Trip Report — Spring in Cape May 2026

May 10-16, 2026 with Sam Wilson



A rookery near Ocean City gives us amazing opportunities to see egrets, herons, and ibis in their peak breeding plumage. American Egret photographed by guide Sam Wilson.

It was a pleasure to be back on the East Coast for peak spring migration, enjoying the amazing diversity Cape May has to offer. Songbird migrants were a bit slow along the coast, but our persistence was rewarded with a beautiful week, a great showing of breeding birds, and outstanding shorebirding. Highlights included a rare Bar-tailed Godwit trailing a group of Red Knots over the Cape May Point dune crossing, a Marbled Godwit at Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (Brigantine), good looks at several Saltmarsh Sparrows and Gull-billed Terns, and a spectacular shorebird show on the Delaware Bay.



Huge numbers of breeding migratory shorebirds visit the beaches of the Delaware Bayshore to feast on horseshoe crabs each May. We had close up views here of Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, and Laughing Gulls. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

We visited a number of well-known birding sites, beginning at the Cape May Meadows. There we spotted a rare Stilt Sandpiper in the wetland area, along with fantastic views of breeding Prairie Warblers, Brown Thrashers, and the local colony of Least Terns nesting on the upper beach.

The next morning started with a bang at the Cape May Bird Observatory's Spring Watch platform at Coral Avenue. Scanning through my scope, I picked out a large, oddly proportioned shorebird at a distance, flying with a small flock of Red Knots. As it drew closer, we alerted the Spring Watch counters and were thrilled to confirm it as a Bar-tailed Godwit, a true rarity in New Jersey! The morning also brought Common Nighthawks overhead, a few Parasitic Jaegers, and some very late Purple Sandpipers lingering on the rocks along the shoreline.



Blue-winged Warbler is an uncommon breeder in South Jersey. We caught up with a few of the known breeding pairs in some natural grassy clearings on the edge of the Pine Barrens. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

At the CMBO Northwood Center, we picked through migrant warblers, including half a dozen Blackpolls in breeding plumage, a Magnolia Warbler, and a Nashville Warbler. After an excellent Mexican lunch at a new restaurant in Cape May Court House, we headed to Shell Bay Landing, where we saw the first of many Gull-billed Terns. Impressive flocks of migrant Hudsonian Whimbrels paraded over the marsh, alongside Saltmarsh Willets.



The group after some successful hawkwatching at Rea Farm on Cape Island. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

The Delaware Bayshore is a globally important bird area, especially for a few weeks in May. Each spring, millions of horseshoe crabs emerge from the Delaware Bay to spawn on the beaches of New Jersey and Delaware. This remarkable phenomenon draws thousands of shorebirds and Laughing Gulls, all eager to feast on the crab eggs as waves and shifting tides expose them.

This year was unusual. Water temperatures were far below normal for the season, and few crabs had come ashore to spawn. One might expect that to limit the number of birds, but it seemed to have the opposite effect: the birds lingered, waiting for the spawning to begin. Many thousands of Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers crowded the beaches everywhere we looked.



Clapper Rail's aren't always so easy to see! We were lucky to see several foraging at Forsyth National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

South Jersey's Pinelands and Atlantic White Cedar swamps host a number of interesting breeding species, and we made several stops in Belleplain State Forest and pineland sites along the county line. Belleplain delivered Acadian Flycatcher, Worm-eating Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Hooded Warbler, Pine Warbler, and Yellow-throated Warbler. We also enjoyed superb views of Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Prothonotary Warbler, and Northern Parula.



Black-and-White Warbler is a familiar breeding bird known for its creeping behavior along tree bark. We enjoyed watching this one possibly taking food to a nest. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

That same afternoon we took a pontoon boat tour of the saltmarsh behind the barrier islands. We enjoyed close views of breeding colonies of Forster's and Common Terns, migrant shorebirds, Seaside Sparrows, and a lingering Common Loon.

Later, we visited the Ocean City Welcome Center, home to an active rookery, where we braved the wind for views of egrets, herons, and ibis. Many of the birds were incubating eggs or tending very young nestlings. We had a beautiful evening celebrating a great birding day at a restaurant overlooking the Cape May Harbor, enjoying apps, cocktails, and fantastic sunset views.



A mob of shorebirds on the Delaware Bayshore including Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstones, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

At the end of the week we visited Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (Brigantine), one of New Jersey's premier birding destinations. Spring is the ideal time to enjoy this famous birding refuge. On our day trip we tallied about 80 species, including a scarce Marbled Godwit, White-rumped Sandpipers, Black Skimmers, Marsh Wrens, and a variety of woodland birds.

Taking full advantage of the last full day, we sought out more passerine migrants and added several new birds, including Scarlet Tanager, Wilson's Warbler, and Yellow-throated Vireo. One of the strangest (and slightly disturbing) moments came when we watched a Red-bellied Woodpecker probing tree cavities. It pulled a young nestling from one hole, killed it, and stashed it in another cavity. This behavior isn't unheard of for Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and it certainly satisfied our morbid curiosity! It was a reminder of the life and death drama that can occur in our own backyards, and that wildlife doesn't always behave the way we expect!

We closed the trip with a palate cleanser at Norbury's Landing on the Delaware Bayshore, saying goodbye to the abundant shorebird migrants

with lots of close Red Knot flybys. A notable gathering of large terns put on a final show, with 55 Royal Terns and 135 Caspian Terns flying about and resting on a sandbar. In my experience, this is the largest concentration of Caspian Terns I have seen, and it is a near high count for the state. We then made our way to the Philadelphia airport for departures, thankful for great birds and great company.

Thank you to everyone who joined this birding adventure. I look forward to seeing you on the next one!

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link: **https://ebird.org/tripreport/521525**

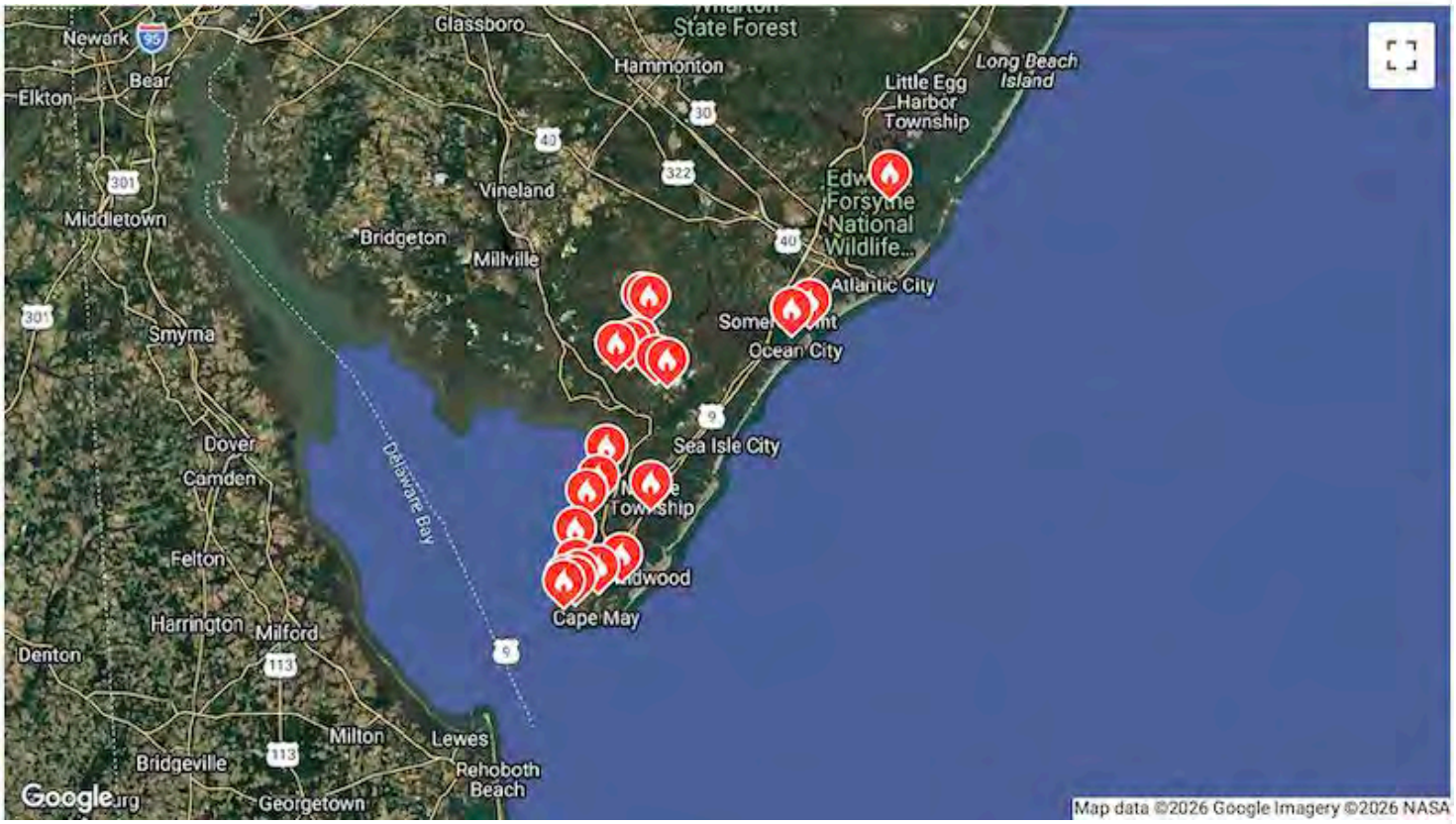
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--Sam

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10 – 16 May 2026 (7 days) Link-only



New Jersey, United States

Atlantic | Cape May

Sam Wilson

fieldguides® Birding Tours

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159 25 26

Species Observed | Checklists | Species with Photos

LIFERS 5

Species Observed

Show all details

20	Brant	*Branta bernicla*	2
52	Canada Goose	*Branta canadensis*	4
11	Mute Swan	*Cygnus olor* *	1 3
1	Wood Duck	*Aix sponsa*	1
4	Gadwall	*Mareca strepera*	2
43	Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*	6
51	American Black Duck	*Anas rubripes*	2
6	Green-winged Teal	*Anas crecca*	1
1	Red-breasted Merganser	*Mergus serrator*	1
2	Wild Turkey	*Meleagris gallopavo*	1
2	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia* *	2
24	Mourning Dove	*Zenaida macroura*	7
1	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	*Coccyzus americanus*	1
1	Common Nighthawk	*Chordeiles minor*	1
1	Chuck-will's-widow	*Antrostomus carolinensis*	1
18	Chimney Swift	*Chaetura pelagica*	6
3	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	*Archilochus colubris*	2
13	Clapper Rail	*Rallus crepitans*	1 5
27	American Oystercatcher	*Haematopus palliatus*	6
84	Black-bellied Plover	*Pluvialis squatarola*	1 4
3	Killdeer	*Charadrius vociferus*	2

289	Semipalmated Plover	*Charadrius semipalmatus*	7
2	Piping Plover	*Charadrius melodus*	1 1
131	Hudsonian Whimbrel	*Numenius hudsonicus*	3
1	Bar-tailed Godwit	*Limosa lapponica*	1
1	Marbled Godwit	*Limosa fedoa*	1 1
1800	Short-billed Dowitcher	*Limnodromus griseus*	8
9	Spotted Sandpiper	*Actitis macularius*	5
1	Solitary Sandpiper	*Tringa solitaria*	1
35	Lesser Yellowlegs	*Tringa flavipes*	2
43	Saltmarsh Willet	*Tringa semipalmata*	4
22	Greater Yellowlegs	*Tringa melanoleuca*	2
813	Ruddy Turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*	1 7
1045	Red Knot	*Calidris canutus*	6 3
1	Stilt Sandpiper	*Calidris himantopus*	1 1
1366	Sanderling	*Calidris alba*	4
580	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*	4
3	Purple Sandpiper	*Calidris maritima*	1
6	White-rumped Sandpiper	*Calidris fuscicollis*	1
269	Least Sandpiper	*Calidris minutilla*	7
1228	Semipalmated Sandpiper	*Calidris pusilla*	1 6
2	Parasitic Jaeger	*Stercorarius parasiticus*	1
3	Bonaparte's Gull	*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*	2
5186	Laughing Gull	*Leucophaeus atricilla*	19
17	Ring-billed Gull	*Larus delawarensis*	6

143	American Herring Gull	*Larus smithsonianus*	12
36	Great Black-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*	6
4	Lesser Black-backed Gull	*Larus fuscus*	2
29	Black Skimmer	*Rynchops niger*	3
82	Least Tern	*Sternula antillarum*	7
9	Gull-billed Tern	*Gelochelidon nilotica*	1 2
135	Caspian Tern	*Hydroprogne caspia*	2 1
130	Forster's Tern	*Sterna forsteri*	11
72	Common Tern	*Sterna hirundo*	2
66	Royal Tern	*Thalasseus maximus*	4
8	Common Loon	*Gavia immer*	2
162	Double-crested Cormorant	*Nannopterum auritum*	9
38	White Ibis	*Eudocimus albus*	3
75	Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*	6
2	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	*Nyctanassa violacea*	1 1
1	Black-crowned Night Heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*	1 1
2	Little Blue Heron	*Egretta caerulea*	1
2	Tricolored Heron	*Egretta tricolor*	2
18	Snowy Egret	*Egretta thula*	1 8
3	Green Heron	*Butorides virescens*	1 2
49	Great Egret	*Ardea alba*	2 5
23	Great Blue Heron	*Ardea herodias*	2
6	Brown Pelican	*Pelecanus occidentalis*	1

4	Black Vulture	*Coragyps atratus*	1
24	Turkey Vulture	*Cathartes aura*	7
50	Osprey	*Pandion haliaetus*	12
5	Cooper's Hawk	*Astur cooperii*	4
1	Northern Harrier	*Circus hudsonius*	1
7	Bald Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*	3
1	Broad-winged Hawk	*Buteo platypterus*	1
2	Red-tailed Hawk	*Buteo jamaicensis*	2
3	Red-headed Woodpecker	*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*	1
8	Red-bellied Woodpecker	*Melanerpes carolinus*	1 7
5	Downy Woodpecker	*Dryobates pubescens*	4
1	Hairy Woodpecker	*Leuconotopicus villosus*	1
3	Northern Flicker	*Colaptes auratus*	2
4	Eastern Wood-Pewee	*Contopus virens*	3
8	Acadian Flycatcher	*Empidonax virescens*	4
1	Eastern Phoebe	*Sayornis phoebe*	1
24	Great Crested Flycatcher	*Myiarchus crinitus*	11
27	Eastern Kingbird	*Tyrannus tyrannus*	1 4
12	White-eyed Vireo	*Vireo griseus*	8
1	Yellow-throated Vireo	*Vireo flavifrons*	1
17	Red-eyed Vireo	*Vireo olivaceus*	8
9	Blue Jay	*Cyanocitta cristata*	4
4	American Crow	*Corvus brachyrhynchos*	2

14	Fish Crow	*Corvus ossifragus*	4
23	Carolina Chickadee	*Poecile carolinensis*	10
26	Tufted Titmouse	*Baeolophus bicolor*	8
3	Horned Lark	*Eremophila alpestris*	1
2	Bank Swallow	*Riparia riparia*	2
41	Tree Swallow	*Tachycineta bicolor*	4
24	Purple Martin	*Progne subis*	3
3	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*	3
88	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	8
3	Cliff Swallow	*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*	2
1	White-breasted Nuthatch	*Sitta carolinensis*	1
11	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	*Polioptila caerulea*	5
1	Northern House Wren	*Troglodytes aedon*	1
20	Eastern Marsh Wren	*Cistothorus palustris*	1
13	Carolina Wren	*Thryothorus ludovicianus*	8
34	European Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris* *	8
30	Gray Catbird	*Dumetella carolinensis*	10
1	Brown Thrasher	*Toxostoma rufum*	1
13	Northern Mockingbird	*Mimus polyglottos*	6
5	Eastern Bluebird	*Sialia sialis*	3
1	Veery	*Catharus fuscescens*	1
5	Wood Thrush	*Hylocichla mustelina*	1 3
15	American Robin	*Turdus migratorius*	8

20	Cedar Waxwing	*Bombycilla cedrorum*	5
18	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus* *	3
5	House Finch	*Haemorhous mexicanus* *	3
12	American Goldfinch	*Spinus tristis*	4
6	Chipping Sparrow	*Spizella passerina*	2
7	Field Sparrow	*Spizella pusilla*	2
25	Seaside Sparrow	*Ammospiza maritima*	3
4	Saltmarsh Sparrow	*Ammospiza caudacuta*	1
1	Savannah Sparrow	*Passerculus sandwichensis*	1
8	Song Sparrow	*Melospiza melodia*	3
2	Eastern Towhee	*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*	2
1	Yellow-breasted Chat	*Icteria virens*	1
3	Bobolink	*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*	1
2	Orchard Oriole	*Icterus spurius*	2
1	Baltimore Oriole	*Icterus galbula*	1
129	Red-winged Blackbird	*Agelaius phoeniceus*	1 11
8	Brown-headed Cowbird	*Molothrus ater*	6
49	Common Grackle	*Quiscalus quiscula*	5
24	Boat-tailed Grackle	*Quiscalus major*	5
7	Ovenbird	*Seiurus aurocapilla*	6
4	Worm-eating Warbler	*Helmitheros vermivorum*	1
2	Louisiana Waterthrush	*Parkesia motacilla*	1
4	Northern Waterthrush	*Parkesia noveboracensis*	3

1	Blue-winged Warbler	*Vermivora cyanoptera*	1 1
11	Black-and-white Warbler	*Mniotilta varia*	2 5
3	Prothonotary Warbler	*Protonotaria citrea*	2
1	Nashville Warbler	*Leiothlypis ruficapilla*	1
35	Common Yellowthroat	*Geothlypis trichas*	13
4	Hooded Warbler	*Setophaga citrina*	3
10	American Redstart	*Setophaga ruticilla*	4
19	Northern Parula	*Setophaga americana*	1 7
7	Magnolia Warbler	*Setophaga magnolia*	1 4
9	Northern Yellow Warbler	*Setophaga aestiva*	3
9	Blackpoll Warbler	*Setophaga striata*	3
3	Black-throated Blue Warbler	*Setophaga caerulescens*	1 3
7	Pine Warbler	*Setophaga pinus*	4
16	Yellow-rumped Warbler	*Setophaga coronata*	3
8	Yellow-throated Warbler	*Setophaga dominica*	1 4
2	Prairie Warbler	*Setophaga discolor*	1
1	Wilson's Warbler	*Cardellina pusilla*	1
2	Summer Tanager	*Piranga rubra*	2
8	Scarlet Tanager	*Piranga olivacea*	3
36	Northern Cardinal	*Cardinalis cardinalis*	11
7	Blue Grosbeak	*Passerina caerulea*	2
27	Indigo Bunting	*Passerina cyanea*	4

ADDITIONAL TAXA

2	Short-billed/Long-billed Dowitcher	*Limnodromus griseus/scolopaceus*	1

9	Saltmarsh/Prairie Willet	*Tringa semipalmata/inornata*	2
20	Forster's/Common Tern	*Sterna forsteri/hirundo*	1
15	American/Fish Crow	*Corvus brachyrhynchos/ossifragus*	1