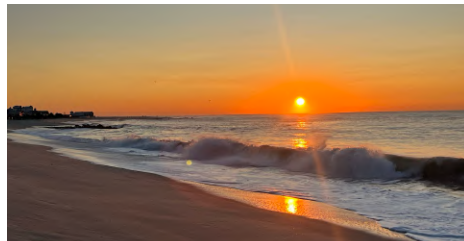


Cape May Fall Migration | Oct. 15-21, 2024

Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



Guide: Dan Donaldson and participants - Jan, Nancy & Dave, Lyn, Tom, and Cynthia & Bahman



Tues., Oct. 15th

Arrival Day | Cape May State Park Hawk Watch

It's arrival day and participants arrived either directly by car to Cape May or through Philadelphia airport and arriving by Naturalist Journeys van. Regardless of mode, by 3:00 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 the famous Hawk Watch Platform. We visited this location many times throughout the week. It's the center of activities during fall migration and any bird or any birding celebrity can show up at any time. It's location at the very southern tip of Cape May Point means that any birds relying on land during migration, either overland or near shore, end up at this tip of the point, and need to make the decision to fly out into the Atlantic, cross the Delaware Bay, or turn around and head back north to skirt around the Delaware Bay over land. Some birds just keep on flying and some birds take days or weeks to make the decision.

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We stayed for an hour and a half and picked up around 30 species. It was sunny and there was a light, but a nice steady movement of hawks and the afternoon light gave us great looks at Black and Turkey vultures, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned, Coopers, Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks. The nearby ponds were loaded with waterfowl, including a Eurasian Widgeon, a regular here the last couple years, that was associating with American Widgeons and Northern Pintails. Yellow-rumped warblers were seemingly everywhere and Golden-crowned Kinglets were ever-present in the evergreens around the hawkwatch platform.

Dinner was at the Sapore Italian Restaurant featuring seafood with Italian flare.

Wed., Oct. 16th CMBO Center | Cape May Point SP | Salt Marsh Islands

Our first morning in Cape May required a stop at the Cape May Bird Observatory center-Headquarters for the birding activities in the area, and the wicked good giftshop. We spent 30 mins inside checking out binoculars, t-shirts, artwork and field guides, then made our way to the backyard habitat and gardens. The restored and naturalized habitat quickly produced Swainson's Thrush, Carolina Chickadees (lifer for west coasters), an Eastern Towhee and a feeding flock of 4+ Brown Creepers.

Next we were off to Cape May Point State Park again. We spent the rest of the morning here on the platform and birding the vegetated sand dunes. Amazingly, White Ibis were the birds of the day (and the week), with many flocks passing by or stopping at the ponds in front of the hawkwatch platform. White Ibis were seen daily on this trip, which is unusual for this region. Ebird was constantly questioning our Ibis sitings and numbers. Flocks consisted of mostly juveniles. One theory is that hurricanes Helene and Milton pushed these birds up from their more southerly habitats. We pickup up 27 species from the platform with highlights being Little Blue Heron, Osprey, 88 Sharp-shinned Hawks, Hermit Thrush, a nice Peregrine flyby, American Kestrels and Red-shouldered Hawks.



After lunch at the reliable Ocean View restaurant, we drove north, out into the saltmarsh Island areas around Two-mile Landing, Nummy Island, and Stone Harbor. Two-mile Landing is one of Dan's favorite spots for Clapper Rails, and Saltmarsh and Seaside Sparrows. We stopped here anytime we had some extra time in our days. Today, we got our first glimpse of Brant here, with 50+ in the area. Greater Yellowlegs, Forster's Terns, a Common Loon, and Tri-colored (lifer for most), Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets all sited here. We then made our way to Nummy Island, a salt marsh island that has many tidal creeks and pans (small ponds) that make for great birding. Along this route we pulled off the road several times to see large flocks of American Oyster Catchers, Black Bellied Plovers, 3 wonderful Marbled Godwits, and spent some time studying Royal Terns (lifers!).

Thurs., Oct. 17th Morning Flight | Higbee Beach | Salt Marsh Boat Tour

A very early start this morning. After a quick breakfast in our rooms, we headed out to Higbee Beach at 6:30 AM to experience Morning Flight. Many, if not most, songbirds are nocturnal migrants that fly with the north and northwest winds. Often, birds that are migrating overnight along the east coast of the United States are carried out over the Atlantic Ocean by these winds. After sunrise, these migrating birds will turn north (toward shore) and in Cape May, they come ashore at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (just north of Cape May Point on the Delaware Bay). All this songbird activity also draws the attention of avian predators such as Sharp-shinned and Cooper hawks, Merlins and Peregrine falcons. Upon arrival, we were greeted by a very cooperative Northern Bobwhite quail. Hard to say if this was a wild or released bird but is sure was fun to see it. It was a very cold morning, 40 degrees, and the birding was a bit light, but we still had a wonderful birding experience here with an hour of effort producing over 40 Sharp-shinned hawks, sometimes only 10ft above us, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, American Phoebes, hundreds of Yellow-rumped warblers. We then walked the meadows and fields at Higbee Beach adding a nice Yellow-billed Cuckoo, many more hawks, Purple Finches, White-throated, Field, Song and Swamp sparrows, and along with some nice low looks at Black Vultures. All of us chilled, we made our way to breakfast/Lunch to warm up with plenty of hot coffee and tea.

In the afternoon, we boarded the Osprey Pontoon Boat for a guided Back Bay Salt Marsh tour. A favorite activity on this trip, Captain Bob started the trip by taking us out to the jetty entrance of Cape May Harbor to observe the many species of birds that sit on the jetty to wait out the high tides. We were not disappointed. We observed hundreds of scoter flocks flying just offshore, and many shorebird species along the jetty. We had flocks of hundred(s) of Sanderlings and Black-bellied plovers and Forsters Terns. A wonderful surprise was 3 Purple Sandpipers (new species for this fall trip) feeding amongst the algae along the waterline of the jetty. This was also our best and closest looks at American Oystercatchers, Ruddy Turnstones, and Great Cormorants.



Working our way back into the vast saltmarshes, we the tide was working against us a bit, but we still had great sightings, more White Ibis, Brant, Egrets, Boat-tailed Grackles, terns, and Great Black-backed gulls.

We had a wonderful dinner at Secondo Panico and returned to our hotel to update our trip species list before turning in.

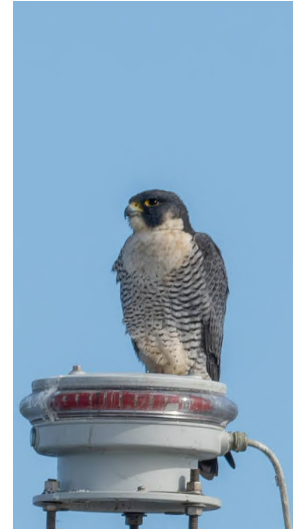
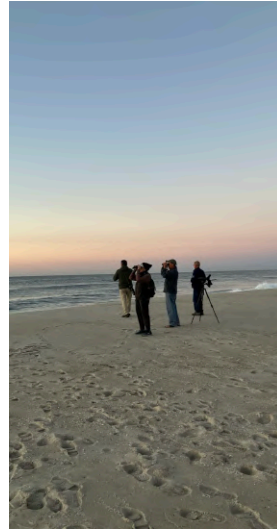
Fri., Oct. 18th Delaware | Cape May Lewes Ferry | Cape Henlopen State Park

Another early start this morning, as were off to catch the early Cape May Lewes Ferry to Delaware and Cape Henlopen State Park, one of this trips favorite days. Of course, we used the ferry's one hour crossing as a mini pelagic birding opportunity. There's always something interesting on the crossing this time of year, and this morning we had flocks of Surf Scoters pass by the front of the ferry. Gulls included the usual suspects of winter plumaged Laughing Gulls, Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls. Royal terns were present for most of the crossing watching for churned up fish. Brown Pelican and Northern Gannets are regulars on this crossing.

Once in Lewes Delaware, we headed directly to Cape Henlopen State Park. Cape Henlopen is just across the bay and a few miles south of Cape May, but its habitats are starkly different. Here the mainland habit is ancient sand dunes now covered with pines and coastal forest species. Japanese Black Pine, planted by the military nearly a hundred years ago for erosion control, is now a dominant invasive throughout the Delaware shoreline, but there's also Southern Yellow Pines and plenty of white cedars here as well. I don't know if a direct correlation to the Japanese Black Pine, but our quest bird for today, the Brown-headed Nuthatch, has established its northernmost population here.

We picked up our quest bird, the Brown Headed Nuthatch in a pine clearing just off the trail. We had 4 individuals stay with us for quite a while-great photos and observations. We then made though the pine woodlands, picking up all four expected thrushes -Swainsons, Hermit, Gray-cheeked, and American Robin, on our way up the large dune to Fort Miles, a WWII era gun emplacement that protected the entrance to the Delaware Bay. The underground museum was open today, so we took some time out of birding to go through museum and impressive cannon collection. Song sparrows, Mockingbirds, and Juncos actively worked the scrub brush on the hilltop many flocks of Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers feeding in the pines on the hillsides.

We lunched in the historic town of Lewes at the Nectar Café. After a quick walk though town we returned to Cape Henlopen to bird a couple other locations, including their own hawkwatch platform, where we had great



looked at Peregrine, Osprey and Bald Eagles, and of course, more kinglets and Yellow-rumps. Our last stop of the day was at the park's nature center, that had a great bird feeding station where we picked up Eastern Towhees for the trip.

We took the afternoon ferry back to Cape May and had our traditional pizza and bird list party back at our hotel.

Sat., Oct. 19th Forsythe NWR | Avalon Seawatch |

Today was our day for visiting Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge in Brigantine NJ, but not without a stop at Avalon Café for amazing coffee and bagel sandwiches for the hours' drive to the refuge. Forsythe, formerly Brigantine, NWR is a famous east coast birding destination. It's a very large wetland and forest complex that juts out into Reeds Bay near Atlantic City. Waterfowl stage here in great numbers during migration. Driving the roads along the management units we observed 66 species of ducks, shorebirds, gulls, herons and passerines in the nearby woodlands. The dry gravel roads with low vegetation were perfect stopover habitat for Savannah Sparrows and we had them flying in front of the van most of the wetland drive. Northern Shovelers, Mallards, Black Ducks, Green-winged Teal, and Ring-necked ducks were observed along the wetland units while scoters, Black and Surf, flew by out over Reed's Bay. Shorebirds were here in good numbers as well, sometimes very close to the road. We had great encounters with Black-bellied plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, hundreds of Dunlin, along with Semi-palmated sandpipers. Our streak of White Ibis sightings continued here as well with a flock of 12 Juveniles. Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, turkey vulture, Osprey and a nice flyby Merlin rounded out the drive. We passed through a woodland area on the drive out and picked up Belted Kingfisher, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren and Carolina Chickadees.

On our return drive to Cape May, we stopped in Avalon New Jersey to visit the Avalon Seawatch, reported to be America's longest running bird count location. Avalon sits on a geographic oddity along the shore. Here the shoreline of the coast makes an abrupt 1-mile long 90 degree jut out into the Atlantic Ocean. Birds, especially seabirds that are migrating off the coast suddenly find themselves encountering land and end up flying very near or over this location. The winds were a bit off, but we still managed looks at Sanderlings and Dunlin resting on the breakwall, Flybys included Brown Pelicans, many flocks of Forsters and Royal terns, a Common Loon, Northern Gannets, a couple hundred Double Crested Cormorants, and White-winged and Black Scoters were observed flying just off the point. The CMBO counter staff gave a nice 20 presentation on the history of the Seawatch and the population/migrations dynamics of the seabirds we were seeing fly by.



We then made our way back to Cape May, freshened up, and had dinner at the Bella Vida restaurant.

Sun., Oct. 20th CMBO Trolley Tour | Two Mile Landing | Hereford Inlet

This morning, we participated in the Fall Birding Festival and participated in the Cape May Birding Observatory's early morning Trolley Tour with local birder/author Michael O'Brian and Louise Zemaitis, local birder-guide-artist. It was a brick morning, with a full trolley. We had a great morning!

Our first stop was the familiar Two-mile landing site we've been visiting all week. This morning the tides and winds were in our favor, and most importantly, so were the sparrows. We hit the saltmarsh sparrow trifecta with Nelson's Saltmarsh and Seaside sparrows all making appearances together in a grassy area near the inlet. It was a great moment with the sparrows staying still enough for the whole group to get great looks at close range, even though scopes. It was perfect!

Our second stop was Hereford Inlet in North Wildwood. Here there's a long accessible seawall that affords great looks at the many sandbars in the inlet during low tide, a favorite spot for shorebirds. The sightings here were incredible. 350+ American Oystercatchers, 18 Marbled Godwits, over 500 Sanderlings, 1500 Dunlin, 30 Black Belied Plover were all tallied in less than an hour. To top it all off, we had a wonder Red Knot observation in a nearby tide pool. Needless to say, it was a great morning.

Afterwards we went shopping at the birding festival's optics and art sale and had lunch outside on the wharf at The Wharf restaurant.

From the Wharf we walked to our next adventure. The Trip to the Rips boat trip aboard the Cape May Whale Watcher, a large whale/dolphin excursion boat that we fill with 150 birders for this trip. Big Fun! It was a beautiful sunny day, but the winds were not in our favor coming strong out of the east. So our guides took the unusual counter clockwise route around the island, through the Cape May Canal (which created the island), out into the Delaware Bay, around the southern tip of the island, and then up the east coast of the island which is the Atlantic Ocean.

The birding was a bit light, but we had an amazing encounter with a Parasitic Jaeger as soon as we exited the canal, into the Delaware Bay. This bird circled the boat twice and went back to working the shoreline of Higbee Beach. We saw plenty of Black and Surf Scoters, had great looks photographing opportunities of Great Cormorants (lifers) both flying and roosting at the inlet. Great Black-backed Gulls were roosting on the inlet



breakwall was well. We counted 75. Perhaps the most exciting observation of the trip was our close encounter with a feeding Hump-backed Whale. Often feeding within a hundred feet of the boat, we spent about 30 minutes just floating and enjoying this spectacle of nature. Great photos and video.

We returned to our rooms to freshen up for our last bird list and then dinner at The Oyster Bay restaurant where of course we shared a plate of oysters and had the best meal of the trip.

Mon., Oct. 21st Departure Day

The last breakfast is always a bit melancholy. We're tired from a full week of birding, but we've made new friends, shared birds and wonderful experiences. This was a pretty tight group and we'll miss each other. We enjoyed one last breakfast together, shared our contact information and said goodbye to those that weren't going to the airport with the group.

Photos: Group (Dan Donaldson - DD), American Oystercatcher (DD), Brown Pelican (DD), Beach Scenic (Tom Matthiae - TM), Great Egret (TM), Group Birding (TM), Red-tailed Hawk (DD), Red-bellied Woodpecker (DD), Royal Tern (TM), Peregrine Falcon (DD), Sanderlings (TM), Salt Marsh Sparrow (DD), Boats (TM), Common Yellowthroat (DD)