

Trip Report — Spring in Cape May 2025

May 11-17, 2025 with Doug Gochfeld



We see a lot of cool birds on this tour, but the orange flocks of breeding plumaged Red Knots embedded in the mass of birds feasting on the Horseshoe Crab spectacle are perhaps the most iconic, and impressive, bird event our spring trip here partakes in. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

This year's Field Guides spring jaunt Cape May tour was yet another fine running of this reliably entertaining and fun tour. It was packed with great experiences, from massive flocks of shorebirds feasting on Horseshoe Crab eggs along the Delaware Bayshore, to the waterbird bounty of the extensive salt marshes of New Jersey, to a panoply of breeding songbirds in the protected forests at the northern end of the county, and a few fun rarity wild cards! The weather threw us a few curveballs this year, including back-to-back days where the dreaded trifecta — fog, wind, and rain — played a prominent role. but we managed to adjust our plans to make the best of the weather day-to-day, and found plenty of great birds. Some of the nice scarcities and rarities that we connected with this spring were European Whimbrel (currently considered a subspecies by Clements/eBird, but perhaps not for long), Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Roseate Tern, King Rail (heard

only), and an extended view of an awesome Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper hybrid (a hybrid combination that was a lifer for me!).



Chuck-will's-widow breeds in Cape May, but they can be a devil to eyeball once they hit their breeding territories. So, we were over the moon when we found a migrant that had just arrived from over the water roosting in broad daylight. Honorable mention goes to the chickadee that dropped down through the foliage to investigate this out-of-place brown blob, drawing our attention to the goatsucker perched just a couple of feet off the ground, which we otherwise might have missed. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Unlike the reliably excellent fall migration in Cape May, springtime landbird migration in Cape May can be a bit finicky, and we need some extra help from the weather to get songbird passage migrants onto the peninsula. This year was no exception, and we had to bide our time before we finally got a great overnight arrival of migrants to the peninsula on our final full day of the tour. These migrants lasted all of one day, but we took great advantage of that Friday morning, turning up a nice mix of warblers (highlighted by multiple Bay-breasted and a male Blackburnian), and a supporting cast that

included Yellow-throated and Blue-headed vireos, Swainson's Thrushes and brief looks at a scarce-in-Cape May Black-billed Cuckoo.



Blue Grosbeak is a stunner, and it breeds in a couple of places on Cape Island. This one perched up beautifully for us during one of our overcast days. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Rewinding, however, we kicked things off with one of the highlights of spring in Cape May: a visit to Belleplain State Forest, at the northern end of the county. Throughout our visit, from breakfast onward, we found the forest alive with song — Acadian Flycatchers calling “pit-za”, Ovenbirds delivering their emphatic “teacher-teacher-teacher,” and Eastern Wood-Pewees and Wood Thrushes contributing their own iconic songs to the mix. We glimpsed Prothonotary Warbler in fairly short order, and then improved our looks at this stunner from acceptable, to good, to “oh my goodness, I can’t imagine it coming any closer”. Hooded Warbler eventually showed well, as did Yellow-throated Warbler, finally, after we had been hearing them over and over again. We also got a surprisingly long look at a Louisiana Waterthrush. This bird is often tricky to see on this tour, since they are amongst the earliest of

the breeding warblers to arrive; by this time of year, they are often silent, and skulky, already in the midst of their nesting cycle.



Sure, it's not a "species," but it's still super cool. At our very last birding stop of the tour, at Heislerville, we took an ogle at a close shorebird flock, and immediately noticed this weird looking shorebird. It's almost the size of a Dunlin, but has dense streaking on the underparts, rather than a black belly patch, and the bill isn't quite as long and decurved as a Dunlin. Those traits look rather like a White-rumped Sandpiper. And so it was that we zeroed in on the identification of hybrid Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper with relative ease. This was a lifer for me, and a really rare find on a global scale! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

In addition to the timing and weather, a couple of things that matter when birding Cape May in Spring are moon phase and inshore sea surface temperature: Atlantic Horseshoe Crabs come to spawn in spring during the full moon, and they particularly like the water to have warmed to a certain temperature. This year, we hit it just right for the peak of the spawning—and with it, the arrival of thousands of shorebirds, coming from their wintering grounds in South America, to fuel up on the crab eggs before continuing on to their Arctic breeding grounds. Seeing the Red Knots in particular, many of them already wearing the pinkish-red tones of breeding plumage, was a real

highlight. This year, our visit happened to coincide with researchers capturing and banding some of the shorebirds. We got to see the researchers and volunteers get to work with processing the knots: measuring, weighing, and banding them, and even taking blood samples, before releasing them back to the horseshoe crab egg fiesta. Seeing these birds in-hand was a real treat—not only did we get to see the birds up close and personal in stunning detail, but it gave us a window into the hard work being done to protect this remarkable migration phenomenon.



Yellow-breasted Chat is a scrubland breeder on Cape Island, and we were bestowed with multiple flight displays from this territorial male. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Our boat trip through the salt marshes of far southern Cape May County was another standout. Cruising through the salt marsh in spring feels like another world, and being out on the water gave us a fresh perspective on the vibrant coastal ecosystem that supports so much biomass. We found a couple of really nice congregations of shorebirds feeding on low tide mudflats (including over a thousand Dunlin in their bright breeding regalia), Common

Terns nesting amidst the large colony of a couple of thousand Laughing Gulls, some leftover waterbirds that seemed to be spending the summer (Common Loon, Black and Surf scoters), good looks at Clapper Rail, and even dozens upon dozens of Diamondback Terrapins, both on shore and floating with just their heads breaking the surface.

Keeping on the salt marsh theme, the next day was spent at a couple of well-known salt marsh birding sites in the salty back bays. We made a morning visit to the mind-boggling Ocean City waterbird colony, which includes several hundred pair of White Ibis, a species which didn't start breeding in New Jersey until 2020. Yellow-crowned Night Herons were also well-represented, and we especially enjoyed seeing their turquoise eggs. We also drove around the eight-mile auto loop at Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, which truly never disappoints. We found high numbers of shorebirds (probably over 7,000 individuals) and other waterbirds, including a few White-rumped Sandpipers, and nice numbers of Gull-billed Tern and Whimbrel. We sorted through the many Marsh Wrens, Seaside Sparrows, and Common Yellowthroats living in marshy pannes and weedy shorelines in search of Saltmarsh Sparrow, and we eventually came through with nice views of a couple of these breeders, which are highly threatened by sea level rise.



Horseshoe Crabs are one of the defining creatures of springtime in the coastal Mid-Atlantic. They're especially important to the Delaware Bay ecosystem. Here is a cuddle puddle of crabs, probably having already done their egg-laying business, and waiting for the next evening high tide to help bring them back out to their maritime home. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

And of course, no trip to Cape May would be complete without good food. In addition to our picnic breakfasts and our pilgrimages to regional stalwarts Wawa and Uncle Bill's Pancake House (complete with tastings of various versions of Taylor Ham, a polarizing regional specialty), we had some fantastic dinners at some of the many fine Cape May eateries. Whether we were partaking in local seafood or tasty Italian and Indian food, it was a great way to unwind after long days in the field and reconnect with the group over shared highlights. While I consider Cape May a second home, and am there frequently, I hadn't guided our spring tour here since before the pandemic, when I co-guided some trips with my dear friend Tom Johnson, so this was a special trip for me, and I thank you all for joining me for a really fun week in one of my favorite birding locations on the planet!



Another shorebird rarity! This European Whimbrel was mixed into the flock of Hudsonian (American) Whimbrels in the salt marsh at Shell Bay landing, and luckily, the flock took flight while we were present, allowing us to see the diagnostic white wedge down the back and onto the rump, and the more extensively pale underwings. Whimbrel had yet to be split by eBird when we saw this bird, though by next year's tour, eBird will have come into alignment with other international taxonomies and recognized the two forms of whimbrels in this photo as two different species! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Here is a list of mammals and other notable non-birds we encountered during our lovely week in Cape May:

Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)
Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*)
Woodchuck (*Marmota monax*)
Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)
Common Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*)
Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
American Mink (*Neogale vison*)
White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
Eastern American Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes fulvus*)

Atlantic Horseshoe Crab
Common Eastern Box Turtle
Diamondback Terrapin
Southeastern Mud Turtle
Common Snapping Turtle



Piping Plover is state endangered in New Jersey, and there are only a few pairs left breeding in the southern part of the state. We were able to find this male on its territory during a foggy morning near Ocean City, thanks to some good directions from our plover biologist friends - thanks guys! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

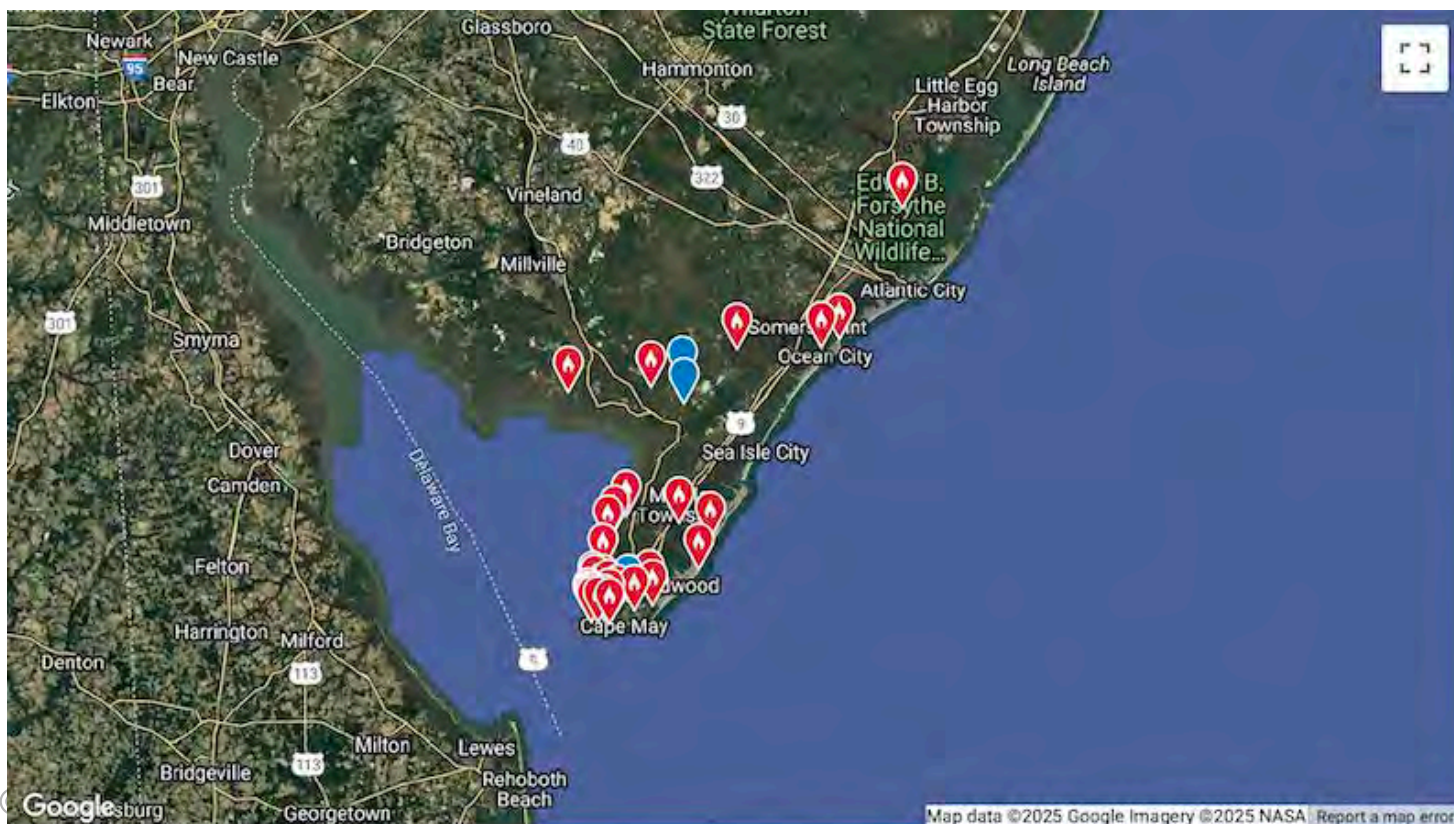
You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/375742>

--Doug Gochfeld (Treeswift)

Field Guides Birding Tours -- SPRING IN CAPE MAY, 2025 (with Doug Gochfeld)

11 – 17 May 2025 (7 days) Link-only



 New Jersey, United States

Atlantic | Cape May | Cumberland

 Doug Gochfeld



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

 156

 38

 2

Species Observed

[Show all details](#)

1	Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna autumnalis</i>	▶  1
60	Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	▶  4
212	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	▶  9
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i> *	▶  3
1	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	▶  1
42	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	▶  10
26	American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>	▶  4
22	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	▶  5
23	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>	▶  6
1	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	▶  1
34	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	▶  2
12	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	▶  3
27	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> *	▶  7
43	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	▶  17
3	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus americanus</i>	▶  2
1	Black-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus erythrophthalmus</i>	▶  1
1	Chuck-will's-widow	<i>Antrostomus carolinensis</i>	▶  1
23	Chimney Swift	<i>Chaetura pelagica</i>	▶  5
6	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>	▶  3
1	King Rail	<i>Rallus elegans</i>	▶  1
40	Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus crepitans</i>	▶  7

19	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	▶  7
236	Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	▶  5
7	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	▶  3
788	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	▶  9
1	Piping Plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	▶  1
70	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	▶  7  5
620	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>	▶  9
7	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>	▶  6
2	Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>	▶  2
97	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	▶  3
43	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	▶  8
14	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	▶  4
141	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▶  9
64	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	▶  3
563	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	▶  6
2959	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	▶  7
25	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	▶  3
6	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	▶  2
148	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	▶  7
8749	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>	▶  7
6712	Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>	▶  17
25	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	▶  4
700	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	▶  10
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	▶  6

12	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	▶  6
252	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>	▶  3
60	Least Tern	<i>Sternula antillarum</i>	▶  11
27	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	▶  3
77	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	▶  3
211	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	▶  19
70	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	▶  6
2	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	▶  2
14	Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	▶  5
4	Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	▶  4
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	▶  3
757	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	▶  10
593	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	▶  3
134	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	▶  2
92	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	▶  2
37	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	▶  2
1	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	▶  1
3	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	▶  2
34	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	▶  6
2	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	▶  2
111	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	▶  6
15	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	▶  4
3	Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	▶  1

20	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	▶  8
103	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	▶  18
1	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Astur cooperii</i>	▶  1
1	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	▶  1
12	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	▶  5
2	Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>	▶  1
3	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	▶  2
3	Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>	▶  1
9	Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>	▶  4
1	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	▶  1
3	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>	▶  3
8	Eastern Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus virens</i>	▶  3
7	Acadian Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax virescens</i>	▶  2
2	Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	▶  1
22	Great Crested Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus crinitus</i>	▶  9
8	Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>	▶  5
26	White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>	▶  7
2	Yellow-throated Vireo	<i>Vireo flavifrons</i>	▶  1
1	Blue-headed Vireo	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>	▶  1
22	Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	▶  5
25	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	▶  7
13	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	▶  3
13	Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>	▶  6

1	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	▶  1
23	Carolina Chickadee	<i>Poecile carolinensis</i>	▶  7
24	Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>	▶  9
52	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	▶  7
204	Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>	▶  10
1	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>	▶  1
58	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	▶  14
7	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>	▶  4
9	Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	▶  5
26	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	▶  2
25	Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>	▶  9
67	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> *	▶  13
34	Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	▶  10
3	Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	▶  3
17	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	▶  9
1	Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>	▶  1
1	Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	▶  1
4	Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	▶  1
4	Wood Thrush	<i>Hylocichla mustelina</i>	▶  1
24	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	▶  9
11	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	▶  4
33	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i> *	▶  7
25	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i> *	▶  9

12	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	▶  5
13	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>	▶  5
26	Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>	▶  7
33	Seaside Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i>	▶  4
4	Saltmarsh Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza caudacuta</i>	▶  1
18	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	▶  6
2	Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>	▶  1
6	Yellow-breasted Chat	<i>Icteria virens</i>	▶  3
2	Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	▶  1
3	Orchard Oriole	<i>Icterus spurius</i>	▶  2
2	Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>	▶  1
178	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	▶  16
9	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	▶  3
75	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	▶  17
70	Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>	▶  9
13	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	▶  4
4	Worm-eating Warbler	<i>Helmitheros vermivorum</i>	▶  1
1	Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia motacilla</i>	▶  1
2	Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>	▶  2
9	Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	▶  2
3	Prothonotary Warbler	<i>Protonotaria citrea</i>	▶  1
32	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	▶  11
3	Hooded Warbler	<i>Setophaga citrina</i>	▶  1

9	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	▶  3
9	Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>	▶  3
5	Magnolia Warbler	<i>Setophaga magnolia</i>	▶  3
3	Bay-breasted Warbler	<i>Setophaga castanea</i>	▶  1
1	Blackburnian Warbler	<i>Setophaga fusca</i>	▶  1
3	Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>	▶  3
3	Chestnut-sided Warbler	<i>Setophaga pensylvanica</i>	▶  1
15	Blackpoll Warbler	<i>Setophaga striata</i>	▶  4
1	Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>	▶  1
2	Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>	▶  1
1	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>	▶  1
10	Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Setophaga dominica</i>	▶  1
12	Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>	▶  4
2	Wilson's Warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>	▶  2
2	Summer Tanager	<i>Piranga rubra</i>	▶  1
3	Scarlet Tanager	<i>Piranga olivacea</i>	▶  2
49	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	▶  12
5	Blue Grosbeak	<i>Passerina caerulea</i>	▶  2
34	Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>	▶  10

HYBRIDS

1	Mallard x American Black Duck (hybrid)	<i>Anas platyrhynchos x rubripes</i>	▶  1
1	Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper (hybrid)	<i>Calidris alpina x fuscicollis</i>	▶  10  1

ADDITIONAL TAXA

3	Mallard/American Black Duck	<i>Anas platyrhynchos/rubripes</i>	▶  2
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19	dabbling duck sp. <i>Anatidae</i> sp. (dabbling duck sp.)	▶  2
4	duck sp. <i>Anatidae</i> (duck sp.)	▶  1
1	Yellow-billed/Black-billed Cuckoo <i>Coccyzus americanus/erythrophthalmus</i>	▶  1
3	King/Clapper Rail <i>Rallus elegans/crepitans</i>	▶  2
1	Black-bellied Plover/golden-plover sp. <i>Pluvialis</i> sp.	▶  1
15	Lesser/Greater Yellowlegs <i>Tringa flavipes/melanoleuca</i>	▶  1
40	peep sp. <i>Calidris</i> sp. (peep sp.)	▶  2
3160	shorebird sp. <i>Charadriiformes</i> sp. (shorebird sp.)	▶  5
210	Larus sp. <i>Larus</i> sp.	▶  2
10	Sterna sp. <i>Sterna</i> sp.	▶  1
10	tern sp. <i>Sterninae</i> sp.	▶  1
25	white egret sp. <i>Egretta/Ardea</i> sp.	▶  2
5	American/Fish Crow <i>Corvus brachyrhynchos/ossifragus</i>	▶  1
19	crow sp. <i>Corvus</i> sp. (crow sp.)	▶  5
1	Catharus sp. <i>Catharus</i> sp.	▶  1
2	new world sparrow sp. <i>Passerellidae</i> sp.	▶  1