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Ohio Big Week and Warblers, A Birding and Nature Tour October 1-8, 2014

Trip Report

By Dan Donaldson, guide

With 6 participants: (Charlie & Phyllis, Ruth & Owen, Marcyes and Craig)

Wed., Oct. 1 Arrival in Philadelphia – travel to Fogelsville PA

All our flying travelers arrived safely in Philadelphia to warm, sunny skies. We departed to Fogelsville, Pennsylvania, our lodging town while in the Hawk Mountain area. Driving west, Pennsylvania's varied geology and geography was immediately noticed as we travelled from the gentle rolling hills of Philadelphia toward the Appalachian Mountains. We arrived at the Hawthorne Inn and Suites in time to sneak in some local patch birding while we awaited the arrival of our driving participants. A local woodlot perched above an industrial park proved to be a local haven for migrating songbirds. As the sun was setting, we witnessed wave after wave of hundreds of American Robins dropping out of the sky. Some mixed songbirds (Cedar Waxwings and blackbirds) were travelling with them and a local Cooper's Hawk was working the treetops trying to snag one for an evening meal. After meeting up with the rest of our group at the hotel, we departed for a fun dinner at a historical tavern.

Thurs., Oct. 2 Orientation and Hawk Mountain

Today, we were introduced to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and Research Center and Appalachian ridge-top birding. In the early 1900s, the sites on Hawk Mountain were the favorite hawk shooting grounds of local hunters. In the 1930s, the site was purchased by Rosalie Barrow-Edge thus establishing the first hawk conservation center in the world.

After a quick visit to the renowned Hawk Mountain Visitor Center, we departed for the walking trail up the mountain to the hawk lookouts. The south winds were not favorable for hawk migration this day, but the weather was otherwise beautiful and the camaraderie



amongst those sitting on the rocks at the lookout kept us all in good spirits. Even though there were very low numbers of hawks, we did view Carolina Chickadees, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Blue Jays moving through trees along the ridge and the local population of Turkey Vultures occasionally flying by.

With the birding slow, we opted to depart early in the afternoon to bird local patches on our way back to Fogelsville. A local Audubon contact pointed us toward the Trexler Environmental Center in Lehigh County, a new LEED-certified Environmental Learning Center with a great observation deck on the roof along with natural plantings. The decks offered great views of the rolling countryside, including a bison and elk farm. We wrapped up our birding day with a visit to a nearby covered bridge and a quick walk along the riparian area of Jordan Creek, a small tributary of the Delaware River. Dinner was at the Fogelsville Hotel (another 100 year old inn).

Fri., Oct. 3 Pine Barrens / Cape May, New Jersey

This was another beautiful, sunny day, but the winds did not change in our favor. Rather than venture up Hawk Mountain again, we departed first thing for Cape May, New Jersey.

Our drive took us along the Schuylkill River which winds its way through Philadelphia before joining the Delaware River. Crossing the Delaware at the Walt Whitman Bridge, we caught views of Philadelphia's very active sea port and entered New Jersey. Soon, we were out of the city and enjoying the vista in rural countryside of the Garden State. Driving along the Atlantic City Expressway, we passed through the New Jersey Pine Barrens, aka *the Pinelands*. The Pine Barrens are a 1.1 million acre tract of dense coastal pine forest with nearly pure sandy soils that are very low in organic nutrients. As a result, the Pine Barrens is home to many rare plants including orchids and carnivorous plants. Its sandy soils are also the perfect filter for ground water and the area is the main recharge area for the Kirkwood-Cohansey Aquifer which is considered some of the purest water in the United States.

Driving east and then south, the geography quickly changed from Pine Barrens to coastal salt marshes and barrier islands. We arrived in Cape May in time for a seafood lunch at a raw bar on the local fishing wharf.

After lunch, we headed directly to the Cape May Point State Park located at the southernmost tip of New Jersey. This state park boasts dunes, beach and other natural areas as well a lighthouse and interpretive center which attracts many visitors. This migration hotspot also attracts many birders who come to this premier migration location on the peninsula adjacent to the Delaware Bay.

The Hawk Watch platform was our first stop here where we checked in with the counters for the hawk counts for the day. The day was sunny and quite warm and the migrating raptors were very high in the sky. Thankfully, there were popcorn clouds moving across the sky which served as the perfect backdrop to see Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons and mixed hawks moving out over the Delaware Bay. We made a quick drive to Sunset Point, but missed the sun setting over the bay.



We departed to settle into our hotel rooms, rested up and departed for dinner.

Sat., Oct. 4

Beach Walk / Cape May and Salt Marsh Boat Tour

We started every morning with an optional sunrise beach walk. We were out the door by 6:15 a.m. and off to the nearest open coffee shop. From there, we were able to walk to the beach in search of birds with coffees in hand. Cape May is known for a very reliable population of Black Skimmers that choose to rest on one of the busier parts of the beach in the mornings. We did not have any problem locating them and spent the better part of these mornings watching the flock feeding in long undulating lines between the near shore waves. On shore, the skimmers rest in a tight formation with precision spacing, moving in concert to make room for skimmers arriving from the surf. We returned back to the hotel in time to meet up with the rest of the group for breakfast.



This was our morning for exploring the Cape May Point State Park and Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO) Visitor Center. We headed straight for the State Park and Hawk Watch platform again. Early morning seems to be the time for viewing as hawks and falcons which have spent the night in the area are up hunting the meadows. Unlike the day before, Merlin and Sharp-shinned hawks were in good numbers and flew very low, sometimes even below us as they darted between the platform and nearby trees. We left in late morning to visit the CMBO Visitor Center and gift shop. We helped contribute to the local economy while also supporting the area's conservation organization with purchases, and then headed to lunch.



Our afternoon explorations were spent afloat in the salt marshes along the New Jersey Coast. New Jersey has over 300,000 acres of salt marshes, so exploring some of them is always on the to-do list when visiting this area. We timed our boat trip to coincide with the high tide so the thousands of acres of mudflats were underwater forcing birds to congregate in the higher and drier areas. Our craft was the Osprey, a very large and stable pontoon boat with an enclosed cabin; a perfect platform for birding the back bays of the marshes. Herons and egrets were the feature of this trip and we were lucky enough to get great looks at Great Blue, Little Blue, Black-crowned night,

Yellow-crowned night, and even Tri-colored Herons. Peregrine Falcons were also present in the marshes and stirred up the flocks of shorebirds in the area. Regardless, we managed to see large numbers of Semipalmated Plovers, Oyster Catchers, and Ruddy Turnstones. A few Northern Harriers also hunted the higher areas along the tidal creeks we birded.

Sun., Oct. 5

Morning Flight / Stone Haven / Avalon Sea Watch / The Meadows

This was our only very early start for the entire trip. We were all off at 6:15 a.m. to witness the “morning flight” at Higbee Beach. 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. Just before 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). If you look at a map of the coastline of the eastern U.S., and imagine you are out at sea, heading north will get you to shore the quickest. 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 WMA.



We arrived just before sunrise and joined the 40 or so birders that are already in place. Most birders present had climbed to the top of a nearby dredging spoils pile that affords clear views of the entire area. Half of our group joins them and half opted for the nearby observation platform. Soon, the birds started arriving in great numbers. Warblers in mixed flocks of 5-10 began arriving in waves. Redstarts, Palms, Northern Parulas, Black-throated Blues and Yellow-rumped Warblers were arriving in waves. Merlins and Sharp-shinned Hawks were also soon spotted skimming the treetops and meadows in search of the newly arrived prey.

Amazingly, the very skilled official counters needed only hear a “sip”, “zeep”, or catch a glance at a tail flash to identify the passing birds. At times, there were birds arriving too fast for us to even see them all, let alone identify them. At one point, we were standing shoulder to shoulder and a Merlin managed to pass between our heads—so close all we could do is laugh in amazement! Masses of Northern Flickers were among the most impressive spectacles we observed this morning. Wave after wave of flickers appeared over the woodlot flying very near the platform, often stopping in the nearest dead branch for a quick rest. We quit counting at 200 but we are sure there were many times those numbers. Within an hour, the spectacle was over and the trees and meadows were once again quiet. While here, we took a quick walk to the nearby beach and returned to town for a late breakfast.





The Avalon Sea Watch was our afternoon destination. At the Barrier Island town of Avalon, the New Jersey Shoreline makes an abrupt, one mile jut eastward toward the Atlantic. This makes the northern-most end of Avalon a great spot to encounter seabirds that frequent the coastline. There are CMBO counters here daily for the entire fall migration season and they are always more than helpful with bird spotting and identification for visitors.

Our winds once again returned to blowing from the south, unfortunately keeping most birds well off shore. During the lull in birding activity, the counters give us a quick seabird identification workshop. After this, we again turned our binoculars to the sea and got good looks at Common, Forster's, Royal and Caspian Terns. Semipalmated Plovers were spotted at close range as they hid from the wind in the rocks of the seawall. Occasionally, they popped up right in front of us to give us incredibly close looks. We were even able to see the webbing in their feet from which their name is derived—semi-palmated means having toes joined only part way with a web. Ruddy Turnstones and Semipalmated Sandpipers were also using the rocks for shelter from the wind along with a single Red knot. Red knots are listed as endangered in New Jersey and can be found along the New Jersey coast in the tens of thousands feeding on breeding horseshoe crabs on their spring migration to their Arctic breeding grounds.

Leaving Avalon, we headed back to Cape May to bird "The Meadows". The Meadows is The Nature Conservancy's ocean front property just north of the Cape May State Park which has been restored from an overgrown cow pasture to a native dune complex with fresh water ponds. This dune complex is prime nesting habitat for Piping Plovers and Least Terns. The fresh water ponds in such close proximity to the ocean attract birds throughout the year. In fall, it is prime Merlin hunting grounds. Migrating Green Darner Dragonflies tend to congregate in the meadows and Merlins make easy meals of them. This evening, we saw over 20 Merlins hunting the meadows until sunset. Birding around the freshwater ponds, we were able to find Blue and Green-winged Teal as well as a Wood Duck pair.

We departed The Meadows and headed to Sunset Beach, near Cape May Point to watch the sun set over the Delaware Bay. Dune and meadow restoration in this area also attract Merlins which we observed hunting over the grasslands.

Mon., Oct. 6	Day in Cape May Area / Higbee
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This morning, we took another early morning beach walk. Following breakfast, we spent the entire day birding in the Cape May area. It was a beautiful, sunny day but again the winds out of the south were very strong making our birding very challenging.

We started our day at the Cape May Point State Park where CMBO has their hawk watch platform. We spent the morning birding mostly from the platform but venture out to bird the trails around the dunes, ponds and beach areas in the State Park's 153-acre Natural Area. The ponds attracted waterfowl

overnight; we were pleased to view at least three Eurasian Wigeons, a more rare bird most places. Other waterfowl spotted include Canada Geese, Mute Swans, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail and a pair of Ruddy Ducks. Juvenile Little Blue Herons were also present providing nice side-by-side comparisons with like-plumaged snowy egrets.

Once the morning's main movement of birds tapered off, we left the State Park and headed to "The Beanery". The Rea Family farm, better locally known as "The Beanery" used to be a working lima bean farm. The Beanery is centrally located in the middle of Cape May Island and its agriculture fields are surrounded by wet woods which warm up quickly in the morning. In fall, it provides shelter and attracts migrating songbirds. This day, we also used it as a location to get out of the wind searching for birds trying to do the same. The birding was light, but we did get some great looks at Osprey carrying fish to distant perches. Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds worked blooms for nectar in the prolific stands of Jewelweed along the walking paths. We also glimpsed our first Brown Thrasher for the trip here as well.

From the Beanery, we travelled to Two Mile Beach Unit of the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge, just north of the Cape May Harbor. We arrived at low tide and the beach was nearly a quarter mile wide, but a tidal pond blocked our access to the surf. The pond was active with gulls, however, and we got great looks at Great Black-backed, Herring, Ring-billed and Lesser Black-backed gulls. The shorebirds we were hoping to see were surely hunkered down out of the wind and out of sight. We spent our beach time here picking seashells and re-assembling very large horseshoe crabs from the many scattered crab pieces and parts. We returned to Sunset Beach to watch for terns as the sun set. For one reason or another, the Royal Terns seem to be much more abundant on the Delaware Bay side of New Jersey than the Atlantic side. We were treated to another beautiful sunset then departed for the hotel and dinner.

Tues. Oct. 7	Edwin B. Forsythe and Avalon Sea Bird Watch
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On our last full day, we drove north up the coast of New Jersey to Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, just north of Atlantic City. We timed our visit here with high tide in hopes of catching rails and other waterbirds in the freshwater impoundments which have controlled water levels. Waterfowl were spotted here in good numbers, especially the teal species and American Black Ducks. Pied-billed Grebes were still paired up from the breeding season; most ponds boasted a pair in each open area of water. Northern Harriers were also present in good numbers. With the high tide, Harriers hunted the higher ground along the roadways, giving us good looks at both male and females. The falcons were also well represented this day with Peregrine, Merlin and American Kestrels all making appearances. Belted Kingfishers were very active in the fresh water ponds as well.



After spending several hours at Forsythe, we decided to make another stop at the Avalon Sea Watch site on the return trip back to Cape May. On the drive across the salt marshes to Avalon, we spotted very large flocks of Black-bellied Plovers resting on the newly emerging mudflats. Of course, we stopped to take better looks at them through our spotting scope. Back at the seawall at Avalon, the counters were

present and they shared the news that parasitic jaegers had been seen here all morning. We did manage to spot several of these jaegers harassing gulls and terns, but they were pretty far out over the ocean and appeared mostly as black specks chasing white specks, even through the magnification of a spotting scope. We took a quick walk on the nearby beach in search of some shorebirds and were rewarded with views of feeding Sanderlings-a new bird for the trip list.

Wed., Oct. 8 Departure Day - Lunar Eclipse!

Total Lunar Eclipse!! We were very fortunate this last morning to be in the perfect geographic location to witness an early morning total lunar eclipse. We departed the hotel at 4:45 am for a coffee run and to position ourselves for the best view of the eclipse. It turns out that The Cove restaurant that we have patronized this week is that spot. It's closed today, so we were able to borrow some patio furniture, haul it around the back of the restaurant to get out of the wind and into the shadows away from the nearby street lights. With coffees in hand, we sat in a row and watched the shadow of the earth slowly move across the full moon. When fully in shadow, the moon turned blood red instead of black shadow. The eclipse lasted about 1.5 hours in total and the sun, now behind us, revealed another beautiful sunny morning.



We enjoyed one last breakfast together and loaded our belongings. We said our goodbyes to those who drove to New Jersey and we departed for the Philadelphia airport.