

# Cape May Birding & Nature | Trip Report

October 14 – 21, 2018 | Written by Dan Donaldson & Rick Weiman



**With Guides Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman and participants Michael, Rita, Karen, Meg, Jordon, Linda, Schuyler, Glenn, Ilanya, Richard, and Nancy**



## **Sunday, Oct. 14 | Arrival in Philadelphia | Travel to Cape May, NJ**

All our flying travelers arrived safely in Philadelphia to partly sunny skies, and were met by trip leaders, Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman. All luggage and participants accounted for, we departed the airport at 2:30 p.m., and drove directly to Cape May, New Jersey, and the Sea Crest Inn, our hotel for the duration of the trip. Here we settled in at the hotel and met up with the other participants that drove to Cape May. Sunset comes early on the east coast this time of year, and at 5:45 p.m. we loaded up and drove to Sunset Point, to watch the sunset (of course) before heading out for our first dinner in Cape May. Clouds obscured our first try at Sunset Point, but we planned to try all week. While at the point, we observed a couple of gull species, Common and Caspian terns and, our first Red-tailed Hawk of the trip. We then drove back through Cape May Harbor to the north side of the harbor to dine at the Harbor View restaurant. It's a little out of town, and a little less busy, but

it offered great night views of the marinas and Cape May Harbor. Harbor View offered a good seafood menu, including their famous She-crab soup. After an evening of making new friends and a great meal, we returned to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

## **Monday, Oct. 15 | Orientation Day**

Our first full day in Cape May and we awoke to light rain, however it had stopped by the time we were finished with breakfast. Today was orientation day. We familiarized ourselves with the island and the local birding locations that we would be frequenting during the week ahead.

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 the once overrun backyard into a very nice birding location. Here we observed our first warblers of the trip, Black-throated Blue, and Yellow-rumped, along with nice movements of the migrating American Robins, working the woodlots on their way south. We then visited Cape May Point State Park, the location of the famous hawk watch platform. Many of today's top birders, authors, and researchers have spent countless hours there as interns and seasonal bird counters. The morning was wet and overcast, which wasn't ideal hawk watching conditions, but we did get good looks at a Peregrine Falcon working the meadow. We also got good looks at the waterfowl in the pond that included Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American and Eurasian Wigeons, Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Great blue Herons, and Great and Snowy Egrets. We were also fortunate to have great looks at a very cooperative Dickcissel, a very good bird for this trip, that returned multiple times to feed, with White-throated, and House sparrows at the base of the platform.

After lunch at Bela Vida Café, we searched the Cape May Meadows, a Nature Conservancy-owned dune restoration project that offers great birding opportunities in freshwater wetlands, and over a mile of wild beach. Here, thanks to Rick's connections, we met Barbara Brummer, the New Jersey State Director of The Nature Conservancy. Barbara gave







our group a great introduction to the Meadows property and reviewed the massive restoration project, that converted the property to an overgrown field, full of invasive plants and feral cats, to a thriving wetland and freshwater dune complex, that now provides habitats for nesting Oyster Catchers and other shorebirds. Our walk around the meadow loop took us over the dunes and to the beach and back. The inshore wetlands produced a wide variety of waders and waterfowl, including Gadwalls, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintails, and several American black Ducks, that give us great diagnostic looks when compared to the many nearby Mallards.

From atop the restored dunes, with its many rows of planted Seaside Goldenrod, Sea Oats, and other native grasses, we were able to view the ocean where we are able to identify many flocks of Black Scoters with smaller flocks of White-winged Scoters. In the distance we were able to identify several Parasitic Jaegers, chasing down Forster's Terns and Laughing Gulls, until they dropped their recently caught fish.

We returned to the Sea Crest Inn to freshen up for dinner. We made a trip down to Sunset Point and caught Royal Terns and Black Skimmers working the nearshore waves as they flew out of the Delaware Bay to roost for the evening, perhaps on the secluded dunes at the Meadows. We caught a partial sunset beyond the sunken concrete ship and headed to Lucky Bones in Cape May for dinner. At dinner we looked at the weather forecast and due to expected northwest winds, we decided to change our schedule to visit the Morning Watch, and delay our back-bay boat trip to Wednesday.

## **Tuesday, Oct. 16 | Higbee Beach, Cape May State Park & Stone Harbor Beach**

We started the day 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. After sunrise, these migrating birds will turn north (toward shore) and in Cape May, they come ashore at Higbee Beach's 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.

After a quick coffee and snack trip at the Wawa convenient store, we arrived to grab our spots on the observation platform just before sunrise, and we were joined by a couple of other birders that had climbed to





the top of a nearby dredging spoils pile, that affords clear views of the entire area. The birding was fairly light but we did manage very good looks at Golden-crowned Kinglets, Field and Song sparrows, a couple flyover Common Loons, and wonderful looks at perhaps the most cooperative Yellow-billed Cuckoo ever, which stayed near the observation platform moving from bush to bush, often stopping to spread its wings in the sun. It must have been a cold night over the water.

After lunch at the Ocean View Restaurant, we headed north to the bird portions of New Jersey's 200,000+ acres of salt marshes. Noodling our way from Cape May to Stone Harbor, our first stop was Two-Mile Landing, a site of a small marina and restaurant, that is surrounded by saltmarsh. This also happened to be the local hotspot for Sharptailed, and Seaside Sparrows. The ocean winds were strong and the

sparrows eluded us this stop, (Spoiler Alert! We dipped on these two species for the trip after multiple attempts at this location), but the birding here was still very good and a few of the group were able to get a quick glance at a flushed Clapper Rail, and most of us were able to hear Clappers calling in the distance over the wind. Other birds that were easily seen were Great Black-backed Gulls, Boat-tailed Grackles, over 100 Brant, Forster's Terns, a busy Kingfisher, and 3 separate Peregrine Falcons, that worked the flats as they passed through.

Back in the van, we continued on Ocean Drive through the marshes to Nummy Island. In the many tide pools and channels along the road, we found a fairly large pool with conspicuous shorebird activity. This was one of the times that the more you look, the more you see and our persistence was rewarded with Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers, Greater Yellowlegs, Caspian Tern, Great and Snowy Egrets, Ruddy Turnstone, and a group of 18 Red Knots huddled together in an island clump of Saltmarsh Cordgrass.

Moving on, we arrived at Stone Harbor late in the afternoon. Walking through the well vegetated dunes to get to the ocean and beach, we found hundreds of Monarch butterflies avoiding the winds by clinging to the thick







patches of Seaside Goldenrod that grow on the back side of the dunes. Cresting the last dune, we saw that the tide was out and we had a ¼ mile beach flat to walk and bird. Scanning the front of the dunes we found a Peregrine Falcon sitting on a fencepost in the distance, which gave us great scope views. Along the Atlantic, the shorebirds and gulls worked the outgoing surf. After 30 minutes of walking and birding, we checked off 200+ Sanderlings, 20 Great Black-backed Gulls, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Great Egrets, and Song and White-crowned Sparrows. Our birding was done for the day and we head back to the Sea Crest Inn and freshened up for dinner at the Red Brick Ale House in North Cape May.

### **Wednesday, Oct. 17 | Back Bay Salt Marsh birding by boat**

We started the day with a pre-breakfast beach walk. We ended up at the Sunset Pavilion on the west side of town. Here there was a broad cove and wide beaches that offered shelter for birds that like to spend the night on the beach. We didn't have a great amount of time but we did get good views of a cooperative Lesser Black-backed Gull, some Dunlin, and were treated to a squadron of Black Skimmers that set down in front of us after their morning feeding. We had breakfast at the Ocean View Restaurant, and headed to Miss Chris Marina, to board the Osprey for our back-bay salt marsh boat trip. The Osprey is a large enclosed pontoon boat with an on-board naturalist, and a very birdy captain. We had timed the tides perfectly, and the dropping high tide allowed our boat to motor through channels and creeks that would be impossible at low tide. This enabled us to take a little longer trip and make our way to large exposed newly mudflats in areas that are only observable by boat



Departing the marina, we headed to the mouth of the Cape May Harbor. Passing the Cape May Coast Guard Station, we were reminded that two of our participants, Tom and Linda Lightfoot, spent several years living here while Tom served at this very station during his younger days. The mouth of the harbor is protected by two parallel rock walls, which serve as resting places for hundreds of birds during high tide. Here we got our first good looks at American Oystercatchers, and nice closeup views of many of





the shorebirds we've been seeing primarily through scopes, such as Red Knots, Sanderlings, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers, and a variety of gulls, including good numbers of Great Black-backed.

Motoring on from the inlet, we headed across the open waters of the bay to the salt marshes nearer shore. In the bay we observed an isolated pair of Ruddy Ducks, that allowed us to pass by without flushing. Continuing on to the mudflats, we found a gathering (aka. a sedge, siege, or scattering) of over 50 Black-crowned Night-herons on a sandbar of a creek outlet. Careful scanning produced a single juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-heron, a first for the trip. Once in the tidal creeks and broader channels of the draining marsh, we easily saw several rafts of over 500 Brant. The mudflats that have shorebirds are covered in shorebirds. Dunlin, well over 1000, are the most prevalent, and we managed great looks at more American Oystercatchers, Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Red knots, Short-billed Dowitchers, and Greater Yellowlegs. Gulls were also present on the flats and watched as Laughing, Herring, and Great Black-backed gulls competed with the shorebirds for marine worms, fiddler crabs, and other marine morsels.

We turned around before the tide gets too low. The creeks, now well in their banks have concentrated the Great blue Herons, and Great and Snowy egrets. Caspian and Royal terns were also working the creeks, diving into the exposed schools of bait fish. A reliable flock (Charm) of Purple Finches had been frequenting a nearby island and we were successful in locating them. Retracing our path back to Miss Chris Marina, we passed under the bridge for 2 miles, landing where a Peregrine Falcon had claimed a territory and had a successful nest last season.

We arrived back at the marina after a productive morning on the boat and we had lunch at the doc-side takeout windows at the Lobster House restaurant. This is how the locals do it. Great seafood in paper boxes and plates, a favorite beverage, picnic tables, sitting in the sun amongst the docked fishing fleet, whilst Fish Crows kept an eye on us from the rigging of the boats.

Today was a big day on the water, and we decided to take the afternoon off at the hotel to relax and catch up. Some of the group opted to bird a little around the Cape May State Park and Northwood Center. We gathered up at 6:00 p.m., and headed to North Cape May again, this time at the 5 West restaurant for dinner, drinks, bird lists, and comradery.



## Thursday, Oct. 18 | Lewes Ferry Crossing to Delaware, Cape Henlopen State Park & Prime Hook NWR



The morning started at 6:00 a.m., grabbing a quick Wawa breakfast and catching the Lewes Ferry to cross the Delaware Bay, to the state of Delaware. We used the ferry as a pelagic trip across the Delaware Bay to Cape Henlopen State Park, and 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 is just across the Bay from Cape May, but its landscape is conspicuously different. With high sand dune hills, hundreds of feet high, covered in Yellow Pines, and Eastern Red Cedars, it provided us with a completely different birding habitat and perhaps the cutest bird of our trip, the Brown-headed Nuthatch. We worked the patchwork of pines, searching for quite a while, but eventually we heard their conspicuous calls that sound exactly like a rubber duckie bath toy. We spent nearly 20 minutes watching and listening to a small flock, or Jar, of the nuthatches, that attracted Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets that came in very close to the group. We hiked the paved trails through the barrens and up to the top of the highest dune in the area. the location of Fort Miles Historical Area that offers commanding views of the entrance of the Delaware Bay. With our remaining time at Cape Henlopen State, we covered the bay, forests, and dunes and saw Snow Geese (including two



blues), Wood Duck, Horned Grebe, Peregrine Falcon, Carolina Chickadee, Brown Thrasher, White-throated Sparrow, and Northern Cardinals.

A quick visit to the Gordon Pond area of the park, produced awesome comparison looks at Lesser and Greater Yellow-legs, as they fed close to our trail. Along with some peep species, we got good looks at a Northern Harrier



working the grass flats around the pond, Snowy Egrets and Eastern Phoebe, and an early Dark-eyed Junco. We made a quick stop at the visitor center on our way out, where we quickly picked up a bunch of our regulars. We also picked up nice additions to our list: Northern Mockingbird, Tufted Titmouse, Brown Creeper, Purple Finch, and a very cooperative Cape May Warbler.

We returned to the park in the late afternoon to visit the local hawk watch tower for looks at Bald Eagles, Black and Turkey Vultures, and Red-tailed Hawks, that fly the thermals created by the warming lands near the bay. We headed into the historical town of Lewes, to have lunch at the guide's-favorite Nectar Café, where we had one of the best lunches of the trip. After lunch, we drove to Prime Hook NWR for some waterfowl watching.

Prime Hook NWR is a 10,000-acre wetland unit on the Delaware Bay, that is under restoration to once again, allowing free flowing bay water into the previously enclosed wetland units. As we were limited on time due to the ferry schedule, we decided to walk the short loop trail at the visitor center, and a quick out and back to an area that was holding wading birds. After a short walk through upland forest and field habitats, we found Swamp, Field, Savannah and White-Throated Sparrows, and continued to walk the boardwalk trail along one of the large impoundments. Here we were greeted with a large flock of Northern Shovelers, and a small stream channel that held 30 or so Great Egrets. Also seen were Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and flocks of Forster's Terns that worked the open water of the wetland units, along with a couple Northern Harriers.

The Lewes Ferry dock is located very close to Cape Henlopen State Park, so with about 30 mins to spare we visited the Cape Henlopen hawk watch platform, in hopes of seeing some raptors before we headed back to Cape May. A Redtail, a Bald Eagle, and some Turkey Vultures were all we could see in our allotted time. Back on the Lewes Ferry to Cape May, we again took advantage of the ride and got in some pelagic birding. No new birds for the return crossing, but additional looks at Northern Gannets and the occasional Parasitic Jaeger is always a good thing. Returning to Cape May a bit tired, and a little late for going out to dinner, we decided to order pizza and we converted Dan's large hotel room into our own enjoyable pizza buffet.

## **Friday, Oct. 19 | The Day! – Birding with author, Richard Crossley**

Today was our first day participating in the Cape May Birding Festival. Our first adventure was an early morning trip with Richard Crossley, on a trolley that visited several of Richard's local patches around Cape May. Richard is now a resident of Cape May. We plan to visit several of the places we've already birded, but to experience them with Richard is a treat!





This trip was scheduled long ago, but we were lucky enough to have it take place on “The Day”. The day when the flying conditions the night before were perfect for passerines, when the morning winds were right, and when the skies were cool and clear. There are only 2-3 “Days” during fall migration in Cape May. We boarded our trolley with Richard and head south to our first stop, Cape May Point State Park.



Within the first five minutes at this stop, we knew we were in for a great experience. With the morning sun low, on the horizon of clear blue skies, we exited the trolley and headed up onto one of the dunes that afforded us views of both the ocean, and the interior wetlands of the park. We were immediately greeted with flock after flock of mostly Yellow-rumped warblers. Waves after waves would come in off the ocean and fly down the shoreline, right over top of our heads. With our best efforts to count the warblers by naked eye, there were easily over 2000 birds (conservative estimate) in roughly the hour we were there. The rolling waves of warblers would flow over us with many of the birds in the front dropping into nearby vegetation and fences, stopping for a quick rest or insect, then lifting off again to join the stream of birds flying overhead. We were also able to see flocks of Cedar Waxwings, mixed flocks of Blackbirds, and the ever-present strings of Blue Jays. Richard spent quite a bit of time teaching us how to identify species by flock and flying patterns, and how to notice birds within the flock that are different or out of place. It was also a good day over the ocean, and we witnessed stream after stream of Black Scoters. I quit counting after 1500.

After an hour of being showered by Yellow-rumps, we were back on the trolley and headed to the Sunset Beach area, specifically an old industrial site called the Magnesite Plant, which is soon to be another protected natural area. This area is largely covered in concrete and asphalt, but Eastern red Cedars have colonized the area and it's a unique habitat of 6-10 foot evergreens spaced over several acres. These trees offer great perches and here we found more Yellow-billed Cuckoos, American Kestrels, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, our first Broad-winged Hawk of the trip, and around two-hundred flyby scoters, that were shortcutting over the peninsula to reach the Delaware Bay.

Back in the trolley, we headed to The Beanery, a locally preserved farm that allows birding. Here we walked the paths between fields in search of sparrows and other small passerines. The birding is light, but the diversity was good. We found Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwings, Song and Swamp Sparrows, Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Purple Finch, Turkey and Black vultures, Carolina Wren, and a Veery that was roosting in the top of a cottonwood tree.

With our morning trip complete, we broke for lunch at Belle's Diner. Still trying to get the Nelson's and Seaside sparrows, we headed back to Two-mile Landing and dipped again on the sparrows, but picked up American Black Duck, and a large flock of 150 Brant feeding nearby. We returned to the Cape May Bird Festival and toured the vendor exhibits. All the birding support, optics companies, and organizations were there. Many of us tried out the new equipment, shopped for clothing, and a few of us ended up with new optics. With this, we called it a day and headed back to the hotel for an hour rest before our big dinner at the famous Lobster House Restaurant. We planned to attend a keynote on Saturday, so we chose to dine big tonight.



## **Saturday, Oct. 20 | Local birding, Avalon Seawatch & Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge**

Today was our last day of birding and we had two important areas left to bird. Avalon Seawatch in Avalon, New Jersey, and Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, near Atlantic City. With an early breakfast under our belts, we started our birding with another attempt at the sparrows at Two-mile Landing. With no luck on the sparrows, we did find ourselves surrounded by a migrating flock of 2500+ Tree Swallows, swirling their way south along the tops of the maritime scrub/shrub habitat, looking for whatever flying insects they could find to fuel their migration to South America.

We then headed north, to visit the Avalon Seawall Seabird counting station, and the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, about 60 miles up the coast from Cape May.

The Seawatch is located in the coastal town of Avalon, which sits on a 5-mile bump out into the Atlantic, that brings southerly migrating seabirds very close to shore. The Cape May Bird Observatory has been running a fall seabird count there for the last 20 years, counting nearly 800,000 birds per year. Upon arrival at Seawatch, we were greeted by several pods of Bottle-nosed Dolphins that presumably were also working their way along the coast and get pushed close to shore just as the migrating birds do. After spending about a half an hour here we tallied several new species for the trip, Common Loon, Red-throated Loon, and 500 more Black Scoters to our lists. On the break walls and nearby beach, we were able to see Royal and Forster's Terns, Black-bellied Plovers, many Sanderlings, a Ruddy Turnstone, and a single Semipalmated Sandpiper.

We grabbed a quick lunch at Brian's Waffle House and headed to Forsythe NWR. Crossing the inner coastal waterway from Avalon, there is a small island that houses The Wetland Institute, a small nature center and aquarium that specializes in New Jersey's salt marsh habitats. We stopped here for a reported Little blue Heron, a white juvenile, which Jim from our group located. A few more shore bird observations and we were back in our vans and driving to Forsythe NWR. Once there our first were two small freshwater ponds near the entrance of the driving tour. There's a small observation tower that affords good views of the area. Here we quickly saw a Tricolored Heron, Great blue Herons, and searched for Clapper Rails that frequent the ponds during high tides.



We began our 5-mile driving tour around the many wetland units that makeup the refuge. We arrived at the tail end of high tide and the wetlands were full of shorebirds, thousands of shorebirds. There were several Peregrine





Falcons that kept the shorebirds moving. We estimated we saw between 3-5 thousand Dunlin, Sanderlings, and other peeps in the waves of alternating white and brown, as they eluded the Peregrines trying to bust up the flocks, attempting to isolate a single bird. We were fortunate in finding 2 Glossy Ibis we scoped and photographed many times. A single American Avocet was located sleeping on a mudflat. After about 15 minutes of observation, it finally woke up and gave the entire group good looks.

We then had a group decision to make. It was 3:00 p.m. and we had a keynote presentation to attend. The birding had

been pretty wonderful, and we had two vans with us, so those that wanted to stay could stay back with the second van, and those that wanted to hear the keynote presentation could head back. After a secret ballot, nobody wanted to leave so we stayed until late in the afternoon. All in all, we tallied 16 species of waterfowl, 14 species of water birds with the Avocet, Tri-Colored, and Glossy Ibis being our prized birds. We also saw, Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls, Merlins, Northern Harriers, Marsh and Carolina Wrens, a Gray Catbird, White-throated and White-crowned, Nelson's, and Savannah (40) Sparrows. It was a great day at the refuge.

We arrived back in Cape May early evening time. We decided that it was too late to go to a full-service restaurant, so we opted for another pizza and beverage night at the hotel. Jeff and Eileen offered their very large suite for the party. Other than the Lobster House, I'd have to say we had the most fun at our two pizza nights at the hotel. Well fed and tired from our long day outdoors, we turned in early and prepared for our trip back to the airport in the morning.

## Sunday, Oct. 21 | Departure Day

The last breakfast is always a bit melancholy. We were tired, but we made new friends, shared birds and experiences, and certainly laughed a lot. This was a pretty tight group and we will miss each other. We enjoyed one last breakfast together, sharing our contact information and saying goodbye to those that weren't going to the airport. Our van was already loaded, and we departed for Philadelphia Intl.

### Photo Credits:

Beach sunset, Dan Donaldson (DD); Double-crested Cormorants, Richard Voelker (RV); Fiddler Crab, RV; Dickcissel, Janey Mersey (JM); Yellow Warbler, RV; Birding the meadows, RV; Cross Dunes, DD; Hawk Watch Tower, RV; Greater Yellowlegs, RV; Yellow-billed Cuckoo, RV; Black Skimmer, RV; American Wigeon (male), RV; Atlantic City Saltmarsh, RV; Brant Geese, RV; American Oystercatcher, RV; American Wigeon, RV; Pine Barrens, DD; Footsteps to the bay, DD; Tree Swallows on the fence, RV; Swarm of Tree Swallows, RV; Scoping at Foresythe National Wildlife Refuge, DD; Foresythe NWR Tailgate, DD; Cross Wetlands observation, DD.