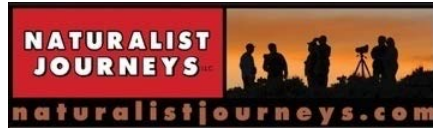


Cape May: Spring Migration | May 13 – 19, 2025 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With Naturalist Journeys leaders James P. Smith and Rick Weiman, and 12 awesome participants; Sandy, Janet & Philip, Linda G., Lorraine & Craig, Linda H., Marilyn & Ed, Mary Anne, Deb and Rena.



Mon., May 13 Arrivals | Cape May Point SP

Arrivals went smoothly as the leaders divided forces to pick up guests from various spots around Philadelphia International Airport. Deb and Mary Anne drove independently to Cape May with a view to meeting the group later at the Seacrest Inn. The earliest arrivals had time for an enjoyable lunch at the Ocean View Restaurant on Beach Ave in Cape May, literally just down the street from the Seacrest. Gusty winds from the east brought light rain and drizzle to the southern tip of Cape May but didn't dull the enthusiasm for a late afternoon outing!



As a way of getting orientated we headed straight for Cape May Point State Park where we enjoyed a pleasant, atmospheric start to the trip under the watchful eye of the famous Cape May Lighthouse. A Forster's Tern foraged over bunker pond in front of the Hawkwatch platform just as Rick spotted a Glossy Ibis busily feeding in the shallows alongside a Great Egret, and there was a confiding Field Sparrow sitting up in the bushes for delightfully close views. The Purple Martin condos along the edge of the parking lot appeared to be fully occupied with 30 or 40 residents that would occasionally fly out uttering their familiar rich, 'burbling' calls. After a short walk along the boardwalk through Eastern Red Cedars and Wax Myrtle bushes, a brief foray over the dunes found a resting American Oystercatcher on the beach while several Least Terns flew by calling excitedly, one of them carrying a tiny fish. There wasn't too much moving over a stormy Delaware Bay although a Black Scoter was a nice find for the first afternoon as it flew by relatively close to shore.

We returned to the Seacrest to freshen up and headed out (via the local liquor store) to Sapore Italiano, Rick's pick for a delightful evening meal. The tour was off to a wonderful start and

it felt good to be back in historic Cape May with new found friends.

Tue., May 14 Beach Ave | TNC South Cape May Meadows | Wetlands Institute

An early start saw rain clouds driven by 35 mile-an-hour winds blasting in from the southeast. We skipped plans for the proposed beach walk and instead headed down to the pavilion at the 2nd street jetty where the first birds included American Oystercatcher, several Least Terns and a small flock of Sanderlings scurrying along the tideline. A break in the showers provided a nice window for a short walk along the beach just as Linda G spotted a close Black Skimmer majestically winging its way into a strong headwind. A few more Least Terns were joined by several Forster's Terns foraging just offshore and a pair of Black Scoters flew west before we headed over to the Ocean View Restaurant for a hearty breakfast served by very friendly staff.



Afterwards we drove the short distance to The Nature Conservancy South Cape May Meadows preserve where we met up with Rick's friend and staff biologist called Damon Noe. Damon gave us a great verbal introduction to the impressive projects ongoing around the preserve and adjacent beach while Purple Martins in their condos 'burbled' at close range. Soon we embarked on a loop of the preserve led by Damon as Indigo Buntings, Field Sparrows and Northern Cardinals sat up and sang while a small group of Glossy Ibis dropped into one of the marshes but then remained unseen. The newly constructed boardwalk provided a fine vantage point overlooking a brackish channel where we had close views of a foraging Least Tern whilst below on the muddy shores a nice cameo of shorebirds included Least, Semipalmated and Spotted Sandpipers, and a Semipalmated Plover.

A singing Yellow-breasted Chat was a further highlight as we walked over to the beach and observed the remarkable 6 foot high protective fence and raised beach area constructed by Damon and his team. Thier success was more than evident as the enclosed area protected dozens of pairs of Least Terns, and a few pairs of American Oystercatchers. Damon mentioned the site now boasted the highest breeding success of any beach nesting Least Tern colony in the state of New Jersey!

Other birds in the beach area included a bright Prairie Warbler, several Field Sparrows, and a Common Yellowthroat. Mallard, Gadwall, Solitary Sandpiper and Snowy Egret further graced our notebooks as we continued the loop by the wetlands as a mist-laden sea fret rolled in from the southeast.

After picking up 'to-go' lunches at the local Wawa we drove north to the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor and enjoyed a fine picnic lunch overlooking an expanse of saltmarsh. The open mudflats were full of shorebirds; Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones and lots of Dunlin, all of them resplendent in full summer plumage. The first Willets of the tour were present in smaller numbers and Ospreys made full use of the nesting platforms provided, and there was an ever-present chorus of vociferous Clapper Rails. After lunch we were met and escorted around the property by Devin Griffiths who works mostly on promotion and media for the Wetlands Institute but, by his own admission, much prefers to be outside! A fine selection of herons proved to be one of the highlights with a couple of Black-crowned Night-herons roosting in the trees across the saltmarsh, along with Snowy Egret and an adult Little Blue Heron on view as well as a flyover Tricolored Heron! During the walk it became increasingly warm and sunny but, curiously, the mist refused to clear shrouding the nearby coastline and preventing any further observations for the remainder of the day. The break in birding was welcome and timely since it gave us a chance to swing by the ACME market and pick up supplies for our breakfasts in the following few days.



In the evening we had a delightful dinner at the Blue Pig Tavern deep inside the historic Congress Hall. We were joined by Todd Pover, a senior biologist with the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey, a nonprofit based in Princeton, NJ.

Todd's main focus is beach nesting birds, most specifically the Piping Plover and after dinner he gave a wonderfully informative slide show in Rick's room based on his work with the foundation.

A long but rewarding first day had come to an end and how lovely it was to drift off to sleep to the sounds of the ocean just across the street.

Wed., May 15 Cape May Point | Seagrove Ave | CMBO Northwood Center | Saltmarsh Boat Tour

We met at 7 AM and drove the short distance to the CMBO Spring Migration Watch at Coral Ave. Despite the dune top location visibility was poor, so poor in fact we couldn't even see the ocean! The sea fret from the previous day persisted and, as such, it was very quiet for migration although a Blue Grosbeak did fly along the dunes, a new bird for the trip. Fish Crows called from the nearby pines and several summering Prairie Warblers could be heard and seen singing from the dunes while a calling Great Crested Flycatcher in the local neighborhood was a little more surprising. Since migrants were few we headed over to Seagrove Ave where our fortune changed as we came across a smart adult Red-headed Woodpecker working around a small cluster of cedars. Rick spotted both Carolina and Northern House Wrens perched up and singing, and a pair of Indigo Buntings popped into view as did a Chipping Sparrow. A Pine Warbler uttered its trilling song from high in the Loblolly Pines and eventually came into view, plus a Merlin was perched so discreetly it blended in perfectly with its surroundings.

At the nearby Northwood Center, the CMBO headquarters, a brief walk around the gardens found a Black-and-white Warbler, and several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Carolina Chickadees before the mosquitoes chased us away. Craig lingered a bit longer and managed to photograph a fine male Blackpoll Warbler! After a little retail therapy at the Northwood Center we had a delightful lunch at the Bella Vida Café before returning to South Cape May Meadows for a brisk walk to the observation deck hoping to see a reported Black-necked Stilt seen earlier in the morning. Unhappily, the stilt was a no-show but our effort was rewarded with a couple of Common Nighthawks careening about the mid-day sky with the local Chimney Swifts.



In early afternoon we headed over to Miss Chris Marina for the 'back-bay' boat trip with Captain Bob Lubberman, very ably assisted by deckhand and naturalist, Miss Patty. The *Osprey* is a large pontoon boat enclosed from the elements aside from the bow but even there, Captain Bob allowed small gatherings of birders on the front of the boat just as long as they didn't block his view! This was an excellent three hour boat ride, fully narrated by Bob and Patty with all the birds called out in a timely manner. Shorebirds in full breeding plumage were a highlight not least of which were numerous brightly

plumaged Ruddy Turnstones and Dunlins, and only slightly fewer Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plovers, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. A few Willets were seen and heard too, these birds being local breeders in the expansive saltmarsh habitat and we had the great fortune to come across a group of migrating Whimbrels resting on a mussel shoal. Ospreys appeared to be prolific with many pairs nesting on man-made platforms and channel markers providing outstanding photo opportunities for all.

Things got a little choppy as we headed out along the channel jetty while carefully scouring the rocks and boulders for flocks of Purple Sandpipers which, thanks to Captain Bob's determination, were duly found. And, we weren't done there as Captain Bob pushed onto the channel marker at the very end of jetty finding two late season Great Cormorants resting with Double-crested Cormorants. The calmer waters of Jarvis Sound provided the backdrop for views of one of the world's largest colonies of Laughing Gulls with several pairs of Forster's and Common Terns finding 'safety in numbers' deep within the colony. A small heronry containing several Great Egret nests with smaller numbers of White Ibis and Black-crowned Night-herons added further cheer to this wonderful trip and a couple of adult Yellow-crowned Night-herons 'dazzled' in the *spartina* grass, their long yellow crest plumes blowing in the breeze. Captain Bob excelled as he picked out a couple of Clapper Rails and a single Green Heron furnishing a perfect end to a perfect afternoon. We rounded off another brilliant day by returning to the marina for a fine meal at Lucky Bones and after dinner watched the sun set across the saltmarsh before returning to Rick's room for the daily checklist and a little cream.

**Fri., May 16 Higbee Beach WMA | Beach Plum Farm | Cook's Beach |
Return the Favor Horseshoe Crab Rescue Program (almost)**



Clear skies and warm temperatures got the day off to a fabulous start. Higbee Beach WMA was first on the agenda as we had plans to sample various elements of this carefully managed 1100 acre site offering a fine mix of habitats including early successional scrub, cedar clad hedgerows, mature forest, sand dunes and beach. We began in the open fields where things got off to a racing start with 9 Glossy Ibis flying over followed by singing Prairie Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Blue Grosbeaks, and good views of a White-eyed Vireo somewhat deeper in the thickets. Migrants were admittedly few but one sun drenched corner held a small 'pocket of birds' and we spent some time here finding a Northern Parula, a couple of Red-eyed Vireos, a fine male Blackpoll Warbler and a flycatching Eastern Wood Pewee as well as hearing (but not seeing) Blue-headed Vireo and American Redstart. By mid-morning we moved over towards the Delaware-Lewes ferry terminal and Delaware Bay. Bottlenose Dolphins frolicked in the mouth of the Cape May channel and Rick picked out a fine adult Bald Eagle perched high above the ferry terminal. The giant boulders along the jetty were home to another group of Purple Sandpipers in what was turning to be a strong late season showing of a species bound for nesting grounds in the barren, rocky tundra deep within the Arctic Circle. The jetty harbored a nice group of resting Forster's Terns along with Black and Surf Scoters on the ocean, all of which were available for scope studies.

Beach Plum Farm was the venue for a fabulous outdoor brunch, the home made pulled pork sandwiches and frittata being especially popular choices. Birdwise it was a little quiet though a Blackpoll Warbler sang as we arrived and a Red-bellied Woodpecker was seen towards the end of our visit. After brunch we drove about 30 minutes north to the Delaware Bay side of the Cape May peninsula at Cook's Beach. The beautifully clear morning had given way to rather dark, foreboding skies brewing in the north. The air was tense, humid and full



of no-see-ums but as we entered an area of saltmarsh Clapper Rails vocalized and Seaside Sparrows flew across the dirt road ‘teeing-up’ and offered fantastic views. Even so, distractions like those couldn’t have prepared us for the spectacle that was about to come. As we walked onto Cook’s Beach at extreme high tide, tens of thousands of birds came into view, all of them feasting on horseshoe crab eggs. Chief among them was the Red Knot, the Delaware Bay shore being of vital importance to their ongoing migration as they fueled up on fatty horseshoe crab eggs for the next stage of the long journey north. Many of the Red Knots were in full breeding plumage and were joined by hundreds of breeding plumaged Semipalmated Sandpipers, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstones along with the odd Willet and Sanderling.

The view to our north was completely different. The shore itself was full of thousands of Laughing Gulls with a few Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, and dozens of Double-crested Cormorants. It was certainly a puzzling north-south divide between shorebirds and gulls, and Rick mentioned he hadn’t seen anything quite like it before. The beach also gave our first Royal Tern and Ring-billed Gull of the trip just as giant thunderheads gathered in the most dramatic fashion in ever darkening, brooding skies. A major storm was clearly on the way and the beach was no place to be. The peace and serenity was suddenly shattered as lightening bolted across the sky and “severe weather warnings” simultaneously blasted from the phones of all the birders present on the beach. The exodus was instant and complete but even there, in the mayhem, a few of us managed to catch sight of the first Belted Kingfisher of the trip just before we made it back to the vehicles. The rain came down hard and heavy and, with tornado warnings in the forecast, Rick decided it was safest to head back to the hotel for some down time.

In the evening Rick hosted a scrumptious supper of pizza and salad in his room and then gave a presentation on the complexities of the horseshoe crab breeding cycle, migrating shorebirds, local fishermen (the crabs are used for bait) and the medical industry which uses blue horseshoe crab blood for testing vaccines. From there it was on to Pierce’s Point Beach, only just south of Cook’s Beach. Here we met up with Rick’s friend and CWF Biologist Larissa Smith with the hopes of getting onto the beach to take part in the volunteer flipping of horseshoe crabs and at least help with their breeding opportunities. Unhappily though, the lingering thunderstorms refused to disperse and with frequent bolts of lightening crossing the sky we had little choice but to abandon. After thanking Larissa for her time we headed back to the Seacrest after a drama filled day.

Sat., May 17 Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Oyster Creek | Ocean City Rookery and Seaview Dunes

Another early start saw a Field Sparrow giving its sweet trilling song from across the street as we left the Seacrest. A straightforward drive up the Garden State Parkway noted a few Green Herons, Bald Eagles and a single Red-tailed Hawk along the way before arriving at Edwin B Forsyth NWR around 8am to be greeted a singing Eastern Wood Pewee. Black-throated Green and Pine Warblers, as well as Tufted Titmouse and Eastern



Bluebirds were all found around the parking lot too. Enthusiasm for a short walk around the visitor center building and picnic area was tempered a little by the onslaught of pesky no-see-ums although we did manage to have brief views of a Brown Thrasher.

A nearby boardwalk not only offered fantastic views across the saltmarsh toward the Atlantic City skyline but also wonderful looks at Clapper Rails, Seaside Sparrows and nesting Marsh Wrens. Formerly known as “Brig”, the refuge covers over 48,000 acres of pristine south New Jersey coastal habitat and is a critically important stopover for migrants along the Atlantic Flyway as well as being home to thousands of breeding birds. The 8 mile drive loop features only small fraction of the refuge but was more than enough to keep us busy for the entire morning. The salt pans and marshes were absolutely full of northbound shorebirds in full breeding plumage. Literally thousands of Dunlin, along with Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Ruddy Turnstones and a handful of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs graced our binoculars. This was also ‘skimmer’ country and we marveled as a Black Skimmer foraged up and down the channel in unique fashion right in front of us. This particular bird made a big impression and was well photographed and videoed, skimmers being the only bird family in the world to have evolved with a lower mandible longer than the upper mandible.

Forster’s Terns could be seen foraging all around offering great comparisons with the larger billed and much rarer Gull-billed Terns present. Rick was in full rescue mode and picked up Eastern Box, Eastern Musk, and Painted Turtles from the road! Back at the visitor center a quick bathroom stop offered another chance to admire the fully occupied Purple Martin gourds, a species we’d enjoyed at many stops in Cape May and surely one of the signature birds of the trip? From there it was only a short drive to the Oyster Creek Restaurant, a wonderfully scenic site literally overlooking Oyster Creek and the adjacent saltmarshes as we dined on the screened-in porch to the sounds of Clapper Rails and singing Seaside Sparrows.

After a drizzly start the day had turned truly immaculate by early afternoon and we headed south to the Ocean City Welcome Center, a somewhat surprising site to view a major heron rookery located next to a busy causeway over the Rainbow Channel. The heron nests were discreetly hidden in mature trees and bushes but ultimately offered close range views of Great Egrets, Black-crowned Night-herons, White Ibis and even a nest of Yellow-crowned Night-herons. A couple of Tricolored Herons flew over, and we managed to secure reasonable views of an American Black Duck.

Rick used his network of contacts once again, this time to drive the short distance north to the end of Ocean City and its dune system where he knew a Piping Plover would be nesting. Not only did we quickly find the female plover on the nest conveniently indicated by a large protective cage, but Rick then found the male feeding out



on the beach along the tideline. A quick scan up and down the beach found another two individual Piping Plovers one of which was briefly joined by three Sanderlings.

The day ended in glorious East Coast sunshine with high temperatures reaching the upper 80s. By the time we returned the Seacrest, Cape May had morphed into a busy seaside resort as we fought through traffic to find the town filled with happy beachgoers and folks generally enjoying a beautiful weekend in the sun! The venue for dinner was the Bella Vida which was quiet enough to go through the daily checklist and discuss plans for early an departure the following morning.

Sun., May 18 CMBO Spring Migration Festival | Belleplain State Forest | Trip to the Rips

Rick had already primed us for a 5:15 am departure from the Seacrest and it was actually quite pleasant to be on the road before sunrise. The last full day of the tour was to be dedicated to NJ Audubon and Cape May Bird Observatory Spring Festival activities, the first of which was a guided tour of the dawn chorus tour in Belleplain State Forest. We arrived at the visitor center a little before 6am and met up with half-a-dozen festival guides and around 25 festival participants. After a quick orientation we set off caravan-style to sample elements of the 11,000 acres of prime pine-oak woodland and cedar swamp, some of the finest forest to be found in Cape May and Cumberland counties.

Things got off to a great start as an Acadian Flycatcher offered bursts of its sharp 'peetz-ha' song along with its more discreet twittering 'tremolo' song. After a patient wait we were all rewarded with pretty good views as well as hearing the beautiful, ethereal song of a Wood Thrush close by. The next stop brought us to a bridge overlooking a slow moving creek. Another Acadian Flycatcher burst into song, alongside the loud cadent song of Louisiana Waterthrush while an Eastern Phoebe flitted about the canopy. A few 'splutter' calls of Hairy Woodpecker could be heard as well as the hollow song of Yellow-billed Cuckoo in the distance. The whole experience recalled the old Dick Walton days and his 'Birding by Ear' CD series until a bright male Prothonotary Warbler suddenly popped up on the guard rail and hung around for long enough for the entire party to see. Curiously though, this particular bird was completely silent.

Further stops included more audio practice with Summer Tanager, Yellow-throated, Worm-eating, Hooded and Black-and-white Warblers, all being skillfully pointed out by the festival guides. The last site was in open, early successional habitat and offered nice visuals of Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Prairie Warbler and Indigo Bunting as well as fine studies of Black and Turkey Vultures overhead. By mid-morning the Belleplain SF visitor center

was open and the T-shirts on offer well received. Meanwhile, a sun-filled corner of the parking lot offered some of the best birding of the morning and over the course of the next 20 minutes, Yellow-throated Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Chipping Sparrow and Blue Grosbeak all came into view.

From there we headed south. It was a beautiful yet breezy Sunday morning and we spent some time at the Cape May NWR visitor center purchasing more mementos while catching up on views of skulking species in the coastal dune scrub such as White-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler and a fine male Eastern Towhee. Yet another enjoyable seafood lunch was arranged by Rick, this time overlooking the huge Laughing Gull colony at Two Mile Landing. At 2 pm, we set off for the “Trip to the Rips” and joined lots of other festival participants on the upper deck of the American Star, a large whale watching vessel fully equipped with comfortable seating, bathrooms, concessions etc. Tom Reed was in the wheelhouse calling out the birds over the speaker system as we departed Cape May marina passing the coastguard training facility and eventually out into the Atlantic. Despite the breezy conditions, the swell was relatively shallow and the conditions calm. The species profile was quite similar to that experienced on the *Osprey* a few days prior. Purple Sandpipers featured for the third time in the tour and we spent some time checking the breakwater for them as well as a Great Cormorant resting with its Double-crested cousins. Forster’s and Royal Terns came into view, the Royals flying by at similar height to the upper deck offering nice ‘eye-level’ looks. Throughout the trip a young deck-hand was ‘chumming’ off the back of the boat and eventually created a nice chum-slick attracting hundreds of gulls. Most of them were species already seen on the tour but unusually high numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls could be found among them. Red Knots, Black and Surf Scoters and an abundance of Bottlenose Dolphins were further highlights as we returned via the southern tip of Cape May Point with clear views of the lovely Seacrest Inn visible from the boat.

Around 6:45 pm we gathered for a farewell (and delicious) dinner at the Oyster Bay Restaurant and then enjoyed a final checklist tally (with ice cream) in Rick’s room surprisingly but delightfully serenaded by a Chuck-wills-widow singing somewhere off to the west, a little distant but its unique song could clearly be heard. Afterwards we shared our favorite memories from the tour and, while highlights will always be difficult to pick out, the pre-storm experience at Cooks Beach filled with thousands of shorebirds received the most votes, while the Black Skimmer ‘skimming’ at Forsythe NWR was voted bird of the trip closely followed by honorable mentions for Clapper Rail, Piping Plover, Boat-tailed Grackle, Prairie Warbler, Northern Cardinal, Least Tern and (singing) Wood Thrush.

Mon., May 19 Departures

After an action packed week, we settled for one last relaxing breakfast at the Ocean View Restaurant, thankfully within comfortable walking distance of the Seacrest Inn. The day was sunny and cool accompanied by the refreshing air of a cold front moving in from the northwest, ideal for travel and ensuring a smooth journey back to Philadelphia International Airport.

Special thanks go to all of our awesome participants for making this trip so enjoyable to be a part of. The humor, generosity and group camaraderie on this tour was second to none. And, extra special thanks to Rick Weiman for his stoic leadership and excellent trip organization.

James P. Smith
Northfield, MA.

Photo Credits: Group (Rick Weiman), Black Skimmer (James P. Smith), Stormy Skies (James P. Smith), Black Skimmers (Craig Granlund), Group at Cape May Meadows, Yellow-breasted Chat (James P Smith), Solitary Sandpiper, Beach Smiles, Group (Craig Granlund), Group (James P Smith), Diamondback Terrapin, Surf Scoter, American Oystercatcher, Black Scoter, Red Knots & Ruddy Turnstones (Craig Granlund), Osprey (Rick Weiman), Sea Crest Inn (Craig Granlund), Box Turtle (Rick Weiman), Piping Plover (James P Smith).