



CAPE MAY MIGRATION MADNESS September 28 - October 3, 2017

Tour leader: Josh Engel

Cape May in September and October can be a magical place—abundant songbird migrants, wetlands filled with shorebirds, ducks, and waders, and a constant stream of raptors overhead. The weather was magnificent, almost too magnificent, lacking any strong cold fronts that drop so many birds in Cape May. We did well with raptors—from our first moments in Cape May when Merlins and American Kestrels were flying past us at close range in the golden glow of the fading light. We did well with waterbirds, too, with great views of Black and Surf Scoters and a wide range of puddle ducks; excellent studies of most of the expected shorebirds and wading birds, plus the bonus of two Wood Storks circling over the hawkwatch tower. Songbird migrants were not abundant, but we did build up a decent list, with fifteen species of warblers. Highlights included wonderful views of Nelson’s Sparrow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Cape May Warbler.

On top of the birds, we had a great group, ate lots of delicious food, learned the joys of Wawa, spent a lovely day of birding in Delaware, saw an acrobatic Red Fox, and enjoyed the Mid-Atlantic Coast at a beautiful time of year.

TOP 5 BIRDS

- 1 (tie). American Avocet
- 1 (tie). Cape May Warbler
- 3 (tie). Tree Swallow (spectacular numbers)
- 3 (tie). Brown-headed Nuthatch
- 3 (tie). **Nelson’s Sparrow**
- 3 (tie). Merlin (photo below)
- 3 (tie). Bald Eagle/Osprey chase



TRIP REPORT

Day 1: The group converged in Philadelphia and off we were. First stop, hawkwatch. We knew a raptor flight was happening, so we wasted no time. With the sun low behind us, we had incredible views of many Merlin and American Kestrel, both occasionally diving for a dragonfly, along with many Ospreys and a couple of Peregrine Falcons. The weather was beautiful and the birds were flying—a great way to start a Cape May trip!

Day 2: It was with great anticipation that we started the first full day of the trip. Northwest winds overnight with a cold front meant BIRDS. When I stepped outside to get the van, I looked up and two harriers were flying overhead. A good sign, so be sure.

We arrived at Higbee and started our morning's birding. It wasn't quite as gangbusters as we had hoped, but we did eventually get excellent looks at a good diversity of warblers, including Black-throated Green, Prairie, Magnolia, Black-and-white, and Northern Parula. Sharp-shinned Hawks and other raptors were buzzing about and many flickers were passing through. We arrived back to the parking lot where Carolina Wrens put on a great show.



We had great studies of both Yellow (shown here) and Western Palm Warblers.

We then headed to the hawkwatch. Raptors were flying again, but many were very, very high. We did get excellent looks at Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk, and others as they passed low. The Broad-winged kettles stayed high, but were fun to watch in the scope, and much excitement surrounded the two Wood Storks, a real vagrant here, that soared for some time in the distance over the Bay.

After lunch in a local café, we visited another Cape May hotspot, the Beanery. A flock of Black Vultures was gliding low over the parking lot as we arrived. The temperatures had risen by this time, but we found a flock of migrants in the shaded woods. A Blue-headed Vireo was a nice find, and we had further good looks at warblers that we had seen in the morning. After an afternoon rest, we headed to the beach, where a couple hundred monarchs were gathering, feeding on goldenrod in the beautiful

evening light and getting ready to roost in the dunes pines. A mixed flock of Surf and Black Scoters was just off the beach, and we added Carolina Chickadee to our growing bird list. The day ended with a delicious seafood dinner at a harborside restaurant.

Day 3: Today started like yesterday, with Wawa and birding at Higbee Beach. The passerines were slower than yesterday, but there was a nice early raptor movement. We did eventually find a few migrant passerines, including our first Nashville Warbler and great comparisons of Yellow and Western Palm Warblers.

Our next stop was Cox Hall Creek, where we took a nice walk under the oaks. Migrants were scarce, but we did eventually find a cooperative Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a small mixed flock with Northern Parula, Black-throated Green Warbler, and a few others.

We decided on a change of pace after that, moving from the woodlands to the wetlands. We arrived at Stone Harbor and scoped the beach. Lots of people, no oystercatchers. But there were hundreds of Sanderlings, with Red Knot, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstones, and Western Sandpipers mixed in. Nearby wetlands held a flock of Willets with a few Short-billed Dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers, and other wetlands held a good number of wading birds, including many Tricolored Herons and a single Little Blue Heron, along with a close flock of Black-bellied Plovers. We also watched a Caspian Tern catch a fish and eat it mid-air.

We returned to Cape May for the obligatory gift shop stop at the Cape May Bird Observatory visitor center, where a Blackpoll Warbler and a few other migrants greeted us. We finished the day with a Japanese dinner.



We had great views of Brown-headed Nuthatch on our day trip into Delaware.

Day 4: We had a little interstate adventure today, hopping on the day's first ferry across Delaware Bay into the bay's namesake state. We didn't see too much from the ferry itself, but once we disembarked and entered Cape Henlopen State Park, the birding improved. We almost immediately found a flock of the park's specialty songbird, Brown-headed Nuthatch. A good number of passerines were in the same

area, including a beautiful Pine Warbler. We then visited the hawkwatch, where a tornado of Tree Swallows was often in view, a truly impressive sight. An Osprey flew by carrying a fish; we then noticed the Bald Eagle coming after it. In an impressive show of speed and skill, the Bald Eagle chased down the Osprey, forced it to drop its prey into the ocean, and swooped down and picked it up.

After a lovely lunch in Lewes, we headed north to Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge. The low tide and lovely light made for a memorable afternoon trip. American Avocets were abundant, and we enjoyed watching them forage in the mud. Many other shorebirds were present, including Marbled Godwit, White-rumped Sandpiper, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. Ducks were also numerous, including Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, American Black Duck, Northern Pintail, and Ruddy Duck. We had tremendous, close views of Saltmarsh Sparrow, a rare treat given the secretive nature of the species. A Bald Eagle swooped down a caught a fish, showing us that they really can hunt for themselves, too. We finally ventured back to Cape May, after a long, satisfying day.



We had spectacular scope views of Nelson’s Sparrow in Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge.

Day 5: We spent another day around the birding Mecca of Cape May. It was another gorgeous morning as we started with a walk at The Meadows. There was a good variety of ducks present, including great views of American Black Duck, American Wigeon, and Northern Pintail. Swamp Sparrows were along the trail and Virginia Rail was calling from the marsh. Both American and Fish Crows were about, and we got the sense that a raptor movement was getting started, with Merlin, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Osprey flying by.

We then moved over to the state park. A walk along the boardwalk was slow, but a stop on the hawkwatch platform was much more productive. raptors were migrating, and though many of the birds were very high, we had great studies at varying distances at a variety of birds of prey. There were a few warblers feeding in the trees around the platform, including several Tennessee Warblers and a beautiful male Cape May Warbler.

After a delicious lunch at a café in town and a rest back at the hotel, we ventured into the saltmarshes north of Cape May for the afternoon. We found a few American Oystercatchers, but they remained

distant. We had great views of Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, and heard a Clapper Rail, but neither Clapper Rail nor any sparrows would emerge from the marshes for us.

Day 6: For our final morning, we started with a beautiful sunrise at the beach adjacent to our hotel, where gulls and terns often gather. A beautiful Black Skimmer was with the flock, and a number of Royal and Forster’s Terns were flying by. After grabbing breakfast, we returned to Cape May’s famous early morning hotspot, Higbee Beach. But we tried a different trail, which we had all to ourselves. Unfortunately, the east winds overnight meant there were few birds, either. We did have four perched kestrels in view at one time, giving us great comparisons of males and females. There were a few migrants in the understory, including Common Yellowthroat and Swamp Sparrow, and an Eastern Wood-Pewee perched up for us.

We made a couple other brief birding stops around town, finding Black Scoters just off the beach and a few raptors migrating. We also had a wonderful demonstration of Monarch tagging. We ended with some last minute souvenir shopping, and then we were off to the airport, a wonderful trip having come to an end.



Boat-tailed Grackle was one of the saltmarsh specialists that we saw. This one was checking itself out in the car’s mirror.

TRIP BIRD LIST. Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird list. 123 species observed.

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*)

Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*)

Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*)

American Wigeon (*Mareca americana*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

American Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*)

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*)

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*) Nice looks in a mixed scoter flock just off the beach.

Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*)

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

GAVIIFORMES: Gaviidae

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

A few flybys at the hawkwatch platform at Cape Henlopen.

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)

PODICEPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

CICONIIFORMES: Ciconiidae

Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) A real rarity, we saw two circling for quite some time at the Cape May hawkwatch platform.

SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*)

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Cathartidae

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*)

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) A highlight of the trip was watching a Bald Eagle chase down an Osprey and steal its fish.

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae

Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*)

Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)
Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)
Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)
Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

GRUIFORMES: Rallidae

Clapper Rail (*Rallus crepitans*) (Heard)
Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) (Heard)

CHARADRIIFORMES: Recurvirostridae

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) Wonderful views of large numbers of this beautiful shorebird at Bombay Hook NWR.

CHARADRIIFORMES: Haematopodidae

American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*)
Nice if distant views at Stone Harbor.

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)
Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae

Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*)
Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)
Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*)
Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*)
Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)
Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)
White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*)
Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*)
Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*)
Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*)
Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*)
Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) Great views of a flock of "Western" Willets at Stone Harbor.
Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*)

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)
Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*)
Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*)

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*)

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)

Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) Nice views of a single individual on the beach on our final morning.

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

CAPRIMULGIFORMES: Apodidae

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) (Leader only)

CAPRIMULGIFORMES: Apodidae

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) (Leader only)

CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae

Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)

Great views of one at Cox Hall Creek.

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)

Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) Spectacular views at the end of a massive kestrel migration day in Cape May, our first day of the trip.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) Like kestrels, we had many spectacular, close views on our first afternoon of the trip.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Tyrannidae

Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*)

Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*)

PASSERIFORMES: Vireonidae

Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*) Nice views for a couple of us at The Beanery.

Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) Among other sightings was a large roost in Cape May Harbor as we went to dinner one evening.

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) Huge numbers, particularly spectacular at Cape Henlopen.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*)

Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*)

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*) We had wonderful, leisurely views of this localized species in Cape Henlopen.

PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae

Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*)

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*)

Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Polioptilidae

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*)

PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae

Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*)

PASSERIFORMES: Mimidae

Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*)

Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*)

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)

PASSERIFORMES: Mimidae

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae

Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

PASSERIFORMES: Parulidae**Northern Waterthrush (*Parkesia noveboracensis*)****Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)****Tennessee Warbler (*Oreothlypis peregrina*)****Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*)****Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*)****American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*)****Cape May Warbler (*Setophaga tigrina*)** Spectacular views of a male just next to the hawkwatch platform in Cape May.**Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*)****Magnolia Warbler (*Setophaga magnolia*)****Blackpoll Warbler (*Setophaga striata*)****Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*)**

Great views of both "Western" and "Yellow" Palm Warblers.

Pine Warbler (*Setophaga pinus*)**Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*)****Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*)****Black-throated Green Warbler (*Setophaga virens*)****PASSERIFORMES: Passerellidae****Nelson's Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*)** We had great views of this difficult-to-see species at Bombay Hook NWR.**Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*)****Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)****Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)****Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*)****PASSERIFORMES: Cardinalidae****Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)****Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*)****Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) (Leader only)** Heard and seen fleetingly at Higbee Beach.**PASSERIFORMES: Icteridae****Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)****Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)****Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*)** Nice views of this saltmarsh specialist.**PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae****House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)****PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae****House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)**

MAMMAL LIST

Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*)

Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*)

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) We had great views of a Red Fox, even watching it effortlessly jump a fence, in the dunes at Cape Henlopen.

River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) A couple of people saw one on a mudflat at Bombay Hook NWR.

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)



We saw a spectacular congregation of Monarch butterflies in the Cape May Dunes, including this tagged individual. We also had a personal tagging demonstration, thanks to Louise Zemaitis.