

Trip Report — Fall for Cape May II 2024

September 29-October 5, 2024 with Megan Edwards Crewe

We had an unexpectedly long look at 'That Little Terror that is the Merlin'. Video by guide Megan Edwards Crewe. The video by guide Megan Edwards Crewe can be seen on the webpage.

Cape May is justly famous for its autumn bird migration. Each year, tens of thousands of raptors, nearly 100,000 seabirds and untold numbers of passerines funnel down its peninsula on their way south. Our tour is timed to intersect with a slice of that river of birds, and it did just that. From our first morning, when a mix of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks swirled over Cape May Point State Park, to the fabulous morning at Higbee's, where a constant, chipping stream of birds streamed past, to the ever-changing mix of migrants around Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center, and the morning liftoff of hundreds of Great Blue Herons over Cape May Point, we certainly got to see some of the spectacle. Even the Monarch butterflies and migrant dragonflies got in on the act! Fortunately, our weather was mostly cooperative, with some lovely, sunny days. But there was WAY too much east wind, which kept water levels so high that the tides couldn't go out, and certainly impacted our shorebird totals.

Once we'd driven down from the Philadelphia airport, we started our birding right across the street from our hotel, sifting through four species of gulls and enjoying a big mixed flock of hundreds of Black Skimmers and Royal Terns snoozing on the sandy beach. Early the next morning, we ventured to Cape May Point State Park, a place we returned to regularly during the week, to take advantage of its picnic shelters and restrooms. Each day, a mix of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks flap-flap-glided overhead, allowing repeated practice for distinguishing between them. Blue-winged and Green-winged teal floated side by side on Lighthouse Pond, giving us the chance to appreciate the subtle differences between their eclipse plumages. A couple of young Common Gallinules picked their way along the edge of Bunker Pond, where an American Bittern stood stock-still along the shore. Two

Dickcissels mingled with a chattering flock of House Sparrows near the hawkwatch platform. An early morning visit to Higbee's one day brought a steady stream of birds headed north off the sea, reorienting after a night of flying. With constant chips, they surged overhead or flicked through the treetops, pausing only for a few seconds before heading off again -- an exhilarating experience for us earthbound mortals below! We watched a zippy Merlin try to snag a Palm Warbler or Common Yellowthroat out of a weedy field there (it escaped), and spotted our only Blue-headed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Indigo Bunting, Swamp Sparrow and Scarlet Tanagers in the trees around its edges.

We spent several afternoons roaming the street outside the Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center, as well as the center's grounds themselves, delighted by an ever-changing mix of birds. A jaunty Ovenbird strode around under the feeders one day. A young male Rose-breasted Grosbeak showed the first hints of a rosy chest. In scruffy junipers along the road, wing-flicking Ruby-crowned Kinglets mingled with American Redstarts, Northern Parulas, Magnolia Warblers and Red-eyed Vireos as they scrounged for insects. A Nashville Warbler hitched its way up a tall weed stem. Carolina Wrens and Carolina Chickadees allowed careful study as they visited the observatory's feeders. A stealthy Yellow-billed Cuckoo slipped through the treetops one afternoon, while a Philadelphia Vireo did the same a few days later. A visit to the county's small airport yielded a busy group of eight Horned Larks searched for seeds among the weeds growing in cracks in the concrete apron. A short way up the bayshore, we hit the woodpecker motherlode along a flooded dirt track in the Dennis Creek WMA, with six species -- including a couple of flashy adult Red-headed Woodpeckers and an immature Yellow-bellied Sapsucker -- vying for attention among the multitude of dead and dying trees.

We ventured north to Edwin B. Forsyth NWR one day, where a patchwork of wetland and woodland just north of Atlantic City produced a multitude of waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors -- as well as some very special passerines. A trio of Eastern Bluebirds decorated a juniper bush near the visitor center's

parking lot. The impoundments held plenty of waterfowl, with scores of American Black Ducks (the species for which the reserve was initially established), a little group of Ruddy Ducks and a pair of Wood Ducks (found only after a CONSIDERABLE search!). A stand of tall grasses on an otherwise unremarkable corner of the wildlife drive proved irresistible to some hoped-for sparrows, and we connected with Seaside, Saltmarsh and Nelson's sparrows there -- though it required some patience to see them as they ducked in and out of the multitude of stems. As we worked our way along the north side of the impoundment, we chanced across a vagrant we'd heard about earlier in the day; the very confiding Lapland Longspur allowed progressively closer views until we were quite literally right beside it.

An afternoon on the flat-bottomed "Osprey", got us up close and personal with some of the many denizens of Cape May's extensive salt marshes. On the long stone jetties protecting Cape May's harbor, we found dozens of Black-bellied Plovers and Short-billed Dowitchers sprinkled among scores of American Oystercatchers. Ruddy Turnstones patrolled marina seawalls, while a single Common Tern rested among its plentiful Forster's cousins nearby. At the Wetlands Institute, we counted six species of heron and egret -- including both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons -- scattered across the saltmarsh or roosting in a big juniper stand. A mob of 'Western' Willets and Greater Yellowlegs preened or snoozed on shallow ponds in the high marsh, and side-by-side Least and Semipalmated sandpipers provided a "live field guide" comparison of their differences. On Stone Harbor's storm-ravaged beach, we found gangs of Dunlin and Sanderlings scuttling like clockwork toys along the tideline, with a few taller Red Knots and a group of Marbled Godwits among them. The Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Meadows reserve served up a handsome male Wood Duck and a feisty Marsh Wren, as well as the tour's only Field Sparrows and a flyby trio of Brown Pelicans. And who will soon forget the surging river of Tree Swallows twittering their way all around us as we crossed the dunes? It was like being in a snow globe!

Thanks so much for joining me for the week. I hope you learned a thing or two, and enjoyed the adventure we shared. And I hope to see you all again on another tour somewhere soon. Until then, good birding!

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/293980>

-- Megan

OTHER CRITTERS SEEN ON THE TOUR:

Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*): Single animals seen on several days, including one nibbling grass on the lawn of our hotel.

Woodchuck (*Marmota monax*): Emma spotted on along the roadside on our drive south from the airport.

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*): Common and widespread, seen every day of the tour, including a few raiding the feeders at the Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center.

Common Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*): One paddled across Lighthouse Pond at Cape May Point State Park, then settled in to nibble something tasty near some Green-winged Teal along the shore.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*): Surprisingly scarce this year, but we did FINALLY catch up with a fishing pod just offshore at South Cape May Meadows.

Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*): One lumbered across the road in front of us, seen as we traveled "home" after dinner at the Blue Pig.

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*): A couple grazed along the NJ parkway, seen as we hurtled north towards Forsythe NWR and we saw another at the Dennis Creek WMA, while we searched for woodpeckers.

Cope's (or Southern) Gray Tree Frog (*Hyla chrysoscelis*): One snoozing on a red arrow sign at Cape May Point State Park was pretty adorable. The gray tree frogs, which were recently split, are best separated by call. Though we didn't hear this one, the ones found south of the canal are almost invariably this species.

Black Rat Snake (*Elaphe obsoleta*): One tucked into the floor joists under the hawkwatch platform at the state park was a surprise. It was nervous and quite "kinked" to start with, until it realized we weren't going to bother it.

Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis sauritus sauritus*): Some great spotting by Emma netted us good views of this little snake along the edge of the trail in Cape May Point State Park.

Diamond-backed Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*): A couple seen hauled up on a muddy bank during our back bay boat trip on the Osprey. This species is found in tidal saltwater

creeks.

Northern Red-bellied Turtle (*Pseudemys rubiventris*): A few piled on logs in the freshwater ponds at Forsythe NWR. Their all-black heads help to distinguish them from the next species.

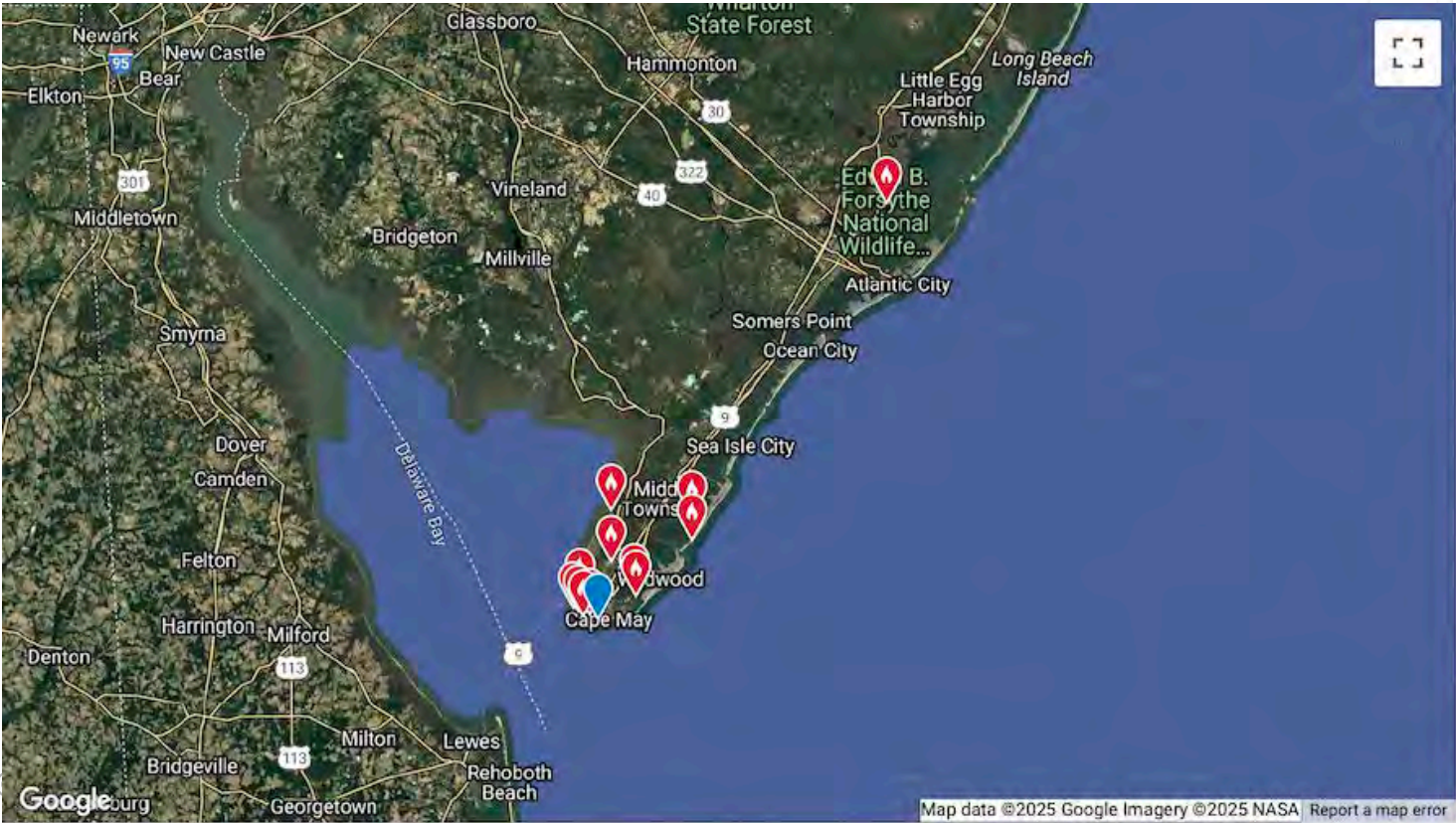
Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*): A small one in a little pond at Cox Hall Creek WMA was one of the few creatures we saw on a very quiet afternoon there.

Field Guides Birding Tours — CAPE MAY II 2024 (with Megan Edwards Crewe)

29 Sep – 5 Oct 2024 (7 days) Link-only







 New Jersey, United States

Atlantic | Cape May

 Megan Edwards Crewe (Field Guides), Megan Crewe



For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional media for this trip...

DATA FOR: [Group \(all people\)](#) ▾

141

Species Observed

21




















Checklists



































25





























Species with Photos




























Species Observed

























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10	Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis</i>	▶  6
61	Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i> *	▶  5
3	Wood Duck <i>Aix sponsa</i>	▶  2
22	Blue-winged Teal <i>Spatula discors</i>	▶  3
13	Northern Shoveler <i>Spatula clypeata</i>	▶  3
4	Gadwall <i>Mareca strepera</i>	▶  1
1	American Wigeon <i>Mareca americana</i>	▶  1
61	Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	▶  6
4	American Black Duck <i>Anas rubripes</i>	▶  2
1	Northern Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	▶  2
28	Green-winged Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	▶  2
9	Ruddy Duck <i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	▶  1
2	Wild Turkey <i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	▶  1
6	Rock Pigeon <i>Columba livia</i> *	▶  2
16	Mourning Dove <i>Zenaida macroura</i>	▶  10
1	Yellow-billed Cuckoo <i>Coccyzus americanus</i>	▶  1
4	Clapper Rail <i>Rallus crepitans</i>	▶  2
2	Common Gallinule <i>Gallinula galeata</i>	▶  1
3	American Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	▶  4  3
1	Black-bellied Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	▶  3
8	Killdeer <i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	▶  1  2

8	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	▸  2
1	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	▸  1
X	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>	▸  2
12	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	▸  2
12	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	▸  1  2
35	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	▸  1  5
X	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▸  1
20	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	▸  1  1
100	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	▸  1  1
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	▸  1  2
1	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	▸  2  1
3	Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>	▸  1
4	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>	▸  1  4
50	Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>	▸  13
83	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	▸  13
80	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	▸  7
14	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	▸  2
170	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>	▸  1
1	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	▸  3
6	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	▸  2  6
X	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	▸  1
130	Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	▸  1  7
1	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	▸  1
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	▸  1  1

33	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	▶  2  6
72	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	▶  2  5
4	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	▶  3
2	American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	▶  1  2
3	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	▶  1  2
6	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	▶  3
5	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	▶  1
2	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	▶  1
14	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	▶  3  8
2	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	▶  1  1
25	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	▶  1  7
14	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	▶  8
3	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	▶  1
14	Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	▶  8
4	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	▶  9
18	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	▶  12
21	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>	▶  10
7	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Astur cooperii</i>	▶  7
2	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	▶  3
4	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	▶  4
3	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	▶  5
9	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>	▶  9
1	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>	▶  1

2	Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>	▶  1
2	Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>	▶  1  4
4	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	▶  7
1	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>	▶  1
15	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	▶  10
7	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	▶  4
10	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	▶  2  9
1	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	▶  1
1	Eastern Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus virens</i>	▶  2
6	Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	▶  2  4
2	White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>	▶  2
2	Blue-headed Vireo	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>	▶  1
X	Philadelphia Vireo	<i>Vireo philadelphicus</i>	▶  1
11	Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	▶  8
8	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	▶  10
10	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	▶  9
X	Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>	▶  2
1	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	▶  1
9	Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>	▶  8
4	Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>	▶  6
8	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	▶  2  1
665	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	▶  11
1	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	▶  1

3	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Corthylio calendula</i>	▶  6
1	White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	▶  1
1	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	▶  1
2	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliopitila caerulea</i>	▶  1
3	Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	▶  2
1	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	▶  1
8	Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>	▶  11
94	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> *	▶  8
88	Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	▶  9
2	Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	▶  3
3	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	▶  7
3	Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>	▶  1
X	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	▶  1
42	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i> *	▶  4
7	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i> *	▶  4
2	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	▶  3
1	Lapland Longspur	<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	▶  2  1
X	Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>	▶  1
1	White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>	▶  1
X	Seaside Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i>	▶  1
X	Nelson's Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza nelsoni</i>	▶  1
X	Saltmarsh Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza caudacuta</i>	▶  1
X	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	▶  1

2	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	▶  3
2	Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>	▶  1
6	Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	▶  3
96	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	▶  7
X	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	▶  2
2	Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>	▶  4
1	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	▶  1
8	Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	▶  7
1	Tennessee Warbler	<i>Leiothlypis peregrina</i>	▶  2
2	Nashville Warbler	<i>Leiothlypis ruficapilla</i>	▶  2
68	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	▶  8
13	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	▶   1  8
2	Cape May Warbler	<i>Setophaga tigrina</i>	▶  1
6	Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>	▶  7
X	Magnolia Warbler	<i>Setophaga magnolia</i>	▶  1
1	Blackburnian Warbler	<i>Setophaga fusca</i>	▶  1
2	Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>	▶  1
3	Blackpoll Warbler	<i>Setophaga striata</i>	▶  3
2	Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>	▶  3
62	Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>	▶  7
5	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>	▶  7
1	Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>	▶  1
3	Scarlet Tanager	<i>Piranga olivacea</i>	▶  3

- 8

Northern Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis

▶

6
- 2

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Pheucticus ludovicianus

▶

2
- 2

Indigo Bunting

Passerina cyanea

▶

3
- 2

Dickcissel

Spiza americana

▶

1
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