

Cape May: Spring Migration | May 14-20, 2024

Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



With guides Rick Weiman and Pat Lueders and participants Lee, Ginny, Robin, John G., Jeff, Ellyn, Joan, John D., Nancy, Harold and Lenore.



Tues., May 14

Arrivals in Philadelphia and then on to Cape May, NJ

Guide Pat Lueders met the early arrivals and visited the John Heinz Wildlife Refuge on the way to Cape May for a short bird walk. American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Warbling and Red-eyed Vireos and a Wood Thrush were some of the birds seen or heard there. Rick picked up the rest of the group with the exception of Jeff and Ellyn who drove directly to Cape May from NY state. We all met at the oceanside Sea Crest Inn and settled into our rooms. Around 4:30 we headed to the Cape May Lighthouse and Hawk Watch Platform at Cape May Point State Park. We parked next to the Purple Martin condos and enjoyed watching dozens of these large swallows fly around the parking lot. From the hawk platform we watched Least Terns hover and dive for fish in Gull Pond.



They were soon joined by a pair of Ospreys who glided near us making several unsuccessful attempts to snag fish for dinner. We also saw Forster's Terns and Laughing Gulls and heard a Prairie Warblers and Field Sparrows singing in the cedars by the dunes. Just offshore a raft of Ruddy Ducks and several Black Scoters were loafing.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at Sunset Liquors to stock up on wine for the week and for our welcome to Cape May dinner at Sapore Italiano. The deliciously fresh seafood (many ordered the house bronzino fish special) and pasta dishes were enjoyed by all. A good first day to start the tour!

Wed., May 15 Beach Walk | The Wetlands Institute | TNC South Cape May Meadows

We woke up to some rain, so we slept in a little bit before heading to our favorite local restaurant right up the block called Ocean View, where we had a filling breakfast served by their friendly staff. After breakfast, the rain had dissipated for the most part, so we went to the end of Beach Ave. and scanned for birds. We had good looks at Surf and Black Scoters bobbing in the waves, a lone Sanderling feeding at the water's edge, and several gulls and terns. The bird of the morning though was a Tricolored Heron that flew right over us on its way to the nearby wetlands at Cape May Point.

We then drove up the Garden State Parkway about 10 miles to the town of Stone Harbor to visit the Wetlands Institute. We walked their salt marsh trail and quickly added several new shorebirds including Black-bellied Plovers in breeding plumage, Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Semipalmated Plovers, Willets and many Dunlin. Also observed were Great Egrets, Boat-tailed Grackles, at least a dozen Ospreys and an actively feeding, breeding plumaged Little Blue Heron. Clapper Rails teased us with their calls from the tall grasses but refused to show themselves. Rick knew one of the institute's Conservation Specialists, Megan Kolk, who spoke to the group about their many projects related to the stewardship of wetland species and coastal ecosystems through their programs in research, conservation, habitat restoration and education. Before leaving, we shopped in their gift shop and donated to their fundraising efforts for all their good work protecting New Jersey's coastal wetlands and the species that depend on them.

We stopped at the local Wawa to get some to-go lunches and then drove to The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) South Cape May Meadows preserve and dined on their new picnic tables. After lunch we walked the trails, spotting a few of the shorebirds we'd seen earlier in the day. A pair of Black Skimmers flew over us as we approached the beach overlook trail. When we reached the beach, we saw that a large area was surrounded with temporary fencing to protect the nesting Least Terns from mammalian predators. We also saw several



American Oystercatchers on nests as well. When we reached the viewing platform that overlooks the wetlands, we had close looks at Greater Yellowlegs, a Glossy Ibis and a dancing Snowy Egret.

The preserve underwent a massive restoration project that started after several large storms caused severe flooding in the early 90's. A diverse group of stakeholders including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and TNC joined forces to restore the beach, dune and wetland habitat to improve ecosystem functions and habitat quality. Some successful results of the project include increased beach-nesting bird habitat, creation of resting and feeding areas for birds within the wetlands, construction of freshwater ponds behind the dune, and removal of phragmites, an invasive reed that was reducing habitat for migratory birds. The project was completed in 2007 and restored nearly 460 acres. By this fall, NJ TNC hopes to have a new boardwalk installed in a wetland area that cannot yet be accessed.

After a break at the hotel, we gathered for our first species checklist of the tour. We then went to dinner at The Blue Pig in the historic Congress Hall area. The road to the front of the hotel was blocked off as a movie biopic about Bob Dylan was being filmed in Cape May that week. We walked through the now idle movie set, with vintage cars, a 1960s bus and movie props and signs representing the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. We were joined at dinner by Todd Pover, a Senior Biologist for the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ (CWF). After our meal Todd came back to the hotel and gave a presentation on New Jersey's endangered and threatened beach nesting birds: Least Tern, Piping Plover, Black Skimmer and American Oystercatcher. Todd explained what CWF and its team of biologists and volunteers do to monitor and protect these birds during the busy spring and summer nesting seasons when they are competing with people (and their pets and frisbees) for the same resource. Naturalist Journeys makes annual donations to CWF supporting the admirable work they do to protect habitat and conserve at-risk species in NJ.

Thurs., May 16 Spring Watch | CMBO | Salt Marsh Boat Tour

We woke to a clear and crisp morning with temps in the 60's. Our first stop was the NJ Audubon Spring Watch, a research initiative of New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory and is the only springtime, all-species migration count on the East Coast. The count season begins March 1 and continues through May 31. Observations are made from a platform that overlooks the mouth of Delaware Bay to the west and the town of Cape May Point to the east. Each day, counters arrive at sunrise, with the observation period continuing for three to five hours depending on conditions and migration intensity. A wide array of birds, often in excess of 200 species, are recorded during the three-month window.



During our hour plus visit, we observed Common and Forster's Terns, many gulls, a scoter trifecta (Black, Surf and White-winged) and Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in the surf. Long time volunteer Vince Elia gave us a talk about the spring watch history, nuances of the counting process and details on all of CMBO's bird monitoring counts in the spring and fall including the Cape May Point Hawk Watch, Avalon Sea Watch and the Higbee Beach Morning Flight. He highlighted the data analysis process that is now compiled in real time using tablets and Trektellen (www.trektellen.org) and the trends they are observing with certain species of birds.

Next, we visited Bella Vida Garden Café for another filling breakfast and then the gardens of the Cape May Bird Observatory. At the feeders were Tufted Titmice, House Finches, Northern Cardinals and Carolina Chickadees. We had heard there were Mississippi Kites seen in the area and sure enough, two flew overhead for quick views. We then stopped at a new birding location on Seagrove Ave. and had wonderful looks at a male Indigo Bunting along with Great Crested Flycatcher, Chipping Sparrow and White-throated Sparrow. Some volunteers were clearing out invasive plants and showed us a very cute eastern box turtle they had found.

We grabbed another to-go lunch from Wawa and dined on picnic tables at the Miss Chris Marina, then boarded the *Osprey* for our tour of the back-bay salt marshes and estuaries of Cape May with Captain Bob Lubberman. The *Osprey* is a large, enclosed pontoon boat manned by the very knowledgeable Captain Bob and naturalist, Miss Patty. We had timed the tides well, and the dropping high tide allowed our boat to make it through channels and creeks that would be impossible at low tide. Departing the marina, we headed to the mouth of the Cape May Harbor, passing the Cape May Coast Guard Station.

Birds were plentiful and provided close viewing opportunities. We observed several lingering Common Loons and a very late Long-tailed Duck, several dozen breeding-plumaged Ruddy Turnstones and other shorebirds like Dunlin, Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets and Whimbrels. Ospreys in flight and on nests on man-made platforms and channel markers were plentiful. Along the jetty rocks in the channel leading to the ocean were a flock of Purple Sandpipers, a life bird for many on the tour. We passed by an old Osprey nest on a tower now occupied by a pair of Bald Eagles with two brown-feathered chicks just visible during our stop. Next was the largest nesting colony of Laughing Gulls on the east coast, which also contained nesting Common and Forster's Terns. Rick spotted a Least Bittern that was flushed by the boat, and it soon flushed again, giving Captain Bob a thrill as it was only the second one seen on his tours in the many years he's been doing them.



After the exciting boat tour, we stopped at the Acme grocery store to purchase food for our in-room breakfast for the next few mornings, which all had early starts planned. We then had a late afternoon break at the hotel and a fine meal at the Secondo Panico restaurant followed by our species checklist and some ice cream during our list review.

Fri., May 17 Higbee Beach WMA | Beach Plum Farm | Cook's Beach | Return the Favor Horseshoe Crab Rescue Program

After breakfast in our rooms, we arrived early at Higbee Beach WMA hoping that there had been active migration overnight. On the way, a healthy Eastern Coyote was spotted in a field along the road. Naturalist Journeys Guide Hugh Simmons was in the area as a volunteer CMBO spring festival guide and he joined us as well. The Cape May peninsula hosts one of the world's largest migrations each spring as over a million birds stop at the peninsula seeking food, cover and water, and Higbee Beach plays a vital role in the migration, providing migrants with a stopover site as they increase their fitness before continuing their sojourns south.

Unfortunately, we could quickly tell that migration was slow as we'd had cool temperatures and east winds most of the week that tend to push birds inland. But it is still a great area to bird as the 1,100-acre site offers a unique blend of habitats including dune, forest, scrub-shrub and early successional fields. The NJ Endangered and Nongame Species Program, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, manages the fields and scrub-shrub areas for migrating songbirds and raptors. We started at the canal area of the WMA and saw several more Purple Sandpipers on the jetty with dolphins splashing in the surf. More Black Scoters and Double-crested Cormorants streamed by as a pair of adult Bald Eagles perched on the ferry station towers across the canal from us.

Birding the traditional field one at Higbee gave us local nesters such as Indigo Bunting, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Great Crested Flycatcher, Prairie Warbler and an elusive, but finally seen, White-eyed Vireo. As we walked back to the vehicles, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo called in the parking lot.

We were hungry by now, so we set out for an outdoor brunch at Beach Plum Farm, a beautiful, 60-acre organic farm that provides much of the produce to local restaurants. They serve a fantastic breakfast or lunch and have a network of trails through the woodlands and pastures on the property. Before we ate, we birded the wooded



wetland trail and added American Redstart and Red-bellied Woodpecker to our trip list. Rick shared that this was good Prothonotary Warbler habitat and a few minutes later Lee spotted one and several of us got quick looks at it. During brunch at the picnic tables, Ginny noticed a male Scarlet Tanager at the edge of the woods. We watched Gray Catbirds and Common Grackles chase each other while we ate and made friends with the local chickens roaming the beautiful gardens there.

The Delaware Bay is a critical location for spawning horseshoe crabs and many shorebirds, most notably Red Knots, have evolved to time their migrations to this spectacle, gorging on the fatty eggs to fuel their migration further north. Based on local reports, we visited Cook's Beach and, after a rough drive, encountered an amazing scene of crabs and shorebirds! Thousands of shorebirds were at the water's edge feeding on horseshoe crab eggs including hundreds of Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Dunlin. We were able to compare Sanderlings, Semipalmated Sandpipers and White-rumped Sandpipers based on coloration and size. Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers were present in smaller numbers as was a lone Willet.

We watched the birds move up and down the beach, occasionally flushed by Great Black-backed Gulls. Many of the Red Knots we observed through the scope were visibly plump due to the abundance of eggs, a good sign for their arduous journey ahead to their northern breeding grounds. Red Knot numbers have been steadily declining over the past 20 years, mainly due to the over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs, and are on the federal endangered species list. New Jersey enacted a moratorium on horseshoe crab harvesting in hopes the population will recover. Reports filtered in later that week that this was the highest concentration of shorebirds observed on the bay in the past 10 years. After we'd had our fill of shorebirds, we scanned the saltmarsh and had very nice looks at multiple singing Seaside Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds.

That night we had an early pizza party dinner at the hotel and reviewed the species list. Afterwards Rick gave a presentation on the complicated relationship between horseshoe crabs, migrating shorebirds, the local fishermen who use the crabs for bait and the medical industry that collects the crab's blue blood for testing vaccines. Then it was on to Pierce's Point Beach on Delaware Bay where around 8:00 p.m. to view the sunset and assist CWF Biologist Larissa Smith and her intern, James, rescuing breeding horseshoe crabs. The crabs are easily overturned by waves or impinged on man-made structures, and without help would likely perish the next day from dehydration or predation. Since they are not sexually mature until around 10 years of age, every one of these breeding crabs, especially the larger females, are important to the overall population. We were now part of an 11-year volunteer program called "*Return the Favor*," which has rescued over one million horseshoe



crabs by recruiting an army of volunteers. We contributed to those numbers by saving 22 crabs in our 1.5 hours walking the beach that night. We also witnessed multiple crabs in the water exhibiting breeding behavior as males swam and crawled close to shore in search of the females. It was quite a memorable experience for all of us who participated.

Sat., May 18 Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Ocean City Heron Rookery | Two-Mile Landing

After another early breakfast in our rooms, we drove north to the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. Known simply as “Brig” to many birders, the refuge protects more than 48,000 acres of southern New Jersey coastal habitat, with freshwater wetlands and saltmarshes interspersed with shallow coves and bays. The refuge’s location in one of the Atlantic flyway’s most active flight paths makes it an important seasonal stopover for migrating birds.

A short walk in the wooded area produced Carolina and House Wrens, Song Sparrow, Gray Catbird, Tree Swallow and Purple Martin. We heard American Redstart and Pine Warbler in the trees and had good looks at several Yellow Warblers. We then walked the short boardwalk marsh trail at the entrance to the 8-mile drive and a pair of Barn Swallows perched on the railing for a photo. Several Marsh Wrens were singing their cheerful, bubbly calls and nest building in the grasses underneath us, and most of us had nice looks at these active little birds. An immature Bald Eagle soared overhead as did many Ospreys, some carrying fish. Clapper Rails called but never revealed themselves to us.

A pair of Wood Ducks and a Mute Swan with several young cygnets were found on a small pond next to the observation tower. Highlights from our eight-mile drive around the refuge included super close Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers and Semipalmated Sandpipers, all in breeding plumage. We had more good looks at singing Seaside Sparrows and at least a dozen Common Yellowthroats as they perched nicely along the roadside for photos. Gull-billed, Least and Forster’s Terns along with Black Skimmer, Glossy Ibis and Black-bellied Plover were among the 58 species we recorded.

We then had a nice seafood lunch at the nearby Oyster Creek Inn that sits directly on a saltmarsh. As we entered the restaurant, a Clapper Rail called loudly, but of course wasn’t seen. After lunch, we visited the Ocean City Welcome Center where there is an active heron rookery in the trees below the causeway and parking lot. From the railing we were looking down at the rookery, an amazing spectacle with dozens of Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibis, White Ibis (now nesting in NJ!) and both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, all building nest or incubating eggs, and we learned that Great Egrets and Night-Herons have blue eggs. Also in



the mix were a few nesting Little Blue and Tricolored Herons. We walked down a path that gave us eye-level views of the nesting birds and we some brown fuzzy White Ibis hatchlings chirping for a meal as well as a Great Egret with three wobbly chicks reminiscent of a Muppet movie!

We returned to Cape May in the afternoon with some free time. Some folks visited the Washington Square walking mall, some relaxed at the hotel, and Harold, Lee, John and Robin joined Rick to bird the saltmarsh at Two-Mile Landing in search of the elusive Clapper Rail. The group set out towards the marsh while Rick waited, scanning near the van. And wouldn't you know it, a Clapper Rail emerged from the reeds and began to preen directly behind the van. Fortunately, Rick was able to alert the others, and everyone had wonderful scope views, photos and videos of the rail preening in the open for over 20 minutes. We shared our sighting with other excited birders as well.

Dinner that night was back at the Bella Vida Garden Café, which serves local food with a Costa Rican flair. The owner, Chris, always takes good care of our groups, and we enjoyed another lovely meal followed by our species checklist back at the Sea Crest Inn and a well-deserved rest.

Sun., May 19 **CMBO Spring Festival | Belleplain State Forest | Trip to the Rips**

After our final in-room very early breakfast, it was time to join the NJ Audubon Cape May Bird Observatory Spring Festival. We had signed up for the dawn chorus tour in Belleplain State Forest which meant we were on the road at 5:30 a.m. Belleplain contains more than 11,000 acres of pine-oak woods and Atlantic White Cedar swamps in Cape May and Cumberland counties. It was our best chance to see or hear breeding birds like Hooded, Worm-eating, Yellow-throated and Prothonotary Warblers, as well as Summer Tanager. A nice surprise was that one of the festival leaders was an old friend of Rick's, Bill Boyle, who wrote the book *"A Guide to Bird Finding in New Jersey"*, so we knew we were in good hands. We arrived just as the sun was rising and birds were singing in the parking lot. After introductions, our first stop was a field on Vine Road where we had wonderful looks at a Yellow-billed Cuckoo that flew into to a leafless tree in front of us. Several male Indigo Buntings and a pair of Eastern Bluebirds added some color to the morning, but the Blue Grosbeak we were hoping for proved elusive.

Other stops produced views of a male Prothonotary Warbler taking a caterpillar to its nest hole, a calling Hooded Warbler, several Yellow-throated Warblers and an Acadian Flycatcher. At our final stop we searched the fields for Blue Grosbeak with no luck, but on the way back to the cars, Pat found a stunning male Summer



Tanager that was photographed nicely by Lenore. In all we observed 47 species and added quite a few new ones to the trip list. On the way back to Cape May, we stopped at Jakes Landing Road, near Dennis Creek, and had great looks at a loudly singing Ovenbird while listening to the enchanting song of Wood Thrushes. Down by the saltmarsh, Clapper Rails, Seaside Sparrows and Marsh Wrens sang and called and an adult Bald Eagle flew by, spooking several Glossy Ibis.

We had lunch at the Ocean View Restaurant and took a short break at the hotel before heading to the marina to board the American Star, a large whale watching vessel that was the final NJ Audubon Spring Festival adventure for our group. We sat on the top deck with other registrants and left the Cape May inlet for the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The excursion was billed as a "Trip to the Rips," visiting the area where the Atlantic meets the Delaware Bay, causing an upwelling of currents that attracts pelagic birds to the rich bounty brought to the surface. The sea was calm, and the sun was shining so it was a perfect day for a three-hour tour. We soon saw several Atlantic bottlenose dolphins near the boat along with many gulls and terns previously seen, and of course more Ospreys. In the distance some of us observed a dark-colored, immature Northern Gannet. The boat passed our hotel and then Cape May Point and the lighthouse before circling back through the canal to the dock, giving us all an interesting view of Cape Island fully surrounded by water.

Our farewell dinner was at Oyster Bay that served delicious seafood. After dinner, we capped off the day with a visit to Scoop's on Sunset for ice cream before returning to the hotel to finish our final species checklist of the trip. We shared our favorite memories and birds of the trip with the Return the Favor night leading the votes for best stop while the heron rookery and Cook's Beach with its thousands of shorebirds coming in as close seconds. The favorite bird was the Red Knot, fitting as we saw hundreds of them looking plump and healthy leaving us hopeful for their future. In second place was that elusive Clapper Rail, and I think all five of us who saw the preening individual voted for it.

Sat., May 20 Homeward Bound

After a nice, filling breakfast at Ocean View, we loaded up the vans and headed toward the Philadelphia Airport. We had an hour or so to kill so we took the scenic route along Route 47 with a planned stop on Jakes Landing Road. On the way Rick received word that Sandhill Cranes had been seen in a field near TNC's Eldora Preserve. This was certainly an unexpected sighting and made for a great final addition for our trip list. A quick stop at Jakes yielded some expected species like Seaside Sparrow, Marsh Wren, Osprey, Bald Eagle and more calling Clapper Rails.

We soon reached the airport, and hotels for those extending their stay, in Philadelphia. We said our goodbyes with the hopes of being together soon on another Naturalist Journeys adventure. For the tour we had a total of 126 species of birds, impressive when one considers that songbird migration was minimal most of the week due to prevailing east winds.

Photos: Group (Hugh Simmons), Ruddy Turnstone (Rick Weiman - RW), Great Egret (Lenore Atwood - LA), Common Yellowthroat (LA), Barn Swallows (Pat Lueders - PL), Indigo Bunting (LA), Osprey (LA), Summer Tanager (Ellyn), Lighthouse (LA), Short-billed Dowitcher (Lee Carn - LC), Little Blue Heron (LA), Snowy Egret (LA), Group (RW), Black Vulture (LC), Glossy Ibis (LA), Group Birding (Nancy McClure - NM), Tufted Titmouse (LA), Young Eastern Box Turtle (PL), Indigo Bunting (LA), Osprey on nest (RW), Ruddy Turnstone (RW), Common Loon (LA), Great Black-backed Gull (PL), Beach Plum Farm (PL), Sunset walk looking for Horseshoe Crab (RW), Rick & Ginny (Hugh Simmons), Group Birding (Hugh Simmons), Least Sandpiper (LA), Forster's Tern (RW), Eastern Kingbird (PL), Laughing Gulls (LA), Ruddy Ducks (LA), Eastern Bluebird (LA), Prothonotary Warbler (LA), Red-bellied Woodpecker (LA)