, migrating shorebirds, and waterfowl, as well as Northern Harrier and Bald Eagle hunting over the marshes. All the East Coast waterfowl and wading birds can be found here, too, and Brant should still be possible. Watch as Peregrine Falcon push around shorebirds that take flight in flashing waves of motion. Osprey are also common and we may even tire of seeing them! These thousands of acres of fresh and saltmarshes host almost every East Coast water bird.

After a picnic lunch and on the way south back to Cape May we stop at Belleplain State Forest located in the Pinelands National Reserve. Belleplain contains the greatest variety of habitats anywhere in New Jersey, including saltwater marsh, Atlantic white cedar swamp, and oak-hickory forest. Some spring Belleplain specialties are nesting Yellow-throated, Hooded, and Prothonotary Warblers as well as Summer Tanager and Acadian Flycatcher. We return in time to freshen up and then enjoy a seafood dinner at a local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (B,L,D)

Mon., May 23 Beach Plum Farms | Cape May Point State Park | Higbee Beach

We start the day with an outdoor breakfast (weather permitting, of course) at Beach Plum Farms and walk the property's trails and fields searching for migrating songbirds and raptors. We then visit Higbee Beach WMA with its many fields and deciduous forests just adjacent to Delaware Bay (often the first stop for exhausted and hungry migrating songbirds and raptors). After lunch at a local restaurant the rest of the day is open to perhaps revisit some of our premier birding spots such as the Cape May Point State Park or the Meadows, based on what's been observed recently on rare bird alerts or as weather conditions dictate.

We can also have some free time in the afternoon to enjoy parts of historic Cape May on their own or continue with more local birding. Our farewell dinner tonight is at another wonderful Cape May restaurant where we finish our bird lists and reflect on the great week of birding we've experienced.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (B,L,D)

Tues., May 24 Departures

After an early breakfast, we depart for the Philadelphia airport where we should arrive by 11:00 AM. Please plan flights out after 1:00 PM (B)

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Pace of the Journey

This is a relaxed journey with only a few 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

Group, Hugh Simmons Photography (HSP); Hooded Warbler, Steve Shunk; Baltimore Oriole, Doug Greenberg; Blue Grosbeak, Carlos Sanchez; Magnolia Warbler, Homer Gardin; Northern Harrier, Greg Smith; Birders at Dawn, Dan Donaldson.

Cost of the Journey

The cost of this journey is **\$2690 DBL / \$3190 SGL**, from Philadelphia. Cost is based on double occupancy and includes all accommodations, meals specified in the itinerary, group airport transfers, professional guide services, local park and other area entrance fees, miscellaneous program expenses, and festival registration fee. Cost is based on a minimum number of 8 participants; with fewer a small group surcharge (typically \$100 – \$300) may apply. Cost does not include transportation to or from your home to Philadelphia or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, portorage, maid gratuities, or beverages from the bar.

Travel Information

Please arrive at Philadelphia International Airport (PHL) no later than 2:00 PM on May 18, and plan to depart after 1:00 PM on May 24. If you arrive early or stay on after the trip in Philadelphia, there are a number of hotels close to the airport. If you plan to drive, please meet the group at the hotel in Cape May by about 3:00 PM. Parking is available.

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