

Cape May: Fall Migration

with Naturalist Journeys



October 10 – 16, 2023

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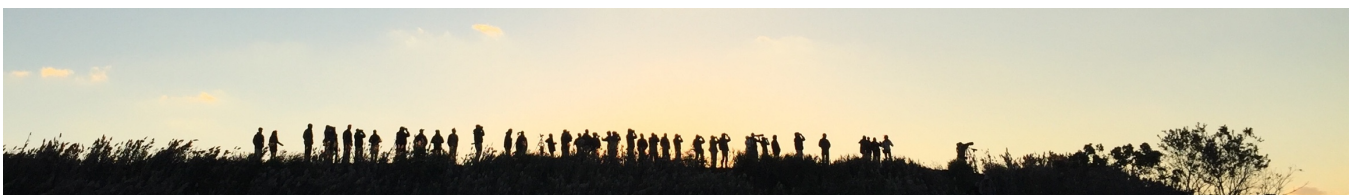
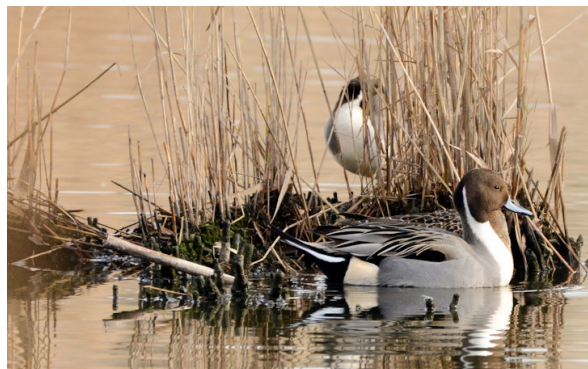
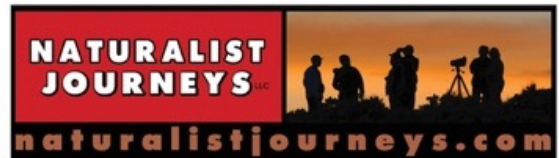
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Tour Summary

7-Day / 6-Night Cape May Migration Tour
\$2990 DBL / \$3630 SGL, from Philadelphia
Airport is Philadelphia International (PHL)

Experience the ultimate fall bird migration at America's quintessential beach town. Historic Cape May in October is considered the top birding destination in North America to witness fall migration, especially for birds of prey. Timed for peak land and sea bird 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 and Avalon Sea Watch; 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 experience the thrill of large scale migration from the Morning Flight viewing platform.

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. Many mornings begin with an optional sunrise beach walk in search of shorebirds and the beautiful Black Skimmer. 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 south and find themselves at this peninsula; the perfect spot to stop and fuel up before heading out over the Delaware Bay. Far from the metro areas of northern New Jersey, the Cape May peninsula is home to forests, farmland, wetland meadows, and salt marshes. We catch late migrating eastern warblers and experience the larger songbird migration, which is peaking while we visit. Famous for its hawk migration too, we spend time at the various hawk watches and counting locations. Large numbers of shorebirds and seabirds are also in migration, and they use the vast saltmarsh flats to feed and rest.

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 daily activities accordingly.

Tour Highlights

- Enjoy a one-stop, unpack, and relax tour at a beachside hotel
- Watch for large numbers of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, and Merlin at the Cape May State Park Hawk Watch Platform
- Spend an afternoon at The Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Meadows Preserve, one of the most successful beach habitat restorations on the Atlantic seaboard
- Look for Common, Forster's, Caspian and Royal Terns at Stone Harbor Point
- Search for the elusive Diamondback Terrapin, America's only saltwater marsh turtle along with migrating ducks, shorebirds, and herons aboard a salt marsh pontoon boat cruise
- Visit Avalon Sea Watch, one of the country's longest-running seabird watch/counting sites and a good spot to see dolphins and whales
- Watch hundreds, if not thousands, of warblers and other passerines at Morning Flight, a morning watch of returning birds that were pushed out to sea on their evening migration
- Marvel at the east coast's largest population of migrating Monarch Butterflies

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Tues., Oct. 10 Arrivals

Please plan to arrive today at the Philadelphia International Airport (PHL) where we assemble as a group by 2:00PM at a pre-arranged baggage claim area. Your guide is wearing binoculars and meets you there. Then, we load up and travel about 2.5 hours to our lodgings in Cape May, New Jersey. If time permits, we visit the Cape May Point State Park and its famous Hawk Watch and then take a bit of time to freshen up for dinner and get to know our fellow traveling companions.

Accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn (D)

Wed., Oct. 11 Higbee Beach | Cape May Point State Park | South Cape May Meadows Preserve

We're off for an early start to the Morning Flight viewing platform at Higbee Beach, an ongoing morning watch/count of returning migrants 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 do this at least once on the trip as a group and then as an option on any appropriate morning.

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 pickup any birding necessities. Then we're off to the Cape May Point State Park Hawk Watch Platform, nature center, and light house. There, we spend the rest of the morning hawk watching and exploring the state park. A good day on the hawk watch platform can be marked by the passing of 2000 – 3000 Sharp-shinned and Coopers Hawks, and dozens of Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. More than 1000 Osprey have been counted on a given day, too! Walking the nearby beach can produce sightings of Parasitic Jaeger, all three scoters, loons, and many species of gull. Walks around the park can produce late migrating eastern passerines this time of year and multiple duck species as well. Lunch is at one of our favorite local cafes.

This afternoon we explore the South Cape May Meadows Preserve. 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 at the Meadows can be nothing short of spectacular. It's famous for evening Merlin and Peregrine flights as they work the meadows to catch that last dragonfly snack before settling in for the evening. Many of the hawks counted at the Cape May Hawk Watch pass directly over the Meadows or hunt within 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 at the Sea Crest Inn (B,L,D)

Thurs., Oct. 12 Cape May Seafront | Stone Harbor Point | Salt Marsh Boat Tour

This morning those who wish can enjoy an optional sunrise beach walk before breakfast. Migration is much in evidence with passerine calls heard in the predawn and migrants foraging in the dune vegetation. After breakfast we head to Stone Harbor Point where many of the shorebirds 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.

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.

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

Fri., Oct. 13 Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Nummy Island | Sunset Beach

We bird our way to 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, American Bittern, Black-crowned Night-Heron, 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 flashing waves of motion. Osprey are 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 possible—Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, and American Avocet have all graced previous visits.

In late afternoon we explore the salt marshes as we drive the intracoastal areas with stops at Nummy Island where Nelson's, Saltmarsh, and Seaside Sparrows frequent narrow tidal channels as well as the large, pale form of Savannah Sparrow, 'Ipswich Sparrow', a sub-species that breeds solely on Cape Sable Island but winters in small numbers along the Atlantic Coast. Tides may require that we rearrange some of the activities today. We close the day 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., Oct. 14 Higbee Beach | Beach Plum Farm | Cape May Point State Park

We start the day with another pre-dawn visit to the Morning Flight platform at Higbee Beach. Past experience has shown that repeat visits can be extremely productive, especially during the first two to three hours of daylight. An outdoor breakfast, weather permitting, follows at Beach Plum Farm, after which we walk the property's trails and fields searching for migrating songbirds and raptors. The rest of the day is wide open, perhaps to revisit some of the premier birding spots such as the Cape May Hawk Watch, or watch Monarchs roosting and being tagged at Cape May Point State Park, as well as paying careful attention to the most recent grapevine news and rare bird alerts which could lead us anywhere on the Cape May peninsula!

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

Sun., Oct. 15 Avalon Sea Watch | Jake's Landing | Historic Cape May

This morning we head north to the Avalon Sea Watch, one of the country's longest-running seabird watch/counting sites. Birds we're likely see here include: Double-crested Cormorant (200,000 per year), Red-throated Loon (50,000 per year), scoters (100,000 – 200,000 annually, mostly Black and Surf), Northern Gannet (50,000 per year), and uncountable numbers of gulls. Here, 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 here to help with identification and information.

After brunch we head further north toward Jake's Landing, an expansive area of saltmarsh haunted by Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, and Bald Eagle! Carefully checking the muddy creeks may reveal Clapper Rail and Nelson's Sparrow and we shall hopefully find Palm Warbler of both sub-species and good numbers of Savannah Sparrow. The saltmarsh is overlooked by mixed woodland, often an extremely productive area for

woodpeckers—Pileated, Hairy, Downy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers are all possible, plus Yellow-bellied Sapsucker ... that's as well as White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches! Eastern Screech-Owl, while more aloof, is also resident in the woodland and we may just get lucky and hear one call.

Late afternoon can be taken at leisure, a relaxing walk along the beach or an exploration of Cape May's famous historic downtown area, closed to vehicular traffic. Our farewell dinner tonight is at another wonderful Cape May restaurant where we finish our bird lists and reflect on the week.

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

Mon., Oct. 16 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.

Travel Information

Arrival and Departure Airport: Philadelphia International (PHL)

Arrival: October 10, 2023 Please arrive no later than 2:00 PM for the drive to Cape May, if going direct to Cape May by car, please arrive no later than 6:00 PM to join the welcome dinner

Departure: October 16, 2023 Plan to depart after 1:00 PM

Early Arrivals: 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 Cape May hotel by about 3:00 PM. Parking is available.

TRAVEL TIP! This is a journey that many can drive to, and you can park at our hotel in Cape May, meet the group there. If you fly into Philadelphia we can pick you up at the airport or at the Hampton Inn Philadelphia International Airport, our guide's selected hotel for this journey. If you chose another hotel that is fine, but please plan to return to the airport for pick-up; we'll provide times in a meet-up plan ahead of the journey.

Pace of the Journey

This is a relaxed 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.

Cost of the Journey

The cost of this journey is **\$2990 DBL / \$3630 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, and miscellaneous program expenses. Cost does not include transportation to or from your home to Philadelphia or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, porterage, maid gratuities, or beverages from the bar.

Photo Credits

Group, Hugh Simmons Photography (HSP); Tree Swallows, HSP; Common Buckeye, Carlos Sanchez; Northern Pintail, Sandy Sorkin; Northern Harrier, Greg Smith; Birders at Dawn, Dan Donaldson.

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