



Field Guides Tour Report

CAPE MAY MEGAN'S WAY II 2014

Oct 6, 2014 to Oct 12, 2014
Megan Crewe & Tom Johnson

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



The iconic Cape May lighthouse is a beacon for birders in fall. There can't be many better places on this planet to watch birds in early October. Photo by guide Tom Johnson.

Every week during migration is different, and on this tour we spend five days covering a relatively small area at the southern tip of New Jersey hoping to capitalize on whatever conditions bring migrants to the coast. Well, we struck it rich this week, with several days of strong migration and lots of birds to enjoy. Prevailing northwest winds set us up with impressive morning flights of songbirds and midday streams of raptors.

We spent much of our time through the week focused on the protected habitats near the very tip of Cape May, primarily Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area and Cape May Point State Park. At Higbee Beach, we marvelled at the post-dawn stream of songbirds over the trees and endeavored to pick out the goodies from the hordes of sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers in the beautiful dune forest. Friday, Day 5, was particularly overwhelming - we spent several hours in the morning covering a quarter mile track along the edge of the woods, scattering flocks of sparrows with every step! There were simply too many birds to look at, a problem that I think everyone was happy to have. At Cape May Point, we focused a bit more on the high flying birds, scanning the kettles of accumulating raptors and picking out a surprising variety of species ranging from Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels all the way up to Bald and Golden Eagles.

Trips farther afield took us on a pontoon boat into the back bay and salt marsh of Wildwood, and a drive up toward Atlantic City led us to the wildlife drive at Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (aka Brigantine or just "Brig"). In addition to many ducks and other marsh birds, we had several quality encounters with American Bitterns at Brigantine, perhaps a precursor to the evening's migration. While we were toasting the week and enjoying our last dinner together at a lovely Italian restaurant in West Cape May, a nocturnal takeoff of epic proportions took place, with hundreds of American Bitterns, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Great Blue Herons, and other birds taking to the sky over Cape May. Enchanted by this, we took turns leaving the dinner table and scurrying to the adjacent parking lot next to the restaurant to hear the growls and barks of the heron flight and even to see some of the birds illuminated in the streetlights.

Cape May in fall also means a good chance at seeing rarities, and we did well on this tour, seeing Eurasian Wigeon, Rufous Hummingbird, and Loggerhead Shrike.

Megan and I had a great week - you can imagine how exciting it is for us as guides to be at one of the world's migration hotspots with perfect weather conditions and a delightful bird show to match. We hope you'll delight in the memories, and we look forward to birding with you again in the future.

Thanks,

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

BRANT (*Branta bernicla*) – These were the pale-bellied "Atlantic" Brant.

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – Unfortunately, these invaders are rather common in Cape May Point. [I]

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*)

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – We had repeated, excellent views at 3 different rusty-headed males mixed in with American ducks on Bunker Pond in front of the Cape May Hawkwatch. These rarities have actually become a regular feature of fall and winter on the Cape in recent years.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – Hundreds were on the ponds around Cape May Point, entertaining us with their squealing whistles and courtship antics.

AMERICAN BLACK DUCK (*Anas rubripes*) – We found several of these East Coast specialties in the marshes of Brigantine and also on the Osprey boat trip near Wildwood Crest.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Anas discors*)

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

SURF SCOTER (*Melanitta perspicillata*) – Though most arrive later in the fall, we did find a few of these mixed in with larger numbers of Black Scoters around Cape May Point.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – These seaducks were present in small groups around the jetties of Cape May Point.

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – A small flock of turkeys along New England Rd. near Higbee Beach put in an appearance early one morning during our first drive of the day.

Gaviidae (Loons)

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

AMERICAN BITTERN (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) – Several posed for us at Brigantine on the last day, and then we had the unusual experience of hearing and seeing groups of migrating bitterns flying over Cape May just after dark on the tour's last evening.

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*)

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Egretta caerulea*) – A white immature gave us repeated, extended views in Cape May Point on four different days.

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*) – We found this handsome heron in the marshes of Stone Harbor.

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*)

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – We saw these in a few places during the day, including Brigantine. The night flight on the tour's final evening included lots of these squawkers.

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – Several of these bizarre herons were standing around in the marsh near the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor, overseeing the high-tide shorebird roost.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*) – The frantic flaps, short tails, and white primary patches helped us pick out these vultures from flocks of Turkey Vultures. Both species were common on this tour.

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – These formed the core of soaring groups of raptors during the midday hours in Cape May Point.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Common - we saw these migrating and fishing every day.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – We were thrilled to see a striking juvenile circling overhead with a Bald Eagle at the South Cape May Meadows. The species is an uncommon but increasing migrant throughout the region as the eastern population experiences an upswing.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*)

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*) – This is the frequently most common small raptor in the sky through the peak of fall migration in Cape May. We saw dozens of these, often in comparison with larger Cooper's Hawks

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*) – We had many memorable looks at this medium-sized *Accipiter* throughout the tour. Aggressive tawny-naped, round-tailed immatures made for nice comparisons with Sharp-shinned Hawks.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Once a rare sight here, now Bald Eagles are almost common! We had good views of immatures and adults, and even had the opportunity to compare a large-headed, flat-winged Bald Eagle to a small-headed, dihedral-soaring Golden Eagle over the Meadows.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK (*Buteo platypterus*) – Broad-winged Hawks like to avoid water crossings, so those that end up in Cape May are frequently trapped at the end of the peninsula for multiple days. We saw small kettles of this small *Buteo* over Cape May Point on several occasions.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

CLAPPER RAIL (*Rallus longirostris*) – One of the Atlantic Coast subspecies emerged from the salt marsh and paraded around on the mud near Two Mile Landing in Wildwood Crest. These birds are much grayer and less contrasty than those on the Gulf Coast (or King and Ridgway's Rails).

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus palliatus*) – These striking shorebirds greeted us on several occasions - their loud "weeeee" calls often herald a flyby along a beach.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

SEMPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

SOLITARY SANDPIPER (*Tringa solitaria*) – One individual bobbed around a small pool in a wooded lot in Cape May Point. We had beautiful views with reflections of fall foliage forming a colorful background.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

WILLET (*Tringa semipalmata*) – We saw a flock of lanky, pale gray "Western" Willets roosting at high tide at the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor. The local breeders are "Eastern" Willets, but most of those leave by the end of the summer (and we saw none on this tour), just as migrant "Westerns" are arriving.

MARbled GODWIT (*Limosa fedoa*) – Two of these large cinnamon shorebirds fed on the flats near Nummy Island on our first visit to Stone Harbor. These are uncommon fall migrants in the region.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*)

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus*) – A handful of "Gray" knots accompanied larger groups of Dunlin and Sanderlings on the beaches of Stone Harbor and Sea Isle City.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*)

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

SEMPALMATED SANDPIPER (*Calidris pusilla*) – We had nice comparisons with longer-billed Western Sandpipers, illustrating the very subtle differences between these peeps.

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*) – These were primarily on the beach in Sea Isle City and Stone Harbor.

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus griseus*) – This is the common migrant dowitcher in Cape May. By October, most have passed through, so numbers are a bit lower and you need to maintain vigilance for the less-common Long-billed Dowitcher.

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – A flock of 16 of these big chunky dowitchers were feeding and flying around calling ("PEEK!") in the impoundments at Brigantine on our last day.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – Still common, though numbers dwindled substantially since the summer months.

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*)

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus*) – These European invaders are a regular feature on the beaches in Cape May, especially near the jetties around the Point. We were able to compare them to their larger, darker-backed, and generally more menacing relatives, Great Black-backed Gulls.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*)

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – These huge terns entertained us on several days, including a few close flybys on Bunker Pond in Cape May Point.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – A few of these long-distance migrants were peppered through the silvery flocks of abundant Forster's Terns.

FORSTER'S TERN (*Sterna forsteri*) – Abundant on the beaches and offshore.

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*) – Though they don't breed regularly in New Jersey, Royal Terns often disperse northward after breeding in Delmarva and farther south, and are a regular fall feature on the beaches and over nearshore waters.

BLACK SKIMMER (*Rynchops niger*) – A dense flock of over 400 skimmers was a feature of the beach adjacent to our hotel in the city of Cape May.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [I]

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*)

Apodidae (Swifts)

CHIMNEY SWIFT (*Chaetura pelagica*)

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus colubris*) – A few immatures were zipping around the gardens of Cape May Point.

RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD (*Selasphorus rufus*) – This rarity showed up at a beautiful garden in Cape May Point (thanks to Bill and Edie Schuh!), and we were lucky to compare this rusty-flanked bird to nearby Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – Numbers of migrants augment the sparse breeding population here. We had lots of flyover views of these loud piscivores.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – This tour coincides with the arrival of numbers of migrant Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in Cape May. These boreal forest breeders often concentrate to feed at sap wells on the elm trees in the Point.

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*)

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*)

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*) – This beautiful woodpecker is a common migrant through Cape May - the yellow flashes of wings and tails of dozens of these handsome birds loping over the dune forest is an unforgettable sight.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – Common migrant - we saw loads of these small, lightweight falcons migrating through. This bird is almost gone as a breeder at the southern tip of New Jersey, but becomes abundant from September through October.

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – Less common than kestrels, these dark bullet falcons are a constant source of terror for songbirds and other raptors in Cape May. We saw these every day, often harassing other birds.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – This is the raptorial emblem of Cape May and can be a common sight here, a major upswing since the population crashed several decades ago during the DDT era. We saw these impressive large falcons every day.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus virens*) – A few of these flycatchers were at the tail end of their migration window through Cape May.

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*)

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – Though this predator used to be regular in south Jersey, it is now very rare. One hunting from treetops at the impoundments at Corbin City in Atlantic County was an impressive sighting (and a state bird for Tom).

Vireonidae (Vireos)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*)

BLUE-HEADED VIREO (*Vireo solitarius*)

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*) – These neotropical migrants often rivaled warblers for the most numerous members of songbirds flocks. Most were brownish-eyed immatures.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Early October marks the peak of Blue Jay migration in Cape May, and we saw LOTS! Loose flocks of these slow-flying corvids floated overhead, and with some attention, we could pick out jays carrying acorns along for a migration snack.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

FISH CROW (*Corvus ossifragus*) – We found these small eastern crows every day. They often fly around the coast in small flocks, announcing their presence with nasal "uh-uh" calls.

Alaudidae (Larks)

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*) – These open-land birds are overall prettyscarce in Cape May, but are a regular feature at the Cape May County Airport.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – These swarmed overhead in tight flocks all along the coast. These flexible swallows are able to switch their diet from flying insects to fruit and can persist quite late into the fall before heading farther south down the coast.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Parus carolinensis*) – This drab, dull-winged chickadee is the resident chickadee species here - Black-capped is quite rare this far south in New Jersey.

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus bicolor*)

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*)

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*)

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Common; vociferous; tough to see. We finally had a few pop out for us at Higbee Beach.

Poliophtidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*)

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – These were arriving from the boreal forest during the tour, often heard giving tinkling sounds from the forests.

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*) – Very common - almost every songbird flock held a kinglet or two.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – We saw a few, predictably perched quietly in the shadows for a few seconds before disappearing back into the forest.

VEERY (*Catharus fuscescens*) – One tired individual soaked in some sun and then retreated to feed in the shadows at Cape May Point State Park on one of our last mornings.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*)

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – Very common! We saw loads of these in all of the wooded patches we birded this week.

BROWN THRASHER (*Toxostoma rufum*)

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) **[I]**

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*)

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*)

TENNESSEE WARBLER (*Oreothlypis peregrina*) – After a bunch of quick flyovers, we finally had one settle down for some brief but solid views in a persimmon tree at Higbee Beach during the big sparrow flight.

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Common is right! We kept checking these to make sure they weren't Connecticut Warblers, but we didn't run into any on the ground this time around.

AMERICAN REDSTART (*Setophaga ruticilla*) – These active warblers flitted around with spread wings and tails, hunting insects around wooded edges. Most were "yellowstarts", but we did see some striking orange and black males.

CAPE MAY WARBLER (*Setophaga tigrina*) – We saw a few of these attractive "Tiger Warblers" in trees in Cape May Point.

NORTHERN PARULA (*Setophaga americana*)

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*)

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – We saw one of these on our last day - October is getting toward the end of their migration window here.

BLACKPOLL WARBLER (*Setophaga striata*)

BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER (*Setophaga caeruleascens*)

PALM WARBLER (*Setophaga palmarum*) – Common; we saw both the brown "Western" and brighter yellow "Eastern" forms.

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – We saw several Pine Warblers seemingly glued to the black pines of Cape May Point.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – This is a superabundant species here in October and November. On multiple mornings during our tour, over 10,000 Yellow-rumped Warblers flew over Cape May.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*) – This subspecies is rare in Cape May, averaging <1 per fall here. One flew by giving its slurred "chew" callnote while we were birding along the dune in Cape May Point State Park.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*)

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

EASTERN TOWHEE (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*)

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*)

FIELD SPARROW (*Spizella pusilla*) – A few of these cute, shy sparrows posed for us at Higbee Beach.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

SALTMARSH SPARROW (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) – We had excellent up-close views of this salt marsh specialist at Nummy Island in Stone Harbor during a high tide marsh romp.

SEASIDE SPARROW (*Ammodramus maritimus*) – After some work, we saw some of these large-billed, dark salty sparrows at Nummy Island.

SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*)

SWAMP SPARROW (*Melospiza georgiana*) – We were able to study good numbers of these colorful sparrows during the heavy flight at Higbee.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) – If we saw one, we saw a hundred. We certainly had our fill of these chunky sparrows during a big flight at Higbee Beach.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) – We saw the expected "Eastern" race (ssp. *leucophrys*) at Higbee Beach during the morning sparrow fallout.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

SCARLET TANAGER (*Piranga olivacea*) – A few yellow-olive "October tanagers" posed, including one particularly cooperative one near Cape May Bird Observatory at Lily Lake.

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

ROSE-BREADED GROSBEAK (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*)

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – These buzzed by us in flight at Higbee Beach on a regular basis. Most are fairly nondescript buff-brown in October.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

BOBOLINK (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) – We lucked into a few flyovers that "bink"ed their way across the sky. Next stop, Venezuela!

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*)

RUSTY BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus carolinus*) – A few of these declining boreal breeders flew over us in the mornings. The best views were during the sparrow fallout at Higbee Beach.

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – These were mostly the coastal "Purple" Common Grackles. "Bronzed" Grackles from west of the Appalachian front typically arrive in numbers a bit later in the fall.

BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus major*) – We saw these big handsome grackles in the Atlantic coastal marshes on several occasions. This far north, they are closely tied with saltmarsh, rarely straying away from this habitat.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) [I]

PURPLE FINCH (*Haemorhous purpureus*) – A few of these northern breeders "tink-tink"ed their way overhead during morning songbird flights.

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – We had some in-flight views of these boreal breeders and got to hear their "clear" and "zzzzzzzzzzreer" calls in flight. This fall has marked a moderate flight of these irruptive birds south out of their breeding range.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*)

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

MAMMALS

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus*)

NORTHERN RACCOON (*Procyon lotor*)

STRIPED SKUNK (*Mephitis mephitis*)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 154 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa