

Naturalist Journeys Cape May Fall Migration Tour



Naturalist Journeys Cape May Fall Migration Tour Species List October 12 - 18, 2021

With guides Dan Donaldson and Andy Jones and 11 participants: Mari, Marti, Tom, Pam, Myrna, Lee Amy, Nancy, Bonnie, Henry and DJ

Cape May Trip List Compiled by Andy Jones

Summary:

Cape May, New Jersey is a premier migration destination. Its unique geography means that it is the last stop for many southbound fall migrants before they cross the Delaware Bay. And its wide array of habitats, ranging from tidal marshes to maritime forests, supports these migrants as the stopover to rest and feed during the migration. And let's not forget that it is a beautiful little town! We focus on mid October to take advantage of the large numbers of migrating birds; the warbler diversity has dropped off but the hawk, sparrow, shorebird, and other birds are in both large numbers and species diversity.

Cape May's geography and habitats did not disappoint us in 2021. We combed through the Yellow-rumped Warbler flocks for other migrants in the forests, sorted through sparrows in fields and saltmarshes, and experienced water birds by boat on three trips, finding large numbers of gulls, wading birds, and shorebirds. A late Yellow-billed Cuckoo was notable. We recorded over 100 species, including several difficult or rare species like White Ibis, Great Cormorant, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, American Bittern, and Nelson's Sparrow.

Guide Andy Jones compiled an eBird trip report for this trip; this is a beta feature of eBird and this link will become public once the feature is available to everyone, sometime in December.

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/2957>

(HO)= Distinctive enough to be counted as heard only

(DO)= Confirmed only through digital camera imagery

(I)=introduced

BIRDS (115 species recorded, of which 2 were heard only, and 1 was digital only):

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (9)

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*—Several small flocks were noted, mostly from the jetty by our hotel, looking west towards The Meadows.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (I)—Sighted several times on freshwater bodies in Cape May Point, mostly near the lighthouse and on Lily Lake (across from the Cape May Bird Observatory).

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*—Three birds flew by on our final morning, viewing the migrants from the small building across from our hotel.

Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors*—Four individuals were seen at the Cape May Meadows, near the observation tower.

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Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*—We found a few small groups of this common species, including at Cape May Meadows and by the lighthouse.

American Black Duck *Anas rubripes*—One lone individual was amidst the Mallards at Cape May Meadows.

Hybrid: American Black Duck x Mallard—One individual of this hybrid joined the two parental species at Cape May Meadows. It featured a dark body and blue-purple on the secondary feathers, and a few small upturned uppertail feathers.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—A handful of individuals were on the Cape May Meadows pond near the observation tower.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*—Abundant at The Meadows; we estimated 100 individuals feeding here.

Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*—We had very brief flyby looks of this species on our boat trips, including the Lewes ferry (in Delaware waters).

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (1)

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*—Seen by Dan's vehicle's group on the first day, along the Garden State Expressway.

GREBES: Podicipedidae (1)

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*—Two individuals were feeding at The Meadows.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (2)

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* (1)—Large flocks hang out on the hotels along the beachfront, as well as on other substantial buildings around town. The most interesting sighting was of a bird flying around on the ferry as we crossed the Delaware Bay; several birds were roosting on perhaps nesting on the ferry itself.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*—Surprisingly few sightings, mostly flyby individuals at a few migration spots.

CUCKOOS AND ALLIES: CUCULIDAE (1)

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*—We did not expect this species! This was late in the season for a cuckoo sighting, and when Bonnie first spotted this species in a small tree on the dike by the Morning Flight Platform, everyone from many groups scrambled to see the bird. Not only did that individual stay put, but another one spent a long time on the other side of the platform.

RAILS, COOTS AND ALLIES: Rallidae (2)

Virginia Rail *Rallus limicola*—Very brief looks by several trip participants at The Meadows. We also pursued Clapper Rail during the Osprey boat tour, but I don't believe anyone from our group saw that species.

Sora *Porzana carolina*—HO—Heard only at The Meadows.

OYSTERCATCHERS: Haematopodidae (1)

American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*—We saw very large groups roosting on the jetties during our boat trips, as well as a single flyby at Two Mile Landing.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (3)

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Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*—We connected with small flocks at many sites, and a larger flock at Two Mile Landing that was visible with lots of other shorebirds during our Osprey tour. Several singletons were also resting on the jetties alongside other shorebirds.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*—About thirty individuals were roosting and feeding at Cape Henlopen in Delaware.

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*—Four random encounters with flyby individuals that were apparently migrating, including at the jetty across from the hotel.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae (14)

Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*—A huge surprise, we connected with two individuals at Cape Henlopen in Delaware. They were far off and easily confirmed as godwits by their long, upturned bill, but patient observation led to brief views of their white rumps to confirm this species. Their next step of their migration might take them overwater nonstop to South America, so we were fortunate to connect with these birds!

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*—Our best looks at this colorful shorebird were during the Osprey boat trip when we found them resting on the wooden pilings around the yacht club, but we also found groups on the rock jetties in several places.

Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*—One individual showed its long, droopy bill and tall stance while we studied it from the blind at The Meadows.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*—All told, we saw well over 1,000 individuals. They were feeding in the waves on most beaches, roosting on jetties, and randomly flying by us at many oceanfront sites.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*—Droopy bills made these chunky shorebirds stand out anytime we encountered them. We saw a few flocks here and there, including mixed in among Sanderlings on the jetties, as well as a couple of birds that gave us longer looks from the blind at The Meadows.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*—A small flock of these yellow-legged small "peep" sandpipers were always present when we stopped by Two Mile Landing, and a handful were noted in Cape Henlopen.

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*—Not routinely encountered on these October trips, one individual was among the mixed shorebird flock by the blind at The Meadows.

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*—One or two individuals were snoozing on one of our visits to The Meadows, near the Least Sandpiper group.

Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*—This species has mostly already left the area by mid-October, but we found them in several places, including at The Meadows and on jetties.

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*—A single individual was found among the Sanderlings on the jerry from our trip to The Rips. A brown bird with a droopy bill among the ghostly gray peeps.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*—Two birds were scoped in the large shorebird flock at the end of Two Mile Landing; it was quite late in the season for this species.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*—Small numbers were noted at many marsh locations, particularly The Meadows and Two Mile Landing.

Willet *Tringa semipalmata*—We nearly missed this species, but then a flock of 35 birds popped out of the marsh as seen from atop the Wetlands Institute, showing off their beautiful black and white wing pattern.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*—We located several groups at marsh locations, with the largest numbers at Cape Henlopen.

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SKUAS AND JAEGERs: Stercorariidae (1)

Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*—The guides noted one individual from the Lewes ferry that most people did not get a chance to see, and two individuals flew by on our trip to The Rips.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (9)

Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*—Common at all marsh and beach sites, in plumages ranging from dingy brown juveniles to a handful of smart gray adults still sporting their summer black hoods and red beaks.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—Uncommon, but several were noted at beach sites, particularly one cooperative individual on the beach across the street from our hotel.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*—Common at all freshwater and saltwater sites, and the most common gull after Laughing Gull on our boat trips.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*—Formerly a rarity in North America, this species has become common in a few key locations. Cape May is a great place to see good numbers of this bird in all plumages. On our trip to The Rips, boat guide Cameron Cox noted one individual in crisp juvenile plumage, meaning that it was only a few months and had already made it to New Jersey from unknown breeding locations in the North Atlantic.

Hybrid: Herring x Lesser Black-backed Gull— One was identified by boat guide on our last day, while we were watching the large feeding flock of gulls, just north of the jetty.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*—Typically only seen on saltwater, we had long studies of this massive gull at several sites, including a flock feeding on a juvenile shark carcass across from our hotel.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*—A handful of singleton sightings from coastal sites of this huge migratory tern.

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*—Small numbers were spotted along larger water bodies, with our best looks at this along the inland canal from our boat trips.

Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*—Far outnumbering the Caspian Terns, this exclusively coastal species was seen in small and moderate flocks commuting to roosting sites and in active migration along beaches.

Black Skimmer *Rhynchops niger*—Recorded at several beach sites, perhaps most memorable was the flock of 50 individuals in continuous flight along the water at the beach across from our hotel at dawn.

LOONS: Gaviidae (1)

Common Loon *Gavia immer*—Three individuals passed by our seawatch across from the hotel on the final morning of the trip.

GANNETS AND BOOBIES: Sulidae (1)

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*—Dan spotted a beautiful adult in bright white plumage on the ferry trip, in Delaware waters.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (2)

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*—A group of up to six of these massive, North Atlantic cormorants were hanging out on the jetty at the Cape May Inlet from our boat trips. White patches along their throat were clear plumage differences, as well as the huge size difference versus Double-crested.

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*—Many sightings at all coastal sites, including migratory groups of up to 100 individuals. Very large flocks were roosting on the rocks at Lewes, DE.

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PELICANS: Pelecanidae (1)

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*—A group of over 75 individuals were loafing on the Lewes side of the bay, and we had a close flyby encounter with three individuals on the boat trip to The Rips.

HERONS AND EGRETS: Ardeidae (8)

American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*—Woohoo! We flushed one during the Osprey boat tour, near the spot where the night-herons were roosting. Unmistakable in flight.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*—Small handfuls at most marsh sites, plus a remarkable group of six flew into strong headwinds over the ocean during our last seawatch across from the hotel.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*—Found at many sites, with the largest numbers noted at Two Mile Landing. My favorite sighting was of a flock of 16 flying over the beach waaaaay overhead at the end of our boat trip to The Rips.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*—Large numbers at Two Mile Landing and smaller numbers are many marsh sites.

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*—We picked out a single adult plumaged individual at the Wetlands Institute, among the other wading birds.

Tricolored Heron *Egretta tricolor*—Two individuals showed off their distinctive white bellies at the extensive marshes around the Wetlands Institute.

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*—Carefully picking through cedars and other trees next to the water during our Osprey boat trip resulted in an impressive count of 40 individuals of all plumages (adult, second-year, and juvenile).

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*—Hidden amongst the Black-crowneds was a single second-year bird. Unusual for this late in the season.

IBIS AND SPOONBILLS: Threskiornithidae (1)

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*—We enjoyed a long study of three individuals (one brown juvenile and two adults) at the pond at the lighthouse, and a single flock flew by while we were on the beach near our hotel. Very late in the season for this species.

NEW WORLD VULTURES: Cathartidae (2)

Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*—We picked up several individuals among the more common Turkey Vultures in several spots, primarily in Delaware.

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*—Spotted many times throughout the trip at many locations.

OSPREY: Pandionidae (1)

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*—Common at marsh sites and along inland waterways, with most individuals likely to be in the middle of migration rather than local breeders. I'll never forget the scene when one flew over the hawkwatch carrying a fish, only to fly back a moment later with a hungry Bald Eagle in hot pursuit!

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (5)

Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*—We briefly studied this long winged raptor over the dunes from the beach across from our hotel.

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Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*—Common at many sites, this actively migrating species was particularly abundant from the Morning Watch Platform.

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*—Always outnumbered by Sharpies, but we found a handful of individuals at several sites, including one at The Meadows that flushed the shorebird flock that we were studying in the blind.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*—Found in 1s and 2s at many inland water sites as well as random flyovers, plus our favorite sighting of one successfully stealing a fish from an Osprey.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—Two individuals were along the waterway at the start of our Osprey boat tour. It was too early in the fall for the migrant influx.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae (1)

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—Briefly seen at several freshwater and brackish water sites.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (3)

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*—One individual rested in the mostly bare tree in front of the Morning Watch Platform.

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*—We only connected with two individuals, one at the Morning Watch Platform and one on the boardwalk around the lighthouse area.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*—Around 75 individuals passed by the Morning Watch Platform, including several that were harassed by a wily Cooper's Hawk. Smaller numbers observed at many other sites.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (3)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*—Our first individual was at the Wetlands Institute, and another was seen from our boat trip to The Rips. Then we were surprised to see several attempting to depart over the ocean to Delaware on our last seawatch across from the hotel on the last morning.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*—Seen as a small handful of individual at many sites, including good looks at them while we watched the sun set at Sunset Beach. Several departed New Jersey while we were on The Rips boat trip, heading out to Delaware, and several gave up and returned to shore!

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*—Only a handful of individuals, but great long looks at one banded juvenile at The Meadows.

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS: Tyrannidae (1)

Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe*—A single individual perched briefly by the Morning Watch Platform.

VIREOS: Vireonidae (2)

Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*—One individual foraged near the persimmons at the CMBO Headquarters.

Blue-headed Vireo *Vireo solitarius*—Brief looks of a single individual at the Morning Watch Platform.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (3)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*—Surprisingly few individuals around, mostly noted around the lighthouse.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—Far outnumbered by Fish Crows, we only confirmed two by call at the hawkwatch.

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Fish Crow *Corvus ossifragus*—The abundant urban crow here, with very large numbers around the Osprey boat launch site and the harbor.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae (1)

Carolina Chickadee *Poecile carolinensis*—Noted in small numbers at several spots, including looks after a great deal of effort at the ponds near the lighthouse.

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS: Hirundinidae (1)

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*—Will any of us ever forget the tornado of swallows that we watched along the beachfront? Several thousand birds put on a show for us before dissipating to the west. Two days later, we could hardly find any individuals of this species anywhere!

KINGLETS: Regulidae (2)

Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*—Small numbers within songbird flocks in forested sites, particularly in Delaware.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula*—Always outnumbered Ruby-crowns in mixed flocks; our best views were of several individuals bathing in a forest puddle in Cape Henlopen.

NUTHATCHES: Sittidae (2)

Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*—A down year for this irruptive species, we only found a single individual (Cape Henlopen).

Brown-headed Nuthatch *Sitta pusilla*—As many as six individuals were found during our walk along the beach forest at Cape Henlopen.

TREECREEPERS: Certhiidae (1)

Brown Creeper *Certhia americana*—One joined in a mixed flock in the forest at Cape Henlopen.

WRENS: Troglodytidae (1)

Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*—Present in small numbers in forested habitats, mostly noted by call and song, but seen at a few sites.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (1)—We enjoyed (yes, enjoyed) scope views of a lovely glossy individual at the beach by our hotel, and noted this species at many other urban sites.

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS: Mimidae (3)

Gray Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*—Most catbirds are well south of New Jersey this late in the season, but we saw a total of 12 individuals, including good looks at several from the Morning Watch Platform.

Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*—Great studies of this bird at the Morning Watch Platform.

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*—Present at many sites, including some desperate individuals trying to defend "their" bayberry fruits from marauding Yellow-rumped Warblers along the dunes.

WAXWINGS: Bombycillidae (1)

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*—A single flock of 12 flew over the Morning Watch Platform.

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OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae (1)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (1)—Present at many urban sites, including the dense shrubs in the revered Wawa parking lot.

PIPITS AND WAGTAILS: Motacillidae (1)

American Pipit *Anthus rubescens*—Two individuals flew over, calling and briefly seen, at the beach across from our hotel.

FINCHES: Fringillidae (1)

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*—Not common this year, with just a few flyovers noted at the lighthouse.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (10)

Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina*—We picked out two individuals amidst the flocks of sparrows at Cape Henlopen.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*—Low numbers this year, with the largest group noted at the Morning Watch Platform.

White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*—Low numbers of this species, with the best looks at the Morning Watch Platform.

Nelson's Sparrow *Ammospiza nelsoni*—At least one, and probably several, were seen during the Osprey boat tour, in the tidal marshes. Henry photographed one during this trip, and his photo confirms that it was from the population that nests in the interior of northern Canada rather than the Atlantic coast (*altera* subspecies).

Seaside Sparrow *Ammospiza maritima*—DO—This sighting poses an intriguing problem that's unique to our modern digital camera era. We searched for this species from the Osprey boat tour, but none of our group saw the species. A few candidate birds were perched far from the boat, but neither guide was 100% certain on them. When Henry came home and reviewed his photos, he found that he had a wonderful photo of this reclusive species from that boat trip! Do we count it for the trip list? Does it count for anyone's life list? We will leave those decisions to you. We dub this one "digital only" for the official list.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*—This was the most common sparrow in the dunes at most sites, and noted at a few other tidal marsh sites, particularly Two Mile Landing.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*—Seen in 1s and 2s along marsh sites.

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolni*—We had intermittent views of this species at Two Mile Landing, not a commonly seen sparrow in Cape May.

Swamp Sparrow *Melospiza georgiana*—Common at The Meadows, and noted at several other marsh sites.

Eastern Towhee *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*—Our best looks were at a midday stop at the Two Mile unit of the NWR, and noted at a few other shrubby sites.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS: Icteridae (4)

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*—Two individuals passed by at the Morning Watch Platform, impressing us with their unimpressive flight style.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*—Few individuals remain in the area this late in the fall, mostly in small flocks seen around marsh sites.

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Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*—A single flock of 8 birds flew by while we birded Two Mile Landing.

Boat-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus major*—A handful of birds remained this late in the fall at Two Mile Landing, with some males still singing and displaying to each other.

NEW WORLD WARBLERS: Parulidae (4)

Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*—Seen by a few people, at The Meadows.

Blackpoll Warbler *Setophaga striata*—A single individual appeared in a treetop, briefly, at the Morning Watch Platform.

Palm Warbler *Setophaga palmarum*—We picked up singles or small groups of these birds by searching for their wagging tails, mostly in the dunes.

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata*—Hyperabundant at every single site, including small groups idly flying over the marsh sites and many individuals dropping into the dunes after coming in off the ocean at first light.

CARDINAL, GROSBEAKS, AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (2)

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*—Picked up in small numbers at a number of forested sites.

Dickcissel *Spiza americana*—HO—A single individual flew overhead on the first morning at the beach across from the hotel, giving its distinctive rattle-like nocturnal flight call.

Mammals (2 species)

Eastern Gray Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*—Recorded at a few sites in Cape May.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*—Seen on all of our boat trips, and several people managed photos of them.