

Cape May: Spring Migration | Trip Report

May 18-24, 2022 | by Rick Weiman



With guides Rick Weiman & Pat Lueders, and participants Andrea, Barbara, John, Kathleen, Lee, Marilyn, Nancy, Ronda, Thomas and Tracy



Wed., May 18

Arrivals

Welcome to Cape May! We met our group of six at the Philadelphia airport around 1:30 with Lee & Nancy and John & Kathleen driving directly to Cape May. After our arrival about 2 hours later at the oceanside Sea Crest Inn and a short rest we headed to the Cape May Point State Park, home of the famous Cape May Point lighthouse and hawk watch platform. A quick scan of the beach was not very birdy, but we did see multiple Laughing Gulls and an American Oystercatcher on a nest. From the hawk watch platform Pat educated the group on Common Tern and Snowy Egret identification tips and in the pond, we witnessed an incredibly large number of Mute Swans (20+) feeding and cavorting, a lone Pied-billed Grebe in full breeding plumage, and a hunting Osprey. The parking lot was swarming with Purple Martins who colony nest in the martin condos provided for them by the lighthouse. Our welcome to Cape May dinner was at Oyster Bay and several of us enjoyed fresh seafood such as



grouper, crab cakes, and local Delaware Bay oysters on the half-shell. We then visited the Acme across the street to buy some breakfast fare for the group for our early morning in-room breakfasts. As darkness was falling in the Acme parking lot hundreds of Chimney Swifts were chittering and circling the local church tower as they funneled into their night-time roost.

Thurs., May 19

Spring Watch | The Cove Pond | Osprey Boat Tour

The day started out a bit windy and rainy so instead of birding as planned we had an early breakfast at the Ocean View restaurant a few blocks from the hotel and then visited the NJ Audubon Spring Watch on Coral Ave in Cape May Point. The Cape May Spring Watch is a research initiative of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory and is the only spring all-species migration count on the East Coast. The count season began March 1 and continues through May 31. Observations are made from a dune-top platform that overlooks the mouth of Delaware Bay to the west, and the town of Cape May Point to the east. Each day, counters arrive in time to start monitoring at sunrise, with the observation period continuing for three to five hours depending on conditions and migration intensity. A wide array of birds, often in excess of 200 species, are recorded during the three-month window. During our hour plus there as the sun came out and the wind died down, we observed Black Skimmers, Brown Pelicans, Surf Scoters, Northern Gannets, Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins in the surf off the jetty, and we just missed several Mississippi Kites that popped up on the rare bird alert a half hour after we left.

After the spring watch we walked the pollinator gardens of the Cape May Bird Observatory where it was not very active migration-wise. We did see some locals such as Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Common Yellowthroat, and Indigo Bunting. Luckily before we left for our next stop, the Mississippi Kites we had missed earlier soared over the gardens. A quick visit to the Cove Pond on Mt. Vernon Ave. gave us Barn Swallows and Purple Martins feeding over the pond. Further up the path was a Delaware Bay beach viewing spot where we observed several endangered Least Terns and more Surf Scoters and a Brown Pelican flock. Walking back to the vans a Prairie Warbler and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo called from the dunes. We had time for a relaxing outdoor seafood lunch at the Harbor View restaurant on the water with a harbor view of course, before heading to the



Miss Chris marina to board the Osprey for our tour of the back-bay salt marshes and estuaries of Cape May with Captain Bob Lubberman. The Osprey is a large, enclosed pontoon boat, manned by a very birdy Captain Bob. We had timed the tides well, and the dropping high tide allowed our boat to make it 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. Birds were plentiful and provided close viewing opportunities. Leaving the inlet, we headed across the open waters of the bay to the salt marshes nearer shore. In the bay we observed a pair of Common Loons, one in full breeding plumage, several colorful Ruddy Turnstones, and 4 Red Knots on a sandbar along with other shorebirds like Dunlin and Semipalmated Plovers and Sandpipers, and multiple gulls. Ospreys in flight and on nests on man-made platforms and channel markers were plentiful, as were several dolphin sightings.

We ended up with 30 species of birds on the 3-hour tour including Bonaparte's Gull and Great-Black Backed Gull, and we passed the largest Laughing Gull nesting colony on the east coast, which also contained nesting Common and Forster's Terns. Retracing our path back to Miss Chris Marina, we observed additional species such as Black Skimmer, Black-bellied Plovers in breeding plumage, American Oystercatchers, and several Whimbrel and Willets. We headed back to the hotel for a break and then enjoyed a delicious outdoor dinner at Bella Vida where the food has a Costa Rican flair. We were joined for dinner by Conserve Wildlife of NJ (CWF) Senior Biologist Todd Pover who then came back to the Sea Crest Inn and gave an engaging presentation to our group on New Jersey's beach nesting birds and the work CWF and other conservation organizations do to conserve the fragile populations of Piping Plovers, Least Terns, Black Skimmers and American Oystercatchers. After Todd's presentation we completed our first species list of the trip and called it a night after our first exciting full day in Cape May.

Fri., May 20

Belleplain State Forest | Spring Festival

An early start after breakfast in our rooms led us to Belleplain State Forest, consisting of more than 11,000 acres of pine-oak woods and Atlantic White Cedar swamps in Cape May and Cumberland counties. We drove the back roads with open van windows and side doors listening for calls of the resident breeding birds. Several Wood Thrushes singing their melodious song started us off followed by Ovenbirds (one later seen perched), Worm-eating Warblers, Acadian and Great-crested Flycatchers and Yellow-throated Warblers. The birds were hard to spot in the fully leafed out forest, but good looks were had of Black-and-white Warbler and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Near Sunset Road is a wet area with American White Cedar trees and here a Hooded Warbler called multiple times but would not show himself. We headed to the park office for a bathroom break and in the



parking, lot added more new calling birds including Eastern Wood-Pewee, Summer Tanager, and good looks at Eastern Phoebe. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were also zipping along the park's feeder station.

At the end of Jakes Landing Road is a salt marsh in the Dennis Creek WMA that ends at Dennis Creek. In this open habitat we finally got to see the birds well and there were some great looks at perched and singing Seaside Sparrow, Marsh Wrens, a flock of feeding Glossy Ibis and a pair of perched resident adult Bald Eagles. Clapper Rails were calling so close it seemed you could reach out and touch them, but these secretive birds would not share their hen-like looks with us. We left Jake's for the Cape May Bird Observatory's Center for Research where we had our first NJ Audubon spring festival program, "An Introduction to Shorebird Identification" presented by NJ Audubon's VP of Education Dale Rossetlet. The one-hour program was extremely helpful to all, with her tips on separating the often-confusing mixed flock shorebird species from each other by using body and bill size and feeding behavior as identification tools.

Then it was off to the local WaWa where we selected our lunches of salads and sandwiches to then visit the East Point Lighthouse and their picnic tables on the shore of Delaware Bay. Some more shorebirds, gulls, terns, along with Song Sparrows, Boat-tailed Grackles, and Gray Catbirds joined us for lunch. After lunch with we visited the nearby Heislerville Wildlife Management Area to put our new shorebird i.d. skills to the test. This WMA in SE Cumberland County consists of almost 4,000 acres of diked salt-hay marshes, impoundments, tidal marshes, and pine-oak forest. Before too long our clients were separating Dunlin from Short-billed Dowitchers and Semipalmated Sandpipers like old pros. Back-bellied Plovers and Semipalmated Plovers were also present as well as a lone Great Blue Heron. We witnessed courtship displays by a pair of endangered Least Terns, as a fish was exchanged between the pair followed by mating. Pat pulled two White-rumped Sandpipers out of a large flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers and explained the field mark differences to the group. A large island of hundreds of roosting Double-crested Cormorants was also visible as we left the WMA.

After a tip by Naturalist Journey's guide Hugh Simmons, who also lives part time in Cape May, we skipped our scheduled trip to Cook's Beach and instead headed to Reeds Beach where horseshoe crabs had begun the million-year-old process of coming to the shores of Delaware Bay to lay their eggs in the sand. Several hundred crabs were visible, with males attached to the back of the larger females with a specialized claw to fertilize the eggs as they are laid and buried in the sand. It was too early in the egg-laying season (which is very water



temperature dependent) for many shorebirds to be present yet to feast on the fat-enriched eggs, but several patient Laughing Gulls were standing by for a snack. Hugh also alerted us that an Iceland Gull had been seen there earlier, and it was easy to spot and photograph with its almost all white plumage. Back to the hotel for a short break after an already full day of birding and then on to that night's spring festival presentation by Kathy Horn about her and her husband's journeys over the years to spot 100 bird species in all 50 states. It was an entertaining presentation filled with good tips on how they used the latest birding apps to help them accomplish their goal. We then had a late dinner at the unique and historic Menz restaurant in Rio Grande before turning in for the night and skipping the species list until tomorrow.

Sat., May 21

Beach Plum Farms | Wetlands Institute | Stone Harbor

A quick tour of the fields and vineyards at Willow Creek Winery allowed us to do our species list outside. We then we headed right next door to the beautiful setting of Beach Plum Farms for an outdoor breakfast on a 75°F sunny Saturday morning in Cape May. After breakfast we walked the trails of the farm and quickly had a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and many calling resident birds. The highlight was most definitely a male Indigo Bunting that all our group had good looks at and was a life bird for a few participants. We could not dawdle long here as we had an appointment at 10:00 with Barbara Brummer, State Director of the NJ Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and good friend of Rick.

We met Barbara at the TNC South Cape May Meadows preserve and before long had a perched and singing Yellow-breasted Chat that all of us got to see through the scope. We walked the loop trail of the preserve finding a Stilt Sandpiper along the way and many other shorebirds. In the coolness of the bird-blind (while we watched a Lesser Yellowlegs and some Dunlin feed) Barbara told us about the history of the massive restoration project of the preserve. It started after several large storms caused severe flooding in the early 90's and a diverse group of stakeholders, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, The Nature Conservancy, and the local governments, met to discuss a potential comprehensive ecological restoration project. By 1998, the USACE completed the feasibility study, funding was secured, and implementation was underway. During the first phase of the project nearly 1,400,000 cubic yards of sand were used to construct a 1-mile long, 18-ft tall sand dune and widen 2 miles of beach. During the second phase,



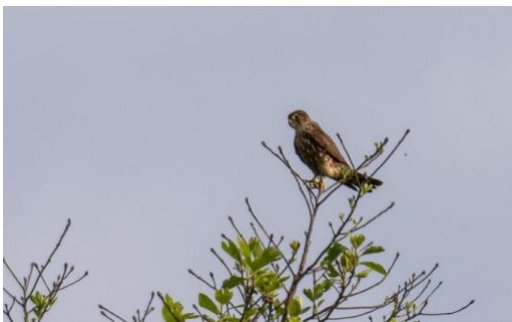
freshwater wetlands were restored, and drainage culverts were added to improve water flow, quality and draining — thereby increasing their ability to prevent flooding. The restoration of the beach, dune and wetland habitat also served to improve ecosystem functions and habitat quality. Examples include increased beach-nesting bird habitat, creation of resting and feeding areas for birds within the wetlands, construction of Piping Plover ponds behind the dune, and removal of Phragmites, an invasive reed which was limiting habitat for migratory birds. The project was completed in 2007 and restored nearly 460 acres of coastal habitats.

We thanked Barbara and departed and while the rest of interior NJ was setting 100-year-old records for 95°F heat we sat under the shady gazebo cooled by ocean breezes at the Cape May Point State Park and had a delicious picnic lunch from the West Side Market. Lee, Thomas, and Rick enjoyed their famous cheesesteaks while others dined on salads and deli sandwiches. Then it was off to Stone Harbor to visit the Wetlands Institute and walk their marsh trail and new boardwalk over the salt marsh. Some new birds observed were Tri-colored Heron and a very cooperative Green Heron. Lots of shore birds were also present including Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin and several Willets. Stephanie at the front desk there gave us an impromptu presentation of the Institute's mission to promote appreciation, understanding & stewardship of wetlands and coastal ecosystems through their programs in research, conservation, and education. Before leaving we shopped in their gift shop and donated to their fundraising efforts for all their good work protecting NJ's coastal wetlands and the species that depend on them. The weather was perfect for an outdoor dinner at a 40-year Cape May institution, Louisa's Café, a farm-to-table restaurant that partners with Beach Plum Farms. The fresh flounder and shrimp and scallops were of course delicious, as were their home-made desserts of Key Lime Pie and a Raspberry Crisp. After dinner we completed the species list in Rick's room and he gave a presentation he prepared for the trip on the complicated relationship between horseshoe crabs, migrating shorebirds, the local bay men who use the crabs for bait, and the medical industry who collects their blue blood for testing vaccines, all who rely heavily on this ancient species for different reasons.

Sun., May 22

Higbee Beach | Rea Farm | Pelagic Boat Trip

After breakfast in our rooms, we arrived early at Higbee Beach WMA hoping there had been a bit of migration over-night. The roughly 1,100-acre area offers a unique blend of several different habitats, including dune, forest, scrub-shrub and early successional fields. The NJ Endangered and Nongame Species Program, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, manages the fields and scrub-shrub areas for migrating



songbirds and raptors. The Cape May peninsula hosts one of the world's largest migrations each spring and fall as millions of birds stop at the peninsula seeking food, cover and water and Higbee Beach plays a vital role in the migration, providing migrants with a stopover site as they increase their fitness before continuing their sojourn north or south. With all that being said you still need the right weather pattern for migration, and we did not have it on Sunday morning, with warm south winds. We did see some local nesters and new birds for the trip such as male and female Blue Grosbeaks, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, more Indigo Buntings in beautiful sunlight, and a singing Swainson's Warbler. As we were heading back to the parking lot we met up with and shared a Blue Grosbeak with the NJ Audubon tour group and they in turn showed us a perched Merlin on the top of a tree who posed for us for over 5 minutes. We left Higbee Beach for a short drive to the Rea Farm, still called the Beanery by local birders as lima beans were once grown there. This birding area has some wet woods that occasionally have nesting Prothonotary Warblers. Unfortunately, they were not present or decided to be secretive that morning. We did however have wonderful looks at a Yellow-billed Cuckoo who we had heard call several times on the trip and now happily observed flying and perching. Four more colorful Indigo Buntings were also seen and heard.

After a filling brunch back at Bella Vida and a short break we headed to the marina to board the American Star, a large whale watching vessel that was the final NJ Audubon spring festival adventure for our group. We sat on the top deck with other spring festival registrants and left the Cape May inlet for the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The excursion was billed as a "trip to the rips" to visit the area where the ocean meets Delaware Bay and causes an up-welling of currents that attract pelagic birds to the bounty floating up from the sea floor. The sea was calm, and the sun was shining so it was a perfect day for a 3-hour tour (unlike Gilligan and the Skipper's journey). We soon had a lonely Harbor Seal swimming near the boat followed by several Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins. Close views were had of different gulls and terns previously seen as well as fishing Osprey. Then the star of the show appeared, a dark-morph Parasitic Jaeger gently bobbing close to the boat before flying off a



short distance and landing. Another one was seen further away as was a Northern Gannet and a Wilson's Storm Petrel. The boat passed our hotel and then Cape May Point (and a feeding Bald Eagle on the shore) and circled back through the canal to the dock, giving us all an interesting view of cape island by water. Dinner that night was at the Iccara Bistro where fresh seafood with an Italian flair was served. After dinner we completed our species list and headed to bed.

Mon., May 23

Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Ocean City Rookery

After breakfast in our rooms, we headed north on the Garden State Parkway to the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge protects more than 48,000 acres of southern New Jersey coastal habitats. More than 82% of the refuge is wetlands, of which 78% is salt marsh, interspersed with shallow coves and bays. The refuge's location in one of the Atlantic flyway's most active flight paths make it an important stopover in seasonal bird migration. A short walk in the wooded area by the parking lot gave us our only Eastern Bluebirds of the trip as well as Tree Swallows on nest boxes and a perched and singing Willow Flycatcher. We walked the boardwalk marsh trail and a Willet perched on the railing for all to see as a flock of 15 Glossy Ibis fed in the salt marsh near us. Several Marsh Wrens were singing their cheerful bubbly calls and nest building in the grass's underneath us and most of us got some nice looks at these active little birds. An adult Bald Eagle soared overhead being mobbed by 2 Fish Crows.

We then visited the freshwater Gull Pond where Thomas spotted a male Wood Duck perched in a tree above a nest box. Mute Swans and Mallards were in the pond but not much else. The 8-mile circular drive around the refuge was extremely birdy, with many of the shorebirds already seen present. Rick finally spotted a Clapper Rail walking across the mud flats after only hearing many on the trip. We had 4 more in view before the loop was complete. Other highlights were a Greater Yellowlegs spotted by Pat, Black Skimmers skimming alongside the vans in the canals next to the road, and super close Ruddy Turnstones in stunning breeding plumage. We left Forsythe and headed south back to Cape May but not before a visit to the Ocean City, NJ visitor's Center where there was an active heron rookery in the trees below the causeway and parking lot. The views there from the



railing are such that you are looking down at the rookery. It was an amazing spectacle with dozens of Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibis, White Ibis (now nesting in NJ!), and Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, all in the process of nest building or incubating their eggs, and all very visible. We learned that Great Egrets and Night-Herons have blue eggs. We stayed much longer than planned as it was hard to leave so we had a late outdoor seafood lunch in Wildwood at The Crab House near 2-mile landing and across the channel from the Laughing Gull nest colony. We birded the salt marsh near the restaurant after lunch and had another Clapper Rail sighting and an American Oystercatcher on a nest. Captain Bob on the Osprey boat cruised by us and we all waved him a loud “Hi Captain Bob” greeting. Since it was mid-afternoon most of the group decided to rest up before dinner, but Andrea went shopping with Pat and Rick took Thomas and Barbara back to the state park for a walk on the boardwalk trail. It was pretty quiet bird-wise but we did see some fuzzy white puff ball Mute Swan chicks with mom & dad keeping a watchful eye on us. Our farewell dinner was at Sapore Italiano, just a few blocks from the hotel and we then headed to Scoops around the corner for some fresh ice cream. The final species list was done in Rick’s room, and we all took turns recounting our favorite birds (Clapper Rail was the winner) and experiences from the trip. One of the big takeaways for this author was how impressed the clients were with the state of New Jersey, which of course I am very proud of being a life-long resident. They left with a whole new appreciation for its natural beauty and the size and scope of the protected wetlands and salt marshes we birded and boated in. Several of them mentioned how impressed they were with New Jersey's efforts to conserve so much habitat when other states are still losing their wetlands to development.

Tues., May 24

Homeward Bound

It was a rainy morning so after packing up the vans around 8:00 we enjoyed our last breakfast at the Ocean View restaurant down the block from hotel. After breakfast we said goodbye to our new friends Lee & Nancy and John & Katherine who were all driving home. We decided to take the scenic route back to the Philadelphia airport since we had plenty of time before flight # 1 so we did a side trip down Jake’s Landing Road in Dennisville. We drove slowly with the windows down in the forested section of the road and flushed a large raptor that flew ahead of the vans and perched. It was a Barred Owl! We drove slowly passed it as it stared back at us, and we all got excellent looks. Down at the salt marsh section we heard more Seaside Sparrows,

Marsh Wrens, and Clapper Rails and watched a pair of Ospreys bring nesting material to the top of the parking lot's port-a-john. Not the best place for a nest which these undoubtedly young birds would learn soon enough. Soon after it was fist bumps and good-byes at the airport and best wishes to hopefully see each other on another Naturalist Journeys tour soon.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Rick Weiman - RW), Black Skimmers, Lighthouse, Cape May Beach, Group Birding (Hugh Simmons - HS), Whimbrel (HS), Cape May Buildings, Bonaparte's Gull, Osprey, Horseshoe Crabs (HS), Gray Catbird, Great Blue Heron, Indigo Bunting (HS), Meadow (HS), Group birding (HS), Good Fun! (HD), Merlin (HS), Purple Martins (HS), Beach Time (RW), Wood Duck (HS), Song Sparrow (HS), Birding Group (HS), Indigo Bunting (HS), Ruddy Turnstone (HS), Snowy Egret (HS), Great Egret (HS), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (HS), Last Day's Lunch (RW)