

Trip Report — Fall for Cape May I 2025

September 20-26, 2025 with Doug Gochfeld



This Reddish Egret is one of just a couple to have ever been seen in New Jersey, and after showing up in late summer, it stuck around long enough for us to see it. Perhaps a one-off vagrant, but more likely a sign of changing distributions of southern species. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Cape May is a wonderful place. Cape May in the fall is even more wonderful! We had a small but merry group of travelers on this year's fall tour, and we explored many of the places that showcase this lovely area's greatness. September is a particularly mercurial month in Cape May, so it can have a couple of different flavors: it can give you its autumn side, with cold fronts that bring with them pushes of overnight and/or diurnal migration, or it can give you its summer side, with lingering breeders, early season migrants like shorebirds, and often a bit of southern flair spending the end of their summers as far north as they will go. This tour was decidedly in the second

camp, and we felt squarely under the influence of summer, until the very last morning, when the subtlest of autumn tendrils finally made their way to South Jersey.

This tour was also special in that the majority of the group had traveled with our dearly beloved Tom Johnson in the past, and were here in part to see the magical place that he decided to call home. His presence was felt in so many of his former stomping grounds that we visited, and that made each place that much more special.



One of the major highlights of our week was getting to see some of the migration research that is happening in Cape May, up close and personal. We were even privileged to watch a transmitter put onto a Monarch by Mark Garland - as part of a revolutionary Monarch tracking project that got a feature in the New York Times a couple of months after we watched this transmitter be put on! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

The summer vibe of this tour was brought on by four days in a row of moderate to strong southerly air flow, and so the climate must have just peachy to the parade of southern waders that we bore witness to. One of these wader species has recently, in just the past couple of years, become summer breeding residents of New Jersey in force, thanks to the warming climate. White Ibises (Ibi?) were a truly rare vagrant in New Jersey before 2020, but after Tom Johnson confirmed their first nest in the state that summer, the species skyrocketed, and hundreds of pairs are now breeding in Cape May County. We saw the results of this with several migrant flocks around Cape May Point, as well as birds still on the main colony in Ocean City, and over two hundred lingering around Brigantine. Roseate Spoonbill, meanwhile, made White Ibis look positively common before 2020, as it had only been recorded in New Jersey a few times, and only a couple of times before 2017. Again, the species has been pushing farther north each of the past several summers. That said, actually connecting with an active migrant arriving at Bunker Pond during our first morning (interrupting the end of our picnic, in fact!) was a very serendipitous intersection. And then, there was the Reddish Egret, even rarer regionally than the spoonbill. This one was found in late August, then disappeared for a couple of weeks before being refound ten days or so before the tour, and it hung around long enough for us to have excellent prolonged views of this long-legged marsh ballerina at the Wetlands Institute!

We tallied all three of these species on our first full day of the tour, leading us to wonder if we were actually on the Florida tour!



Saltmarsh Sparrows have a very particular breeding habitat, and it is extremely susceptible to climate change. It has been posited that it could be one of the next US bird species to go extinct because of this, though there are multiple conservation projects afoot, and the back bays of central New Jersey are still a major stronghold for the species. Here is a juvenile born this year, and going through its first proper molt. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

A more typical suite of birds that we search for on this tour are birds of the mid-Atlantic saltmarsh. New Jersey has some of the most extensive salt marshes on the Atlantic coast of the US, and they harbor a great amount of life in the summer. We detected Clapper Rails in six different locations, and saw them well in at least two of them (including one that strutted across the dike road behind the vehicle at Brigantine!). Meanwhile, we were also on the hunt for marshy sparrows, with good views of both Seaside and Saltmarsh sparrows at Brigantine, as well as a brief, but close, view of an apparent hybrid Saltmarsh x Nelson's Sparrow. On the boat trip, we were able to ogle a trio of Hudsonian Whimbrel amidst more numerous shorebirds, and elsewhere in the back bays we had Marbled Godwit and an American Bittern!

On the fresh marsh side of things, we saw a close, and eventually somewhat cooperative, Sora on our first evening in Cape May, though it was trying to stay out of the way of the Merlin convention that was patrolling the skies overhead, and a Common Gallinule was picking along the edge of the back of Bunker Pond on our first morning there.



Very few birds migrate as far as Franklin's Gulls. This one ended up off course and on the east coast, and we lucked across it during our boat trip through the back bay. Look at that pink! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Salt marsh isn't the only ocean-associated terrestrial habitat that we visited - the beachfront is also a scene of some notable and fun happenings in Cape May County. We started out with Stone Harbor Point, where Petunia, the 10+ year old Piping Plover with a funny backstory entertained us on the high beach, while Lesser Black-backed Gulls loafed in the surf. Towards the end of the tour, we finally visited the Cape May City Beach, when the weather and time of day aligned, and we had a bird bonanza there, with over 300 each of Black Skimmer and Royal Tern, including several banded individuals

too. Direct comparisons of Lesser Black-backed Gulls with Laughing and Great Black-backed gulls was also quite fun here.

While passerine migrants were pretty thin on the ground, an afternoon outing netted us a duo of Ovenbirds, and a usually scarce Philadelphia Vireo. On our final morning, the conditions finally came together for a little bit of "morning flight" and we got to see a few dozen warblers winging north after a night of southbound migration. In with this songbird flow was an unseasonably early American Pipit, and a late Summer Tanager, the proof in the pudding of this date being such a grab bag of species here!



Another southern resident that graced us with its presence, this Roseate Spoonbill appeared over the hawkwatch on our very first morning, as we were picnicking right next to the platform. The last remnants of breakfast were quickly abandoned as we hustled to get a look at it, though our speed proved unneeded, as it eventually dropped in and landed in a juniper tree in the back of Bunker Pond! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

This trip didn't feature a whole lot of mammals, but the few we did detect (including one by scent only and one by sound only!) follow:

Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)
Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)
Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*) - We heard a couple of these lil' cuties at Belleplain, but they didn't reveal themselves to our eyeballs
Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) - You may have guessed it, but this one was merely smelled, on our penultimate full day
Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) - We saw a couple from shore at Alexander Ave. on our final morning, and we also saw a small pod from the boat when we got pretty far out in Cold Spring Inlet
White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

We also saw a few other non-birds that we took particular note of:

Garter Snake - We had one of these slithering around at Conswell Rd.
Cope's Gray Treefrog - Heard in multiple locations
American Bullfrog - Several at Cox Hall Creek
Green Treefrog - They've expanded into Cape May in recent years from their haunts farther south, and there was one perched in a bush at Michael & Louise's during one of our visits there!
Atlantic Ghost Crab - We saw these sneaky beach predators at Stone Harbor
European Green Crab - This was the crab we saw moving around in the submerged marsh at the Wetlands Institute
Mud Fiddler Crab - Hundreds, or thousands, at the Wetlands Institute and the marsh at Garrett Preserve
Red-eared Slider - Forsythe
Red-bellied Cooter - Forsythe
Eastern Painted Turtle - Forsythe & more
Monarch - Last but not least. We saw several other species of butterfly, and dragonfly, but Monarch was definitely the one we connected with the most deeply!



Clapper Rails are another saltmarsh specialty that we tracked down on the tour, and this one was frozen in some sort of ninja move as it flew over the saltmarsh during our boat trip. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

In addition to all the birds mentioned above, we also saw a few other rarities, notably Franklin's Gull, 2 Eared Grebes, 4 Hudsonian Godwits, and a Eurasian Wigeon. Despite all the rarities, however, it was the more commonplace birds and locations that ended up being in your top 3 favorite experiences of the tour, which shows just how special Cape May in fall is, even without red-letter rarities. Everyone cited the bird and/or butterfly banding/tagging demonstrations as one of their favorite experiences, and getting to see these animals close up, while hearing about all the cool science that is going on with them, and being able to ask the researchers question, was indeed very special. The other thing that was a winner was the birder element of Cape May, whether it was local birding celebrities letting us into their yard (and letting us buy some beautiful shirts from the artist herself!), or watching the evolution of a "twitch" at the legendary Hawkwatch platform after the Roseate Spoonbill was found there, or just running into birders here and there at special places like the Coral Ave. dune crossing.

This trip was truly a pleasure, and this was due to the fact that you all were not just interesting and enjoyable to be around, but because of how interested you were in Cape May. I hope to see you all again in some other special corner of the birding universe. Until then, my heartfelt thanks, and be well!

-Doug



We had another great first-hand experience with research by visiting the Cape May songbird banding station one morning, where this male American Redstart was one of the show-stealers. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

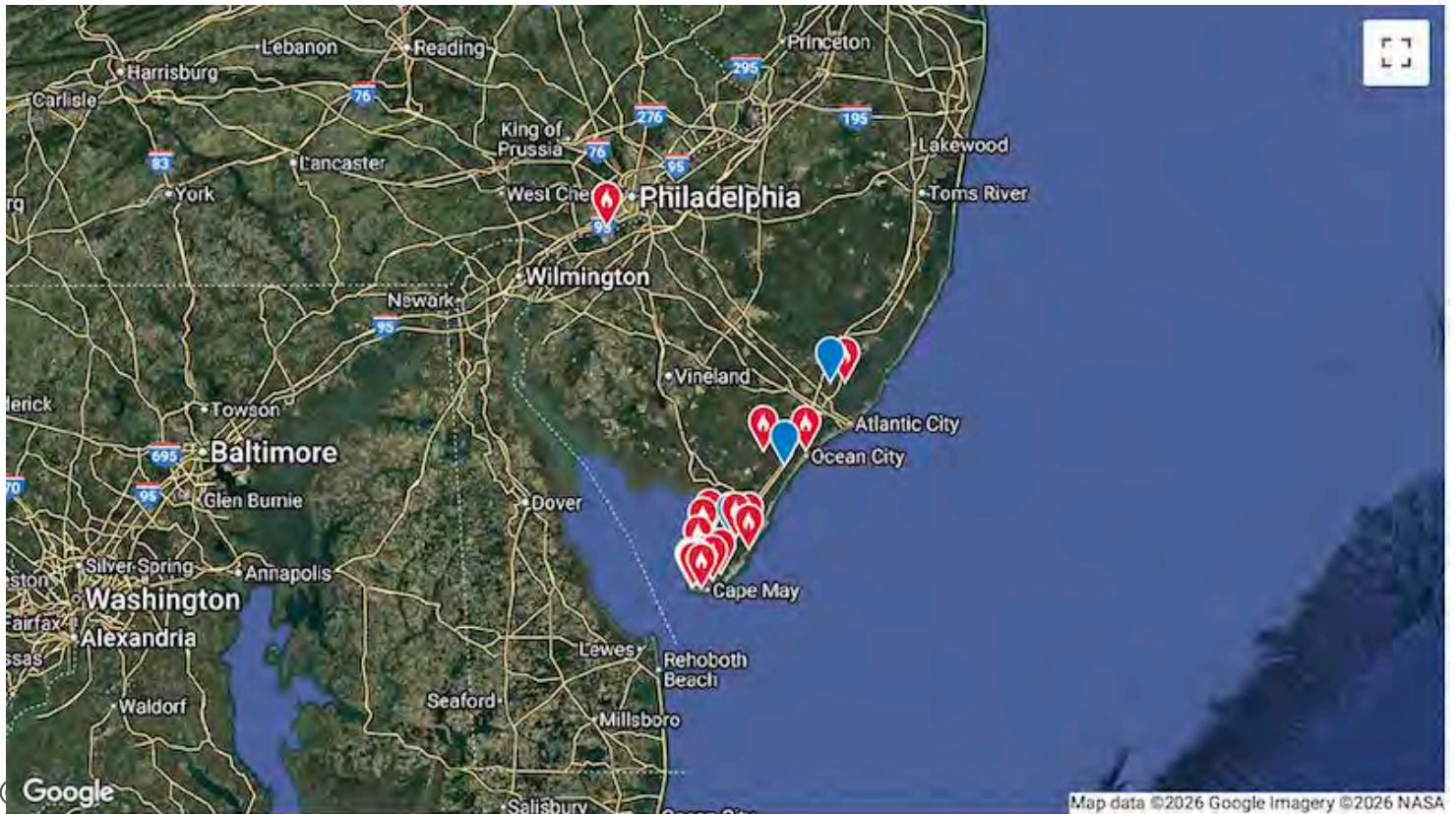
You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/451573>

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--Doug Gochfeld (Treeswift)

Field Guides Birding Tours -- FALL FOR CAPE MAY, 2025 (with Doug Gochfeld)

20 – 26 Sep 2025 (7 days) Link-only



United States

New Jersey | Pennsylvania Subregions

 Doug Gochfeld



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

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Species Observed





























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120	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	▶  6
35	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i> *	▶  3
15	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>	▶  1
81	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	▶  2
1	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	▶  1
151	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	▶  7
271	American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>	▶  5
88	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	▶  4
12	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	▶  1
12	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> *	▶  5
43	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	▶  10
6	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>	▶  1  5
17	Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus crepitans</i>	▶  2  6
1	Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>	▶  1
1	Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>	▶  1
2	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	▶  1
123	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	▶  4  7
306	Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	▶  6
2	American Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	▶  1
135	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	▶  5
1	Piping Plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	▶  3  1
3	Hudsonian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>	▶  3  1















4	Hudsonian Godwit	<i>Limosa haemastica</i>	▶  1  1
1	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	▶  1
83	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>	▶  4
3	Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>	▶  1
1	Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	▶  1
3	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>	▶  1
1	Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>	▶  1
95	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	▶  4
153	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	▶  3
122	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	▶  5
64	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▶  3
2	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	▶  1
34	Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>	▶  1
1201	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	▶  2
17	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	▶  2
23	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	▶  2
29	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	▶  5
2	Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>	▶  2
3	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>	▶  2
516	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>	▶  5
11	Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	▶  2
1989	Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>	▶  16
1	Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>	▶  7  1
18	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	▶  4

391	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	▶  15
44	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	▶  10
76	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	▶  2  6
300	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>	▶  1
49	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	▶  2
411	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	▶  12
16	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	▶  2
349	Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	▶  7  6
2	Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	▶  1
1	Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	▶  1
516	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	▶  8
401	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	▶  6  4
6	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	▶  1
1	Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>	▶  7  1
1	American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	▶  1  1
2	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	▶  1  2
17	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	▶  4
2	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	▶  2
10	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	▶  4
1	Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>	▶  7  1
112	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	▶  8
1	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	▶  1
141	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	▶  1  8




31	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	▶  10
12	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	▶  3
2	Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	▶  1
29	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	▶  6
114	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	▶  16
11	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>	▶  5
2	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Astur cooperii</i>	▶  3
3	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	▶  2
11	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	▶  1  8
2	Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>	▶  1
7	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megasceryle alcyon</i>	▶  6
9	Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>	▶  1
6	Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>	▶  4
9	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	▶  5
1	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	▶  1
20	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	▶  9
3	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	▶  3
11	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	▶  2
4	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	▶  1  3
1	Eastern Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus virens</i>	▶  1
2	Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	▶  2
7	Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>	▶  1
1	White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>	▶  1

1	Philadelphia Vireo	<i>Vireo philadelphicus</i>	▶  8  1
7	Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	▶  1  4
20	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	▶  7
17	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	▶  5
3	Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>	▶  2
2	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	▶  1
45	Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>	▶  8
30	Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>	▶  4
110	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	▶  1  6
4	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	▶  1
2	White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	▶  2
2	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	▶  1
1	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>	▶  1
2	Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	▶  2
3	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	▶  1
22	Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>	▶  2  12
280	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> *	▶  8
16	Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	▶  1  8
3	Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	▶  3
22	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	▶  10
1	Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>	▶  1
35	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	▶  1
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i> *	▶  5








1	American Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>	▶  2  1
19	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i> *	▶  5
8	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	▶  1
8	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>	▶  3
3	Seaside Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i>	▶  2
5	Saltmarsh Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza caudacuta</i>	▶  3  1
11	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	▶  3
6	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	▶  3
96	Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	▶  3
166	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	▶  8
80	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	▶  1
7	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	▶  3
52	Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>	▶  1  4
2	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	▶  1
2	Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>	▶  1
1	Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	▶  1
1	Nashville Warbler	<i>Leiothlypis ruficapilla</i>	▶  1
23	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	▶  1  11
15	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	▶  1  7
15	Cape May Warbler	<i>Setophaga tigrina</i>	▶  1  1
12	Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>	▶  4
5	Northern Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>	▶  4
1	Chestnut-sided Warbler	<i>Setophaga pensylvanica</i>	▶  1








12	Blackpoll Warbler	<i>Setophaga striata</i>	▶  1
1	Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>	▶  1
8	Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>	▶  1  3
1	Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>	▶  1
3	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>	▶  2
2	Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>	▶  2
1	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>	▶  1
1	Black-throated Green Warbler	<i>Setophaga virens</i>	▶  1
1	Summer Tanager	<i>Piranga rubra</i>	▶  1
55	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	▶  15
2	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus ludovicianus</i>	▶  2
1	Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>	▶  1
2	Dickcissel	<i>Spiza americana</i>	▶  2

HYBRIDS

1	Mallard x American Black Duck (hybrid)	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> x <i>rubripes</i>	▶  1
1	Nelson's x Saltmarsh Sparrow (hybrid)	<i>Ammospiza nelsoni</i> x <i>caudacuta</i>	▶  5  1

ADDITIONAL TAXA

110	Mallard/American Black Duck	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> / <i>rubripes</i>	▶  3
400	dabbling duck sp.	<i>Anatidae</i> sp. (dabbling duck sp.)	▶  1
5	duck sp.	<i>Anatidae</i> (duck sp.)	▶  1
250	peep sp.	<i>Calidris</i> sp. (peep sp.)	▶  2
245	shorebird sp.	<i>Charadriiformes</i> sp. (shorebird sp.)	▶  3
50	gull sp.	<i>Larinae</i> sp.	▶  1
50	Sterna sp.	<i>Sterna</i> sp.	▶  2

2	Glossy/White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus/chihi</i>	▶  1
10	white egret sp.	<i>Egretta/Ardea sp.</i>	▶  1
1	Western/Eastern Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus/virens</i>	▶  1
1	Philadelphia/Eastern Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo philadelphicus/gilvus</i>	▶  1
2	crow sp.	<i>Corvus sp. (crow sp.)</i>	▶  1
5	new world sparrow sp.	<i>Passerellidae sp.</i>	▶  1
20	new world warbler sp.	<i>Parulidae sp.</i>	▶  3