



Field Guides Tour Report
Fall For Cape May II 2019

Sep 29, 2019 to Oct 5, 2019
Tom Johnson & Mandy Talpas

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



To get views like this of American Kestrels, all we had to do was find a sheltered spot in the dunes of Cape May Point and wait a few seconds! Photo by leader Tom Johnson.

Our week in Cape May started off a bit wet and windy, but when things dried out and the wind switched around to the northwest, migration kicked into full swing! After a fall cold front, Cape May is legendary for the quantity and diversity of migrating birds, and we got to experience this on some truly top days. During the slower moments with rain or wind from the east, we simply embraced the weather and spent time searching the beaches and marshes for coastal migrants and wetland species - there's no way to have a bad birding day here!

We spent much of our time enjoying the visible migration in Cape May Point, and were nearly bowled over by the stream of Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, American Kestrels, and Merlins passing by through the dunes on a few mornings. The flocks of songbirds foraging in the trees around Lily Lake were simply outrageous - Cape May Warblers, Prairie Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and much, much more, often down below eye level.

On a few days, our intrepid group ventured north along the Atlantic Coast to Stone Harbor and the Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, finding Piping Plovers, White-rumped Sandpipers, American Avocets, and a few "salt sparrows," too. A boat trip on the "Osprey" in the back bays of Wildwood gave us a great eye-level perspective on the saltmarsh and allowed us to find flocks of Marbled Godwits, Red Knots, Brown Pelicans, and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons.

Rarities during the week included an Eurasian Wigeon, an American Avocet, a late Gull-billed Tern, two scarce Philadelphia Vireos, and a remarkable (oh, I remarked!) flyover Bohemian Waxwing at Higbee Beach.

It was relaxing to stay in one comfortable hotel for the whole week and invigorating to eat at a diversity of Cape May's finest restaurants (crab cakes, anyone?) - and we had a chance to interact with the welcoming community of birders and naturalists that call Cape May home. Thank you all for joining Mandy and me in the field at Land's End, and I hope to see you out there again soon!

Good birding,

Tom

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).

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – Common and widespread.

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – These introduced waterfowl are established on the Jersey Shore, where they compete with smaller native ducks, geese, and swans. [I]

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*) – A few great views, including at Cape May Point and near the Gull Pond tower at Forsythe NWR.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Spatula discors*) – These small ducks are some of the most southerly wintering waterfowl that pass through Cape May.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – Plenty were circling around, feeding in their peculiar way, at Cape May Point.

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – One of the common large dabblers at this season in Cape May.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – A rust-headed drake was a nice rarity for our tour. We saw him swimming on Bunker Pond on several occasions as he kept company with a flock of American Wigeon.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Mareca americana*) – A common migrant and wintering species here.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Very common.

AMERICAN BLACK DUCK (*Anas rubripes*) – This classic Atlantic coast species prefers salt marsh habitats, but we also saw them mixed in with Mallards in freshwater ponds near the tip of Cape May.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – A few sightings of these long-necked, elegant "puddle grayhounds."

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (*Anas crecca*) – These tiny dabblers were commonly seen in freshwater ponds and marshes.

SURF SCOTER (*Melanitta perspicillata*) – A few flocks passed offshore when we were on the beach at Stone Harbor Point.

Podicipedidae (Grebes).

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – This tiny grebe has a colorful assortment of historical names: Dabchick, Hell-diver, Hen-bill, Water Witch, and Diedapper were all names used to describe this remarkable bird. We saw a few around Cape May Point.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves).

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Common in towns. [II]

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – A widespread, familiar species - seen every day.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos).

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO (*Coccyzus americanus*) – Our three sightings of this reclusive species were very nice. Mandy spotted one high in a tree at the Beanery; later we found one in an isolated red cedar at Nummy Island; a third was skulking along the edge of Lily Lake in Cape May Point.

Apodidae (Swifts).

CHIMNEY SWIFT (*Chaetura pelagica*) – One morning while watching from the edge of Lighthouse Pond at CMPSP, a few of these small aerialists cruised overhead.

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds).

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus colubris*) – Just a few brief sightings; our tour overlaps with the tail end of the main migration period for this species in Cape May.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots).

CLAPPER RAIL (ATLANTIC COAST) (*Rallus crepitans crepitans*) – On a rainy high tide at Shell Bay, we found a few of these "mudhens" patrolling the unflooded reaches of the saltmarsh.

VIRGINIA RAIL (*Rallus limicola*) – We heard the raspy, pig-like grunts from this small rail at Cape May Point. [*]

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets).

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*) – Two of these elegant black-and-white shorebirds were busy sweeping their bills back and forth near the "dogleg" at Forsythe NWR.

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers).

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus palliatus*) – At Stone Harbor Point, we tallied around 300 of these pied beauties.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – This migrant was fairly common in saltmarsh and on coastal mudflats.

SEMPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – We enjoyed good comparisons between this common migrant and the following species on the beach at Stone Harbor Point.

PIPING PLOVER (*Charadrius melodus*) – Yip yip! These ghostly beauties were running around on the sand at Stone Harbor Point, a key breeding and staging location for this rare New Jersey species.

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – Just a few of these familiar plovers graced our travels around the Cape.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

MARBLED GODWIT (*Limosa fedoa*) – Remarkably, we found 26 individuals at Stone Harbor Point, the most I've ever seen at one time in Cape May.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – A common coastal migrant; the species even winters here in small numbers.

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus*) – A few of these champion migrants were mixed in with large flocks of shorebirds in the Wildwood back bay during our boat trip on the Osprey.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – Over 500 wave-chasers entertained us at Stone Harbor Point.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – This was the common gray sandpiper that formed the nucleus of the big shorebird flocks behind Wildwood and Stone Harbor.

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*) – Just a few sightings - in the Cape May Meadows and in Jarvis Sound.

WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER (*Calidris fuscicollis*) – We studied these long-winged peeps carefully near the "dogleg" at Forsythe NWR. They need those long wings to help with the migration from their Arctic breeding grounds to the coast of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER (*Calidris melanotos*) – Five of these "giant peeps" (so-called because they look sort of like big Least Sandpipers) strode across the marshy flats at the Cape May Meadows during our first outing there.

SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER (*Calidris pusilla*) – We studied about a dozen lingering migrants along the shoreline of Jarvis Sound during our boat trip.

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*) – This was the long-billed peep that we found running with the Sanderlings and Dunlin on the outer beach at Stone Harbor Point.

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus griseus*) – These chunky shorebirds were in flocks in the Wildwood back bays during our boat trip. It's the common dowitcher here, especially in saltmarsh habitats.

WILSON'S SNIBE (*Gallinago delicata*) – Four tried to hide from us at the Cape May Meadows, but even their cryptic brown-and-gold stripes and swirls were no match for our spotting scopes.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*) – Just a few (most migrate earlier) - at South Cape May Meadows and in Jarvis Sound.

SOLITARY SANDPIPER (*Tringa solitaria*) – Two were hiding along the northern edge of Lily Lake.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – This is the more widespread yellowlegs at this season - we saw them in many marsh locations.

WILLET (*Tringa semipalmata*) – The Willets we found at the Wetlands Institute were of the lanky, pale gray western subspecies *inornata*. Many believe that Eastern and Western Willets will be split as separate species in the future.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa flavipes*) – This was the yellowlegs we saw so well with the Pectoral Sandpipers in the Meadows.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – Quite common; seen every day.

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*) – A common non-breeding visitor to these shores.

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – One of the most common gulls that can be found here 365 days a year.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus*) – We saw these increasing visitors daily, with 20 birds on our first full day of birding. The closest known nesting colonies are in Greenland, and this species has been shifting its migration and wintering routes westward from Europe to include North America.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – The big one. A common coastal gull here.

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – The immature bird at Forsythe NWR was a rarity for the date. Despite checking with the Bird Banding Lab, we still haven't heard back on where this one was banded (it's possible that the banders will submit their data at the end of the year and we'll be able to report back later on the origins of this one).

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Over 100 of these massive terns were at Stone Harbor Point during our boat trip there.

FORSTER'S TERN (*Sterna forsteri*) – A common marsh-nesting, beach-resting representative of the terns.

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*) – These southern breeders disperse northward in late summer and fall, so they were quite common over the ocean during our tour.

BLACK SKIMMER (*Rynchops niger*) – Our best numbers were during the boat trip to Wildwood and Stone Harbor.

Gaviidae (Loons)

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – Two were off Cape May Point.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) – A common waterbird that we saw every day of the tour.

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – These big guys were feeding in the protected water behind Stone Harbor Point - it's a scarce species here in New Jersey in October.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

AMERICAN BITTERN (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) – On the first evening of the tour, we scoped one of these cryptic herons from the famed Cape May hawkwatch - a fun way to kick things off!

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*) – A common sight here during fall migration.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – We saw plenty of these out in the saltmarshes and along freshwater ponds.

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*) – Still fairly common in the ponds of Cape May Point and especially around Forsythe NWR.

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Egretta caerulea*) – One was in the saltmarsh pond at the Wetlands Institute.

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*) – A few of these slender herons were in the marshes behind Stone Harbor.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – Fairly common - we saw a few feeding and others roosting.

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – The boat trip introduced us to these beautiful crab aficionados.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – Our only sighting came in the big feeding flock at the "dogleg" at Forsythe NWR

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*) – A common year-round resident; the short-tailed vulture with choppy wingbeats.

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – Widespread, familiar, and common here in fall.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Daily sightings of MANY - these fish-eating raptors were streaming by on their fall migration.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*) – Just a couple of migrants spotted overhead and in the marshes of Forsythe NWR.

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*) – A common feature of the fall migration in Cape May - we enjoyed a spectacular, breezy morning in Cape May Point with eye level looks at many of the 150 Sharpies that passed by.

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*) – Plenty of excellent views of these increasing raptors - we saw over 60 on one day!

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – This large raptor has become increasingly common at Cape May - we were pleased to see them on a daily basis.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK (*Buteo platyterus*) – On a warm, sunny day, we spotted over 15 of these small Buteo hawks kettling over Cape May Point and the Beanery.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Just a couple of sightings - most of these familiar hawks migrate later in the fall, in late October and November.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – A common migrant in Cape May; several seen each day.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – A recently arrived juvenile was in a mixed flock along the edge of Lily Lake in Cape May Point.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – We heard more than we saw, but we did eventually have some nice views around the Beanery.

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Dryobates pubescens*) – Just a couple of sightings of this common woodpecker.

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*) – Wow - these handsome woodpeckers were migrating through in great numbers; we saw them just about everywhere!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – It was a great week for seeing migrant kestrels - especially later in the week when the sun came out a bit more!

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – Cape May is one of the finest places to see large numbers of Merlins - we found these small, dark missiles chasing other birds on a daily, perhaps even hourly, basis.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Though this tour usually overlaps with the peak of Peregrine migration, we encountered lower-than-normal numbers this year. However, there were still some excellent sightings of migrating "duck hawks" heading past the Point.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*) – These late migrating flycatchers were just starting to show up during our tour.

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*) – A couple of migrants skulked in the thickets of Cape May Point.

PHILADELPHIA VIREO (*Vireo philadelphicus*) – This was a nice highlight - we were fortunate to study two individuals closely near the Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center.

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*) – A common migrant often found in mixed species foraging flocks here.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Common; seen daily.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Common; seen daily.

FISH CROW (*Corvus ossifragus*) – Our best sightings of these small, nasal-voiced crows were along the barrier islands and saltmarshes of Cape May.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Over 1000 during our boat trip through Jarvis Sound.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – We spotted a few tardy migrants flying with Tree Swallows over Cape May Point.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*) – A common leader of mixed songbird flocks in Cape May.

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – Not as common here as Carolina Chickadee; we only saw this crested beauty on a few days.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – A very common bird at Cape May, especially noticeable by its loud voice.

Poliopitilidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliopitila caerulea*) – A few were with songbird flocks at Lily Lake.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*) – One chattered and flicked its wings at us from a red cedar along Lily Lake.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Only a few - most will migrate through Cape May in late October and November.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – A common bird of thickets here; seen each day.

BROWN THRASHER (*Toxostoma rufum*) – This is the most secretive member of the Mimidae family in Cape May, but we had some nice views.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Common and conspicuous here.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Ubiquitous. [I]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

AMERICAN PIPIT (*Anthus rubescens*) – Three flew over calling and pitched into the Cape May Meadows.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – On our final morning, a single Bohemian Waxwing flew over the group while we were birding at Higbee Beach. The loud, grating trill helped us lock on to this very rare visitor from the north. It was especially surprising to see this species here during a non-invasion year.

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) – Only a few flocks of these lovely birds were seen during morning flight events.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – A common resident and migrant here. [I]

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*) – Most of ours were flying over in bouncy, noisy flocks.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows)

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*) – We heard and briefly saw a few around the parking lot at Forsythe NWR.

FIELD SPARROW (*Spizella pusilla*) – A handful were in the Meadows and Cape May Point SP.

SEASIDE SPARROW (*Ammospiza maritima*) – One was seen briefly at Nummy Island during a high tide.

SALT MARSH SPARROW (*Ammospiza caudacuta*) – One perched up briefly and then flushed a few times in the saltmarsh at Shell Bay Landing.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – A fairly common migrant that we found frequently along the edges of marshes.

SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*) – Just a few of these widespread sparrows; most will arrive later in the fall.

SWAMP SPARROW (*Melospiza georgiana*) – A few nice views at the Cape May Meadows and also at Higbee Beach.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

BOBOLINK (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) – Heard daily, with good views of a couple of straw-colored individuals in the Meadows.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – Common and widespread.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*) – Just a few flyover sightings.

BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus major*) – These big grackles showed nicely in the saltmarsh during our boat trip on the Osprey.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) – We heard these secretive warblers chipping along the edge of Lily Lake on a few occasions. [I*]

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*) – These migrant warblers were creeping around on branches at Cape May Point and at Higbee Beach.

TENNESSEE WARBLER (*Oreothlypis peregrina*) – We twice found this scarce boreal migrant in mixed songbird flocks along the edge of Lily Lake.

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Migrants popped up in front of us a few times around Lily Lake.

AMERICAN REDSTART (*Setophaga ruticilla*) – We saw these very active warblers wing-spreading and tail-flicking around Lily Lake with mixed flocks.

CAPE MAY WARBLER (*Setophaga tigrina*) – It took a bit of patience, but we had some great looks at these lovely "Tiger Warblers" along Seagrove Ave. and East Lake Dr. in Cape May Point.

NORTHERN PARULA (*Setophaga americana*) – One of the most common warblers that we found during the tour - they were all over!

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*) – A few nice looks at the streaked sides and distinctive blocky tail pattern at Lily Lake.

BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER (*Setophaga fusca*) – Yip yip! This flame-throated migrant showed off in the treetops right next to the Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center.

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – These widespread warblers were mixed with other migrants, mostly around Cape May Point.

BLACKPOLL WARBLER (*Setophaga striata*) – Best views of these champion migrants were at Cape May Point.

BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER (*Setophaga caerulescens*) – Another lovely warbler that we saw right around Lily Lake in Cape May Point. The female in the back garden of the bird observatory was particularly memorable.

PALM WARBLER (*Setophaga palmarum*) – The individuals we saw tail-pumping in various locations were all brownish "Western" Palm Warblers during this trip.

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – Conifers around Cape May Point provided good feeding sites for these habitat-specific warblers.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (*Setophaga coronata*) – Small numbers were around in most flocks of songbirds during the week - the bulk of the migrant "Yellow-rumps" come through after the tour dates. All of ours were the expected "Myrtle" subspecies group.

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Setophaga discolor*) – One was tail-pumping above the roof of the bird observatory in Cape May Point.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*) – A couple of these lovely, yellow-faced warblers fed in flocks along the edge of Lily Lake.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – Common, especially in forested or brushy areas.

ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) – Two were seen briefly near Lily Lake.

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – Heard and seen each day - most were buff-brown individuals.

DICKCISSEL (*Spiza americana*) – One flew over, calling, at Cape May Point SP.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Common around towns. [II]

MAMMALS

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) – These were the rabbits we found on Cape Island.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – The common large squirrel of Cape May.

MUSKRAT (*Ondatra zibethica*) – We saw one swimming around and feeding in Bunker Pond as we looked from the hawkwatch.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Reptiles and Amphibians

Painted Turtle

Diamondback Terrapin

Fowler's Toad

Cope's Gray Treefrog

Spring Peeper

Green Frog

Totals for the tour: 140 bird taxa and 3 mammal taxa