



# Cape May Migration Madness

September 24-29, 2019

**Tour leader: Jason Weckstein**

[Click here for the Cape May tour webpage](#)

Cape May is one of the best places in the country to watch migration unfold. This is a trip that gets to take it all in—migration in Cape May, waterbirds along the Jersey Shore, and a day across the bay in Delaware to see what avian riches the other side of the river holds. This trip featured some excellent raptor migration, 14 species of warblers, 19 species of shorebirds, some wonderful coastal specialties like Saltmarsh and Seaside Sparrows, American Oystercatcher, and Black Skimmer, and even a few local rarities. Read on for the day-by-day report.

### Top 5 birds as voted by the group

1. Northern Harrier
2. Common Loon
3. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
4. Green Heron
5. Eurasian Wigeon

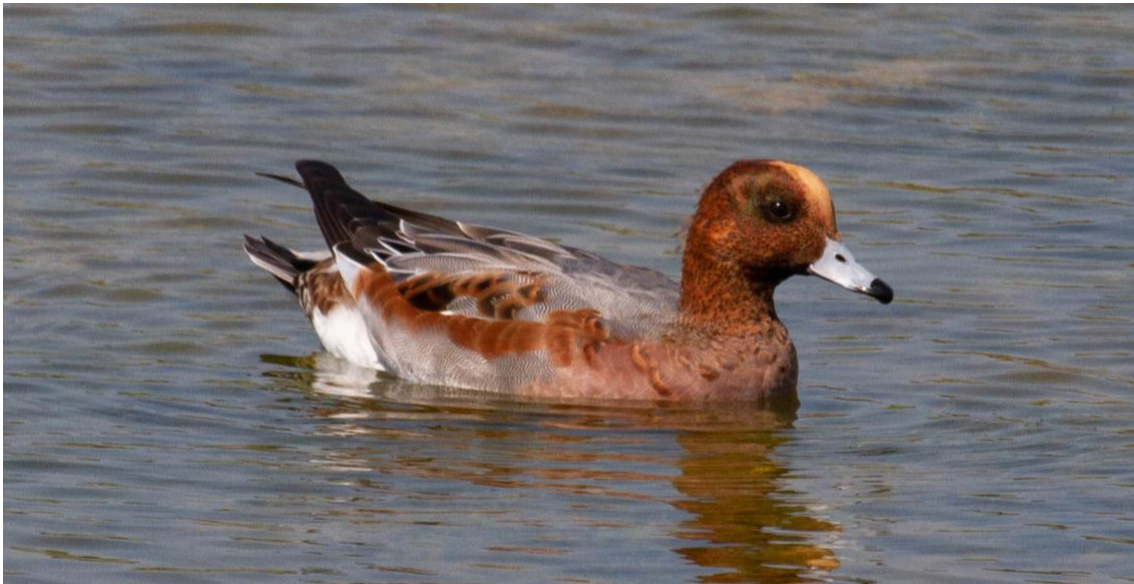


*A Peregrine Falcon flies by the Cape May Hawkwatch. Photo by Jason Weckstein.*

**Day 1, Sep 24. Arrival, to Cape May.**

An earlier than usual pickup at the airport meant that we arrived in Cape May earlier than usual for the first day of the tour. We made a brief stop at a Wawa for some much-needed lunch, then headed straight to the Cape May State Park hawk watch, where we enjoyed fantastic views of several raptor species. Immediately after exiting the car, five American Kestrels flew overhead and one easily snatched a migrating dragonfly out of the air. The kestrel spectacle continued with a few Merlins sprinkled in for good measure. Other raptors included Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Bald Eagle, and Broad-winged Hawk. We also had a smattering of ducks and herons on Bunker Pond.

After nearly 30 minutes we decided to spend the remainder of the day at the Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Meadows. Although the freshwater marsh at this site was low on water we still managed a handful of shorebirds (Least Sandpiper, both yellowlegs, and Killdeer), a few ducks (Blue-winged Teal, Mallard, and American Black Duck), and the falcon and Osprey spectacle continued. We also had our first Bobolinks of the trip and first warbler species (Western Palm Warbler). We walked the beach in hopes of seeing some birds but were rewarded by some spectacular breaking waves and a slew of ghost crabs. Other non-bird critters seen at the meadows included a muskrat and a large common snapping turtle. We ended the first couple of hours birding in Cape May with 39 species of birds. Not a bad way to start a fantastic birding trip. We ended with a yummy dinner at Lucky Bones Backwater Grill.



*Eurasian Wigeon. Photo by Jason Weckstein.*

**Day 2, Sep 25.**

We started our day with a quick trip to Wawa for breakfast and coffee and headed to Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area to look for migrant songbirds for the first few hours of

morning. The radar from last night indicated that good numbers of migrating perching birds were in the air which can often mean an epic flight of migrant songbirds. Although the morning perching bird flight wasn't insanely epic we did see decent numbers of migrant songbirds including 12 species of warblers and 3 species of vireos.

After Higbee we made a quick stop at Sunset Beach to check out the concrete ship and then spend a while at the Cape May Bird Observatory Northwood Center, where we had nice looks at a variety of warblers. Then we were off to pick up some yummy sandwiches at Westside Market for a picnic at the Cape May State Park Hawk Watch. We watched hawks for a little while and then took a walk on the boardwalk trails at the park where we enjoyed more raptors, some waterfowl, and more warblers! The hawk flight was strong today and we saw Bald Eagles soaring overhead at almost every stop we made today, plus we saw good numbers of Broad-winged Hawks and had great comparisons of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks flying overhead.



***Brown Pelicans. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***

We then headed over the Cape May Point neighborhood to look over the "rips" for seabirds. On the beach at we had nice views of Common and Forster's terns, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and we had one Brown Pelican flyby. We were also treated to nice views or 1 or 2 Parasitic Jaegers chasing after the terns in the rips. We ended the day with a drive to salt marsh at Nummy's Island and the Wetlands Institute where we added Tricolored Heron to the trip list and saw a large group of "Western" Willets among other things. We returned to the hotel to freshen up before a delicious Italian dinner at Sapore Italiano.

### **Day 3, Sep 26.**

After our now traditional breakfast stop at Wawa we headed to the Beanery, a famous location for many mega rarities over the years. The birding was unfortunately a bit slow and we only ended up seeing 3 warbler species. However, we did manage to see several resident species

including multiple Hairy Woodpeckers and we had excellent views of Merlin perched, which is always a treat.

It was pretty clear after our ~1hr of birding there that the migrants from yesterday had mostly moved on and that little new movement filled in the hole. We opted to drive over to Cox Hall Creek Wildlife Management Area, which is located in Cape May County, but off of Cape Island. Here we hoped we might find some remnant migrants and perhaps more resident birds. We ended up seeing only two warbler species here, including Black-throated Green Warbler (new for the trip) and a couple of Pine Warblers. We saw decent numbers of resident forest and scrub birds such as Brown Thrasher, Red-bellied Woodpecker, etc.



***Common Snapping Turtle. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***

After a sit-down lunch, we headed to the Cape May Bird Observatory Northwood Center, and the forest patch there was basically birdless. Given that earlier in the morning a Eurasian Wigeon was reported from one of the second Plover Pond, we decided to head to Cape May Point State Park where we could look for raptors and hopefully find the wigeon. Agnes was tired from miles of walking and opted to enjoy the ocean breeze on the hawk watch platform. Jason and Laura walked to the plover ponds where they hit the jackpot, finding a number of new birds for the trip including Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, the Eurasian Wigeon, and even better, a flock of 25 White Ibis (an uncommon visitor to the Cape May area). The ibis flew towards the hawk watch for all to see, including Agnes! We also watch a young *tundrius* Peregrine Falcon unsuccessfully strafe the ducks in front of us, which was spectacular. After hiking back to the hawk watch platform Jason and Laura opted to enjoy the ocean breeze with Agnes in the hopes that something interesting would fly by.

Hawkwatching was much slower than the previous days. However, our waiting paid off when the hawk counter yelled out “Common Raven.” This is still a rare bird southern New Jersey and we had nice scope views of this bird being harassed by some crows. It was an excellent comparison of the tail and wing shape differences between the crows and Common Raven. Although the day was the slowest yet, it was the best in terms of rarities! Even a “slow” day in Cape May is fantastic! We ended the day with some saltmarsh and beach birding around Stone Harbor and Nummy’s Island.



© Jason D. Weckstein

***Snowy Egret and its reflection. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***

#### **Day 4, Sep 27:**

Today we woke up bright and early to catch the 7am Cape May-Lewes Ferry. The ferry ride was enjoyable, and we managed a couple of nice birds along the way including a single Parasitic Jaeger which flew well above the water in front of the ferry. A nice flock of Brown Pelicans flew close, providing excellent views. As we approached the Lewes, Delaware, ferry dock, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull flew in behind the boat... not a bad way to start our Delaware bird list.

We immediately drove to Cape Henlopen State Park after exiting the ferry and began birding the area around the campground. The dune/pine forest was very quiet, but eventually found some Carolina Chickadees and Tufted Titmice and among them found our first Brown-headed Nuthatch. Eventually we found several more and had fantastic views of this very cool bird at

the edge of its range. After a brief stop at the nature center to enjoy their aquaria of local fish, we went to the hawk watch platform. Winds were out of the south, so most of the hawks were distant and views were not as epic as in Cape May. However, we had excellent views of Blue Grosbeak and had a Common Loon fly over, adding two new species to the trip list. From here we headed to the fishing pier to see if there were any interesting birds in the bay and quickly added Surf Scoter among other birds.



***Forster's Tern. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***

We then packed it up and drove into Lewes for a nice café lunch and then drove about 1 hour to Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, where we spent the rest of the day. Bombay Hook was spectacular, in particular for shorebirds and we ticked off American Golden Plover, Hudsonian Godwit, Marbled Godwit, hundreds of American Avocets, among many other shorebirds. After nearly 12 hours of birding we began the 2.5 hour drive back to Cape May for dinner and had a spectacular Flounder dinner at the Lobster House. It was an excellent day!

#### **Day 5, Sep 28.**

It was another magical day of birding in South Jersey. This morning after picking up breakfast we drove about one hour north to Forsyth (Brigantine) National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge has a fantastic 8 mile loop road that is always loaded with birds. At the beginning of the loop road, we had nice scope views of several close Seaside and Saltmarsh Sparrows. In fact, some of our views had individuals of both species side by side for comparison. We drove up the road a ways until we came upon a group of shorebirds roosting in the freshwater marsh on the inside of the dike road and picked out a few things like Stilt Sandpiper, which was new for the trip. There were huge numbers of Forster's Terns around and we lucked into a Parasitic Jaeger, chasing down one of these terns to steal its food. This is normally something that one only sees offshore, so seeing this unfold over the Forsyth NWR dike road was amazing. The bird proceeded to fly out over the bay after it finished chasing the poor little tern. We enjoyed numerous ducks, wading birds such as Glossy Ibis, and a plethora of shorebirds including

American Golden Plover. We even got to watch a Peregrine Falcon harassing and hunting a large group of shorebirds feeding in the freshwater marsh.

We finished birding Forsyth around midday and headed back to Cape May where we took a mid-afternoon break. We headed back out to bird Cape May Point State Park in the late afternoon and it was unfortunately slow, but we managed to add Yellow-rumped Warbler, a new species for the trip. We ended the day enjoying an outdoor dinner and sunset, and some birds, at Coral Avenue beach overlook. What a great way to end a fun day!

### **Day 6, Sep 29.**

First thing in the am, after a quick breakfast stop, we headed to the Cape May beach to find Black Skimmer, which we had managed to miss so far this trip. We walked out to the beach and saw a flock far up the beach and decided to drive up the beach to see them more closely. We walked back to the car and immediately noticed that the flock was up in the air and that they were flying toward the beach where we were parked. We turned around and headed back to the beach and were rewarded by fantastic in flight and perched views of ~250 Black Skimmers and a handful of Common, Forster's, and Royal terns. It was a great opportunity to closely study all four of these species.

After enjoying these beach birds, we headed to Cape May Bird Observatory Northwood Center to bird the woods before we headed back to Philadelphia. We managed to find four species of warblers, American Redstart (which ate a moth 5 feet from us), Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler, and Common Yellowthroat. Plus we finally got good solid looks at Downy Woodpecker. A quick stop at the point parking lot yielded a few Sharp-shinned Hawks and a Kestrel and then we headed out for the drive to Philly.

All in all it was a great tour and showed why Cape May is so special in the fall!



***Osprey. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***

**BIRD LIST.** 125 species. Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2019 update. Former or alternate English names are in parentheses. (H) = heard only; (L) = tour leader only. The global IUCN red list status is listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>
Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus crepitans</i>
Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
American Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Hudsonian Godwit	<i>Limosa haemastica</i>
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>
Semipalmated Sandpiper (NT)	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>



Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>
Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>

White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>
Philadelphia Vireo	<i>Vireo philadelphicus</i>
Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>
Brown-headed Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pusilla</i>
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>
Seaside Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i>
Saltmarsh Sparrow (EN)	<i>Ammospiza caudacuta</i>
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>
Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>
Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>
Magnolia Warbler	<i>Setophaga magnolia</i>

Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>
Chestnut-sided Warbler	<i>Setophaga pensylvanica</i>
Blackpoll Warbler (NT)	<i>Setophaga striata</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>
Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>
Black-throated Green Warbler	<i>Setophaga virens</i>
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>

MAMMAL LIST. 3 species.

Gray Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*  
Muskrat - *Ondatra zibethicus*  
Bottle-nosed Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*



***Brown-headed Nuthatch is only found on the Delaware side of the Delaware River. Photo by Jason Weckstein.***