

Cape May Fall Migration

October 7-13, 2025

Trip Report by Dan Donaldson



**Guides Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman and participants:
Tim, Sue, Drina, Thomas, Penny, Jeannetta, Judith, Vince, Mike and Ann**



Tues., October 7: Arrival Day | Transfer to Cape May

Arrivals to Cape May went very smoothly today. With half of our participants driving themselves directly to Cape May, those that flew in to Philadelphia were quickly picked up and we made the trip to Cape May in time for lunch on the wharf. Once everyone got settled into their rooms at the Sea Crest Hotel, we were able to do some afternoon birding before dinner. We loaded up the vans and headed to the most famous spot to bird in Cape



May, the Cape May Bird Observatory Hawkwatch Platform, located at Cape May Point State Park and Lighthouse. We sat in the brilliant sunshine and took in the beautiful scenery of vegetated beach dunes, maritime forest, and of course the Cape May Lighthouse. The platform sits in front of Bunker Pond - famous in its own right for the migrating waterfowl that show up here. This afternoon the hawk migration was largely stunted by winds from the south, so we focused on the waterfowl in the pond. There is a large Mute Swan population on the east coast and there were over 30 on the pond here. Yes, they're non-native, but it sure is amazing to have them flying by us so closely. American Widgeon and Blue-winged Teal were the most numerous ducks here today, most in their eclipse plumage, but we noted the various stages of molt. Northern Pintails were here as well, again, mostly in eclipse plumage, but we had one brilliant male that was still in stunning breeding plumage. We returned to our hotel to freshen up before heading out to Sapore Italiano restaurant.

Wed., October 8: Sunset Pavillion | Two-mile Landing | Wetlands Institute

We woke up to the expected rain this morning, so after a full breakfast we headed to the Second Street (Sunset) Pavilion that overlooks the beaches along Cape May toward the lighthouse and state park. The pavilion kept us out of the rain so we could set up our scopes and watch for birds migrating along the shore. It turned out to be pretty good birding with several Parasitic Jaegers working gull flocks just off shore and a flock of 30+ Black Skimmers resting in the sand 50 yards from the pavilion. Royal and Forster's Terns are ever-present along the shore, so we enjoyed them along with Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings that were frequenting the shoreline.

Next, we headed out into the salt marshes, making our way to Two-Mile Landing, a favorite stop on this trip for tidal birds and sparrows. The tide was out and we had mudflats for shorebirds. We parked near one and were rewarded with Killdeer, Semi-palmated Plovers, Least and Semi-palmated Sandpipers (good comparison session) and a very cooperative Spotted Sandpiper. Walking out along the nearby inlet, we had some fly-by Snowy and Great Egrets, Boat-tailed Grackles, and a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds. The highlight of this stop was a flock of 40+ American Oystercatchers that were resting along one of the nearby tidal creeks. We took a break from damp birding for lunch before heading out again in the afternoon.

Our afternoon outing was a drive up to Wildwood, New Jersey for birding along Hereford Inlet and a stop at the Wetland Institute in Stone Harbor. No new species for us at Hereford Harbor, but Bald Eagles were sitting out the weather on Osprey platforms, giving us long looks and photos. At the Wetlands Instituted, we had very close looks at Little Blue Herons and Tri-colored that were working the creeks along the board walk here. The low



tide brought out thousands of Fiddler Crabs and we spent quite a bit of time watching them display and occasionally joust over preferred burrows. A few Northern Harriers were up hunting in the winds during dry periods. We worked our way back to Cape May for a break before dinner at Lucky Bones and checklist review.

Thurs., October 9: Morning Flight | Revolution Rail | Back-bay Boat Trip

Today was one of our early departure days. We were up and out the door at 6:45 to make our way to Morning Flight, a long-standing bird migration counting station here in Cape May. Most song birds migrate at night and those flying along the east coast often get carried out over the Atlantic by prevailing winds. As the sun comes up, birds head back to the mainland and as they arrive at the Cape May area, they get funneled right by the Higbee Beach Morning Flight counters (and our group on the meadow tower). This morning, we hit it just right and had a wonderful movement of birds appearing in the bright morning sky, skirting the treetops and flying low over us as they continued on their way up the point to the mainland. Northern Flickers and Cedar Waxwings were the most numerous species with flock after flock flying through. Those birds that did stop for a rest in the nearby trees were lit up by the brilliant morning sunshine. Yellow-rumped Warblers were the most numerous warbler species, but we had great looks of sitting Palms and Northern Parulas. The mowed areas provided excellent sparrow habitat below the platform where we had good looks at White-crowned and Swamp Sparrows and our first Dark-eyed Juncos of the trip. Raptors are attracted to all this activity as well. Sharp-shinned and Coopers Hawks would appear from the tree line and make diving runs, often right over the platform, trying to flush any of the tired migrants up. Before leaving the area, we walked the beach and trails through the many managed meadows here at Higbee Beach. Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed hawks continued hunting throughout the morning, sometimes joined by Northern Harriers. Eastern Phoebe hunted the forest edge and flocks of bluejays noisily hopped from treetop to treetop. Great looks at Brown Thrashers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Gray Catbirds nicely rounded out our walk. For lunch, we stopped at a deli to get sandwiches and ate at the CMBO Hawkwatch platform.

We spent our afternoon aboard the Osprey, a large, enclosed pontoon boat, touring the back bays and creeks of the vast salt marshes in New Jersey. The Osprey is the perfect viewing platform for this trip and Captain Bob (quite a birder in his own right) was able to maneuver slowly through shallow creeks and backwater areas where other boats don't venture. We were even able to nose into sandbars and islands. Our first stop was to head out to the inlet channel of the bay and scan the protective breakwalls where shorebirds congregate to wait out the high tide. The birds were there and among the hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers and Dunlins, we were able to pick out a couple Great Cormorants sitting amongst the many Double-crested Cormorants. Turning inland and



moving up the bay to the shallows, we spotted the first flock of Brants of the season. Royal and Forster's Terns were plentiful on sandbars and pier posts. Passing one of the few areas with trees in the saltmarsh, we located Juvenile Yellow and Black-crowned Night Herons resting amongst a tangle of drift wood on a small

island. Once up in the saltmarsh creeks, we spotted several Diamondback Terrapins as we worked our way through feeding Great Blue and Tri-colored Herons and Great and Snowy Egrets.

Our two-hour trip went quickly, but we racked up 26 species for the effort that also included Boat-tailed Grackles, American Oystercatchers, Greater Yellowlegs, and Laughing, American Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls. As usual, a day on the Osprey in the back bays of the salt marshes was a highlight of our week here in New Jersey. We returned to our hotel for dinner and checklist.

Fri., October 10: Coral Avenue | TNC Cape May Meadows | Banding Station

We started our morning with a wonderful sunrise walk along the beach across from our hotel. Our favorite Black Skimmers were already there feeding just off shore. We made a short loop down to the Sunset Beach pavilion getting Sanderling, Laughing and Greater/Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and a flock of Black Scoters passing by low on the water. Back by the hotel, we had nice looks at a Coopers Hawk resting on a wire before heading out once again to hunt the vegetation in the dunes.

After breakfast, we made our way to Coral Avenue beach access. There's a nice boardwalk and platform here that overlooks a more remote section of beach and the dunes here are more mature with a nice mix of maritime forest. Out over the water, we had a consistent flow of scoter flocks. We stopped counting at around 600 Black Scoters and had some smaller flocks of Surf Scoters mixed in. Several Parasitic Jaegers were seen far off shore harassing flocks of feeding terns (Royal and Forster's). The trees surrounding our platform were lit with morning sun and we had great looks at Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadees, Tree Swallows, Ruby and Golden Crowned Kinglets (feeding very close to us), Red-breasted Nuthatches, and of course, Yellow-rumped Warblers.



Our next stop was The Nature Conservancy's Cape May Meadows, where we visited the banding station for about an hour. A bird in hand is always a wonderful treat and seeing and photographing birds at arm's length allows us to see details in songbirds we just can't see through binoculars. It was a bit of a windy morning, but Red-eyed Vireos, Common Yellowthroats, and Song Sparrows made their way to the nets and into the bander's hands, and the bander shared identification tips and migratory facts on each. Afterwards, we met with Damon Now, TNC's Southern Land Steward and preserve manager, who shared the challenges and success stories managing vegetation and breeding bird habitat at Cape May Meadows.

For lunch, we made a stop at the famous Wawa Mart and got food to go so we could head back to the hawkwatch platform to eat, and we're SO GLAD we did. As soon as we stepped out of the van, we learned that there was a Say's Phoebe out on a concrete bunker in the dunes. A rarer visitor to the east coast, this bird caused quite a stir and everyone had multiple looks and photographs. The birding was pretty good, so we decided to just stay in the area the rest of the afternoon. Waterfowl were plentiful with Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Mallards, and Black and Northern Pintails, all visiting the pond in front of the observation platform. Common Loon and White Ibis fly-bys and a Black-throated Blue and Prairie Warblers were briefly spotted in the nearby vegetation. We ended our day of birding at the Sea Grove Avenue Park, a recently preserved woodlot, where we picked up Brown Creeper and Pine Warblers.

Pizza Party! Often our favorite dinner on this trip is our pizza party back at our hotel. We ordered local pizza, picked up some local beverages and had a fine evening, capped off by a special guest, Tod Pover, the Senior Biologist for the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey. Todd shared a couple of presentations on CWF breeding bird projects, namely American Oystercatcher breeding and population studies, and Horseshoe Island, a newly formed sandbar island in Egg Harbor, that has quickly become critical sea/shorebird breeding habitat as there are no terrestrial predators. We capped off the evening with Rick's ice cream buffet that he keeps in his freezer.



Sat., October 11: Forsythe NWR | Avalon Seawatch

It was an early start this morning, so we had an in-room breakfast and departed at 7:00am for the drive to Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. We arrived there by 8:00am and walked the foot trails near the visitor center in search of woodland birds before heading out into the marshes. Blue Jays and crows called from overhead as we picked up a Northern Mockingbird, Savanna Sparrow, Song Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds. We made a quick stop along the Leeds Eco-Trail and Boardwalk to search for Clapper Rails; we heard them, but never spotted these elusive birds. We did, however, spot their primary food source as thousands of Fiddler Crabs were out jousting and feeding in the newly exposed mudflats.

Shorebirds and waterfowl are the main targets for this trip and the numbers of birds here is as impressive as the species themselves. One bay held over 200 Northern Shovelers along with similar numbers of Green-winged Teal x Mallards. Shorebirds included American Avocets, Black-bellied and Semi-palmated Plovers, large flocks of Dunlins, and Semi-palmated Sandpipers. One of the highlights of the refuge was the terns. We had mixed flocks of terns here with Forster's Terns perched and fishing right next to the vans. There was a single Common Tern amongst the Forster's giving us great ID comparisons that would help us all later in the day at Sunset Beach. Large flocks of Royal Terns rested on the grass islands along the drive and one group had a flock of Caspian Terns resting with them, giving us a 4-tern day. The flocks of Double-crested Cormorants that migrate past this spot are amazing with skeins of passing cormorants numbering in the hundreds if not thousands.

On the return drive, we stopped at the Avalon Seawatch site. This is a long-standing, year-round seabird census site run by the New Jersey Audubon that counts nearly a million birds a year. Today was primarily a scoter day and the Audubon staff gave us a wonderful presentation about the site, its geography and how to identify scoter species in flight (again, useful later in the day). In our time here, we easily saw 400+ Black Scoters and were able to identify smaller flocks of Surf Scoters that passed by. By this time, it was fairly windy and shorebirds were taking refuge along the breakwall. Least and Semi-palmateds scurried from shelter to shelter feeding in between



waves splashing up on the breakwall. A couple of Northern Gannets flew over, providing several in the group with new life birds.

We returned to Cape May for dinner at Bella Vida and our checklist.

Sun., October 12: Storm Watch | Sunset Beach

It was an interesting, but still quite fun, day as an unnamed tropical storm entered the area, bringing with it some rain and fairly strong winds. After breakfast, we headed to the 2nd Street Pavilion to bird under some cover. Other birders had the same idea, providing for a morning of comradery. The ocean was up with waves large enough to attract 20 or so surfers that kept us entertained between bird sightings. Scoters had no trouble flying in this weather and our newly learned Surf/Black Scoter identification techniques here very helpful. Common Loons were flying too and we spotted several. A Pectoral Sandpiper made a nice stop on the beach in front of the pavilion and hung out with Sanderlings before continuing on its journey. Peregrine Falcons and a couple of distant Northern Gannets made for a very nice birding experience on a not so nice morning.

After lunch and a warmup, we headed to Sunset Beach in hopes that the prevailing winds would cause the birds to gather here. And, we were right. The wonderful Fish House Grill staff, which has a large covered outdoor dining area (but no customers today) allowed us to set up our scopes and birds from their patio. It was so nice to bird with hot coffee and other refreshments as we spent the afternoon under their roof. Many birds congregated on the beach in front of us with large flocks of Royal and Forster's Terns stopping in to get out of the wind. We were easily able to pick out the occasional Common Terns mixed in with these flocks. Ruddy Turnstones also stopped in to rest and feed. The treat of the afternoon was the raptors that were attracted to all this bird activity. We had 5 Peregrine Falcons making runs amongst the flocks, some of them seemingly working in teams to try and isolate birds. Merlin, Osprey and Northern Harrier were also drawn to this spot. Thanks so much to the Fish House for letting us set up here.

We returned to the hotel to take a break and get ready for our last dinner and checklist together where we shared our favorite birds and experiences of the trip. Due to the storm, which was also timed with a super tide, our dining plans changed and we ate at the Sapore Italiano restaurant.

Mon., October 13: Departure Day

This morning, it was time for us to leave this amazing destination and after our last breakfast together we



gathered outside the hotel to say our goodbyes and exchange information and even make plans for future birding with new friends. Those of us that were heading back to Philadelphia for flights or trains left with Dan for the journey back. Others that drove themselves to Cape May chose to stay as long as possible and birded together for a good bit of the day before heading home. This was a very cohesive group and our texting group continues to be active long after the trip was over.

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