

Cape May Fall Migration | Trip Report | Oct. 14-21, 2018 | by Dan Donaldson & Rick Weiman



With guides Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman, and participants David, Dick, Eileen, James, Janet, Jeff, Kenneth, Linda, Miriam, Tom, and Vivian.



Sun., Oct. 14

Arrival in Philadelphia | To the Cape!

Our flying travelers arrived safely in Philadelphia to partly sunny skies and were met by trip leaders Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman. We settled in at the hotel and met up with our participants that drove independently to Cape May. Sunset comes early on the east coast this time of year and at 5:45 we load up and drive 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'll try all week. While at the point to observe a couple gull species, see Common and Caspian terns and our first Red-tailed hawk of the trip. We then drive back through Cape May Harbor to north side of the harbor to dine at the Harbor View restaurant. Harbor View offers a good seafood menu, including their famous She-crab soup. After an evening of making new friends and a great meal we return to the hotel and a good night's sleep.

Mon., Oct. 15

Orientation | Birding Cape May

It's our first full day in Cape May and we awoke to light rain, but it had stopped by the time we were finished with breakfast. Today was orientation day, and we use this day to familiarize ourselves with the island and the local birding locations we'll be frequenting in the week ahead. First stop, the Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO) headquarters for the bird-news of the day and the mandatory visit to the well-appointed giftshop. After our visit



inside CMBO we bird the small woodlot of the CMBO offices. Many habitat enhancements have turned this once overrun backyard into a very nice birding location. Here we observe our first warblers of the trip, Black-throated Blue and Yellow-rumped, along with nice movement of 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 spent countless hours here as interns and seasonal bird counters. This morning, being wet and overcast, wasn't ideal hawk watching conditions, but we did get good looks at a Peregrine Falcon working the meadow and 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 search explore the Cape May Meadows, a Nature Conservancy-owned dune restoration project that offers great birding opportunities in freshwater wetlands and over a mile of now wild beach. Here, thanks to Rick's connections, we meet 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 stray 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 takes us over the dunes and to the beach and back. The inshore wetlands produce 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 can identify many flocks of Black Scoters with smaller flocks of White-winged scoters. In the distance we could identify several Parasitic Jaegers chasing down Foster's Terns and Laughing Gulls until they drop their recently caught fish. We return to the Sea Crest Inn to freshen up for dinner. We make a trip down to Sunset Point and, catch Royal Terns and Black Skimmers working the nearshore waves as they flyout of the Delaware Bay to roost for the evening, perhaps on the secluded dunes at the Meadows. We catch a partial sunset beyond the sunken Concrete Ship and head to Lucky Bones in Cape May for dinner. At dinner we look at the weather forecast and due to expected northwest winds, we decide to change our schedule to visit the Morning Watch tomorrow and delay our back-bay boat trip to Wednesday.



Tues., Oct. 16 Higbee Beach | Cape May State Park | Stone Harbor Beach

Today was an early start and we're 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 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. The birding was fairly light this morning, 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 long cold night over the water.

After lunch at the Ocean View Restaurant, we head 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 is Two-Mile Landing, a site of a small marina and restaurant, that is surrounded by saltmarsh. This also happens to be the local hotspot for sharptailed, and seaside sparrows. The ocean winds are strong today 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 here, as 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 here were Great Black-backed Gulls, Boat-tailed Grackles, over 100 Brant, great looks at resting Forster's Terns, a busy Kingfisher, and 3 separate Peregrine Falcons that worked the flats as they passed through. Back in the van, we continue driving slowly along Ocean Drive through the marshes to Nummy Island. Here in the many tide pools and channels along the road we find a large tidal pond 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 Redknots huddled together in an island clump of Saltmarsh Cordgrass.

Moving on, we arrive at Stone Harbor late in the afternoon. Walking through the well vegetated dunes to get to the ocean and beach, we find 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 see that the tide is out and we have a ¼ mile beach flat to walk and bird. Scanning the front of the dunes we find a Peregrine Falcon sitting on a fencepost in the distance, which gives us great scope views. Along the Atlantic, the shorebirds and gulls work the outgoing surf. After 30 minutes of walking and birding we check off 200+ Sanderlings, 20 Great Black-backed gulls, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Great Egrets, and Song and White-crowned Sparrows. Our birding is done for the day, and we head back to the Sea Crest Inn and freshen up for our dinner at the Red Brick Ale House in North Cape May.

Wed., Oct. 17 Back Bay Salt Marsh | Birding by Boat

Early risers start our day with a pre-breakfast beach walk. We end up at the Sunset Pavilion on the west side of town. Here there is a broad cove and wide beaches that offer shelter birds that like to spend the night on the beach. We don't have a great amount of time, but we do get good views of a cooperative Lesser Black-backed Gull, some Dunlin, and are treated to a squadron of Black Skimmers that set down in front of us after their morning feeding. We have breakfast at the Ocean View Restaurant and head 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. Today we have timed the tides perfectly and the dropping high tide allows our boat to motor through channels and creeks that would otherwise be impassible. This enables us to take a little longer trip and make our way to large exposed newly mudflats in areas that are only observable by boat (this boat). Departing the marina, we head to the mouth of the Cape May Harbor. Passing the Cape May Coast Guard Station, we are reminded that two of our participants, Tom and Linda Lightfoot, spent several years living here while Tom served at this very station his younger days. The mouth the harbor is protected by two parallel rock walls which serve as resting places for hundreds of birds during high tide. Here we get our first good looks at American Oyster Catchers 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 head across the open waters of the bay to the salt marshes nearer shore. In the bay we observe a lone pair Ruddy Ducks that allow us to pass by without flushing. Continuing on to the mudflats we find a gathering (aka. a sedge, siege, or scattering) of over 50 Black-crowned Night-herons on a sandbar of a creek outlet. Careful scanning produces a single juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-heron, a first for these trips. Once in the tidal creeks and broader channels of the draining marsh, we easily see 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



Adult and Young Skimmers



manage great looks at more American Oyster Catchers, Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Redknots, Short-billed Dowitchers, and Greater Yellowlegs. Gulls are also present on the flats and watch as Laughing, Herring, and Great Black-backed gulls compete with the shorebirds for marine worms, fiddler crabs and other marine morsels.

We turn 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 are also working the creeks, diving into the now exposed schools of bait fish. A reliable flock (Charm) of Purple Finches have been frequenting a nearby island and we are successful in located them. Retracing our patch back to Miss Chris Marina, we pass under the bridge for 2-mile landing where a Peregrine Falcon has claimed a territory and had a successful nest this last season. Arriving back at the marina after a productive morning on the boat we 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 with Fish Crows keeping an eye us from the rigging of the boats. Today was a big day on the water, and we decide 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 gather up at 6:00 and head to North Cape May again, this time at the 5 West restaurant for dinner, drinks, bird lists, and comradery.

Thurs., Oct. 18 Lewes Ferry Crossing | Cape Henlopen State Park

This morning we're off at an early 6:00am to grab a quick WaWa breakfast and catch the Lewes Ferry to cross the Delaware Bay to the state of Delaware. We use 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 spot our first Northern Gannets of the trip and get wonderful looks at Parasitic Jaegers. Once on the mainland of Delaware, we head directly to Cape Henlopen State Park. This wonderful park is just across the Bay from Cape May, but it's landscape is conspicuously different. With high sand dune hills, hundreds of feet high, covered in Yellow Southern Pines, and Eastern Red Cedars, it provides us with a completely different birding habitat and perhaps the cutest bird of our trip. The Brown-headed Nuthatch. We work the patchwork of pines searching for quite a while but eventually we hear their conspicuous calls that sound exactly like a rubber duckie bath toy. We spend nearly 20 mins just watching and listening to a small flock (or Jar) of these nuthatches that attracted Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets that came in very close to the group. Hiking the paved trails, through the barrens and up to the top of the highest dune in the area and the location of Fort Miles Historical Area that offers commanding views of the entrance of the Delaware Bay. Our remaining time at Cape Henlopen State we cover the bay, forests and dunes



and see, 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 produces awesome comparison looks at Lesser and Greater Yellow-legs as they feed close to our trail. Along with some misc-peep species, we get good looks at a Northern Harrier working the grass flats around the pond, Snowy Egrets and Eastern Phoebes, and an early Dark-eyed Junco. We make a quick stop at the visitor center on our way out where we quickly see a bunch of our regular trip birds, but we are also pickup nice additions to our list: Northern Mockingbird, Tufted Titmouse, Brown Creeper, a Purple Finch, and a very cooperative Cape May Warbler. We'll return to this 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. For now, we head into the historical town of Lewes to have lunch at the guide's-favorite Nectar Café where we have one of the best lunches of the trip. After lunch, drive 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 allow free flowing bay water into the previously enclosed wetland units. Limited on time due to the ferry schedule we opt 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 where we find Swamp, Field, Savannah and White-Throated Sparrows, we walk the boardwalk trail along one of the large impoundments. Here we are 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 work the open water of the wetland units and 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 visit the Cape Henlopen hawk watch platform in hopes of seeing some raptors before we head 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 take advantage of the ride and get 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 opt to order pizza in, and we convert Dan's large hotel room into our own enjoyable pizza buffet.



Fri., Oct. 19

Birding with author Richard Crossley

Today is our first day participating in the Cape May Birding Festival. Our first adventure is an early morning trip with Richard Crossley on a trolley that will visit several of Richard's local patches around Cape May. Richard is now a resident of Cape May. We'll visit several of the places we've already birded but experiencing them with Richard will be a treat. The Day! 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. We board 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 exit the trolley and head up onto one of the dunes that affords 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. Wave after wave would come in off the ocean and fly down the shoreline, right over top of our heads. Our best efforts to count the warblers by naked eye easily tallies over 2000 birds (conservative estimate) in the roughly an hour we were there. These 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 lift 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 migrating Blue Jays. Richard spent quite a bit of time teaching us how to identify species by flock and flight 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 Black Scoters. I quit counting after 1500.

After an hour of being showered by yellow rumps we're 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 busted up 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 find more Yellow-billed Cuckoos, American Kestrels, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned and Coopers hawks, our first Broad-winged Hawk of the trip, and a couple hundred flyby scoters that were shortcutting over this peninsula to reach the Delaware Bay. Back in the trolley, we head to The Beanery, a locally preserved farm that allows birding. Here we walk the paths between fields in search of sparrows and other small passerines. The birding is light, but the diversity is good. We find, 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. Our morning trip complete, we break for lunch at Belle's Diner. Still trying to get the Nelson's and Seaside sparrows we head back to Two-mile Landing and dip again on the sparrows but picked up American Black Duck and a large flock of 150 Brant feeding nearby. We return to the Cape May Bird Festival and tour 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 call it a day and head back to the hotel for an hour rest before our big dinner for the trip at the famous Lobster House Restaurant. We're going to attend a keynote speaker at the festival on Saturday, so we opt to have our formal trip wrap-up dinner tonight.

Sat., Oct. 20

Avalon Seawatch | Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge

Today is our last day of birding and we have 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 start our birding with another attempt at the sparrows at Two-mile Landing with no luck on the sparrows but 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 find to fuel their migration to South America. We're heading north today to visit the Avalon Seawall Seabird counting station and Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, about 60 miles up the coast from Cape May. The seawatch is in the coastal town of Avalon which sits on a 5mile 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 here for the last 20 years, counting nearly 800,000 birds per year.

Upon arrival at Seawatch, we are greeted by several pods of Bottle-nosed Dolphins that presumably are 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 with the local counters we tally several new species for the trip, Common Loon, Red-throated Loon, add 500 more Black Scoters to our lists. On the break walls and nearby beach, we could see Royal and Forster's terns, Black-bellied Plovers, many Sanderlings, a Ruddy Turnstone, and a single Semipalmated Sandpiper. We grab a quick lunch at Brian's Waffle House in Avalon and head north to the 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 stop here for a reported Little Blue Heron, a white juvenile, which Jim from our group soon located. A few more shore bird observations and we were back in our vans and driving to Forsythe NWR. Once there our first stop is two small freshwater ponds near the entrance of the driving tour. Here we quickly see a tri-colored heron, Great Blue Herons and search for Clapper



Rails that frequent the ponds during high tides. We begin our 5-mile driving tour around the many wetland units that makeup the refuge. We arrive at the tail end of high tide and the wetlands are full of shorebirds. There were several Peregrine Falcons that regularly worked the flats, keeping 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 elude 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 mins of observation, it finally woke up and gave the entire group good looks. We have a group decision to make. It's 3:00pm and we have a keynote presentation to attend. The birding has been wonderful and luckily, we have two vans with us, so those that want to stay can stay back with the second van and those that want to hear the keynote presentation can head back. After a secret ballot, nobody wanted to leave so we stayed until late in the afternoon. We arrive back in Cape may in early evening. Deciding that it was too late to go to a full-service restaurant, we opt for another pizza and beverage night at the hotel. Jeff and Eileen offer there 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 turn in early and prepare for our trip back to the airport in the morning.

Sun., Oct. 21 Departures

The last breakfast is always a bit melancholy. We're tired, but we've made new friends, shared birds and experiences, and certainly laughed a lot. This was a pretty tight group and we'll miss each other. We enjoyed one last breakfast together, share our contact information and say goodbye to those that aren't going to the airport.

Photo Credits: Dan Donaldson (Hugh Simmons -HS), Swallow Swarm (Janet Mersey - JM), Great Egret (HS), Birding the Meadows (Dan Donaldson - DD), Butterfly (DD), Yellow Warbler (DD), Dicksissell (JM), Beach Birds (DD), Hawk Watch tower (DD), American Oystercatchers (DD), Atlantic City Saltmarsh view (DD), Brant Geese (DD), Pine Barrens (DE), Black Skimmers (DD), Beach prints (DE), Tree Swallows (DD), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (DD), Swallow swarm (DD), Cormorants (DD), Turkey Trail (DD), Group Scope (DD), Monarchs (Rick Weiman)