

Cape May: Fall Migration | Trip Report

Oct. 12-18, 2021 | by Andy Jones



With guides Dan Donaldson and Andy Jones, and participants Amy, Bonnie, DJ, Henry, Lee Ann, Marni, Marti, Myrna, Nancy, Pam, and Tom.



Tues., Oct. 12

Arrivals | Making our way to Cape May

Our flying travelers arrived safely in Philadelphia and were met by trip leaders Dan Donaldson and Andy Jones. With all luggage and participants accounted for, we departed the airport in the late morning and drove directly to Cape May, New Jersey. Along the way, a small group of Wild Turkeys along the Garden State Parkway provided the first fun bird sighting of the trip. We rendezvoused with the travelers who had arrived by car, for a late lunch at The Lobster House in Cape May, with Laughing Gulls and Boat-tailed Grackles hounding us for dropped food. We then headed to Sea Crest Inn, our home base for the full trip. Along the way, we drove down



the beachfront road and stumbled across several thousand Tree Swallows feeding on myrtle berries on the dunes, a stunning site! Our first official birding event was a walk across the street to the beach, a site formally called the 2nd Avenue jetty & pavilion. Sunset comes early on the east coast this time of year, and we quickly moved on to Sunset Point on the west side of Cape May, facing the Delaware Bay, to watch the sunset, but we were stymied by cloudy conditions. A few Royal Terns and a couple of Merlins appeared before we headed to Lucky Bones for a delicious dinner. After an evening of making new friends and a great meal we return to the hotel and a good night's sleep.

Wed., Oct. 13 Exploring Classic Cape May Sites

We are lucky with the weather this year! Today, and most of the days of this week, are unseasonably warm, if maybe windier than we might like. We begin our exploration of the classic sites around Cape May with a leisurely walk along the beachfront by the hotel. At 7am, right after our group got together, we started spotting Sharp-shinned Hawks. All told, we saw 40 individuals leaving Cape May Meadows, dispersing east over the town. Several were very close overhead. We spent a fair amount of time sorting through the gulls; Cape May in October is home to a good diversity of common species, and we had ample opportunities to sort out the darker-backed species - Laughing, Lesser Black-backed, and Great Black-backed - among the abundant Herring and the handful of Ring-billeds. Several Great Black-backed were eating a small shark on the oceanfront. And a colossal group of around 500 gulls were viewed through scopes as they followed a shrimp boat out on the horizon. A real highlight was a flock of 15 White Ibis flying by, headed over Cape May Meadows (which we will visit later today) - this is very late in the season for this less-common species. Memorably, we even took some time to admire the beauty of a fall-plumaged singing European Starling. They're maligned, but they're beautiful!

Late morning was spent at the Cape May State Park, where we visited the hawk-watch at the foot of the lighthouse and birded around the dunes. Tree Swallows were in strong numbers, with perhaps 1,000 seen here. And we were lucky to run into Pete Dunne as we approached the hawk-watch! He said hello and welcomed us to the hawk-watch - which he brought into existence through his career at New Jersey Audubon. He charmed us by



reminding us that Cape May drains the Peregrine Falcons out of North America, and birds we were seeing may have come from as far northwest as Alaska. But the raptor highlight at the hawk-watch was not Peregrine Falcons... An Osprey passed overhead carrying a substantial fish. A moment later it flew back by us in the opposite direction, calling and flying faster. An adult Bald Eagle was in hot pursuit. The aerial dogfight ended as expected, with a disappointed Osprey and a well-fed Bald Eagle. Some of the group paused to admire the Seaside Goldenrods which were still in full bloom; one of them had a Wheel Bug eating a freshly caught Four-toothed Mason Wasp.

After lunch we enjoyed a long visit to Cape May Meadows State Park, a property owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, just to the east of the hawk-watch. We walked the trails through brackish water marshes and out to the beach, with a stop on the elevated lookout platform and time spent in their wooden blind. The platform gave us longer looks at ducks, including a hybrid Mallard x American Black Duck, and around 100 Green-winged Teal. And the ducks all flushed into the water as a young Peregrine Falcon flew by and then perched on an Eastern Red Cedar. It spent a long time there; we left the platform, and it was still perched there! Andy's distant Digi scoped photo revealed that it was banded. At the base of the platform, a few members of the group had brief encounters with rails, frustratingly short moments with Sora and Virginia Rail. But the bonanza was in the blind, where shorebirds were on display. White-rumped Sandpiper and Stilt Sandpiper were unexpected treats among the yellowlegs and peeps. Before dinner, we returned to Sunset Beach (a.k.a., Concrete Ship) to watch the sunset. Surface haze led to an imperceptible sunset, so we will have to wait until later in the week for a memorable sunset. Royal Terns continued their pattern of flying by in grounds of two to ten individuals, at dusk, heading towards an evening roost.

Thurs., Oct. 14 Two Mile Landing | Osprey Boat Trip

Morning began with an oceanwatch across the street from the hotel, where we continued to familiarize ourselves with the identification of the common gull species, which nocturnal flight calls rained down from overhead. The morning was cloudy, yet many Yellow-rumped Warblers were arriving into the dunes, and we



tallied around 500 individual warblers in just an hour of sorting out birds overhead. 1,000 Tree Swallows swirled by as well. Remarkably, as we turned to head back to the hotel, a harsh "brrrt" note overhead revealed a migrating Dickcissel, which is not a frequently detected bird here! Fortunately they have a distinctive nocturnal flight call. We then headed off the island, stopping at the local Wawa, a dependable convenience store that we visited a few times during the week! The Ojibwe name for Canada Goose is Wawa, so it's no surprise that the convenience store uses a goose silhouette as its logo. North of the canal, we spent the midmorning hours at Two Mile Landing and the adjacent Two Mile Unit of Cape May National Wildlife Refuge. The landing, despite mostly looking like a waterfront parking lot, was home to some very approachable shorebirds. Black-bellied Plover was a highlight, as was a flyby American Oystercatcher. Sorting through small brown birds in the marsh turned up a Lincoln's Sparrow, a locally rare migrant. The boardwalk at the Two Mile Unit turned up good looks at Belted Kingfisher, several Gray Catbirds, and another couple of hundred Yellow-rumped Warblers. We are going to see a lot of those warblers this week, aren't we?

After lunch, we boarded the Osprey, a small boat that held perhaps twenty-five birders, and gave us a great tour of Jarvis Sound (including its harbor and several marinas) as well as a swing by the jetties on the Atlantic Ocean side. Shorebirds were in abundance. On the wooden structures outside some of the marinas, shorebirds had tucked themselves into a narrow gap between the top railings, including several dozen Ruddy Turnstones. The jetties held good numbers of American Oystercatchers and a large flock of resting Sanderling. Intriguingly, an Eastern Towhee was flying alongside the jetty, possibly just coming in from the ocean after a long flight. The jetties also held five Great Cormorants, which are near the southern limit of their wintering range here. As we explored the marshes of Jarvis Sound, we focused on sparrows and waders. The captain had devised a great way to check for sparrows, by running the boat directly onto a low rise of mud beneath the marsh, temporarily flushing sparrows and encouraging them to perch for at least a few seconds. We had poor looks at a Seaside



Sparrow, and decent looks at a skulking Nelson's Sparrow using this technique. Several other sparrows were either Nelson's or Saltmarsh, but were not seen very well. Pushing the boat into shallow marshy areas also flushed an American Bittern that was seen well, and we had a close approach to many Black-crowned Night-Herons, and an uncommon Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. After the boat trip we returned to Two Mile Landing and saw two Spotted Sandpipers. Certainly not a rare bird, but they are usually far south of Cape May this late in the season. Finally, we wrapped up the day back at Sunset Beach, where Merlins put on a show at dusk. Did we see a nice sunset? Almost, but the Lewes-Cape May ferry happened to pass by the sunset at exactly the wrong moment!

Fri., Oct. 15 Higbee Morning Flight | Poverty Beach | Birding Festival

Actively migrating birds is an experience we never seem to tire of. It is lovely to have a close-up study of a warbler, but it is a stirring sight to see dozens of birds flying just above the treetops in active migration. At Higbee Beach, a combination of habitats on the bay side of Cape May (close to the west end of the canal), a wooden platform was built to get observers up to tree top level to experience migration in action. Cape May Bird Observatory also provides counters who record data on the species diversity and abundance of migrants. The numbers can be truly staggering across a full season. On this morning, we were stunned to get to enjoy extended views of two Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Bonnie spotted the first one in a scrappy tree on the dike, which emptied the observation platform as other tour groups ran to get a look at this bird. They are uncommon here, and typically move through much earlier in the fall. An hour later, another individual was seen from the platform, while the first one was still in view. Impressive! This was a good morning for Sharp-shinned Hawk migration, with 75 cruising past us, often with several sharpies in view at a time. Northern Flickers were on the move, also tallied at 75, with several birds finding the same tall dead limbs to be a great spot to rest in. An



enterprising Cooper's Hawk figured this out and hid in the trees nearby to take a stab at catching these tired flickers. It never worked, but led to some great views of, well, terrified woodpeckers. Other highlights here included Eastern Phoebe, Blue-headed Vireo, Cedar Waxwings, Blackpoll Warbler (just one!), and a few Palm Warblers. During the incredibly sunny midday hours, we wandered through a pretty spot called Poverty Beach, admiring Seaside Goldenrod in full bloom, while several large flocks of Double-crested Cormorants migrated high overhead. Part of the fun of being at Cape May at this time is being there to participate in the Cape May Fall Festival. We had tickets to hear Michael O'Brien speaking about the finer points of sparrow migration. This was a perfect talk for the group, as we were here at the peak of fall sparrow migration, and these Atlantic coastal sites with good habitat diversity are about the best opportunity in North America for large numbers and large diversity of sparrows.

In the afternoon we returned to Cape May Point State Park. Hawk migration had fizzled for the day, but three cooperative White Ibis feeding in the pond were a real highlight. And when I say that migration was off for the day.... there were ZERO Tree Swallows left! We walked through the woods on the boardwalk system, enjoying some fall color from turning leaves, late blooming flowers like meadow beauty, and blue fruits on viburnum.

Sat., Oct. 16 To Delaware! | Cape Henlopen State Park

An early start to the morning got us aboard the 7am ferry to Lewes, Delaware, aboard a colossal ferry that accommodates up to 100 cars. The 17-mile crossing is a great opportunity to look for open water bird species, making this a pelagic trip of sorts. We spotted an adult Parasitic Jaeger in New Jersey waters, and a Surf Scoter passed by the boat in Delaware waters. As we approached Lewes, the extensive jetties were loaded with gulls and cormorants, as well as 75 Brown Pelicans. The weather was perfect again today, with sunny skies and warm temperatures as we explored several sites at Cape Henlopen State Park. The morning was spent walking through pine woods in sandy soils, a habitat that is completely lacking on the New Jersey side. As a consequence, we entered a habitat that is host to many migratory species as well as a specialist species that is not present in Cape May, the Brown-headed Nuthatch. With some effort, we connected with several individuals, convincing us that this is perhaps the cutest species of bird in North America. A tiny bird with a squeaky toy call and a cute face? What's not to love? The forest also held a migratory flock that brought us a quick look at Brown Creeper, a



wintering Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a more extended view of a Golden-crowned Kinglet bathing in a puddle on the forest floor. Sandy soils are home to one of the only cacti in eastern North America, the eastern prickly pear. The hike culminated at the recently opened visitor center at the top of Fort Miles Historical Area, with a sweeping view of the ocean, dunes, and forest

After lunch in the beautiful and historic downtown part of Lewes, we returned to the state park, this time focusing on a large brackish pond called Gordon's Pond. The paved trail around the park was full of people out enjoying the weather, including an enterprising person who had built a motorized one-man vehicle out of a cooler. Yep. But back to the birds... shorebirds were in good numbers here, with good looks at Semipalmated and Black-bellied plovers, several "peeps" including Dunlin, and two long-billed distant shorebirds that Dan and Andy spent a long time studying. Despite the distance, the birds were feeding actively enough that their white rumps were visible, confirming their identity as Hudsonian Godwit. This is a rare species here, and these two individuals were perhaps finishing their feeding bout before heading out over the Atlantic Ocean for a nonstop flight to South America. The return trip aboard the ferry included nice lighting as the sunny day gave way to clouds riding a front. We enjoyed more Brown Pelicans, close studies of more Royal Terns, Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins, and our only look at a Northern Gannet. After a long day, we met up to enjoy a variety of pizza styles (including a Philly cheesesteak option!) in our hotel.

Sun., Oct. 17 Beach Day | Wetlands Institute | Boating to The Rips

As usual, we began the morning by crossing the street to see what activity was happening on the beach. A flock of Black Skimmers appeared, impressing us with their coordinated movements up and down the beach. A few hundred Tree Swallows were present again, but nothing like the swallow tornado from earlier in the week, Palm Warblers and Swamp and Song sparrows skittered around among the dune vegetation. After a wonderful brunch we headed north to Avalon, where the Cape May Bird Observatory staffs a seabird migration count. The weather was clear and chilly, with the wrong winds for active migration. Yellow-rumped Warblers remained present as "background noise", flying along the beach and even landing and seeming to feed on the jetty itself. They are nothing if not adaptable to any landscape! We retreated into the tidal marsh and learned more about this incredibly productive habitat by visiting the Wetlands Institute. This small building is home to displays of



exhibits as well as live animals, including a memorable touch tank where we held horseshoe crabs and other marine invertebrates. We ventured out onto the roof of the property, which turned out to have a spectacular view of the verdant marsh. This scene was home to a migrating American Kestrel, as well as a lot of wading birds; in a single view we found our first Willets of the trip (35 nestled down in marsh islands) as well as Tricolored Heron, Little Blue Heron, and the more routine Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, and Snowy Egret. It was a great opportunity to review identification of these species, including making direct size comparisons.

In the afternoon, we joined a large contingent of birders aboard a large boat organized through the Cape May Fall Festival. Over 125 birders - or better yet, 250 eyes - scanned the intercoastal waterway, the jetties, and then the coastline as we made our way to "The Rips". This chaotic section of the coast is located just offshore from the hawk-watch platform and represents the site where the Delaware Bay waters first mingle with the open ocean and its tidal forces. As such, there is constant churning of waters that provides great foraging for gulls. And where there are gulls, there are often jaegers that patrol the site to steal food from the gulls. They are the ultimate kleptoparasites! In fact, we had decent looks at two Parasitic Jaegers, with one making a moderately close pass to the boat. The shared eBird checklist features photos that really capture the speed and sleek nature of these birds: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S97006382>

In addition to the jaegers, we studied the gulls. Cameron Cox was one of the boat tour leaders, and his sharp, trained eyes, picked out a Herring x Lesser Black-backed Gull hybrid among the feeding flocks dominated by the usual suspects, including Royal and Forster's terns. On the jetties, six Great Cormorants were studied well, as were loafing shorebirds (including American Oystercatchers and Black-bellied Plovers). And when we looked skyward, a flock of sixteen Great Egrets passed high overhead, reminding us that Cape May is a consistent site to see active migration, even in species that we rarely see soaring. After the boat trip, we all warmed up in our hotel rooms, then returned to The Lobster House for a final dinner together. We toasted each other in recognition of a wonderful group of adventurers, and we all began daydreaming of where all our next trips might take us.



Mon., Oct. 18 Departures

Several of our trip participants departed last night or early this morning by car. The remaining group braved very blustery winds for what the guides feared would be a slow, birdless, and cold morning. We sheltered against the beachfront building and watched the beach. Despite "wrong" winds, there were still migrants to be had (and a gorgeous sunrise)! A few waterfowl were on the move, including our only Wood Ducks of the trip. A group of 50 Black Skimmers zigged and zagged along the coast in front of us. But the highlight was unexpected migrants, like a Northern Flicker that came in off the ocean, heading north, and seven American Kestrels and seven Merlins all actively departing from the land heading low over the ocean, bound for Delaware. As those intrepid birds continued their southbound migration, the last of our group said goodbye and moved on to their own destinations. Thank you all for a wonderful migration odyssey to Cape May!

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Amy Greene - AG), Myrtle Berries (Nancy Cutler - NC), Flock (Dan Donaldson - DD), Gull (NC), Group Birding (AG), Sunset (AG), Buds (AG), Blue flower (NC), Gulls (Andy Jones - AJ), Monarch (AG), Wheel bug & Four-toothed Mason Wasp (AJ), White flowers (AG), Peregrine Falcon (AJ), Group Birding 2 (AG), Crab (NC), Wawa Sign, Caterpillar (NC), Beach Birding (NC), Sunset (AG), Scenic (AJ), Hawk-watch (Pam Voss - PV), Wasp (AJ), Boardwalk Group (AG), Yellow Plant (AJ), Ferry Portrait (NC), Lighthouse (AJ), Gull in Flight (AJ), Dolphins (AJ), Birds on rocks x2 (AJ), Gull (AJ), Final sunset (AJ)