

Cape May New Jersey | Trip Report | Oct. 18th – 24th 2021 | by James P. Smith



With guides James P. Smith and Rick Weiman and participants: Cyndy, Dee, David, Ellen, Gayle, Jean F., Jean R., Jim, Maria, and Tootie.



Mon., Oct. 18 Philadelphia | Sea Crest Inn | Cape May Point State Park

Crisp, clear conditions greeted Naturalist Journeys in Philadelphia as James and Rick divided forces to pick up group participants scattered at various hotels around the International Airport, and in the Historic Downtown area of Philadelphia. After a brief phone call between the guides we were on our way, electing to drive the two vehicles independently rather than caravan as originally planned. The journey south was smooth, traffic free and included a welcome break for refreshments and restrooms at a plaza along the Garden State Parkway. It was certainly a beautiful autumnal day, some of the roadside oaks and maples already turning to fabulous fall color. Turkey and Black Vultures, and Red-tailed and Sharp-shinned Hawks rode along the North-west breeze, and common species such as Mourning Doves and Common Grackles punctuated the drive as we headed south. In no time at all, or so it seemed, we were driving onto Cape May Island passing through picturesque residential quarters replete with all the charm that one would expect from one of the most historic vacation towns on the Eastern Seaboard.

Despite the two tour vehicles traveling south independently, arrival at the Sea Crest Inn was virtually simultaneous and we checked into comfortable rooms, our home for the next six nights. And, we were close enough to the sea to hear the pounding of the Atlantic Ocean just across the street. We'd also arrived at Cape



May with daylight to spare. David, Cyndy, and Maria had driven to Cape May in their own vehicles were already at the hotel, meeting up with the group and ready to go. We headed out into the field for a taste of the migration odyssey that was about to come over the course of the next week. Cape May in fall is quite simply the best place along the Eastern Seaboard to observe large scale bird migration and, fortunately for us, many of the key birding sites are located a mere 10 – 15 minutes from the Sea Crest Inn. As such, Cape May Point State Park provided the perfect venue for an hour of birding excellence before the sun went down. Here the famous hawk watch platform, originally founded by Pete Dunne and the NJ Audubon, provided a great point of orientation with views overlooking Cape May Meadows to the east, Cape May's historic lighthouse to the west, and the coastal dunes and Atlantic Ocean to the south. Quite naturally, the slightly elevated hawk watch platform provided fabulous all round visibility making it easy to understand why many a birding personality, author and migration student had spent hundreds of hours at Cape May on this platform.

Being late in the day most of the crowds had dispersed and we had a good deal of the hawk watch platform to ourselves. Bunker Pond right in front of the platform hosted an excellent variety of waterfowl sometimes flushed by a marauding Northern Harrier looking for supper. Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Pied-billed Grebe and (surprisingly) eight Wood Ducks graced our notebooks. Less expected was a White Ibis, a former rarity in New Jersey but a species currently engaged in an impressive range expansion northward from the South-east US. Raptors were still migrating despite the late hour and we had low overhead passages of several Merlins, American Kestrels, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks and three Ospreys, all beautifully highlighted in the pristine evening light. Close to hand, quite literally, we saw our first warblers of the trip feeding in the Eastern Red Cedars just off the platform. Stunning eye-level views in perfect light of Yellow-rumped, Blackpoll and Cape May Warblers entertained us all, especially the photographers in our party. A dozen or so Golden-crowned Kinglets foraged in the cedars with their high-pitched wispy calls coming from all around the platform, some so close they could even be photographed with a smart phone! Often skulking Carolina Wrens put on a wonderful show sunning in the thickets just in front of us. As the sun set behind the Cape May lighthouse and the temperature dropped, we returned to the Sea Crest Inn to freshen up before heading to the Sapore Italinao Restaurant, a fine venue for our welcome dinner and a great choice by Rick!

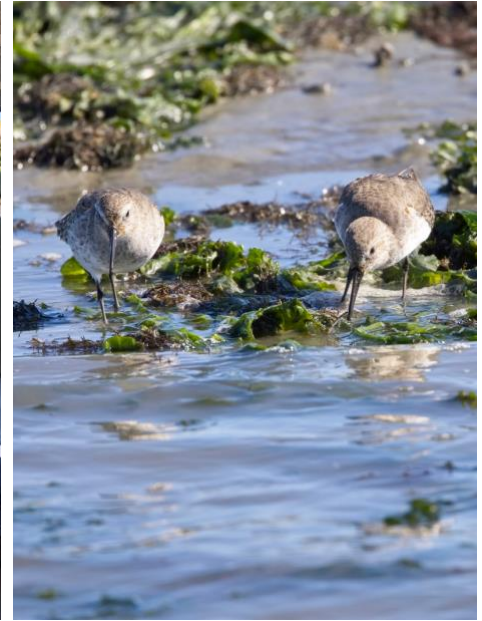


Tues., Oct. 19

**Ocean Blvd | Cape May Bird Observatory | Lily Lake |
Cape May Point State Park | Back Bay**

The day began well before sunrise as we assembled outside the Sea Crest Inn on Ocean Boulevard. An early morning walk along the beach was on the agenda and in the pre-dawn darkness the sounds of passing nocturnal migrants could be heard over the hotel and the eerily quiet streets of Historic Cape May. Not all the call notes were identifiable, but the calls of Yellow-rumped Warblers and Song Sparrows stood out and it had clearly been a busy night of migration. Early morning birding on the beach was bracing to say the least as the sun rose over the Atlantic Ocean and a blustery North-westerly wind drifted sand from the dunes towards the sea. Flights of Herring and Laughing Gulls moved west towards Cape May Point and surprisingly good numbers of Royal Terns passed close to shore offering great views. As the morning brightened up we came across an impressive flock of Black Skimmers resting along the beach occasionally swirling and wheeling around us with immaculate coordination before settling down on the shore. Somewhat surprisingly, Lesser Black-backed Gulls outnumbered Great Black-backed Gulls and we must have noted a dozen or so of these Old World gulls, formerly something of a local rarity but now clearly expanding in range. Rick found a live Horseshoe Crab and happily shared his knowledge of the species with a captive audience. As we began to think about breakfast and walk back towards the Sea Crest, hundreds or perhaps thousands of Tree Swallows passed low along the beach, over the dunes and even through Cape May town. Several Northern Flickers battled against the wind arriving at Cape May by coming in low over the ocean, and dozens upon dozens of Yellow-rumped Warblers and Song Sparrows filtered through the dunes and Seaside Goldenrod. At sea, small flocks of Surf Scoters pushed west along with several spectacular 'V' formations of Double-crested Cormorants. The air was heavy with the aura of migration, and exactly the sort of phenomenon that birders travel to Cape May to experience. Even at Uncle Ben's Pancake House (our venue for breakfast) Yellow-rumped Warblers hopped about the lawns, Golden-crowned Kinglets fed in the ornamental cedars and small aerial predators such as Merlin, American Kestrel and Sharp-shinned Hawks, cruised overhead. It was classic Cape May in the fall!

Next stop was Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO) with its well-appointed optics and gift shop. Formerly a good spot to glean the latest information, birders have relied more on social media platforms in recent years and we



spent little time inside the CMBO building especially when Rick decided to lead a group walk into the beautifully preserved woodlot behind the center. Though not a big woodlot, the habitat provided excellent cover for migrants and the trails, in turn, gave excellent access for birders. Migrants were obvious from the outset as Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Northern Parula, Black-and-white Warbler and Red-eyed Vireo all popped into view and the air appeared to be heavy with the familiar ‘chip’ notes of passing Yellow-rumped Warblers – they just seemed to be everywhere! A Cooper’s Hawk bolted through the trees looking for an easy meal, and species such as Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper and Eastern Towhee all vied for attention leaving us to ponder whether they might be migrants or simply local residents? At Cape May either scenario might be possible. A Gray-cheeked Thrush from the boreal forests of North America was certainly a migrant and was well seen by about half the group. It’s not an easy species to see on fall migration and was easily the rarest species noted on this little woodland venture.

From there we walked around the edge of Lily Lake, the water itself being mostly hidden from view but the willows and cedars surrounding the lake were again full of migrant Yellow-rumped Warblers with some Golden-crowned Kinglets and a couple of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. A Black Vulture perched nonchalantly on a telegraph pole giving the most incredible views whilst in the sky dense flocks of up to 40 Turkey Vultures rose up on the thermals drawing our attention to the ongoing raptor migration passing right overhead! Many of the raptors were low and provided an early opportunity for field study with closely matched species pairs such as Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks, Sharp-shinned and Cooper’s Hawks, and even Peregrine versus Merlin! The perfect place to brush up on raptor ID would, of course, be the famed Hawk Watch Platform at Cape May Point and after a short drive we were there, scanning the skies with dozens of others birders. Things were a little slow in the beginning but a good late season showing of Broad winged Hawks continued, almost all of them juveniles. Northern Harriers passed by, some over the dunes or passing the lighthouse and it wasn’t long before we had our first Bald Eagles in view...adults, immatures, some distant but one or two right overhead. The appearance of Bald Eagles prompted a question from Jean, “Do you ever see Golden Eagles at Cape May?” Pretty unlikely, or so we thought. Golden Eagle is a rare migrant on the Cape May peninsula but, just to add a touch of the bizarre, the booming voice of Pete Dunne resonated from behind us – “*Golden Eagle over the meadows*”!! And there it was with about 30 marauding crows in tow. It was an immature, actually a hatching year bird but disappeared all too quickly behind the tree line only to reappear much closer to the platform about 10 minutes later – wow!



The tour was off to an incredible start. A fine sense of euphoria ensued as we settled down to a fabulous picnic lunch by the hawk watch platform, another fine meal choice from Rick. Golden-crowned Kinglets, Chipping Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and even Blackpoll and Cape May Warblers fed in the nearby cedars, and more White Ibis appeared by the hawk watch platform as we dined.

After lunch we headed over to Cape May Harbor at Miss Chris Marina to board the Osprey, a large flat-bottomed pontoon boat with fantastic all round visibility and, importantly, offering full protection from the elements. The Osprey has the capacity to carry 25 or so birders but on this day only a couple of other passengers were aboard besides our group – good news for those with Covid protocol concerns and very advantageous for all of us in being able to move around the boat. With an expert Captain/birder at the helm and a trained naturalist/spotter on board we were in very good hands! As we pulled out of the marina it was impossible to ignore the comical ‘laughing’ of the local Laughing Gulls and the nasal ‘caw-caw’ of Fish Crows! The cruise headed east through Cape May Harbor then north past Thoroughfare Island into Jarvis Sound and then up towards Stingaree Point and Swan Island. At mid-tide conditions were ideal for scoping out a myriad of saltwater pools, mudflats and channels. Captain Bob skillfully maneuvered the boat to make the most of the crisp October sunshine giving the best possible looks at the avian riches before us. Fabulous views were had of American Oystercatchers, Forster’s, Royal and Caspian Terns, a perched Osprey, and plenty of Great and Snowy Egrets. We also had the advantage of being able to get up close to the many shorebirds on the flats, important at this time of year since most were in non-breeding plumage and identification a field test to say the least but after a little ‘work’ we satisfactorily identified Sanderlings, Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, and Greater Yellowlegs as well as a lot more American Oystercatchers. Small to medium sized flocks of recently arrived Pale-bellied Brants graced the mudflats too, offering some of the best looks and photo opportunities that anyone could wish for. A lone Common Loon popped up in the channel right in front of the boat offering great views and a pair of Peregrines perched for little while on a channel marker before we got a little too close and off they went, admittedly looking very good in flight! The trip was a little light on marsh dwelling sparrows but the process of trying to find them did reveal something special as Maria spotted a heron-like bird hiding in the *Spartina* grass. Captain Bob gently nudged the boat towards the grasses but despite 16 pairs of eyes simultaneously searching for Maria’s ‘heron’ it was nowhere to be seen...and then suddenly, seemingly out of



nowhere, a large, brown heron flushed up from the *Spartina* just in front of the boat giving brief but readily identifiable views as it flew low over the marshes to a new resting place. It was an American Bittern, an absolutely brilliant spot by Maria and one of the scarcer birds that would be seen on the tour. As a finale, Captain Bob steered towards the Atlantic Ocean along Cape May Inlet where we scanned the stone jetties for Great Cormorants and found two of them as well as Ospreys, Great Blue Herons and Double-crested Cormorants. Our time on the Osprey couldn't have gone any better and we returned to Miss Chris Marina to be greeted once again by the local Laughing Gulls and Fish Crows! A remarkably full first day at Cape May was coming to an end and we headed back to the Sea Crest Inn for an hour before finishing the day off with another great dinner venue chosen by Rick, the Five West Pub.

Wed., Oct. 20

Higbee Beach | Ocean View | Cook's Beach | Jake's Landing | Sunset Beach | Cape May Point State Park

The day dawned mild and breezy with winds from the south-west quarter. We left the Sea Crest Inn around first light and headed over to Higbee Beach and the famous 'Morning Flight' platform nestled amid the scrub below the rather overbearing Higbee Dyke. The official CMBO counter stood alone atop the dyke waiting for passerines to lift out of the woodland and begin their orientation flight to the north-west. The fact that he was alone wasn't an especially good sign and it seemed that the locals weren't expecting a big flight. Such measured anticipation will always be something of a gamble though the experienced birders usually meet with success when predicting the big migration flights.

Predictions aside, on this morning the birds were slow to emerge but it was our first attempt at Higbee Beach and the steadier pace of migration was welcome. Tens of Yellow-rumped Warblers passed by the morning flight deck along with a few Blackpoll Warblers, some of them landing in front of the platform for better views. Ellen did well to spot a male Pine Warbler alighting in a leafless sumac, one of scarcer warbler species on the morning flight but this one was well documented with photos and proved to be the only Pine Warbler of the entire tour. Below the deck, Song and Swamp Sparrows and a Dark-eyed Junco could be found foraging in the scrub and we even had good views of skulking Carolina Wrens. If the songbird migration was light by Cape May standards we actually had some great views of raptors including magnificent adult Bald Eagles as well as Merlins, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, and several Northern Harriers. A passing cormorant barely raised a second glance but Maria jumped at the opportunity and nailed several images as it flew past, images that showed that the bird



was clearly a Great Cormorant. This species has a far more limited range than Double-crested being more or less restricted to the Atlantic Coast in North America, just reaching the southern edge of its regular winter range in New Jersey. As the breeze picked up from the south-west we drove over to Sunset Beach timing our visit perfectly to watch three male Surf Scoters pass by at fairly close range as they headed south over Delaware Bay. The cedars behind the beach continued to host yet more Yellow-rumped Warblers with several Sharp-shinned Hawks and Northern Harriers searching for an opportunistic meal!

While the forecast may not have been ideal for raptor migration we headed over to Cape May Point in any case and were greeted by an adult Bald Eagle chasing and stooping at several hundred ducks in the air right above the Hawk Watch platform! The eagle departed unsuccessful in its quest for brunch and the ducks subsequently settled down on Bunker and Lighthouse Ponds. We headed out onto the network of boardwalks and were rewarded with some of our best views of waterfowl; Blue winged and Green-winged Teals, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard, American Black Duck, Northern Pintail, our first Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks of the tour, and fabulous close up comparisons of American and Eurasian Wigeons, the latter being an Old World species and pretty rare anywhere in North America. It has to be said that the Eurasian Wigeon looked rather fetching amid his American cousins with chestnut head, a yellow-buff blaze on the forehead and cool gray body – an ideal situation for field study and photographic opportunities alike. Back at the Hawk Watch platform, far fewer raptors were passing than the previous day but, by way of compensation, we enjoyed close views of Golden-crowned Kinglets, White-throated and Field Sparrows, and Carolina Wrens before heading out for a substantial brunch at the Ocean View Restaurant in Cape May.

Afterwards we explored new territory with a little adventure north along the Delaware Bay side of the Cape May Peninsula. Cooks Beach provided a pleasant, peaceful venue for a beach walk on white sand with close up views of Royal Terns, Dunlin, Sanderling and Black-bellied Plovers and very nice looks at a couple of hovering Belted Kingfishers. Several Boat-tailed Grackles teed up and sang or foraged in the tide wrack. The entrance road to Cooks Beach was quite busy too and on the way out we elected to walk rather than drive it. It was very birdy with a puddle in the road attracting many drinking and bathing birds, mostly White-throated Sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers, with Eastern Towhee, Northern Cardinal, Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse close by in the scrub. Next up was Jake's Landing, a little farther north along the bay though not before an all-important restroom and refreshment break at the 'WaWa', a convenience store/gas station chain operating



throughout New Jersey and other East Coast states. Wawa's corporate ID features a Canada Goose in flight despite 'Wawa' actually being the Ojibwe name for Snow Goose! We reached Jake's Landing boat ramp in the warmth of a breezy, sunny afternoon and initially things seemed pretty quiet. After scanning the expansive salt marshes surrounding Dennis Creek WMA we began to see Northern Harriers in good number, all of them hunting and including a couple of stunning males. Bald Eagles were active in the area too including one that seemed to have developed a taste for American Black Duck as it flushed up and chased a flock of over a dozen or so over the saltmarsh. Further south, a great cloud of at least 1500 shorebirds lifted up evidently flushed and pursued by a fast moving Peregrine. These were 'scope birds' and the identifications somewhat tentative at range but certainly the calls of Dunlin and Black-bellied plovers could be heard emanating from the flock and examination of the photos revealed a number of unidentified dowitchers and peeps in the mix. Alas, the flock never really came close though we did have better luck with a calling Greater Yellowlegs that passed right over the group.

Meanwhile, the quest for the scarcer 'saltmarsh' sparrows continued. We'd had no luck the previous day on the Osprey and the afternoon at Jake's Landing turned in a similar result but the quest did deliver views of Eastern Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows and several tail pumping Palm Warblers. The wooded section of Jake's Landing Road proved to be the charm unexpectedly producing a succession of woodland passerines including a very welcome Red-breasted Nuthatch, the only one of the tour as 2021 wasn't a 'flight year'. The concentration of woodpeckers was something to behold and over the next twenty minutes or so we enjoyed fine looks at Hairy, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and a couple of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. The woodpecker show was a fine way to end the day and we cruised back to Cape May spotting flocks of Turkey and Black Vultures en route as well as several Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks zipping across the road. Mike and Ellen kindly hosted the checklist in their room, a very welcome invitation since dinner at Lucky Bones Backwater Grille was busy, very busy in fact but once again Rick worked his magic and secured a reservation. Dinner was excellent by the way!

Thurs., Oct. 21

Edwin B. Forsythe NWR (Brigantine) | Avalon Seawatch Cape May Meadows

The third morning of the tour saw another early departure from the Sea Crest Inn. Our destination was to be Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, colloquially and formally known to birders as "Brig" or Brigantine.



The drive towards Galloway Township would take around 50 minutes and as we cruised north along the Garden State Parkway the weather was clearly developing into a beautiful autumnal morning. The wind had dropped and pockets of ambient mist shrouded the coastal saltmarshes and woodlots, the mist occasionally rolling back to reveal Great and Snowy Egrets in the marshes and even several White-tailed Deer hanging out in the median! Arrival at 'Brigantine' found the parking lot inundated with birds as dozens of Yellow-rumped Warblers filtered through the oaks and cedars and our first Eastern Bluebirds of the trip posed in the open for all to enjoy. In fact the [parking lot and HQ building area was so busy that we elected to briefly postpone our plans to start the eight mile wildlife drive and focus on the songbird extravaganza around us, and there was plenty to see! A White-breasted Nuthatch crept around the cedars and showed extremely well as did a pair of Tufted Titmice and a Brown Creeper. A couple of Brown Thrashers looked resplendent in the autumn sunshine perched amid Red Maple leaves and put on a great visual and audio show as they repeatedly gave their harsh 'smack' calls. And, for the first time in the tour, we were given a true sense of just how intense the sparrow watching can be at this time of year. Slowly, carefully we identified Swamp, Song, White-throated, Chipping and Field Sparrows all before returning to the vehicles. Delighted with success we headed out onto the one-way drive loop first stopping at a boardwalk and overlook before embarking on the remainder of the eight mile drive. The boardwalk offered some fine elevated views across the saltmarshes with the Atlantic City skyline neatly etched out at some distance to the south. Though initially quiet, we eventually heard and then saw a couple of Clapper Rails at this spot along with Great and Snowy Egrets and a flyby Belted Kingfisher.

The wildlife drive at Brig can be daunting. The size of the refuge is massive, about 48,000 acres, and the drive loop is on a raised berm affording access and visibility to a range of fresh, brackish and saltwater environments. Brig serves as an extremely important resting/refueling area for migrants as well as some breeding birds and with this in mind we drove steadily around the loop stopping to scope the larger concentrations of birds whenever we came across them. It was busy in the early part of the drive as we found large numbers of resting shorebirds including Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Black-bellied Plovers. There was also great interest in a flock of dowitchers which might have been a struggle to identify had they not been flushed a couple of times by a Merlin. By carefully listening to the calls, the flock proved to have both Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers within their number and included several Greater Yellowlegs in the mix. The biggest surprise of the morning came in the form of an American Avocet swimming (rather than wading) in one of the larger pools and a scarce species anywhere along the north-east Atlantic Coast. At the same pool an American Bittern lifted out of the marshes and flapped steadily for a short while before dropping down into the *phragmites* and unfortunately was to remain unseen.



As we continued the drive, Savannah and Song Sparrows flitted up from the grassy banks but try as we might, we couldn't find any of the scarcer 'saltmarsh' sparrows. Northern Harriers seemed to be everywhere and we had absolutely sensational, eye-level views of many foraging Forster's Terns. There was also a Glossy Ibis, as well as two adult Snow Geese and a super raft of over 30 Ruddy Ducks including some fine males. Farther around the loop great concentrations of waterfowl gathered with hundreds of Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Gadwall, and smaller numbers of Mallard and American Black Duck. An exposed mud flat held an impressive flock of 25 Caspian Terns, the largest concentration seen on the tour. Rick knew of a roost of Black-crowned Night-herons and sure enough we came across at least five birds neatly hidden in an isolated, dense grove of Eastern Red Cedars.

As we approached 12 noon, the loop had brought us round to face into the sun and glare was admittedly becoming a problem for viewing. It was also time to think about lunch! We cruised back to the HQ buildings noting Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks along the way as well as an Eastern Meadowlark and six Wood Ducks. An unidentified cuckoo (Yellow-billed or Black-billed) flew by in front of the lead vehicle but quickly disappeared before it could be assigned to either species though the rusty patches in the wings and the very white underparts would indicate a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The WaWa in Smithville was the venue for lunch but rather than eat at the site orders were placed before heading back to Brig for a lovely picnic lunch. Brig had to been good to us but by mid-afternoon it was time to head south for our first visit to the Avalon Seawatch. Much like the Hawk Watch Platform at Cape May Point, this is a dedicated migration watch point occupied by one or more staff members from the Cape May Bird Observatory. The site is tucked under the dunes just south of the Avalon Seawall and is slightly elevated, a distinct advantage when trying to see migrant birds deep within the wave troughs, or other birds that may be hidden behind the Avalon Seawall. Positioned there, we were effectively five miles out in the Atlantic on a sandy 'bump' overlooking Townsends Inlet and Sea Isle City. The CMBO counters face north-east and watch for flocks of southbound migrants hugging the seacoast, many of which can be seen at a great distance to north and well before they arrive at Avalon. Other flocks can suddenly appear over the Avalon Seawall having been missed as they journeyed south. Truth be told conditions were not optimal for our visit. It was warm with light breezes coming from the south-west but by simply watching and waiting we had some nice flights of Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Herons, Surf and Black Scoters and our first Northern Gannets of the trip. In the quieter moments, Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins in Townsend's Inlet entertained us until the next migrants came along!



With Avalon proving to be a little on the quiet side there was still an opportunity to pick up one or more of the many birding sites around Cape May before supper. We chose Cape May Meadows, a Nature Conservancy Restoration project replete with freshwater wetlands and a beautifully vegetated dune system. The wetlands could be overlooked from an elevated platform and from here we scoped through many dabbling ducks though the species profile was similar to that experienced at Brig earlier in the day. The shorebirds 'piqued' a little more interest with a notable flock of 18 or so Lesser Yellowlegs roosting out in the wetlands. Careful scanning through the flock revealed singles of Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers as well as a couple of Dunlin with excellent scope studies of all in direct comparison to the surrounding Lesser Yellowlegs. A nearby observation blind offered close-up views of at least four Least Sandpipers before a Merlin burst through and spooked the lot! We walked the remainder of the roughly half mile loop enjoying the sights and sounds of Cape May Meadows – swirls of Tree Swallows over the wetlands, Red-winged Blackbirds coming into roost, Gray Catbirds and Carolina Wrens calling from the thickets – a super finale to a super day. Rick secured an early dinner reservation at the Bella Vida café and we finished off the day with ample time to go through our bird lists as another brilliant day on the Cape May peninsula had come to an end.

Fri., Oct. 22

Higbee Beach WMA | Cape May Point State Park | Two Mile Landing | Ocean Ave.

The day dawned cloudy with light rain showers, strong south-west winds and slightly muggier than it had been in the previous days. Our first destination was Higbee Beach WMA though not the morning flight platform on this visit. Instead we made a start at the network of trails around the fields and woodlots slightly inland from the coast. South-westerlies are not favorable winds for migrant arrivals at Cape May and it was admittedly a little quiet though good numbers of Yellow-rumped Warblers, Northern Flickers and several Sharp-shinned Hawks moved over the fields and a calling Dickcissel gave its distinctive rasping call notes as it flew over the group. With migrants being scarce we focused a little more on the local breeding species enjoying good views of Red-bellied Woodpecker, Brown Thrasher, Northern Cardinal, Carolina Wren and Carolina Chickadee before heading back to the vehicles pushing up several Eastern Meadowlarks from the fields en route.



Mid-morning saw the group back at Cape May Point State Park where the Eastern Meadowlark theme continued when a flock of a dozen or so passed the lighthouse almost as soon as we arrived. We embarked on the boardwalk trails to soak up the exquisite views of the waterfowl as we had done two days prior. The ponds were again full of waterfowl, many of them close offering amazing views in superb autumnal sunshine. Gadwall were among the most abundant, busily engaged in courtship behavior, and we had great comparative studies of Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Mallard and American Black Duck. Diving ducks were well represented with a smart flock of Ring-necked Ducks and a couple of Ruddy Ducks, and at least one Pied-billed Grebe continued to linger on Bunker Pond. By late morning the warmth of the day created enough thermal activity to encourage some raptors to take off and just before heading for brunch we enjoyed Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks right above Lighthouse Pond.

The morning had been long and it was time for a richly deserved brunch at the Bella Vida café where Rick ran into fellow Naturalist Journeys tour leader and photographer Hugh Simmons while simultaneously picking up a tip on a Monarch staging area back at Cape May Point! Indeed, Monarchs were very much the theme of the day after brunch and we, and many others, enjoyed a spectacular roost of thousands resting in the Japanese Black Pines off Ocean Ave. It was somehow fitting to then move across to the pavilion by the Hawkwatch Platform to watch and engage in a Monarch tagging demo run by the Monarch Monitoring Project Team. Jean and Maria had especially intermit experiences with tagged Monarch's resting on various body parts! The early part of the afternoon undoubtedly belonged to the Monarchs but the tagging demo but even so, the bird migration show would still go on with sightings of another Golden Eagle and three White Ibis cruising right over the Hawkwatch Platform! We had options for the remaining hours of daylight and having two vehicles enhanced those options considerably. After a quick briefing, the group divided forces, some heading back to the Sea Crest Inn with Rick for some well-deserved downtime and the remainder of the group heading over to Two Mile Landing for yet another quest for those pesky 'saltmarsh' sparrows.

Arrival at Two Mile Landing was greeted by excellent views of a couple of Killdeer and a Least Sandpiper feeding on exposed mudflats close to the road. Across Jarvis Sound flocks of Brant were present in good number, perhaps approaching a hundred birds or so and a Boat-tailed Grackle cried out for attention as it sang vigorously from a post in the restaurant parking lot and was impossible to ignore. But our main quarry, the sparrows,



would be low down in the *spartina* grass and to find them we concentrated our efforts along the edges of the saltmarsh. One or two Red-winged Blackbirds brought some initial excitement and then, just a little further behind the blackbirds we had our first sparrow, a Seaside Sparrow perched all-too-briefly before dropping down into the *spartina*. Thankfully most of our party had at least some views of that bird and in the following thirty minutes or so, we patiently played hide and seek with the marvelous sparrows of the genus *Ammospiza*. We never saw the Seaside Sparrow well after the initial sighting but were treated to absolutely stunning views of Nelson's Sparrows creeping furtively between the *spartina* and even in the tide wrack! Most of the Nelson's were of the brighter interior forms *A.n.interior/alterus* but we did see one good example of the Atlantic Coastal form, *A. n. subvirgata*. Strolling back to the vehicle we were then treated to outrageously good views of a juvenile Black-bellied Plover looking as crisp and pristine as only an Arctic breeding shorebird can. Dinner was at Aleathea's right along Beach Ave not too far from the Sea Crest, another great venue chosen by Rick and a restaurant where he seemed to know absolutely everyone!

Sat., Oct. 23

Higbee Beach WMA | Beach Plum Farm | Cape May Point State Park | Cape May Historical District

The predawn air was crisp and the mild mugginess of the previous day had apparently dispersed. While there was no wind to speak of, what little breeze there was appeared to be coming from the north-west. The nocturnal flights calls of Killdeer, Hermit Thrush, Savannah, Song and White-throated Sparrows, and Yellow-rumped Warbler were all audible before first light. The signs were encouraging and we set sail for a return visit to the Morning Flight platform at Higbee Beach. The 15 minute drive across town and field revealed Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks already out hunting evidently trying to snatch an early meal, even before the sun rose over the tree line.

Arrival at Higbee Beach was relatively calm as Song Sparrows and Golden-crowned Kinglets called from the surrounding bushes and the great swaths of *phragmites* reed bed. Atop the Higbee dike, at least nine birders had joined the official CMBO counter, a good sign since it wasn't only us anticipating a good morning. Sparrow numbers had notably increased since our last visit on the 20th with many giving great views directly below the morning flight platform; Song, Savannah, Swamp, White-throated, and Lincoln's Sparrows all featured offering great comparisons along with increased numbers of Eastern Towhees and Dark-eyed Juncos. There was a decent warbler flight too involving Yellow-rumped and Blackpoll Warblers, and great looks at both Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Every once in a while an adult Bald Eagle majestically winged its way over the platform. Around mid-morning things started to get really interesting. A Tricolored Heron migrated south over Delaware Bay and David spotted a superb Yellow-billed Cuckoo in the scrub below the platform, both being the only



sightings of those particular species for the whole tour. Rick suddenly received a rare bird alert, a message that would change the course of the whole morning. The text simply read “*Vermilion Flycatcher at the dike*” which seemed pretty vague at the time. Could they really mean the dike right in front of us at Higbee Beach? Surely not?!! We needn’t have worried and within a minute or so a huge cry of “*VERMILION FLYCATCHER*” came from the counters on the dike. The bird in question was heading straight for our group! Luckily almost all of us were still assembled on the morning flight platform and we simply couldn’t have been in a better place as this beauty settled down to forage from the leafless sumac spikes close to the platform, and there was even an Eastern Phoebe close by for comparison. The Vermilion Flycatcher put of the most fantastic show and appeared to be a resplendent first-year male in total beauty and glory. After 20 minutes or so, the bird moved further south and was eventually lost to view as car load up on car load birders appeared, most of them already very aware of just how rare the bird was - only the sixth record of Vermilion Flycatcher for New Jersey. Not only was it a great rarity but a stunning bird to boot. It seemed like an impossible act to follow and so, with a few stomachs audibly growling, we headed over to Beach Plum Farm for a hearty outdoor breakfast.

The air of euphoria continued during and after breakfast and, unsure of our next move, we elected to walk the trails at Beach Plum Farm. It was a gorgeous fall day and Beach Plum Farm was a new location for us, and being only a mile or two from Cape May Point the birding was bound to be pretty good....wasn’t it? A cluster of oaks and willows in the lee of the wind gave fabulous views of Hermit Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler and Common Yellowthroat, yet another Brown Creeper (an exceptional tour for this species) and some of the best looks at Tufted Titmouse during the whole trip. The warm air thermals had increased considerably by mid-morning and correspondingly, so did the raptor activity. Meanwhile, Rick’s phone was pinging away with text alerts with the latest reading “*Anhinga over the Beanery*”. The Beanery?! We just happened to be standing in an open field no more than a mile from the Beanery and twelve pairs of binoculars simultaneously started scanning the skies for a soaring Anhinga! After a couple of false alarms and one near panic attack we finally spotted the magnificent beast soaring and careening about the sky with Turkey Vultures, Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks. The first views were a little distant but it soon passed close enough to be seen well by the whole group as it drifted south-west towards Delaware Bay. And it was another truly rare bird in New Jersey. Most historical reports of Anhinga in NJ come from the April – July period with late autumn records being truly exceptional. For us, Cape May appeared to be oozing with avian magic and we’d barely had chance to settle down and digest the Anhinga when a large, long-winged, relatively long-tailed raptor suddenly appeared behind one of the closest oaks and



began rising above the fields. The raptor's proportions looked deceptive and after a few seconds it soon became clear that we had eyes on a magnificent juvenile Golden Eagle! Of all the raptors taking off and lifting up over the fields, the Golden Eagle was the closest bird to us cruising effortlessly on the thermals and gaining height rapidly before gliding off to the south-west. It was our third Golden Eagle of the trip, unforgettably illuminated by perfect autumnal sunshine and offering some of the best views we're ever likely to have of the species.

Beach Plum Farm had been something of a revelation. The breakfast, the birding, the ambience and the rarities had all fallen into place and again it was time to thank Rick for his enterprise and knowledge of the area. It was also a good time to relax and recalibrate a little, taking in some of the exhibits and enjoying the 62 acre organic site locally famed for its sustainable agriculture and farm-to-table dining. The Anhinga, Golden Eagle and other raptors at Beach Plum had clearly shown that the thermal activity was good and the migration was flowing. Hundreds of birders were out enjoying a beautiful October Saturday and on arrival at Cape May Point the Hawkwatch Platform was more crowded than we'd seen all week and with good reason. Overhead and across the northern and eastern horizons hundreds of raptors were aloft, rising on the thermals, drifting and hanging over Cape May Point. Many were vultures including 150 or so Turkey Vultures in spectacular tight, swirling kettles and the sky was peppered with hawks; Cooper's, Sharp-shinned, Broad-winged, Red-shouldered and the first significant 'flight' of Red-tailed Hawks of the week. Northern Harriers and Ospreys passed over the platform, the dunes and the open ocean winging out across Delaware Bay with fast moving Merlins, American Kestrels and Peregrines joining the action. True to form, multiple Bald Eagles were in the air too, some more distant than others but they continued to feature over the Cape May horizon as they had done all week. As if the scene wasn't enough, the call went out from one of the official CMBO counters behind us, "*Anhinga over Cape May town!!*" The bird from the Beanery must have doubled back and thought the better of crossing Delaware Bay. The magnificent beast spent time cruising all over Cape May before gaining height and finally drifting off to the north. Hundreds of birders on the platform and in the parking lot had wonderful views of this great rarity with even better views than we'd experienced at Beach Plum Farm. Cape May was at its finest on this October day, a unique and jovial atmosphere with hundreds of birders of all levels celebrating the excitement of autumn migration in full flow.



The morning had been so spectacular that the afternoon could only fizzle and rather than let happen we chose a casual walk over the dunes to the pristine, sandy beach of Cape May Point. A distant line of scoters headed west and included both Surf and Black Scoters, and strings of Double-crested Cormorants continued to move south over the Atlantic as they had done for much of the week. On the beach a nice little cameo of three birds or rather three gulls, with individuals of Herring, Ring-billed and Laughing Gulls all lined up for a nice study. And, wandering back to the parking lot, three newly arrived White-crowned Sparrows had joined the White-throated and Song Sparrows at the edge of the footpath ultimately proving to be last addition to the bird list for the tour. The final afternoon found some of our party heading for the pedestrian precinct in Historic Cape May, while others chose to have some down time at the Sea Crest Inn and a final walk along the beach. We returned to Aleathea's for one last dinner where Rick used all his charm (and then some) to secure a group reservation on a busy Saturday evening in Cape May. And then it was back to the Sea Crest Inn where Mike and Ellen, once more, generously hosted the reading of the bird list as they had done for several evenings in a row.....thank you Mike & Ellen! Vermilion Flycatcher was loosely voted the most popular bird of the trip, while Tootie enjoyed the many Brants we saw, and Rick was delighted to finally catch up with a Golden Eagle in New Jersey. The boat excursion into Jarvis Sound aboard the Osprey was voted among the best and most enjoyable of the field outings.

Sun., Oct. 24 Departures

A fabulous week was coming to end. Maria, David and Cyndy said their good-byes the evening before anticipating an early start for the drive home. The rest of the group elected for a relaxed approach to the final morning, no last minute rushed birding for us. Instead, we headed back to Beach Plum Farm for another 'al fresco' breakfast thinking of the travel day that lay ahead for all of us. It was cool and cloudy but really no bother to be outside especially with birds such as Common Loon (five), Broad-winged and Cooper's Hawks, Northern Flicker and American Robins all passing overhead as we ate. It was a stark reminder, despite it being the end of our tour, that the southbound migration at Cape May is an ongoing event continuing deep into late fall. The rural situation of Beach Plum Farm provided an ideal venue for our last breakfast and, amid the turning colors of fall, we headed north to Philadelphia International Airport enjoying a pleasant traffic free drive to arrive in good time for the afternoon flights home. It had been a wonderful journey greatly enhanced by the cordial, friendly banter shared by everyone on the tour. True to form, Cape May had duly delivered and, coming straight after the restrictions of the Covid pandemic, it felt like a tonic to be out group birding once more. No two Cape May tours will ever be alike making it one of the most exciting birding destinations on the east coast, and all the more reason to come back!

Black-bellied Plover (James P. Smith - JS), Monarch (David Hatcher - DH), Snowy Egret (DH), Group Photo (JS), View from the Boardwalk (JS), Cape May Warbler (JS), Rick sharing about Horseshoe Crab (JS), (Black Skimmers (JS), Bald Eagle (Maria King - MK), Osprey (MK), Aboard the Osprey (JS), Dunlin (MK), Feeding Dunlins (JS), American Oystercatcher (DH), Great Cormorant (DH), Morning Flight Platform (JS), Birding the Platform (JS), Great Cormorant (MK), Birding the Beach (JS), View from Jake's Landing (JS), Green-winged Teal (NJ Stock), Dark-eyed Junco (NJ Stock), Eastern Bluebird (MK), Brown Thrasher and Yellow-rumped Warbler (JS), Scenic (JS), Beach Scene (MK), Snow Geese (MK), Least Sandpipers (JS), Group at Lighthouse Pond (JS), More from Lighthouse Pond (JS), White Ibis (JS), Monarchs (JS), American Wigeon (JS), Monarch resting (MH), Silhouettes (Mike H - MH), Rooster (MK), Eastern Phoebe (JS), Blackpoll Warbler (JS), Vermillion Flycatcher (JS), Harbor (MK), Group at Beach Plum (RW), Beach Plum (RW), Group at Cape May Point (JS), Morning Flight (RW)