



Cape May Fall Migration Trip Report 2024

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Another wonderful week spent at Cape May on an Eagle-Eye Tour! This always popular trip features a bevy of birds, migrants of all different kinds that are funneled down the Atlantic coastline to the south Jersey shores of Cape May. The weather was pleasant, in fact, we could have made due with a little more disturbed weather to push migrants around but we still had a great trip with 139 species seen. We met up in Philadelphia, where I could already tell as we loaded the vans, that there had been an overnight flight of birds on the cold front that had just rolled over. We hurried our way down to Cape May; a drive of just a couple hours and made our first stop at the Avalon Seawatch, one of the three main fall count programs of the Cape May Bird Observatory and my former job from ten years earlier when I worked for the Observatory. Still in the beginning of the seabird count season, there wasn't too much moving, but we had a couple flocks of Surf Scoters and a handful of Brown Pelicans flying past. A nice surprise was a Red-throated Loon overhead- an abundant species here, but not typically seen till the following month! We then hustled down to Cape May State Park, where the bird observatory conducts one of their other count programs, the famous hawk watch! It was a good afternoon too with many Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks zipping past us as Ospreys and Broad-winged Hawks kettled higher above. A nice collection of falcons were seen with over a dozen American Kestrels and five each of Merlins and Peregrine Falcons darting by.



Cooper's Hawk © Skye Haas

The next day we went up to the Forsythes National Wildlife Refuge. This expansive coastal marsh features a long autoloop that provides plenty of opportunities to get out and observe the various wetland species using the area. We saw a ton of ducks, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers, American Black Ducks and Northern Pintails. Shorebirds were plentiful too with lots of Greater Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers peppered with a handful of Long-billed Dowitchers among them and some Dunlin. Lots of White Ibis were present, and a handsome Tricolored Heron put on a really nice show for us. A real treat was plucking out a pair of Saltmarsh Sparrows out of the sea of marsh grass, always a good bird to see.



Tricolored Heron © Skye Haas



Great Blue Heron © Skye Haas

We fell into a routine of checking the hawk deck and a few other classic migrant drop-in sites over the next few days- the beauty of migration is that everyday is a new surprise, ya never know what's gonna come flying down the pike. We had another great Kestrel day with over 30 birds in two hours and 10 accompanying Peregrines from the Hawk Deck. A stroll around the State Park grounds yielded a fun find in the form of a Common Gallinule



Cape May Hawk Watch © Joel

Toland One of the primary ecological features of Cape May are the extensive salt marshes and sandy beach shorelines that line the edges of the Cape. We spent some time checking out these regions and were well rewarded for our efforts! First we positioned ourselves at a marshy sea outlet and

witnessed a spectacle of shorebirds coming into forage on the exposed mud. An absolute treat was the flock of a few hundred Halloween colored American Oystercatchers. Also present were tons of Black-bellied Plovers, Sanderlings, Yellowlegs and Dunlins. Among them we picked out a Marbled Godwit and an American Golden Plover. Very exciting was the extended views of a Clapper Rail that had stepped out of the marsh grass. We then headed over to a nearby beach where we had some first rate looks at one of the flagship birds of Cape May, a flock of Red Knots. These chunky shorebirds have unfortunately gotten a lot of press in recent years for their steep declines so it was a real treat to have a flock of almost 50 birds casually foraging in front of us.



Birding at Cape May © Joel Toland

Our penultimate day of birding Cape May was quite the eventful one. A cold front rolled over the night before, and that meant conditions were finally good for visiting the third count program run by CMBO, their songbird Morning Flight count. When the conditions are right, migrating passerines and other smaller birds find themselves trapped at the end of the peninsula of south Jersey and engage in a morning reorientation flight northwards off the peninsula. It was a good day for a flight and we had hundreds of warblers, mostly Yellow-rumped, but also additional species like Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Palm and Northern Parula whizzed by overhead.



Northern Parula © Skye Haas

A couple Blue-headed Vireos were a nice treat as were a few Indigo Buntings. But the real show was in the amount of Northern Flickers migrating, with several hundred passing us by in just an hour! Handfuls of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers came through as well and a single Red-headed Woodpecker was an exciting surprise. We then had to hurry off to catch our boat! We had signed up for a three-hour tour of the backwater bays and saltmarshes of Cape May, and as always, this was a real highlight of the entire tour. At the sea inlet along a long rock breakwall, we had a huge flock of Black-bellied Plovers and American Oystercatchers. At the very end of the wall, tucked in with the pelicans was a pair of Great Cormorants- a great get! We don't always see this species every year.



Boat trip © Joel Toland



Great Cormorant © Skye Haas

Further into the marsh, we were treated to a host of wading birds, White Ibis, Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. A real surprise was a lingering Eastern Willet, typically gone from North America by this date. A few Clapper Rails were seen moving through the reeds and at one point, the boat captain pushed the nose of the boat right into the reeds where we had some fantastic looks at Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sparrows!



Willet © Skye Haas



Nelson's Sparrow © Skye Haas

For our final morning at Cape May, we did something I don't normally do, set up scopes out on the Delaware Bay. But there was a cool and unusual push of Parasitic Jaegers migrating out of the bay that morning and we actually were able to get some good looks at a few of these normally hard to see seabirds moving past. A steady stream of terns kept us occupied while we waited and a few flocks of ducks like Northern Shovelers and Black Scoters. A fun surprise was a small flock of

Eastern Meadowlarks that came migrating down the beach in front of us! We finished up at the Hawk Count, where a good push of Cooper's Hawks were going by and a few of us saw the only Red-shouldered Hawk of the trip while the rest of the group did one last songbird walk through the woods.



Great Black-backed Gull © Skye Haas



Royal Tern © Skye Haas



Great Egret © Joel Stone

Cape May is always a wonderful time and this was another fantastic visit for Eagle Eye Tours! [Cape May migration bird list 2024](#)