

Cape May: Spring Migration | Trip Report

May 14 – 20, 2023 | by Rick Weiman



With guides Rick Weiman & Greg Butcher, and participants: Bradley, Carol, Caryn, Dana, Elaine, Frank, Jennifer, Joanne, Kathy, Margaret, Melissa & Ron



Sun., May 14

Arrivals in Philadelphia and then on to Cape May, NJ

Welcome to Cape May! We met our group of eight early arrivals at their hotels by noon with Jennifer, Bradley, Ron and Margaret driving directly to Cape May from Maine. Since it was still early in the day, we stopped at a local Wawa for a to-go lunch, and then dined under the pavilion at the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge near the Philadelphia airport. We spent an hour or so birding the woods and wetlands there, seeing a few life birds for our western travelers like Blue Jay and Gray Catbird. An aerial display put on by a pair of Ospreys chasing an immature Bald Eagle away from their nest was riveting to watch. There weren't too many warblers around, but we heard the calls of Blackpoll Warbler, Yellow Warbler and Common Yellowthroat. About two hours later we arrived in Cape May and checked into our oceanside accommodations at the Sea Crest Inn, then after a short rest we headed across the street for a relaxing beach walk. Least Terns and Ospreys were fishing in the shallows, and several American Oystercatchers were busy cleaning out clam shells.



Before dinner we visited the Acme Supermarket to buy provisions for the group for our several early morning in-room breakfasts. It was quite interesting making sure all 14 of us used the same check-out line! Our welcome dinner was just across the street at Oyster Bay, and several of us enjoyed fresh seafood such as grouper, monkfish and linguini with local clams. A good first day to start the tour!

Mon., May 15 Spring Watch | Cape May Point State Park | Salt Marsh Boat Tour

We woke up to a gorgeous spring day with mild temperatures and clear skies. Seven of the group met the guides for a 6:30 a.m. beach walk. Some new birds included Ruddy Turnstones in fresh, breeding plumage, and several gulls: Lesser Black-backed, Laughing, Herring and Greater-Black-backed. The American Oystercatchers and feeding Least Terns were back as well. Several Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins passed by as did a few Brown Pelicans and a Common Loon. After the beach walk, we headed to the locally owned Ocean View restaurant a few blocks from the hotel for a filling breakfast, then visited the NJ Audubon Spring Watch at 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 begins on 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 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 more than 200 species, are recorded during the three-month window.

We observed Common and Forster's Terns, multiple gull species, Northern Gannets, several lingering Purple Sandpipers on the jetty and Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins in the surf. Tom Reed, the CMBO Migration Count Coordinator, gave us an in-depth talk about the spring watch history and counting process, and details on all CMBO's bird monitoring counts in the spring and fall (the other three in the fall are the Cape May Point Hawk Watch, Avalon Sea Watch and the Higbee Beach Morning Flight). He highlighted the data analysis process, now compiled in real time using tablets, and the trends they can determine for individual species of birds. After the spring watch, we visited Cape May Point State Park and its famous lighthouse. We spent some time observing raptors from the hawk watch platform before walking the board walk trail there. We had 25 species



including Mute Swans, a singing male Pine Warbler, Indigo Buntings and a Great Crested Flycatcher. Next, we made the short walk to the beach where we found a perched Brown Thrasher singing over the dunes and an American Oystercatcher on a nest. We then enjoyed another picnic lunch at the Miss Chris marina, making use of their picnic tables before boarding the *Osprey* for our tour of the back-bay salt marshes and estuaries of Cape May. The *Osprey* is a large, enclosed pontoon boat operated by a very knowledgeable Captain Bob and his first mate and naturalist Vince Elia. We had timed the tides well, and the outgoing tide allowed our boat to navigate the shallow channels and creeks that would be impossible at low tide. Departing the marina, we headed to the mouth of Cape May Harbor, passing the Cape May Coast Guard Station. Birds were plentiful and provided close viewing opportunities. We observed several lingering Common Loons, Ruddy Turnstones in breeding plumage and other shorebirds like Dunlin, Semipalmated Plovers, Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers and at least 20 Whimbrel. Ospreys in flight and on nests on man-made platforms and channel markers were plentiful and we had several more dolphin sightings. We observed a pair of Bald Eagles with two brown-feathered chicks that had apparently taken over one of the Osprey platforms, then passed the largest Laughing Gull nesting colony on the east coast, which also contained nesting Common and Forster's Terns. An impressive total of 31 species! Returning to the hotel, we had a short break and then did our group introductions and first species list of the trip in Rick's room. Then we enjoyed a delicious Italian dinner at Sapore Italiano, just down the street from the hotel.

Tues., May 16

Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Ocean City Heron Rookery Return the Favor Horseshoe Crab Rescue

After an early breakfast in our rooms, we headed 40 miles 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 habitat, primarily salt marsh, interspersed with shallow coves and bays, and located along one of the most active segments of the Atlantic Flyway, making it a critical stopover point for seasonal bird migration. A short walk in the wooded area by the parking lot produced Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice and Chipping Sparrows along with Eastern Bluebirds and Northern Mockingbirds. We then walked the short boardwalk marsh trail at the entrance where a very cooperative Willet perched on the railing for all to see. Several Marsh Wrens were singing their cheerful, bubbly songs as they tended to nests in the grasses below us, and most of us got some nice looks at these active little birds. An immature Bald Eagle soared overhead as did many Tree Swallows, Purple Martins and Barn Swallows.



Other highlights on the drive around the refuge included side-by-side comparisons of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, super-close Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers and Semipalmated Sandpipers. We estimated there were more than 800 Semipalms in breeding plumage, some feeding on horseshoe crab eggs. We also had fabulous looks at singing Seaside Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats, with both perching nicely along the roadside for us. We left Forsythe with 63 species of birds, but not before stopping near a forested tract where we heard Ovenbirds and Prairie Warblers singing. As we got out of the car, a Yellow-breasted Chat called and some of us got a quick look at it. We then had a nice lunch at a small, locally owned diner called The Cracked Egg. On our return to Cape May, we visited the Ocean City Visitor's Center where there is an active heron rookery. Here we had the unique experience of looking down at the rookery, an amazing spectacle with dozens of Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibis, White Ibis (now nesting in NJ!) and both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. We observed nest-building behavior and saw many birds incubating their eggs, and all very visible, in fact we learned that Great Egrets and Night-Herons have blue eggs. Also in the mix were a few nesting Little Blue and Tri-colored Herons.

Back in Cape May, we had big plans later that evening, so we had an early pizza party dinner in Rick's room. After dinner we reviewed the species list and Rick 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 pharmaceutical companies who use their blue blood to test vaccines. Then it was on to Pierce's Point Beach, on Delaware Bay, where we met Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ biologist Larissa Smith at 9 p.m. We were there to help her and her husband rescue breeding horseshoe crabs that are overturned by waves or get tangled in man-made structures. Naturalist Journey's guide Hugh Simmons, who lives in the area, also joined us. Without our help, these ancient creatures would likely perish the next day from dehydration and gull predation. We were participating in a volunteer program called, "*Return the Favor*" that has rescued nearly one million horseshoe crabs in the past 10 years by mobilizing volunteers. Our efforts contributed to those numbers by saving 164 distressed horseshoe crabs in 1.5 hours that night. It was quite a memorable experience for all of us who participated, and quite an eventful day as well!

Wed., May 17 TNC South Cape May Meadows | Stone Harbor | The Wetlands Institute

After another delicious breakfast at Ocean View, we met Preserve Manager Damon Noe at The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) South Cape May Meadows preserve. Damon gave us a talk and told us about TNC's efforts to control invasive plant species using techniques such as raising water levels. As we walked the trail system



with him, we learned how he managed the beach area using tall, chain-link fencing to keep mammalian predators out, and man-made cover shields and decoys to attract and protect beach nesting birds. The preserve has an interesting history having undergone a massive restoration project after several large storms caused severe flooding in the early 1990s. In the first phase of the project, nearly 1.4 million cubic yards of sand were used to construct a mile-long, 18-foot-tall, sand dune and widen two miles of beach. During the second phase, freshwater wetlands were restored, and drainage culverts were added to improve water flow, quality and draining. The project also improved nesting bird habitat and was completed in 2007. A new boardwalk trail will be installed providing access to a wetland area.

We walked the loop trail with Damon, finding many of the same shorebirds we had seen previously but with very close views through the bird blind. We added a Least Sandpiper, Black Vulture, Great Blue Heron and Eastern Towhee to the list as we checked off 38 species overall there. After the Meadows, we walked the pollinator gardens of the Cape May Bird Observatory, finding Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Chimney Swifts and Northern Cardinals. Ron spotted a Clapper Rail in the salt marsh while we were enjoying an outdoor seafood lunch at the Two-Mile Landing Crab House. Then we set out for Stone Harbor to visit the Wetlands Institute. On the way, we stopped on Nummy's Island to see more shorebirds, gulls, herons and terns. Once at the institute, we walked the marsh trail and a new, metal boardwalk over the salt marsh. There were many shorebirds present including Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin and several Willets. Also observed were Snowy and Great Egrets and a Little Blue Heron. Clapper Rails teased us with their calls from the tall grasses but refused to show themselves. We met up with Devin Griffiths who told us about the Institute's mission to promote appreciation, understanding and stewardship of wetlands and coastal ecosystems. Before leaving we visited the gift shop, contributing to their fundraising efforts.

After a break at the hotel, we went to dinner at Secondo Panico's in Wildwood and were joined there by Todd Pover, a Senior Biologist for the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ (CWF). After a delicious dinner, Todd gave a presentation on New Jersey's endangered and threatened beach nesting birds: Least Tern, Piping Plover, Black Skimmer and American Oystercatcher. Todd explained what CWF and its volunteers do to help protect these birds during the busy summer nesting season. Naturalist Journeys donates to support this work.



Thurs., May 18

Higbee Beach | TNC Garret Preserve | Cook's Beach

After breakfast in our rooms, we arrived early at Higbee Beach WMA hoping there had been a bit of migration overnight. Guide Hugh Simmons joined us again as well. The Cape May peninsula hosts one of the world's largest migrations each 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. Unfortunately, we quickly surmised that prevailing east winds, which had been the case for most of the week, were directing migrants to more inland locations. But even on a "bad" day, the roughly 1,100-acres of dunes, forests, scrub-shrubs and early successional fields can offer up some exciting birding. We saw some new birds for the trip such as male and female Blue Grosbeaks; Hairy, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers; a Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding on blackberry bush flowers plus more Indigo Buntings feeding in the beautiful, morning sunlight, and a singing Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

We left Higbee Beach for a short drive to the Garrett Family Preserve, one of TNC's newest properties on Cape Island. The preserve is a haven for migrating birds, raptors, bumblebees and butterflies. The seasonal blooms of the wildflower fields provide crucial habitat and food sources for pollinators, as well as excellent photo opportunities for visitors like us. TNC has added many people-friendly amenities including a picnic pavilion, bird blind, artists' easels, and an interactive monarch butterfly statue, which Dana spread his wings with. We found 27 species of birds including nice looks at a Yellow-breasted Chat performing its characteristic flight display, singing Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows and American Goldfinches, NJ's state bird.

Hungry, we made our way to Beach Plum Farm where we settled in for a lovely outdoor brunch. Beach Plum Farm is a beautiful 60-acre organic farm that grows produce for local restaurants and provides a fantastic breakfast or lunch. After our meal we explored the network of trails through the woodlands and pastures on the property adding an immature male Orchard Oriole and a White-eyed Vireo to our bird list.

Leaving Beach Plum, we returned to Cape May to experience the spectacle of spawning horseshoe crabs and watch the shorebirds that depend on these highly nutritious eggs to fuel their migrations north. Based on local reports, we decided to visit Cook's Beach and quickly spotted a flock of 10+ Red Knots mixed in with hundreds of Semipalmated Sandpipers and a few Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers. Red Knot numbers have been steadily declining over the past 20 years, mainly due to the over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs and the resulting loss of eggs for them to feast on. These long-distance migrants are now on the federal endangered species list, and NJ



has imposed a moratorium on horseshoe crab harvesting. Hopefully Delaware and Maryland will soon follow New Jersey's lead. As we watched, a flock of around 30 more Red Knots landed further down the beach. On the drive back down the bumpy road a Wood Thrush called from the forest edge. We visited Two-mile Landing before dinner, a small saltmarsh cove next to the Crab House that is a good spot to search for Seaside and Nelson's Sparrows. High tide concentrates small songbirds into the few shrubs and tussocks that remain above the water. We missed the sparrows, but the saltmarsh gave us our first Black Skimmer of the trip, and great looks at Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Black-bellied Plovers, Boat-tailed Grackles, Fish Crows, calling Clapper Rails and a pair of American Oystercatchers. Dinner was at Harbor View and more delicious, fresh seafood was enjoyed, except for the prime rib Rick ordered.

Fri., May 19 CMBO Trolley Tour | Rea Farm | Shorebird Presentation

After our final in-room, early breakfast, it was time to join the NJ Audubon Cape May Bird Observatory spring festival. We met our leader, CMBO Director Brett Ewald, at 6:30 a.m. at the Grand Hotel for a trolley tour. Our first stop was the Coral Ave. Spring Watch that we had visited earlier in the week. It's a natural geographic gathering point during migration, and we arrived just as the sun was rising and birds were already on the move. For us the highlight was a Parasitic Jaeger that we watched as it harassed a tern, forcing it to drop its fish after a 10-minute chase right in front of us. Two more Jaegers were spotted as well as several Northern Gannets and a very close fly by Brown Pelican. We had a full morning visiting many other local hotspots on Cape May Point including a new forested preserve on Sea Grove Ave. where we found Pine and Prairie Warblers, an Eastern Kingbird and several other songbirds.

After our trolley tour, we headed to the southern tip of Cape May Point at Sunset Beach. Here we saw the remnants of a concrete ship (the Atlantis) that broke free of its mooring and sank after World War I. Maybe building ships out of concrete wasn't such a good idea, although several did make it across the Atlantic Ocean. Now its remains are a great roosting spot for Double-crested Cormorants and several gull species. The Sunset Grille had just opened for the season, so we sat outside overlooking the bay on this beautiful sunny spring day, and many of us enjoyed the Philadelphia-style cheesesteaks. After lunch we headed back to the Grand Hotel for an entertaining presentation by local naturalist, photographer and author Kevin Karlson on Cape May's many shorebird species. With a little time before dinner, we decided to visit the Rea Farm, still called the Beanery by



local birders as lima beans were once grown there. Part of this birding area has some wet woods that occasionally have nesting Prothonotary Warblers, and as we rounded the trail, we heard its loud and distinct, “sweet-sweet-sweet” monosyllabic song. Several of us got a quick flash of yellow feathers before it disappeared and stopped singing. We waited quietly for almost a half hour and were rewarded with good looks at a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and an Indigo Bunting, but not the Prothonotary. We were about to pack it in when Margaret heard the bird further down the trail. After patiently searching, a male suddenly popped into view and then started foraging in front of us, above us and all round us for the next five minutes, a delightful way to end the birding day. Our farewell dinner was at the Bella Vida Garden Café, which serves local food with a Costa Rican flair. The owner, Chris, always takes good care of our groups and we dined in a nice private room. After dinner we had time to race to Sunset Beach to catch the last rays of light, and then we capped off the day with ice cream at Scoop’s before returning to the hotel for our final species list of the trip. We shared our favorite memories and birds of the trip, with the winner being Ruddy Turnstone in its brilliant breeding plumage.

Sat., May 20 Homeward Bound

We woke to a cloudy morning with spotty rain, and we decided to visit Bella Vida Garden Café once again for a relaxing breakfast before heading to the Philadelphia airport. We said goodbye to Ron, Margaret, Brad and Jennifer who were driving, and then packed up the vans and headed north. Most of the group had afternoon flights, so we took our time en route, stopping at the East Point Lighthouse where we found more Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones. We then stopped at the main pool of the Heislerville WMA, which can be excellent for shorebirds, but the high tide had submerged the mudflats and no shorebirds were present. However, Greg spotted birds on a small island in the pool that turned out to be about 200 resting Black Skimmers! Soon after a Great Black-backed Gull landed on the island, flushing them, and giving us the opportunity to watch them in flight as they circled the island, calling loudly and dive bombing the gull until it departed. We had a total of 117 species of birds, a little light for a spring Cape May trip, but not bad when you consider that songbird migration was unusually light for most of the week. Then it was on to the airport for hugs and final goodbyes.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Hugh Simmons - HS), Snowy Egret (Dana Thomas - DT), Indigo Bunting (DT), American Oystercatcher (Rick Weiman - RW), Short-billed Dowitcher (HS), Least Tern (DT), American Oystercatcher (Ron Logan - RL), Willet (DT), Barn Swallow (DT), Northern Mockingbird (DT), Yellow-crowned Night Herons (DT), Eastern Diamondback Terrapin (RW), Common Yellow-throat (RW), Great Egret (RL), Night-time Exploring with the Horseshoe Crabs x 2 (HS), Northern Cardinal female (DT), Red-winged Blackbird (HS), Group (HS), Semipalmated Sandpiper (RW), Prairie Warbler (DT), Group Birding (HS), Blue Grosbeak (HS), Bonaparte’s Gull (HS), Prothonotary Warbler (DT), Common Grackle (HS), Birding the beach (HS), Enjoying the water (RW), Lighthouse (RW)