



CAPE MAY *MIGRATION MADNESS* Custom Tour

October 4-8, 2017

Tour leaders: Josh Engel & Jason Weckstein

Cape May in September and October can be a magical place—abundant songbird migrants, wetlands filled with shorebirds, ducks, and waders, and a constant stream of raptors overhead. The weather was magnificent, almost too magnificent, lacking any strong cold fronts that drop so many birds in Cape May. Fortunately, we did well with raptors, with good raptor migrations, especially Peregrine Falcons, and great waterbirds and saltmarsh specialists. We had wonderful views of Seaside and Saltmarsh Sparrow and Clapper Rail, along with a broad diversity of shorebirds, ducks, and wading birds. Songbird migrants were not abundant, but we did build up a decent list, including a good variety of warblers and sparrows.

On top of the birds, we had a great group, ate lots of delicious food, learned the joys of Wawa, had a wonderful monarch tagging demonstration, enjoyed some “swim-bys” of Bottlenose Dolphin, and enjoyed the Mid-Atlantic Coast at a beautiful time of year.

TOP 5 BIRDS

1. **Black Skimmer (photo below)**
2. **Saltmarsh Sparrow**
3. **Clapper Rail**
4. **Seaside Sparrow**
5. **Peregrine Falcon**



TRIP REPORT

Day 1: Everyone arrived to Philadelphia easily and the gathered group headed for the shore. We picked up lunch once we arrived in Cape May and took it to the hawkwatch platform at the state park for a picnic. The hawk movement was light, but we had nice views of a Peregrine Falcon and enjoyed watching Snowy Egret, Pied-billed Grebe, and Northern Shoveler around Bunker Pond in front of the platform. We still had a bit of time, so we visited the adjacent Cape May Meadows. Ducks were plentiful in the ponds, and we had nice looks at Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, and Gadwall. The definite highlight was seeing a Merlin come in and catch a dragonfly right in front of us.



We had great studies of various terns on this trip, including large numbers of Forster's Terns. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 2: Our first full day in Cape May. We started at Cape May's famed morning spot, Higbee Beach. It was a slow morning for migrants, but we did see Black-and-white Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Yellow Palm Warbler, and a few others. We headed to the beach next, where we were able to scope several Parasitic Jaegers and a Northern Gannet, while a small flock of Black Scoters hung out just off the beach. We enjoyed the gull and tern watching, which included Lesser Black-backed Gull on the beach and close flybys of Royal Tern. A few Bottlenose Dolphins swam past as well.

We finished up the morning at the hawkwatch platform, with a close flyover of a Peregrine Falcon and our first Bald Eagle. After lunch we headed north to Stone Harbor. A beach stop yielded an Osprey carrying a fish in from offshore and a Western Sandpiper with a few other shorebirds. The saltmarshes were particularly productive, with excellent views of many American Oystercatchers. We also found Red Knot, Tricolored Heron, Black Skimmer, Marbled Godwit, and had great views of Royal and Forster's Terns. We capped the day with a gorgeous sunset off Cape May, complete with Northern Gannets and flocks of Black Skimmers flying past, and a wonderful dinner in a local café.

Day 3: With southwest winds overnight, we stuck to Cape May for the morning. We started at The Beanery, where we found a few migrants, but it was clear there wasn't a big overnight arrival. We did see Northern Parula, Black-and-white Warbler, and a few redstarts. We even added an unexpected Eastern Screech Owl singing in broad daylight! We shifted to the hawkwatch after, where a few raptors were moving, including our first of what would be many Peregrine Falcons over the course of the day. A walk on the adjacent trails yielded Bay-breasted Warbler and our first Carolina Chickadees of the trip.



We had close views of Black Vultures where a flock of them was feeding on a roadkill rabbit. Photo by Josh Engel.

We then headed nearby to the Cape May Bird Observatory visitors center. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker put on a good show, along with Northern Parula, Red-eyed Vireo, and a skulky White-eyed Vireo. It was then back to the hawkwatch for our picnic lunch, with Blackpoll Warblers keeping us company. Peregrine Falcons continued streaming by after lunch, while we stopped in at Sunset Beach, while we walked through Cox Hall Creek (where one participant got quite the views of a Black Racer snake!), and even while we stopped in at the state park for a bathroom break. We finished our day's birding with a monarch tagging demonstration while many monarchs fed on goldenrods in the adjacent dunes (and while more Peregrine Falcons migrated by).

Day 4: We got an early start to head north and spend the morning in the famed Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. It certainly lived up to its billing. We started the day with some serious (and successful) sparrow-ing. It took some work, but the entire group eventually got great scope looks at Saltmarsh and Seaside Sparrows, and some people even got scope looks at Nelson's Sparrow. The auto-loop was full of birds, with loads of dabbling ducks, waders, and shorebirds. Peregrines and Northern Harriers were buzzing around and we found a small group of Bobolinks in a grassy area. A Glossy Ibis played hide-and-seek with us, but we eventually all got good looks. A recently arrived flock of Brant flew past us and we had nice views of Semipalmated Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, and other shorebirds.

We headed south to have lunch overlooking a saltmarsh. Some of the group wandered off and heard a Clapper Rail; soon the whole group was looking at a Clapper Rail, in the open, at point-blank range. Not bad for a lunch stop. We made a few quick checks of some other local wetlands, getting additional views of Western Sandpiper, American Oystercatcher, and Marbled Godwit, before heading back to Cape May for a shower and dinner.



One of the trip highlights was extraordinary views of this Clapper Rail. Photo by Jason Weckstein.

Day 5: For our final morning, we started at the beach adjacent to our hotel. It turned out to be a good choice when Sonny spotted a flock of distant birds flying our way. It turned out to be a group of more than 300 Black Skimmers that gave us extraordinary views at the sun rose behind us. It was rather amazing seeing this flock fly around in the golden light of the rising sun with the Cape May Lighthouse in the background.

After grabbing breakfast, we headed to the famed Cape May Meadows for a walk. It was a popular place for birders this morning because of the recently reported marsh birds, which all showed great for us: Common Gallinule, Sora, Virginia Rail, and Wilson's Snipe. Ducks were numerous as well, and we got great looks at a wide variety of dabbling ducks. A Black Skimmer put on a good skimming show and just as we were heading back to the cars Jason spotted our first Little Blue Heron of the trip.

We had just a few minutes to spare, so we returned to the beach, where a large flock of gull and terns was now resting. We had great comparisons of Forster's and Common Terns, along with Royal Terns and Lesser Black-backed Gulls of varying ages. It was finally time to pack up, and we set off for the return trip to the Philadelphia Airport, just an easy 1.5 hour drive away. It was a great trip that provided many lasting memories, great birds, and wonderful camaraderie.



Our last new bird of the trip was this juvenile Little Blue Heron. Photo by Josh Engel.

TRIP BIRD LIST

Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird list. 123 birds observed.

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*)

Brant (*Branta bernicla*)

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)

Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*)

Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*)

Gadwall (*Mareca strepera*)

American Wigeon (*Mareca americana*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

American Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*)

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*)

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*)

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

PODICEPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

SULIFORMES: Sulidae

Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae**Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)****PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae****Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)****Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)****Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)****Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)****Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*)****PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae****Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*)****ACCIPITRIFORMES: Cathartidae****Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*)****Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)****ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae****Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)****ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae****Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*)****Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)****Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)****Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)****Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)****GRUIFORMES: Rallidae****Clapper Rail (*Rallus crepitans*)****Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*)****Sora (*Porzana carolina*)****Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*)****CHARADRIIFORMES: Haematopodidae****American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*)****CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae****Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)****Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)****Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)**

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae**Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*)****Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)****Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*)****Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)****Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)****Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*)****Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*)****Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*)****Short-billed/Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus/scolopaceus*)****Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*)****Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*)****Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) (heard)****CHARADRIIFORMES: Stercorariidae****Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)****CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae****Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)****Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*)****Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)****Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)****Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)****Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*)****Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)****Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*)****Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)****Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*)****COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae****Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)****Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)****STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae****Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) (Heard)****CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae****Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*)****PICIFORMES: Picidae**

Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*)
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)
Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)
Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*)
Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)
Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)
Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Tyrannidae

Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*)
Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*)

PASSERIFORMES: Vireonidae

White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*)
Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)
American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)
Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)
Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*)
Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*)

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*)
Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae

Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*)**PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae****American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)****PASSERIFORMES: Mimidae****Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*)****Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*)****Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)****PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae****European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)****PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae****Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)****PASSERIFORMES: Parulidae****Northern Waterthrush (*Parkesia noveboracensis*)****Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)****Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*)****American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*)****Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*)****Magnolia Warbler (*Setophaga magnolia*)****Blackpoll Warbler (*Setophaga striata*)****Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*)****Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*)****Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*)****Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*) (Leaders only)****PASSERIFORMES: Passerellidae****Nelson's Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*)****Saltmarsh Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*)****Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*)****Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)****Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)****Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*)****PASSERIFORMES: Cardinalidae****Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)****Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*)**

PASSERIFORMES: Icteridae

Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)

Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*)

Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*)

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)

American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*)

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

TRIP MAMMAL LIST

Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)



Part of the flock of 300+ Black Skimmers that we saw at sunrise on our final morning, leading it to be voted bird of the trip. Photo by Josh Engel.