

Delaware Bay

CAPE MAY POINT and VICINITY

BIRDING IN CAPE MAY

by Peter Dunne, Cape May Bird Observatory

There are few places in North America that have been birded longer or have more birding advocates than Cape May, New Jersey. There are fewer still that can offer better birding. From warblers to wading birds, falcons to finches, Cape May is unconditionally acclaimed as "the" place to go for autumn birding.

Cape May is unique among top birding spots because much of the hottest birding can be found along the residential avenues of Cape May Point. The number of species annually recorded there is exceeded only by the number of birding organizations that make annual pilgrimages there. Cape May Point is probably the only municipality on earth where a birder can "pish" in public and not draw attention. Another advantage offered by Cape May's close proximity to coastal resort areas is the fine accommodations that are available. For most of the year, lodging is available at attractive off-season rates.

The adjacent natural areas of Cape May Point State Park and Higbee Beach offer excellent birding habitat and, correspondingly, outstanding birding. Although Cape May's fame as an autumn birding hot spot is justly deserved, it tends to overshadow the fact that there is excellent birding here any time of the year. The Cape's peninsular shape, proximity to ocean and bay, and diversity of habitat all blend to make Cape May a birding spot for all seasons.

CAPE MAY IN SPRING

The first harbingers of spring are the Pintail pairing off in February, newly arrived Red-winged Blackbirds calling from foxtail stalks, and Oldsquaw flying purposefully north. Shorebirds arrive a few at a time until they flood the salt marsh like a spring tide in April and May. Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, and Greater Yellowlegs arrive, followed by dowitcher, Whimbrel, Lesser Yellowlegs, Red Knot, Least, Semipalmated, and White-rumped Sandpipers.

The Green-winged Teal depart, making room for herons and egrets. Osprey appear in mid-March and begin the business of raising a family, while accipiters and falcons, following the barrier islands, are on their way to breeding grounds farther north. The tidal marshes echo with the cries of Laughing Gulls, American Oystercatchers, and Willets. North-bound passerines accelerate through April, peak in early May, and gradually dwindle as the season progresses and spring edges into ...

SUMMER

The doldrums of summer birding generally bypass Cape May.



The Stone Harbor Heronry plays host to almost 2,000 breeding wading birds. Add to this the number of fledged young, and it makes for a busy place indeed. By July, gull and tern colonies erupt with young. Mallards, Black Ducks, and Gadwalls lead their half-grown broods through reeds and down serpentine tidal creeks. Clapper Rails skulk down secret paths, paths as "thin as a rail," followed closely by precocial young.

The avian timetable at Cape May does not follow the dictates of our solar calendar. The dividing line between summer and autumn is at best ephemeral and probably rhetorical. Autumn begins during the sultry days of late June and early July with the southward passage of the first Lesser Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitchers, the first wave in the rising tide of autumn migrants. Black Terns, flying east to the coast, then south, appear in mid-summer. Their erratic flight carries them over salt marshes already teeming with migrating dowitchers, Whimbrel, and assorted "peep." Tree Swallows gather in pre-migration flocks numbering in the tens of thousands. By August, shorebirds of all types abound, while Bobolinks, their calls reminiscent of chiming bells, stream overhead on their way to Argentine wintering grounds.

AUTUMN AT THE MIGRATION MAINLINE

Autumn is a time of magic at Cape May; rising excitement keeps pace with the accelerating rush of southbound birds. The Cape

is a natural funnel, catching coastal migrants and directing them to Cape May Point. The good days are nothing short of spectacular; the exceptional days defy belief.

On a northwest wind, the Cape is alive with warblers. Good flights can occur as early as mid-August. Early September is prime time for the greatest variety of shorebird species. Flickers, kingbirds (both Eastern and occasionally Western), and Blue Jays all vie for the limited number of perches. Tanagers and orioles, cloaked in autumn drab, look sadly out of place on their perches of tall marsh reed.

The kaleidoscopic vision of autumn migrations changes with the turning of the season. September's passerines give way to October's hardy winter finches, and these, in turn to November's skeins of geese. Flocks of Brant drift like smoke on the horizon and over the tidal marshes, Short-eared Owls course over salt hay meadows grown brown with winter.

WINTER

There is nothing more coldly stimulating or more stingingly cold than a winter beach. The vacationing crowds have gone, and the sea and beach belong to the Sanderling, the gulls, and the hardy sea ducks. Lines of scoter pass over the horizon, and Oldsquaw ride the swells beyond the surf. Purple Sandpipers, birds of the rocky coast, are attracted to man-made jetties. A falling tide often brings flocks of Brant, drawn to the newly exposed jetties and the sea plants that anchor themselves there. Common and Red-throated Loons dive for fish, often near shore. If the bay is locked in pack ice, the lee sides of jetties can be crowded with Greater Scaup, Redhead, Canvasback, Black Duck, Goldeneye, Bufflehead, and Red-breasted Merganser.

The cedar, oak, and holly woods of Higbee Beach host winter finches, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, American Robin, Cedar Waxwings, and other hardy winter species. These birds in turn attract wintering Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks. Fox Sparrows scratch out a living in the catbrier (greenbrier) tangle. Woodcock remain all winter unless a prolonged freeze puts their staple diet of earthworms out of the reach of their probing bills. The marsh and tidal flats belong to the Marsh Hawk and Rough-legged Hawk by day and to the Short-eared Owl by night.

Cape May in winter is like Cape May at any time: a place to find the unexpected. Past winters have produced among other things, Dovekie, Thick-billed Murre, Swainson's Hawk, Snowy Owl, White Ibis, Brown Pelican, and even a Wood Stork. If further testimony is needed to support Cape May's wintering wealth, consider the records of the Cape May Christmas Count. The count annually records more species than does any count north of Virginia. To date, the cumulative list stands at an impressive 228 species.

DIRECTIONS TO CAPE MAY POINT

To reach Cape May Point, follow the Garden State Parkway to its southern terminus. Cross the bridge over the Cape May Canal and continue south on Lafayette Street. Turn right on West Perry and continue as straight as possible. West Perry becomes Sunset Boulevard, which continues west to Cape May Point.

Along the way, stop at the South Cape May Meadows (1) (refer to map #1) and scope the shallow pools and grassy areas for wading birds, waterfowl, and shorebirds. The meadows are attractive to Black-bellied Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, dowitchers, and White-rumped Sandpiper during spring and fall migrations; Stilt Sandpiper, Golden Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Hudsonian and Marbled Godwit during fall migration. Loggerhead Shrike regularly occur here during late August and early September and can be seen perched on fence posts and cedar snags. During late September and early October, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin use this large open area to hunt and feed. Late afternoon is the best time to observe these coastal migrating falcons. This is private land, so please conduct your observations from the road only.

A cold front, northwest winds, and any calendar day from mid-August to late November means landbirds at Cape May Point. Given this combination, almost any place on the cape will pass for a good birding spot. Autumn migrants following the Atlantic Coast south are funneled down to Cape May Point where the Delaware Bay causes them temporarily to halt their southward passage in an avian log jam.

Spring migration through Cape May can be equally rewarding. In contrast to the fall migration, most spring movement follows in the wake of a warm front. However, if a warm front and a cold front meet head on over Cape May, watch out! The entire migration can stop dead in its tracks, and Cape May is the only point of land in an awful lot of water. Between 150 and 160 species are recorded annually during the Cape May Bird Observatory's Spring Birding Weekend.

A walk around Lily Lake (2) is a must for migrating passerines. A 30+ warbler day is not unusual during peak migration in early September or early May. Keep your eyes open for rarities. Western Kingbirds are annual autumn occurrences on telephone wires. Any resident's hedge or weedy lot might contain a Clay-colored, Lincoln's, or Lark Sparrow. Lily Lake also boasts an assortment of waterfowl. Wintering divers, puddle ducks, and Whistling Swan will remain as long as they have open water.

Walk or drive to the Cape May Point State Park (3) and follow the nature trails that lead through the marshes, fields, and woodlots of the park. Check the several ponds for wading

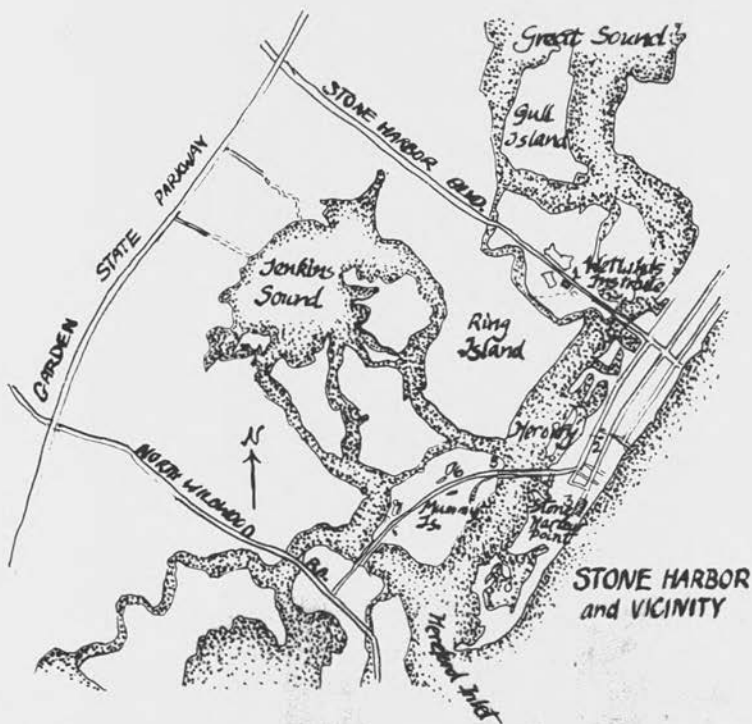
birds and waterfowl. Least Bittern breed in the fresh water areas, and the American Bittern overwinters. Tremendous flocks of Bobolink pass overhead in August and September and, at times, Tree Swallows literally blanket the marsh.

The park is also a particularly good place from which to observe the awesome Cape May hawk flight. An average day's flight during peak season (mid-September to mid-October) is generally in the neighborhood of 500+. The "good" days are spectacular! Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrel stream by in an endless parade. A 50+ Merlin day does not raise any eyebrows because over 100 a day have been seen, and daily counts of between 15 and 20 Peregrine Falcon occur during good flight years. The point even turns up such northeastern rarities as the Mississippi and Swallow-tailed Kite, as well as the Ferruginous Hawk. The Swainson's Hawk is an annual fall occurrence. In 1977 the Cape May Bird Observatory hawk watch recorded 81,597 birds of prey, establishing a new national record for the most hawks ever recorded during an autumn migration.

The beach (4) and the bunker (5) are excellent places to watch for migrating seabirds such as cormorant, scoter, and Gannet. Check the cormorant flocks for an occasional Great Cormorant mixed in with the smaller Double-crested. Common and Red-throated Loons winter in the bay, and large numbers are seen moving in late March and April as wintering populations are augmented by northbound birds. The Parasitic Jaeger can be seen offshore in November, generally in pursuit of some fish-laden gull or Royal Tern, and occasionally, the less common Pomarine Jaeger can be glimpsed. The waters around the several rock jetties and in front of the bunker often provide good looks at hardy winter sea ducks including both Common and King Eiders and Harlequin Duck. Alcids are also seen here occasionally. A walk up the beach from the bunker offers good views of the marshes and a vantage point from which to scope the South Cape May Meadows (6).

A short drive across Sunset Boulevard and up Bayshore Road will intersect the railroad tracks leading to the Magnesite Plant (7), where spring and fall passerines abound. The Prothonotary Warbler breeds in proper habitat on both sides of the tracks, and the thickets along here are a good place to observe the elusive Connecticut Warbler in fall. Scan the shallow pools for wading birds including Pectoral, Solitary, and Spotted Sandpipers, and occasionally, Ruffs.

For Higbee Beech (8), park your car where the pavement ends on New England Road. The trails that lead through the fields and oak, holly, and cedar woods are many and confusing. The fields and hedgerows host nesting Prairie Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Scarlet Tanagers also breed here. The woods can at times be alive with migratory songbirds, and Higbee Beach properly rivals Cape May Point State Park



as a spot to observe the Cape May hawk flight. During the winter months, assorted sparrows, winter finch, Cedar Waxwings, Eastern Bluebirds, and other hardy species can be found here, so do not hang up your binoculars prematurely.

TIPS ON BIRDING STONE HARBOR AND VICINITY

The Stone Harbor area offers some of the finest tidal estuary and coastal habitat in the state. The birdlife is representative, plentiful, and accessible. From the Garden State Parkway, turn east at the light at the Stone Harbor/Cape May Courthouse exit. The Stone Harbor Boulevard, or causeway, bisects the tidal wetlands that lie between the barrier island and the mainland. In addition to the many species of birds that are residents here, these wetlands also attract thousands of migrating shorebirds on their way to and from tundra nesting areas. Periodic stops along the causeway often produce large numbers of Dunlin, Black-bellied Plover, and Western Sandpiper during the winter months; Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers, Whimbrel, and assorted "peep" during migration. Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits, Golden Plover, and phalaropes are possible here for the patient observer. Prime time for shorebirds is April/May in the spring and mid-July through mid-October in the fall. It is best to concentrate your efforts on the grassy flats and pools during high tide, switching your attention to the tidal creeks and

mud flats at low tide. Look carefully for Osprey along the causeway. There are several active nests in the area.

On the right side of the Stone Harbor causeway is the Wetlands Institute (1) (see map #2), an education and research facility concerned with estuarine ecology. Visitors are welcome during regular visiting hours. South of the Institute is Ring Island, home of the largest Laughing Gull colony in the world. This colony can be observed and heard during the breeding season of May, June, and July from the Wetlands Institute' observation tower. Watch along the causeway for Gull-billed Terns, a species on the increase in this area. Their larger size, striking white upper surface and thick, black bill will distinguish them from the Common and Forster's Terns.

Cross the bridge to the barrier island of Stone Harbor and turn right heading south at the first light onto Third Avenue. The famous Stone Harbor Heronry (2) is located 0.9 miles down the road. The heronry's first residents generally arrive in late March, and some birds linger into December. Summer, however, is the best time to plan a visit. In June the number of breeding birds approaches 2,000 and the population swells considerably as it is augmented by young. The list of rookery residents includes Great, Snowy, and Cattle Egrets, Little Blue, Louisiana, and Green Herons, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, and Glossy Ibis. Early morning and late evening are the best times to observe the resident birds. Like the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, the day-feeding herons return to roost when the night herons leave for their nocturnal forays. In the morning, the guard changes again. If the bird or birds you are specifically hoping to see are not in evidence at the parking area provided by the town of Stone Harbor, then try walking around to the other side of the sanctuary for a different perspective.

From the heronry, turn east on any cross street and then south onto Second Avenue. Follow Second Avenue directly to Stone Harbor Point parking area (3). Least Terns course over the dunes and beach front and Piping Plover are summer breeding birds here also. Check the area beyond the breakers for migrating Royal Terns in August, September, and October; Gannet in October and November. All three scoters are found here in the winter months, and Oldsquaw too are plentiful.

The last jetty south has produced more than its share of eider and Harlequin Ducks in the past few years. Short-eared Owls also winter at Stone Harbor Point. These crepuscular predators can be seen at dusk, and often on dark, overcast days, coursing over the point in search of prey. Purple Sandpipers are jetty regulars from November to May.

Backtrack to Third Avenue (Ocean Drive) and continue south to Nummy Island. Stop just before reaching the bridge and scope

the salt marsh south of the road (4). This is a favorite foraging area for Yellow-crowned Night Herons during May and June in search of their favorite food--fiddler crabs.

Cross the bridge to Nummy Island and pull off to the shoulder of the road (5). From November through April large numbers of diving ducks concentrate in Great Channel. Scope the area north and south of the bridge for Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Oldsquaw, and Red-breasted Merganser.

Continue on across the island. Both Common and Forster's Terns are found here during the summer and also included in the list of Nummy Island breeding birds are Clapper Rail, American Oystercatcher, Willet, Long-billed Marsh Wren, and Sharp-tailed and Seaside Sparrows. Black Skimmers are a good bet feeding in the channels or skimming over tidal ponds in the early morning and late evening. Brant can often be seen feeding on Spartina roots or resting on marsh ponds during the winter.

Search carefully for Boat-tailed Grackles. They are fairly common here, so do not dismiss any large black bird as "just a Fish Crow," until you take a second look. Like the marshes along the Stone Harbor causeway, the wetlands adjacent to Ocean Drive are stopping-off areas for migrating shorebirds. The tidal pools along the Nummy Island causeway (6 and 7) are excellent places to see Whimbrel and (particularly during spring migration) Red Knot. Nummy Island is also regarded as one of the best spots to find Marbled Godwit.

There are, to be sure, many other fine birding locations in the Cape May area that merit a birder's attention, but two are worth singling out.

DELAWARE BAY SHORE

The birdlife of the bay shore is rich, varied, and representative of a coastal estuarine system. Sandy beaches at the lower portion of Cape May gradually give way to large expanses of tidal marsh, as the contour of the bay turns north and west. Herons and egrets abound here, many of them commuting daily from roosts and rookeries in Delaware. During the winter months, these marshes host wintering Rough-legged Hawks, Marsh Hawks, and Golden and Bald Eagles.

Along the bay, too, are a number of small communities whose existence is steeped in the long history of Cape May County. The access roads to such locations as Del Haven, Pierce's Point, and Reed's Beach can be made by following Route 57 north and turning west onto the appropriate road. If your visit to Cape May coincides with the first full moon in May, a trip to the bay shore will be rewarded by a true marvel of nature.

During May, and particularly during the highest tides of May,

Horseshoe Crabs make their way up to the high tide line to deposit their eggs. The sight of hundres of these ancient, tank-like creatures distributed along the beach would be complete in itself except for the fact that surrounding the Horseshoe Crabs are thousands upon thousands of shorebirds. May 'is also a month of heavy northbound shorebird movement and a myriad of Red Knot, Sanderling, Willet, and assorted "peep" collect along the bay shore, availing themselves of the bounty of Horseshoe Crab eggs. This spectacle of beaches awash in shore birds is one that will not soon be forgotten.

CAPE MAY COUNTY PARK

One mile north of the town of Cape May Court House on Route 9 lies Cape May County Park. Along with the usual indigenous attractions (baseball diamonds, swings, zoo, etc.), the park is also the location of one of the few Red-headed Woodpecker colonies in the state. A walk through the park with an eye to the trunks of large mature trees will likely be rewarded by sighting one of these striking birds. Although the birds are occasionally seen during the winter here, their occurrence is sporadic. May through August is the best time to plan a visit. Also found in the park at this time are Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood Peewee, Red-belled Woodpecker, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Black-and-white Warbler, and Pine Warbler, to name but a few. Red-tailed Hawks nest locally, and in the past, Eastern Bluebirds have nested in abandoned woodpecker holes.

For more information or for a Cape May bird checklist write:

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This article was adapted, with the author's permission, from a booklet published by Cape May Bird Observatory.

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FOR SALE: Land and Game Birds of New England, Henry D. Minot, 1877, illustrated, 456 pages, very good condition, \$75.00. Contact: Richard Spedding, 22 Tanglewood Road, Sterling Junction, MA 01565, (617) 422-8480.

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