

Cape May Fall Migration | Oct. 17 - 23, 2023

Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



Guides Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman, and participants Ross, Robert, Nancy, Janet, Julia, Suzanna, Paul, Diana, Jay and Laura



Tues., Oct. 17

Arrival Day | Cape May State Park Hawk Watch

Participants arrived either directly by car or via Philadelphia Airport, and by 3:00 p.m. we were all in Cape May, settled into our hotel rooms, refreshed and ready for some late afternoon birding. We headed directly to Cape May State Park and its famous Hawk Watch Platform. We would visit this location many times throughout the week as it's a hotspot during fall migration. Located at the very southern tip of Cape May Point, it offers views of birds migrating overland or near shore. Some birds continue their flights south while others remain for days or even weeks, refueling or waiting for favorable winds. Some head back north to skirt around the Delaware Bay over land.



We stayed for an hour and a half and picked up our first 44 species of the trip. It was sunny and there was a light, but steady movement of hawks, and the afternoon light gave us great looks at Black and Turkey Vultures, Northern Harriers and Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks. The nearby ponds gave us our two birds of the day, perhaps birds of the trip for some participants, as a beautiful male Eurasian Widgeon and an Eared Grebe decided to take a break from migration and spend most of the week resting and feeding in these ponds. Other waterfowl of note were Northern Pintails, American Widgeon, Gadwall, Blue- and Green-winged Teal, Ruddy Ducks and the ever-present Mute Swans that have established a population here. A quick walk on nearby trails through the shrubby marine forest produced Carolina Chickadees, Winter Wrens, Ruby- and Golden-crowned Kinglets and too many Yellow-rumped Warblers to count.

Dinner was at Sapore featuring seafood with Italian flare. When we returned to the hotel, we met to review our checklist for the day, and discuss our plans for the week ahead.

Wed., Oct. 18 Morning Flight | Higbee Beach | CMBO

Our first morning was an early start to witness the "morning flight" at dawn at Higbee Beach. Many, if not most, songbirds are nocturnal migrants preferring to fly on nights with north or northwest winds. Often, birds that migrate overnight along the east coast of the United States are carried out over the Atlantic Ocean by these winds. At sunrise, these birds reorient themselves, turning north to get back over land. In Cape May, they come ashore at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Higbee Beach has been on the radar of birders and volunteer counters for years, but now Cape May Bird Observatory has established this site as an official count and research station. Since 2003, New Jersey Audubon Society's (NJAS) Cape May Bird Observatory, with support from Zeiss Sports Optics, has conducted a daily count of the morning flight at Higbee Beach. The birding was fairly light this morning, but we did manage to get very good looks at Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Field, Song and White-throated Sparrows plus Northern Flickers, Brown Thrashers and 40+ Common Terns.

It was a short walk to Higbee Beach on the Delaware Bay where we immediately saw flocks of Surf and Black Scoters streaming by. A gathering of about 100 Forster's Terns in the ship canal was quite a spectacle to see. The



dunes along the beach were active with Eastern Phoebes, Blue Jays, Crows and Tree Swallows, all actively feeding in the dunes and attracting the attention of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks that would periodically strafe the tops of the dunes. We even noted a Peregrine Falcon that flew by on our return to the beach. All this before breakfast! Then we made a short drive to the Beach Plum Farm for a hearty breakfast.

Afterwards, we birded at the offices of the Cape May Bird Observatory. Once a small vacation home, this property has been converted to a birding hotspot complete with water features, bird blinds and feeders. Although just a quarter acre, the lot has been replanted with native species and is a regular stop for birders. We added Tufted Titmouse and Hermit Thrush to our day list, and of course, the CMBO office, with its library and gift shop, was a necessary stop. Our next stop was South Cape May Meadows, a Nature Conservancy property that has restored 200 acres of dune and coastal wetland habitat creating a very popular year-round birding spot in Cape May. American Oystercatchers and other shorebirds regularly nest here, dispersing along the beaches and mudflats in the salt marshes in fall. We birded the wetlands behind the dunes finding many shorebirds, waterfowl and waders including Northern Shoveler, Stilt Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. We watched and photographed a Northern Harrier working the meadow and picked up our first Common Yellowthroat along the same path.

Our final stop of the day was at the two-mile landing saltmarsh. This out-of-the-way spot can be good for Nelson's and Seaside Sparrows, and we would stop here several times throughout the week to search for these and other saltmarsh specialists. We had our first looks at Brant, a Common Loon and Boat-tailed Grackles and heard a Clapper Rail. Dinner was at the Blue Pig Tavern followed by a special presentation at our hotel on the success story of Delaware Bay breeding American Oystercatchers by Emmy Casper, a biologist from the Conserve Wildlife Foundation. What a treat!

Thurs., Oct. 19 Coral Ave Lookout | Salt Marsh Boat Tour | Hawkwatch

We began the morning with an optional sunrise walk along the beach in Cape May. It was windy and only the hardiest of flyers were out: Double-crested Cormorants, Royal Terns, Osprey and Brandt. We also found three particularly cute Sanderlings tucked into a little break in the sand dune that provided shelter from the wind. The early morning light made for spectacular photos of them.



After breakfast we visited the Coral Avenue Lookout, a.k.a Cape May Point, a small community near Cape May Point State Park. The lookout is actually just the beach access board walk, but it has several levels to get over the dunes, that make it a great birding location. It's a favorite Monarch Butterfly watch and tagging spot, as well as migrating dragonflies. This morning Surf Scoters were on the move. We had hundreds of them streaming by with some Black Scoters mixed in. A Northern Gannet was an excellent observation, as was a flyby Great Cormorant. At one point several hundred Tree Swallows descend on the area and just as abruptly were gone.

We made a quick stop at Seagrove Avenue Park, a newer park that connects to Cape May Point State Park that has served as a hawk banding station for decades (understandably closed to the public). The birding was light, but we did get better looks at birds we've already seen. The group hiked to the hawkwatch platform where we spent half an hour, adding Pied-billed Grebe, Broad-winged Hawk and 5,000+ Tree Swallows to our growing list.

After a delicious lunch on the docks at the famous Lobster House Restaurant we headed to Cape May Harbor for what would be one of the highlights of the trip, touring the vast tidal saltmarshes by boat. We timed our tour for a falling high tide, which concentrates birds on available mudflats and allows the captain to take the boat into areas that are not accessible during low tide conditions. Birds gather on the break wall, waiting for the tide to fall and expose the mudflats. This makes for terrific viewing, and we quickly found large numbers (50-100) of American Oystercatchers, Black-bellied Plovers and several American Golden-Plovers mixed in. Ruddy Turnstones were here in good numbers as well. Turning back towards the harbor, we observed Ospreys and Bald Eagles along the shoreline. The marshes were productive. Forster's Terns were perched on many of the piers as herons, egrets and shorebirds were arriving on the newly exposed mudflats. We had fabulous observations of Snowy and Great Egrets, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Short-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin and Semipalmated Sandpiper. What a great afternoon! Dinner was at the Harborview Restaurant, famous for its She-crab Soup.

Fri., Oct. 20 Forsythe NWR | Avalon Seawatch

We were off early again so we could get to Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge in Brigantine, N.J. Forsythe NWR, or as the locals call it, "Brig," is a famous birding destination. A large wetland and forest complex that juts out into Reeds Bay just north of Atlantic City, it attracts staggering numbers of migrants including Snow Geese later



in the year. We found good numbers of Green- and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers, Black Ducks, Northern Pintails, Hooded Mergansers and Ruddy Ducks (over 200). We also had a wonderful Clapper Rail sighting, and a very close encounter with a Peregrine Falcon. Caspian Terns, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Great Black-backed Gulls were viewed at close range, and we even heard a Barred Owl calling from the forest.

On our return to Cape May, we visited the Avalon Seawatch, America's longest running bird count location. Avalon is geographically unique, situated where the shoreline makes an abrupt, mile-long, 90-degree jut out into the Atlantic Ocean. Migrating seabirds suddenly find themselves quite close to shore, providing birders the opportunity to view several pelagic species from land. It's a wonderful place (normally), but we encountered a storm that came in off the Atlantic and really soaked us. We threw in the towel (no pun intended) and headed back to Cape May to our warm and dry hotel. Dinner was at Bella Vida Garden Café.

Sat., Oct. 21 Stone Harbor | Wetlands Institute | Avalon Sea Watch

Our sunrise beach walk turned up Greater and Lesser Black-backed gulls, Northern Gannets, Sanderlings, a mixed group of scoters, Royal Terns and 5,000+ Tree Swallows. Our first stop was at the Wetlands Institute, a small patch of land along the causeway to Stone Harbor. It's a wonderful nature center with trails that wind through the salt marsh. The institute is best known for its extensive work to protect Diamond-backed Terrapins. The birding was wonderful too, and we found over 25 Willets, a Tricolored Heron, Merlin, Fish Crows, and American Black Ducks, and we heard Clapper Rails as well. Inside the nature center, we had the chance to participate in feeding the aquarium animals: crabs, turtles, urchins and even an amazingly friendly octopus.

We made our way back to Avalon where it was quite windy, but at least it wasn't raining! We added Brown Pelican, Parasitic Jaeger, a few more Northern Gannets, and of all things, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker seen flying in off the ocean. Afterwards, we returned to Cape May to check out the Fall Birding Festival activities, visiting the large vendor area, and picking up our registration materials.

In the evening we had a pizza party back at our hotel followed by a short presentation on a newly formed sandbar in New Jersey that has quickly become an incredible nesting location for shorebirds and seabirds.



Sun., Oct. 22 CMBO Trolley Tour | Hawkwatch | Cape May NWR

This morning we took full advantage of the Fall Birding Festival and participated in the Cape May Birding Observatory's early morning Trolley Tour. What a treat as we had Michael O'Brian and his partner Louise Zemaitis, local birders, artists and authors, with us for the morning.

We spent our time with them in the South Cape May area that included the State Park, residential neighborhoods, Beach and Coral Ave lookouts, and some time on the hawkwatch platform at the state park. Birds were really moving this morning and we observed several large, mixed flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, Rusty Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds and European Starlings streaming over the dunes. The pine trees that lined Beach and Coral Avenues were loaded with birds, with many Pine, Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers as well as a Tennessee and a Cape May.

The observation deck at Coral Avenue gave us a great view of the Delaware Bay, the sand dunes and lands to the west. Flocks of birds were moving through in waves, and we tallied Cedar Waxwings, Carolina Wrens, Ruby- and Golden-crowned Kinglets, American Kestrels, a Kingfisher, several Merlins, and countless Tree Swallows. Standouts included American Pipits, Indigo Buntings, a Winter Wren, Savannah Sparrows. We identified three species of swallows: Barn, Tree Northern Rough-winged, along with several Chimney Swifts. The sheer number of birds made this morning a highlight of the trip for many of us.

After an early lunch, we spent a little time in the Convention Center and then returned to the hawkwatch platform. It was a productive session that gave us better views and photographs of many of the species we encountered earlier in the week, and we did manage to add White Ibis and Ring-necked Duck to our trip list.

Our final outing of the day was to the Cape May NWR's Two Mile Beach Unit, a section of beach and marine forest habitat that avoided development because it was owned and operated by the U.S. Coast Guard. This beautiful habitat, with its intact, vegetated barrier dunes is a wonderful place to walk. Sanderlings and Dunlin were here in good numbers, and we watched them doing their thing, undisturbed by human activity as Royal Terns and Osprey glided by. Our farewell dinner was at The Oyster Bay Restaurant in Cape May, a wonderful venue that perfectly capped off our Cape May adventures.



Mon., Oct. 23 Departure Day | Jakes Landing

Breakfast was a time to reflect on the wonderful week of birding with new friends. Those of us that were driving to the Philadelphia Airport made a quick stop at Jake's Landing, a creek inlet that flows through a large salt marsh complex before entering the bay. While we didn't pick up any new species here, we enjoyed walking through the woods and out to the creek in the marsh.

Photo Credits: Group (Rick Weiman - RW), Red-bellied Woodpecker (Jay Eisenberg -JE), Palm Warbler (Ross Millikan - RM), Red-tailed Hawk (Paul Edelman - PE), Black Skimmer (JE), Least Sandpiper (PE), Cape May Lighthouse (JE), Mute Swan (JE), Herring Gull (PE), Lesser Yellowlegs (RM), Semipalmated Plover (JE), Northern Shoveler (PE), Field Sparrow (JE), Cape May Beach (JE), Walkway (Dan Donaldson - DD), Royal Tern (JE), Black-crowned Night Heron (PE), Great Egret (RM), Peregrine Falcon (PE), Laura-Dan-Rick (RW), Sunset Beach (JE), Cooper's Hawk (PE), Osprey (PE)