

CAPE MAY

A Relaxed & Easy Tour

MAY 17 – 22, 2009

LEADERS: LOUISE ZEMAITIS & MICHAEL O'BRIEN

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Leaders: Louise Zemaitis & Michael O'Brien

Our inaugural Cape May Relaxed & Easy Tour began in Philadelphia where we were serenaded by a Yellow Warbler as the group loaded the vans for our journey to Cape May. After our first Wawa rest stop of the tour in Dennisville, our Cape May birding began at Cook's Beach on the Delaware Bay. Here we witnessed the spring spectacle of Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers feasting on horseshoe crab eggs, and Louise gave a demonstration on the natural history of horseshoe crabs.

A cold front had passed during the night creating chilly and windy conditions—perfect weather for spring hawkwatching in West Cape May! Between the Beanery and Stevens Street (Michael and Louise's house) the group had nice views of seven species of raptors including Bald Eagle and Red-shouldered Hawk. After a wonderful lunch at Bella Vida Garden Café in West Cape May, we took a walk at the Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge, a favorite coastal wetland birding hotspot. Tricolored and Little Blue herons and American Coot, uncommon in spring, were favorites among the many species seen. We talked about the plight of the endangered Piping Plovers as we watched them walk in and out of their nest predator exclosures. We finished our day with a fine dinner at Freda's Café. The "Crabcakes Marcus" is highly recommended for future visits.

We began each day in Cape May with an early breakfast at The Queen Ann (Louise's sister's Victorian house). On our second morning we drove to Belleplain State Forest where we traveled to a number of habitats searching for woodpeckers and songbirds. The woodland edge provided excellent viewing of a pair of White-breasted Nuthatches gathering food for their nestlings, and also of a female Summer Tanager on the ground collecting nesting material. In a nearby grove of pines we saw Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Pine Warblers, and had stunning views of an Acadian Flycatcher. Traveling to the northern edge of the forest, we found one of the most fascinating birds of the tour in the wooded area next to Tarkiln Pond, a singing male Cerulean Warbler x Northern Parula hybrid. Traveling back into the forest, a young grove of Atlantic white cedars proved to be most productive for viewing of Blue-winged and Prairie warblers, Indigo Bunting, and a Red-headed Woodpecker (on a dead tree in the distance). Amongst the oaks and mountain laurels we found a number of other species including Hooded Warbler, Ovenbird, White-eyed and Red-eyed vireos, and Eastern Wood-Pewees. Four pewees, vying for territory, were so close that we could hear their bills snap.

The afternoon's perfect weather and incoming tide provided a most excellent birding experience aboard "The Osprey," a pontoon Eco-tour through the saltmarsh. We cruised through Cape May's Intracoastal Waterway and back into the tidal creeks. Some of the many birding highlights included a flock of Brant (not quite ready to head north to the high arctic), many egrets and herons (some in a rookery), several Osprey nests (a previously endangered species), and hundreds of Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers, and Whimbrels. Our evening meal at Panico's in West Cape May completed another great day.

The next morning was spent birding on Cape Island. Our walk at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area was colored with dazzlingly-blue Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks and a lemony Yellow-breasted Chat. Next, after a quick stop at Cape May Point State Park, we enjoyed some of the most relaxed birding of the tour (some of us in easy chairs) at the Coral Avenue dune crossing in Cape May Point where we did a seawatch at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. Surf and Black scoters bobbed near the jetties while we scanned the horizon for passing Northern Gannets and terns. Finishing our morning at Cape May Point, the group did a little shopping and warbling at Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center. Here we had some absolutely stunning views of a male Magnolia Warbler and a female Blackpoll Warbler.

Our afternoon was spent on the Atlantic coast at Stone Harbor Point and Nummy Island. Here we studied terns and shorebirds under excellent viewing conditions. We shared one of the most exciting birding moments of the trip while witnessing Michael find a male Curlew Sandpiper, a real rarity in Cape May! The beautiful brick-colored bird was feeding not far from where we were standing. It was a life bird for almost everyone. For dinner, we went to The Lobster House at the docks in Cape May.

On our final day we started at Ocean Drive with nice views of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed and Seaside sparrows. Next, we chose to take a second look at the Delaware Bay shorebird spectacle at Cook's Beach. The viewing could not have been better! The weather, the lighting, and the tide were all just right. The beach was littered with tiny horseshoe crab eggs that were being hurriedly gobbled up by thousands of shorebirds and Laughing Gulls. It gave us hope for the future of Red Knots and Semipalmated Sandpipers, whose numbers have been in precipitous decline over the past decade. A moratorium on the harvest of horseshoe crabs seems to be making a difference! Among the masses of shorebirds, we enjoyed studying a single White-rumped Sandpiper at close range. We finished our morning birding at Villas Wildlife Management Area, a gem within a highly developed area. This old golf course, with its big old trees, provides excellent habitat for both resident and migrant species. We particularly enjoyed seeing a Baltimore Oriole and a Scarlet Tanager, both males.

This was a tour with two finales. The first was at Lucky Bones where we had a delicious lunch followed by homemade ice cream sandwiches and our group photo. After saying farewell to a few of our members, we headed north making a few more birding stops on our way back to Philadelphia. At Beaver Swamp Wildlife Management Area we had great views of a Gull-billed Tern and a fledgling Bald Eagle at its nest, while iridescent Glossy Ibises fed in the afternoon light. Our last birding stop, Jake's Landing, was the grand finale. Here we were treated to particularly fine views of a Yellow-throated Warbler in the pines, a Marsh Wren singing and displaying at the edge of the marsh, several Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows sitting up in the marsh grasses, and Clapper Rails in full view!

ITINERARY

May 17: Arrival in Philadelphia; group met at 6:30 pm for a short introductory meeting, then dinner near the hotel.

May 18: Drove to Cape May after breakfast in Philadelphia and a rest stop at the Dennisville Wawa. Cook's Beach and Norbury's Landing on the Delaware Bayshore; hawkwatching at The Beanery (Rea Farm, West Cape May); lunch at Bella Vida, West Cape May; afternoon walk at the Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge; dinner at Freda's Café, Cape May.

- May 19:** Belleplain State Forest and Peaslee Wildlife Management Area; lunch at Lucky Bones, Cape May; afternoon back bay boat cruise aboard the Osprey; dinner at Panico's, West Cape May.
- May 20:** Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area; rest room stop at Cape May Point State Park, seawatching at the Coral Avenue dune platform, Cape May Point; Cape May Bird Observatory, Northwood Center for warblers and shopping, lunch at the Italian Garden, Stone Harbor, afternoon birding at Stone Harbor Point and Nummy Island, dinner at The Lobster House, Cape May.
- May 21:** The marsh on Ocean Drive for sparrows; Cook's Beach for shorebirds and Horseshoe Crabs; Villas Wildlife Management Area (the old Ponderlodge Golf Course); lunch and group photo at Lucky Bones, Cape May; Beaver Swamp Wildlife Management Area; Jake's Landing; dinner at Tuscano's, Mullica Hill, drive to Philadelphia.
- May 22:** Departures for home.

BIRD LIST (136 species)

ALL CAPS = tour highlights in

(h) = heard only

Brant – 15 in Jarvis Sound during back bay cruise

Canada Goose

Mute Swan

Gadwall – a pair at South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

American Black Duck – 2 at Jake's Landing

Mallard

Surf Scoter – 5 off of Cape May Point

Black Scoter – 1 off of Cape May Point

Wild Turkey – increasing common species, seen almost every day

Northern Bobwhite – one calling at Hidden Valley

Common Loon – one flew by La Mer during morning pick-up

Northern Gannet – 3 seen while seawatching

Double-crested Cormorant

Great Blue Heron – non-breeder; 4 seen

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron – uncommon breeder; 5 seen including a couple young birds in funky molt

Tricolored Heron – uncommon breeder; 8 seen

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron – 2 at rookery during back-bay cruise

Glossy Ibis

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey – common breeder after near extirpation; a number of nests during back-bay tour

Bald Eagle – another success story; 9 seen including a fledgling near its nest at Beaver Swamp WMA

Northern Harrier – Cook's Beach and Jake's Landing

Cooper's Hawk – one seen while hawkwatching at the Beanery

Red-shouldered Hawk – one seen while hawkwatching at the Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Red-tailed Hawk

Clapper Rail – great views during back-bay cruise and at Jake's Landing

American Coot – one at South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Black-bellied Plover

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover – 2 at South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Killdeer

American Oystercatcher – seen several times, including 20 during back-bay cruise

Spotted Sandpiper – 2 at South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Greater Yellowlegs – one at South Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge

Whimbrel – 400 seen during the back-bay cruise

Willet – Eastern subspecies that breeds in the coastal marshes; 40 seen during the back-bay cruise

Ruddy Turnstone – common migrant on the bayshore

Red Knot – spectacular show (about 1200 birds) during our visit to Cook's Beach on the last morning

CURLEW SANDPIPER – a stunning male found by Michael during our trip to Nummy Island

Sanderling – common migrant on the bayshore

Semipalmated Sandpiper – common migrant on the bayshore (though the population is in decline)

Least Sandpiper – 20 on Nummy Island

White-rumped Sandpiper – one at Cook's Beach

Dunlin – common migrant on the bayshore

Short-billed Dowitcher – common migrant

Laughing Gull – Cape May contains the largest colony in the world

Ring-billed Gull – one at Norbury's Landing

Herring Gull

Great Black-backed Gull

Least Tern – threatened in NJ; nests in Cape May County

Gull-billed Tern – one at Beaver Swamp WMA

Royal Tern – 8 during Coral Avenue seawatch

Common Tern

Forster's Tern

Black Skimmer – 150 around Nummy Island

Rock Pigeon

Mourning Dove

Cuckoo sp. – 2 fly bys were not identified to species (one flew over the Wawa!)

Chimney Swift – 100, including migrants, with the first day's cold front

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Red-headed Woodpecker – one at Belleplain State Forest

Red-bellied Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

(h) **Hairy Woodpecker**

Northern Flicker

Eastern Wood-Pewee – 10 in Belleplain SF including 4 having a territorial dispute

Acadian Flycatcher – 5 in Belleplain

Eastern Phoebe – nest with young in Belleplain

Great-crested Flycatcher – several at Villas WMA

Eastern Kingbird – several migrants in a field at Higbee Beach WMA

White-eyed Vireo

Red-eyed Vireo

Blue Jay

American Crow

Fish Crow

Purple Martin – large colony at Cape May Point State Park

Tree Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Barn Swallow

Carolina Chickadee

Tufted Titmouse

White-breasted Nuthatch – nice views of a nesting pair in Belleplain
Carolina Wren – seen unusually well
 (h) **House Wren**
Marsh Wren – singing and displaying at Jake’s Landing and Cook’s Beach
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – nest in Belleplain State Forest
Eastern Bluebird – pair at Belleplain State Forest
 (h) **Wood Thrush**
American Robin
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Blue-winged Warbler – Belleplain State Forest
Northern Parula
Northern Parula x Cerulean Warbler hybrid – singing male at Peaslee WMA; extremely rare!
 (h) **YellowMagnolia Warbler** – including stunning views at CMBO Northwood
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler – close views during our last outing at Jake’s Landing
Prairie Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler – nice looks at CMBO Northwood
 (h) **Black-and-white Warbler**
American Redstart
Worm-eating Warbler – Beaver Swamp WMA
Ovenbird – many at Belleplain SF
 (h) **Kentucky Warbler**
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler – Belleplain SF
Yellow-breasted Chat – a highlight during at Higbee Beach WMA
Scarlet Tanager – singing male at Villas WMA
Summer Tanager – watched a female collecting nesting material in Belleplain SF
Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Field Sparrow
SALTMARSH SHARP-TAILED SPARROW – uncommonly great views at Jake’s Landing
Seaside Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Blue Grosbeak – lengthy views at Higbee Beach WMA
Indigo Bunting
Red-winged Blackbird
 (h) **Eastern Meadowlark**
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Baltimore Oriole – singing male at Villas WMA
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

MAMMALS

Eastern Cottontail – numerous on Cape Island

Eastern Gray Squirrel

(h) Chipmunk – Belleplain State Forest

Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin – off of Cape May Point

HERPS

Eastern Fence Lizard