



## Cape May Migration Tour Trip Report 2022

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Yet another fantastic Cape May tour in the books! This short but sweet tour to the Jersey coast was full of birds that were thoroughly enjoyed by this great group. Cape May is an adorable vacation town full of great restaurants, historic homes, a scenic coastline and a thriving community of birdwatchers that have been drawn to Cape May for its incredible annual migration of birds that sometimes can be seen in truly epic numbers- tens of thousands of individuals on a single day! This year, the tour started off with a bang... the bang of an epic N'easter storm that had been wracking the coast for days before the tour even begin! With Cape May still having a steady rain for our first morning we lingered over a hearty breakfast and then started our birding further up the coast at Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is a sprawling coastal saltmarsh with an expansive wildlife drive that would allow us to escape quickly back into the van if the rain started up again! Thankfully the rain held off the entire time we were there, and the storm made for some excellent birding as so often disturbed weather can do. With the high tide combined with storm surge, many birds were pushed up close to the road and we had some great looks at shorebirds including both Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers and White-rumped Sandpipers. Ducks were prolific, with American Black Ducks, Northern Pintails and Green-winged Teal, and the wading birds were really off the hook with hordes of Great and Snowy Egrets along with unusually large concentrations of both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons.



*Yellow-crowned (L) Black-crowned (R) Nighthérons © Skye Haas*

Storm surges are also a great time to look for secretive marsh sparrows- namely Seaside Sparrows, Saltmarsh Sparrows and Nelson's Sparrows. We stopped late in the afternoon along Two-mile Landing just off the Cape Island and were treated to some good looks at Seaside Sparrows as well as a handsome curiosity of a bird. It showed well for photographs which is good because at the time, I was waffling back and forth- was it a Saltmarsh or a Nelson's Sparrow? These closely related species are similar looking but this individual was a real head-scratcher. I had to do some deep digging into photo databases to help me piece together this puzzle as well as have a chat with Michael O'brien; one of the leading bird experts of North America who like so many other talented birders, lives right here in Cape May. He concurred with my suspicion that this was a rarely documented hybrid of a Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sparrow! Known to only interbreed in a few locations, very few photos of this hybrid combination exist and there is no doubt that this was the bird of the trip for me!



*Saltmarsh x Nelson's Sparrow Hybrid © Skye Haas*

The next morning we were up to our elbows in birds! After days of storms, migrants were desperate to start moving again and hawks, warblers, Blue Jays and swallows were streaming along the coastline by the thousands! It was quite the spectacle and the tour participants were amazed that there could be so many birds in the air at once!



*Blue Jay in flight © Skye Haas*

We had to tear ourselves away as we had reservations to take a boat tour of the back bays of the salt marshes of Cape May. Always an amazing time, today was no exception. The mudflats were full of

hundreds of shorebirds. Vast flocks of Black-bellied Plovers, Yellowlegs and Peeps were full of goodies like American Oystercatchers, Marbled Godwits, Red Knots and my first American Avocet for Cape May.



*Marbled Godwit and American Oystercatcher © Skye Haas*

We had some decent looks at Clapper Rail and Tricolored Herons and our only Great Cormorant of the tour. Completing a hearty day of shorebirds, after lunch we went and tracked down a small flock of Hudsonian Godwits that had dropped down into The Nature Conservancy preserve down on Cape May Point. We returned the next day to the southern tip of Cape May; like yesterday, the morning flight of birds streaming along the shoreline was boggling! Easily a thousand Yellow-rumped Warblers passed by, with lesser amounts of Palm, Magnolia, Parula, and Cape May Warblers.



*Northern Parula in flight © Skye Haas*

The number of Tree Swallows in the air was in the thousands and a steady river of Northern Flickers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers had to constantly dodge the roving gangs of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks.



*Northern Flicker © Skye Haas*



*Copper's Hawk © Skye Haas*



*Cape May Warbler © Skye Haas*

Out over the ocean, small flocks of Black and Surf Scoters would cut through the large flocks of Laughing Gulls and Royal and Forster's Terns.



*Forester's Tern © Skye Haas*

Later in the afternoon, we would beat the bushes looking for songbirds that had moved in and were now trying to refuel for the next leg of their journey. Among the Redstarts and Red-eyed Vireos we enjoyed good looks at Black-throated Blue and Green Warblers, Philadelphia Vireo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Blue Grosbeak.



*Black-throated Blue Warbler © Skye Haas*



*Black-throated Green Warbler* © Skye Haas



*Philadelphia Vireo* © Skye Haas

In all, Cape May never disappoints. The sheer number of birds that utilize the area makes quality observations all but guaranteed. From flocks of Black Skimmers wheeling by as we eat breakfast, to the volume and diversity and repeated sights that allows everyone to turn their skills up a few notches to just sitting back and taking in the migration as a whole, to bear witness to something ancient and profound in ease and comfort.



*Cedar Waxwings © Skye Haas*



*Black Skimmers in flight © Skye Haas*

A visit to Cape May in the fall should be on any nature lover's bucket list.