

Cape May: Fall Migration | Trip Report

October 15 – 22, 2017 | Written by Dan Donaldson



With Guides Dan Donaldson & Carlos Sanchez, and participants Meg, Jordan, Linda, Schuyler, Michael, Rita, Glenn, Ilanya, Karen, Richard & Nancy

Sun., Oct. 15 Arrival in Philadelphia | Travel to Cape May, New Jersey

All our flying travelers arrived safely in Philadelphia to sunny skies. After a quick lunch at a local tavern, we arrived in Cape May by late afternoon and in time to settle in to the Sea Crest Inn, our motel for the duration of the trip, and to do some local birding before sunset and dinner.

A quick stop at Coral Avenue beach overlook proved to be a great decision as we got our first birding of the trip in with many Yellow-rumped Warblers working the scrub forest along the beach dunes. We had great looks at a Northern Mockingbird here as well. Scans of the ocean provided looks at a dozen Parasitic Jaegers working the flocks of Laughing Gulls just off shore. Royal Terns were emptying out of the Delaware Bay, presumably to roost for the evening on nearby beaches. We also viewed our first flocks of Black Scoters in long strings flying just above the waves.

We arrived at Sunset Point just in time to watch the sun dip behind the horizon. Royal Terns continued to fly out of the bay, joined by small flocks of Sanderlings (presumably). We finished off the evening with a great dinner at the Harbor View restaurant overlooking the Cape May harbor.



Mon., Oct. 16 Orientation Day — Cape May

Today, our first full day in Cape May, was orientation day to the peninsula and the locations we would be birding throughout the week. A couple participants joined the guides for our daily optional pre-breakfast beach walk, on which we had our first looks at the local flock of Black Skimmers resting on a sand bar; these birds were our quest birds on each of these morning walks. Other highlights for the morning walks were American Oystercatchers and Royal Terns. After breakfast at a local diner we departed for our orientation of the area. First stop was the Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO) headquarters for the news of the day and the mandatory visit to the well-appointed giftshop. After our visit inside CMBO, we birded the small woodlot of the CMBO offices. Many habitat enhancements have turned this once overrun backyard into a very nice birding location. Here we observed our first Ospreys of the trip along with American Kestrel, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, Black-and-white Warbler, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and American Redstart.

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We then visited the famous hawk watch platform at Cape May Point State Park. Many of today's top birders, authors, and researchers spent countless hours here as interns and seasonal bird counters. While we had a consistent flow of Cooper's Hawks flying the meadow and the pond in front of the platform, we also had good looks at waterfowl including Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Herons, and Great and Snowy Egrets. The nearby dogwoods provided great looks at Yellow-rumped Warblers and Northern Mockingbird.

Working toward our lunch location, we made a quick stop at the New Jersey Audubon Center, located in a converted house along the east shore of Cape May Harbor. A quick scan from the parking lot provided us looks at Cape May Warbler, Great Black-backed Gull, and Song Sparrows.

After lunch we search Hidden Valley Meadow for a recently reported Mourning Warbler and while we were not



able to locate our target warbler, we did have a considerable raptor show in the fields with good looks at Northern Harrier, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, a scattering of Great Blue Herons, and an unexpected Blackpoll Warbler.

Before dinner we explored the Cape May Meadows, a Nature Conservancy project that has restored over 200 acres of dunes, freshwater wetlands, and over a mile of now wild beach. Here we viewed Turkey and Black Vultures, a wide variety of waterfowl, including both Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Widgeon, and Black Ducks. The visit was capped off by wonderful looks at a Virginia Rail.



Tues., Oct 17 Back Bay Salt Marsh Birding by Boat

We started the day with our regular morning beach walk, adding Forster's Terns, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Eastern Phoebe, and Tree Swallows to our beach walk list.

After breakfast we headed to Miss Chris Marina to board *The Osprey*, a large enclosed pontoon boat, to tour the back bays of 300,000 acres of salt marshes in New Jersey. The tides were in our favor today as the low tide exposed

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large mudflats near Stone Harbor that were not viewable from land. This added a bonus one-hour extension to our trip. The mudflats did not disappoint, as we viewed incredible quantities of shorebirds including, two Marbled Godwits, 150 Dunlins, 18 Red Knots, 50 Black-bellied Plover, and 24 American Oystercatchers. This was also our best view of Brant with flocks of 160+ rafting within the open waters of the salt marsh. Our captain also made sure we got great looks at roosting Black-crowned Night Herons and wading Tricolored Herons.

We ended our day at Higbee Beach on the Delaware Bay side of the Cape May peninsula. We enjoyed a great walk, picking up the usual beach-side suspects. We were, however, lucky enough to spot an Orange-crowned Warbler working the bayberries along the front range of the dunes.

We ended our day with our usual stop at Sunset Point to watch the sun dip below the horizon.



Wed., Oct. 18 Morning Watch — Avalon Sea Watch | Cox Creek — Edwin Forsythe NWR

This was our only very early start of the entire trip. We were off at 6:15 AM 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 turn north (toward shore) and in Cape May, they come ashore at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area (just north of Cape May Point on the Delaware Bay). If

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you look at a map of the coastline of the eastern U.S., and imagine you are out at sea, heading north gets 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 has conducted a daily count of the morning flight at Higbee Beach WMA.

We arrived after a quick coffee and snack trip to grab our spots on the observation platform just before sunrise and joined the 15 or so birders that had climbed to the top of a nearby dredging spoils pile that afforded clear views of the entire area. The birding was fairly light this morning but we did manage very good looks at Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Field and Song Sparrows, Baltimore Oriole, and Common Loons.

A rare bird alert for a Black-throated Gray Warbler got us to move from the morning watch to nearby Cox Hall Creek Wildlife Management Area to search for this west coast warbler. While we were not able to locate the Black-throated Gray, we did get a good hour of birding at this location and picked up Snow Goose, Pied-billed Grebe, and Brown Thrasher.

After an early lunch we headed to the Avalon Sea Watch located on the Barrier Island town of Avalon. Here 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 migrate south along 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.

Here we saw a couple hundred Black and Surf Scoters in long lines skim the waves as they worked their way south. We also saw Red-throated Loons, a pretty active flock of Sanderlings, and even a flyby of Air Force One.

Next stop, Edwin Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. After an accidental flyover of our location, we arrived at the NWR in time to catch high tide, which brought a lot of birds into the fresh water and water level controlled impoundments of the refuge. The driving tour was along the impoundment dikes and provided access to nearly all of the refuge; here we found good numbers of Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Widgeon, American Black Duck, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Great and Snowy Egrets, a flyby Clapper Rail, White-rumped and Western Sandpipers, and American Golden Plover.



Thurs., Oct.19 Lewes Ferry Crossing to Delaware | Cape Henlopen State Park | Prime Hook NWR

This morning we were off at an early 6:00 AM to grab a quick WaWa breakfast and catch the Lewes Ferry to the state of Delaware. We used the ferry as a pelagic trip across the Delaware Bay to Cape Henlopen State Park and

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Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge. On the crossing, we spotted our first Northern Gannets of the trip and also got wonderful looks at Parasitic Jaegers.



Once on the mainland of Delaware, we headed directly to Cape Henlopen State Park. This wonderful park consists of high sand dune hills covered in pine barren habitat. It is the Eastern Red Cedars and Southern Yellow Pines that attract perhaps the cute bird of our trip. The Brown-headed Nuthatch, which could be heard coming in the distance as it sounded exactly like a rubber duckie bath toy. We spent nearly 20 minutes just watching and listening to a small flock of these nuthatches that came in very close to the group. As we continued walking up one of the highest forested dunes, we were greeted by a singing Pine Warbler, a

beautiful yellow male. We visited Battery Hill, a canon emplacement that once guarded the entrance of the Delaware Bay; here we picked up Horned Larks, Gray Catbird, and Brown-headed Cowbird. Before leaving the park, we visited the local hawk watch tower where we got wonderful looks of Bald Eagles, Black and Turkey Vultures, and Red-tailed Hawks that were flying the thermals created by the warming lands near the bay. We lunched in the town of Lewes and head to Prime Hook NWR.

Prime Hook NWR is a 10,000-acre wetland unit on the Delaware Bay that was under restoration to once again allow free flowing bay water into the previously enclosed wetland units. Limited on time due to the ferry schedule, we opted to walk the short loop trail at the visitor center. After a short walk through upland forest and field habitats we found Swamp, Field, Savannah, and White-Throated Sparrows. We also walked the boardwalk trail along one of the large impoundments. Here we were greeted with a flock of 90+ Green-winged Teals, Great Egrets, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and flocks of Forster's Terns that worked the open water of the wetland units.

Back on the Lewes Ferry to Cape May we again took advantage of the ride to get in some pelagic birding. No new birds for the return crossing but we did get good looks at pods of Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins with young.

Fri., Oct. 20

Day in Cape May Area | Two-Mile Landing | Birding with Pete Dunne | Keynote

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 and our first stop was at Two-Mile Landing, a small saltmarsh pocket that is known for Seaside and Saltmarsh Sparrows. Here we quickly found Nelson's Sparrows and Saltmarsh Sparrows sharing the brushy edges of the driveway. They offered us lengthy looks, often perching together for some great diagnostic observations. Also nearby were Brandt, Black-bellied Plovers, Killdeer, and Boat-tailed Grackle that we surprisingly had to put some work into seeing on this trip.



We also visited the Cape May Hawk Watch platform again today. Carlos was gracious and led the entire group this morning as Dan went to get a bad tire replaced on one of the vans. Here the group picked up Ruddy Ducks, Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks, Red-headed Woodpecker, and White-crowned Sparrows.

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Today we took advantage of the Cape May Fall Birding Festival and took in a talk and walk by author Pete Dunne. We had a picnic lunch in a nearby shelter and continued to bird Cape May State Park. We returned early to the hotel to rest a bit before we headed back to the Cape May Birding Festival for dinner and to hear a keynote presentation by Pete Dunne and Kevin Karlson about their new birds of prey book.



Sat., October 21 Local Birding & Mini Pelagic

We began our day with another attempt at the morning flight. This morning had much more bird activity and Yellow-rumped Warblers were the bird of the morning, with over 100 passing by in the first hour. We also got good looks at Bald Eagle, Palm Warblers, and Brown Thrasher.

We then got in a late breakfast and enjoyed some free time to enjoy the historic district of Cape May and to visit the vendor exhibit at the festival headquarters.

At noon we were off to Utch's Marina to board the *American Star*, a passenger boat that took us on a pelagic birding trip to "the Rips," which is where the waters exiting the Delaware Bay collides with the Atlantic Ocean. Temperature and salinity differences in the water cause the water to stir and churn up food from the floor of the ocean to the surface where schools of fish and seafaring birds feed. Today we were lucky to see an unusually large number of Parasitic Jaegers (20+) continuously attacking feeding gulls until they dropped or regurgitated recently eaten fish. Gannets and large streaming flocks of Black and Surf Scoters were also observed.

We had dinner at the famous Lobster House restaurant located in the main marina in Cape May. We turned in early and got ready for departures in the morning.

Sun., Oct. 22 Departure Day | Lunar Eclipse

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.

Photo Credits: Royal Tern, Greg Smith (GS); Sanderling, GS; Northern Shoveler by Sandy Sorkin (SS); Egret, Richard Becker (RB); Terns, Mike Dilbeck (MD); Sunset with Shorebirds, RB; Northern Pintail, SS; Bald Eagle, SS; Broad-winged Hawk, Carlos Sanchez; Parasitic Jaeger, Peg Abbott.

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
www.naturalistjourneys.com Email info@naturalistjourneys.com