

# New Jersey: Cape May | Trip Report

## Oct. 11 – 17, 2022 | by Dan Donaldson



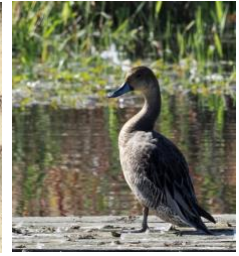
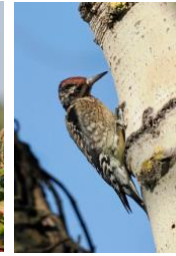
With guides Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman, and participants Amy, Barb B., Barb S., Bob, DeeDee, Don, Donna, Inge, Jeanne, and Richard.



### Tues., Oct. 11                      Arrival Day

We had an early and late pickup from the airport, so Dan took the early arrivals to Cape May, about a two-hour drive from Philadelphia. Then my group arrived in Cape May about 3:00 p.m., checked into our hotel, met up with the participants that drove to Cape May on their own, and then drove down to the Cape May Bird Observatory Hawk Watch at Cape May Point State Park to check out the counts for the day and to watch the evening push of raptors. It was a nice, sunny evening and we indeed had a nice flight of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks as well as many Merlins. A couple White-throated Sparrows and Northern Mockingbirds worked along the edge of the platform. Flocks of Yellow-rumped Warblers were on the move, as they would be all week long in the incredible numbers that they are well known for here at Cape May during October.

Afterwards, the entire group, 12 of us in all, met back at the Sea Crest Motel and after introductions, we went out to our first dinner in Cape May.



**Wed., Oct. 12**

## **CMBO Field Office | Cape May Point State Park Osprey Salt Marsh**

Most mornings, we offered an optional sunrise beach walk at 6:45, crossing the street and working our way to the point at the end of Beach Ave. This is a great spot to watch the sunrise and catch birds flying along the shoreline. Royal Terns were a constant presence here, but this section of beach is a roosting spot for Black Skimmers. This morning, shortly after sunrise, we spotted a distant flock flying against the brilliant sunrise. They eventually made their way to us and we counted approximately 200 Black Skimmers as they made several passes in front of us. We were fortunate to see this large flock nearly every morning of our trip.

After our 8:00 a.m. breakfast, we began our orientation day of Cape May where we briefly visited most of the sites we visit throughout the week. We started out at the Cape May Bird Observatory Headquarters, formerly a small house in Cape May Point. The house was converted into offices for CMBO years ago and they've been hard at work restoring the small back yard to native vegetation. Their efforts have paid off as this is now a terrific birding spot that nearly every birder that visits Cape May stops at. While birding this morning, we found Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Lake Lily lies right across the street from the CMBO office. It's a freshwater lake, which is a welcome stopover spot for birds that have just flown in from the ocean or nearby saltmarshes. A quick walk along Lake Lily provided us with fantastic looks at a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker that worked a small hole in an Aspen tree for a good 15 mins. (Great looks and photos!) Pied-billed Grebes and a dozen Mute Swans were also resting in view of the road.

From the CMBO offices, we headed to Sea Grove Park, a new community park that happens to have a wonderful east-facing treeline that receives the morning sun. We make a quick stop and heard and found Red-breasted Nuthatches, Carolina Chickadees and Yellow-rumped Warblers along with Song and Chipping Sparrows. From Sea Grove Park, we headed to the hawkwatch platform at Cape May Point State Park. The hawkwatch platform serves as the unofficial center of activity during fall migration in Cape May. We spent the rest of the morning scanning the nearby ponds for waterfowl and found Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Mallards and Gadwall with a lone Ruddy Duck as the surprise bird on the ponds that morning. It was a light day at the hawkwatch with only 3,600 birds counted, but that included 83 Peregrine Falcons, and 400 accipiters for the day!



After Lunch we headed to the marina where we boarded the Osprey, a large pontoon boat, for a back bay birding tour through the vast saltmarshes that surround Cape May. The boat's shallow draft allowed us to make our way up tidal creeks to exposed flats that are otherwise inaccessible to birders. But first a quick run out to the break walls that protect the Cape May Harbor entrance. The break wall was loaded with shorebirds including American Oystercatchers and hundreds of Dunlins and Sanderling. Brown Pelicans were resting out there as well. The break wall also happens to be a reliable spot for Great Cormorants, and we found four resting on an antenna at the end of the break wall. Turning back inland we made our way through the vast salt marshes and tidal creeks in search of shorebirds feeding on the mudflats exposed by the outgoing tide. We took a well-deserved break before dinner. Following dinner, we always met for a review of our bird list for the day. This night we had a special presentation from a biologist from the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ who discussed the breeding success of Piping Plovers and a newly created sandspit island that has been a boon for coastal breeding birds. A fantastic first full day of our trip.

## **Thurs., Oct. 13                      Morning Beach Walk | Forsythe NWR | Avalon Sea Watch**

We began the day with another early morning beach walk to the point. This would be our only day with challenging weather. Overnight rains meant the beach was wet, but we still made our way down to the point. However, our only shorebird this morning was a lone Ruddy Turnstone on a small rock jetty at the point. We did see three Bald Eagles though, including one that brought a fish to a nearby telephone pole, thinking it would be a good place to eat in peace. Fish Crows eventually found the eagle and mobbed it, attempting to steal a meal, but the eagle never budged and kept on eating.

Our morning trip took us up the shoreline to Edwin B Forsythe (formerly Brigantine) National Wildlife Refuge. EBF is a famous wildlife refuge, and can hold an enormous number of waterfowl, especially in winter. It's mix of fresh and saltwater wetlands make it a great place for almost any waterbird to show up. The weather was challenging here, but we still managed 40 species of birds, including over a dozen duck species: Wood Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks and Blue-winged Teal gave us great looks. We found a couple juvenile (white) Little Blue Herons, and just down the road we found four juvenile Black-crowned Night-Herons. About halfway through our





10-mile loop drive through the refuge, the rain began to fall. We birded from our vans for the rest of the loop and found 30+ Snowy Egrets along the last leg of the refuge.

From EBF, we made a lunch stop at a local diner, then headed to Avalon, the site of the renowned Avalon Seawatch, perhaps the longest running seabird counting location in the country. Avalon has some unique geography as the river outlet that defines its boundary juts out into the Atlantic for a mile. This causes any southbound migrating seabirds to come into close proximity with the point before they readjust and head further out from the shore. Unfortunately the rain continued and we didn't see many seabirds except for a few Northern Gannets. We did have a wonderful conversation about seabird migration with the official counters. The surf was up, to the delight of the local bottle-nosed dolphins who put on quite a show for us while we searched for birds.

## **Fri., Oct. 14                      Higbee Beach | Two Mile Landing | Stone Harbor**

This morning found us on the road before sunrise, heading to Higbee Beach to witness the infamous morning flight, a local spectacle of Fall migration. Many years ago, birders observed a northward migration of songbirds early in the morning at this location. As it turns out, night-migrating songbirds along the eastern seaboard are often pushed out to sea by prevailing winds. The Cape May peninsula is often the first land these birds see in the morning, and the shortest way back is usually due North. We arrived at dawn and made our way to the watch tower built specifically for morning flight. Yellow-rumped Warblers and Golden-crowned Kinglets were already active, working the nearby trees, as the songs of Carolina Wrens pierced the morning quiet. It wasn't long before small flocks of warblers began to fly overhead. Many landed in the nearby trees, making for easy identification, with Yellow-rumped, Palm and Nashville the most common warbler species we saw. Tree Swallows, Northern Flickers and White-throated Sparrows were also seen in numbers. The official counters were stationed high on the ridge behind us. With a 360-degree view and keen identification skills, they identified most warblers as they flew high above. The official count of the morning had 13 warbler species, with a total of 1,500 individuals. After morning flight, we took a quick walk on Higbee Beach and then walked the Wildlife Management Area Meadows. The Meadows is a great location for smaller songbirds, especially sparrows. On mornings like this, hawks, particularly accipiters and Merlins, work the fields in search of morning prey. A flock of Red-throated Loons chose to take the shortcut over the peninsula, and we got good looks at their brilliant white bellies and unique profile as they flew overhead. Brown Thrashers were also here, announcing their presence with their



unmistakable alarm calls. We left the meadows to the Swamp Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats and headed to breakfast. Breakfast was at the Beach Plum Farm, a beautiful 60-acre organic farm that provides much of the produce to local restaurants. They provide a fantastic breakfast and have a substantial network of trails through the woodlands and pastures on the property, which we explored for an hour after our meal.

Leaving the Beach Plum, we headed up the coast to visit Stone Harbor, with a quick stop at Two-mile Landing. Two-Mile Landing is a small saltmarsh cove that is a good spot to search for Seaside and Nelson's Sparrows. High tide often concentrates small songbirds into the few shrubs and tussocks that remain above the water. Palm Warblers were the bird of the day in the shrubs, but the saltmarsh gave us great looks at Greater Yellowlegs in a pool along with Northern Harriers, sparring Boat-tailed Grackles and Fish Crows, and close-up views of Snowy Egret. The Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor was our main destination on this afternoon. Situated in the middle of a vast saltmarsh, halfway between the mainland the barrier island of Stone Harbor, its elevated boardwalks are perfect for observing shorebirds and herons that typically stay far from populated areas. The Institute did not disappoint as a large flock of Willets were lounging in a pond just off the parking lot. We spent an hour walking the boardwalks and were treated to fantastic, close-up views of an adult Little Blue Heron and a Tricolored Heron that were hunting together in the small pools in the saltmarsh, often in the same binocular view! The elusive Clapper Rail made a rare daytime appearance, as did a couple of Lincoln's Sparrows.

We returned to Cape May and spent the rest of the afternoon at Cape May Meadows and the Hawk Watch platform, which are adjacent and part of the same beach/dune complex. Late afternoons accipiters and falcons become active again, hunting low on the coastal dunes in search of dinner. Between the Meadows and the Hawkwatch platform we saw several Peregrine Falcons, 20+ American Kestrels and many Merlins, Cooper's Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks, all flying right over the perfectly placed hawkwatch platform. The platform is also a great place to observe waterfowl, as the nearby freshwater pond attracts many species of waterbirds. Scoping from the platform we got great looks at Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Gadwall and flyby Surf Scoters. We were even treated to a Brown Pelican and a Snow Goose! We wrapped up a great day of birding with a wonderful meal at Oyster Bay restaurant, one of the best seafood restaurants in Cape May.





**Sat., Oct. 15**

## **Cape Henlopen | Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge**

The ferry trip to Lewes, Delaware, is one of the highlights of the trip. We boarded the 7:30 ferry and used the one-hour crossing as a mini pelagic birding trip. There's always something interesting on the crossing this time of year, and this morning we had flocks of Surf Scoters pass by the front of the ferry. Gulls included the usual suspects of winter plumaged Laughing Gulls, Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls. Royal Terns were present for most of the crossing, keenly watching for churned up fish. One unexpected sighting was a Northern Harrier flying across the bay, just a few feet off the water, much like a Black Skimmer, making it a mystery bird until we spotted its white rump. Brown Pelicans favor the break walls along the Lewes marina, and we spotted three as we came into port.

Once in the town of Lewes, which has its own interesting history dating back to the early 1600s, we headed directly to Cape Henlopen State Park. Cape Henlopen is just across the bay, and even though it's just a few miles south of Cape May, its habitats are starkly different. Here the mainland habitat includes ancient sand dunes now covered with pines and coastal forest species. Japanese Black Pine, planted by the military nearly a hundred years ago, is now a dominant invasive throughout the Delaware shoreline. Our quest bird for today, the Brown-headed Nuthatch, has established its northernmost population here. Walking along the beautiful beach trails, we found large flocks of Red-breasted Nuthatches with 25+ individuals. We walked up to Fort Myers, a World War Two defensive installation, for a quick break, then returned down the trails where we found four very cooperative and vocal Brown-headed Nuthatches along with a few Pine Warblers and 100s of Yellow-rumped Warblers to add to our list. All before Lunch!

Lunch was in town at the Nectar Café, and we enjoyed a walk-through Historic Lewes before heading on to Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge.

Prime Hook NWR is a short drive north of Lewes and contains fresh and saltwater habitats that host great numbers of waterbirds during spring and fall migration. All the usual suspects were here: Canada Goose, Great and Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons, but the stars of the afternoon were 75 American Avocets and a large group of Willets resting in the shallow waters of the impoundments. On the way back from the open water areas, we took a woodland loop trail where we picked up our Eastern Towhee for the trip and took time to enjoy the many woodpeckers that utilize the area. Heading back to the ferry terminal, we made a quick, well-deserved ice cream stop before birding our way back across the Delaware Bay to Cape May. It's Pizza night back in our rooms, always a fun and relaxing evening!



**Sun., Oct. 16**

## **Coral Ave Sea Watch Platform | Monarchs Galore! Cape May Point State Park | TNC Garrett Preserve**

Today would be our last full day of birding for the trip, and the Cape May Birding Festival was in full swing. We participated in two of the festival's keystone events: morning birding aboard a trolley led by the director of the Cape May Bird Observatory Director, Brett Ewald; and a trip to the Rips, where we boarded a large passenger tour boat, venturing out to where the waters of the Atlantic meet the outgoing waters of the Delaware Bay.

Trolly Birding - Our first stop was Coral Ave Dune Lookout. A wonderful small, forested spot along the southern tip of Cape May Point where almost any land or seabird can show up. It's a natural geographic gathering point during migration. We arrived just as the sun was rising and birds were already on the move. We were greeted by 100s of Yellow-rumps feeding in the cedar forest, and flock after flock of Blue Jays flying so high they were little more than twinkling dots in the crisp morning sky. Common and Royal Terns, Cormorants, Northern Gannets, and Surf Scoters were already streaming by the dunes. Soon Cooper's Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels were on the move as well, hunting the dunes as they continued with their southerly migration. We had a full morning visiting many local hotspots. Our last stop was the newest Nature Conservancy preserve in Cape May, the Garrett Family Preserve, a terrific field and coastal forest area that meets migrating birds just as they cross over a large saltmarsh. Here we easily found Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Towhee, American Robins (it took us all week to find them!!), Swamp and Song Sparrows, Brown Thrashers and Northern Mockingbirds. Returning to the hotel, we were greeted by 5,000+ Tree Swallows, which during migration form super flocks that make their way down the coastline in tornado-like fashion. While they'll still eat flying insects during migration, here in Cape May they raid the Bayberry bushes, descending by the hundreds and stripping them of their berries. A fantastic phenomenon to observe and photograph.

After another great seafood lunch, we boarded the American Star for our birding trip to the infamous Rips. The Rips are an upwelling at the mouth of the Delaware Bay where shoals force outgoing tide waters to the surface. This nutrient-rich water attracts birds and fish alike. Not long after leaving port, we spotted a pair of Humpback Whales feeding nearby, and our captain navigated us in for closer views. The whales continued feeding there until we left the area after about 20 mins. Our trip to the Rips was very productive with great looks at Northern Gannets, Great Cormorants, six species of gulls, Parasitic Jaegers, and Brown Pelicans. At the marina and

surrounding shorelines, we had wonderful views of over 200 Sanderlings, and our best looks at American Oystercatchers of the week.



## **Mon., Oct. 17**                      **Departures**

After breakfast, we opted for a change of scenery, driving along the Delaware Bay side of New Jersey on route to the Philadelphia Airport where we unloaded, said our goodbyes to new friends and exchanged contact information.

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Dan Donaldson - DD), Black Skimmers (DD), Little Blue Heron (DD), Whale Tail (DD), Bald Eagle (DD), Northern Mockingbird (DD), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (DD), Cape May Sunset (DD), Northern Pintail (DD), Snowy Egret (DD), Double-crested Cormorants (DD), Brown Pelican (DD), Osprey (DD), Hawk Watch Platform (DD), Gardens (DD), Boat-tailed Grackle (DD), Yellow-rumped Warbler (DD), Little Blue Heron (DD), Exploring the gardens (DD), Black Vultures (DD), Scenic (DD), Group Birding (Rick Weiman) (DD), Bonaparte's Gull (DD), Sanderlings (DD), Herring Gull (DD), Tree Swallows (DD)*