

SPRING IN CAPE MAY: A RELAXED & EASY TOUR

MAY 15 – 20, 2011

LEADER: LOUISE ZEMAITIS

COMPILED BY: LOUISE ZEMAITIS

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

SPRING IN CAPE MAY: A RELAXED & EASY TOUR

MAY 15 – 20, 2011

After a quick exit from Philadelphia, our Cape May Relaxed and Easy tour made its first official stop at Cumberland County's Heislerville Wildlife Management Area. The morning's high tide created perfect, close to the edge viewing conditions for shorebirds. Our entire group was treated to stunning views of thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitchers; Curlew Sandpipers (one male and one female); and a heron rookery. The biggest surprise of the morning, however, was a male Northern Bobwhite (sadly, a declining species) that walked right alongside the van.

We boarded *The Osprey* after lunch for a leisurely afternoon pontoon boat cruise through Cape May's back bays. The Atlantic coastal marshes teemed with activity as noisy nesting terns and gulls jostled for high ground (much to the dismay of the local Ospreys on their nests above). Some highlights from the trip included Common Loon, Tricolored Heron, several Whimbrels, and a handsome Saltmarsh Sparrow. That evening we enjoyed one of the non-birding highlights of the tour, a fine dinner at Freda's Café.

One of the great advantages of being in a birding hotspot is flexibility. In Cape May you can bird before breakfast, as some members of our group chose to do on a couple of occasions. The morning's cloudy, damp weather kept the Purple Martins and Rough-winged and Barn swallows low in the dunes over Cape May Point State Park, affording excellent viewing opportunities. After a gourmet breakfast at The Pier House, the skies cleared and we went to the famous Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area where we were serenaded by Indigo Buntings and a Yellow-breasted Chat while birding the fields. We watched a male Prairie Warbler sing from the beach plums in the dunes where we took a path to the beach. Here we saw our first horseshoe crabs of the tour (inspiring me to give a lesson in their amazing natural history). We walked along the beach flipping crabs that had become stranded on their backs by the high tide. When we got to the jetty we were treated to nice views of a flock of Purple Sandpipers.

In the afternoon we visited Cape May Bird Observatory's Northwood Center where we were surprised to find a Prothonotary Warbler singing at Lily Lake, and watched a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird make arcing displays to a potential mate. We finished the day with some seawatching from Coral Avenue dune crossing. Our vista included a raft of Black and Surf scoters near the jetty, Atlantic bottlenose dolphins frolicking just off shore, and four Cedar Waxwings near the van.

The woodlands of Belleplain State Forest are magical in spring. The oaks, pines, and cedars are full of birdsong. Our third morning of birding was wondrous. We enjoyed scope-filling views of Ovenbird, Eastern Towhee, and an immature male Summer Tanager (whose plumage had the appearance of Western Tanager). We watched several Eastern Wood-Pewees battling for territory, an Acadian Flycatcher building its new nest, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers sitting on theirs (so cute!). Undeterred by a passing rain shower, we birded from the van and happened upon a male Scarlet Tanager bathing in a puddle in the road right in front of us! Nearby, at Jake's Landing, we watched Seaside Sparrows and a

particularly energetic Marsh Wren put on a show at his nest.

Our afternoon was spent exploring the Delaware Bayshore. A slow drive down Beaver Dam Road was highlighted with sightings of a male Prothonotary Warbler singing from the maples, and turtles in the puddles on the road. During stops at Cook's Beach and Norbury's Landing we took in the primordial scene of Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers feasting on horseshoe crab eggs as the sounds of Laughing Gulls filled our ears. We can only hope that conservation efforts continue to help save this endangered phenomenon, as horseshoe crab numbers have continued to decline due to over-harvesting.

Our final morning in the field began with an exciting outing to Cape May Point. The resident birds were up and singing in the nice weather as we walked the trail at the state park. A report of a rare White-winged Dove in the neighborhood compelled us to make a quick extra stop before having breakfast at Uncle Bill's Pancake House. The remainder of the morning on Cape Island included a mini hawkwatch on Stevens Street in West Cape May near my house, and a walk at the South Cape May Meadows (one of The Nature Conservancy's crown jewels) where we observed beach-nesting Piping Plovers, American Oystercatchers, and Least Terns. The weather was so nice that we decided to have lunch at Sunset Beach Grill where we could watch birds fly past the infamous concrete ship at the mouth of the Delaware Bay.

After saying farewell to Cape Island, we headed north towards Philadelphia, making a couple more bayshore stops. Reed's Beach provided us with a fabulous parting shot of the shorebird and horseshoe crab spectacle, and at Stipson's Island road we had close views of a Northern Harrier hunting in the marsh and a male Orchard Oriole bathing in a puddle (a recurring theme).

ITINERARY

Day 1, May 15: Arrival in Philadelphia; group met at 6:30 pm for a short introductory meeting, then dinner at Ruby Tuesday's.

Day 2, May 16: Drove to New Jersey's Delaware bayshore; Heislerville Wildlife Management Area, Cumberland County, followed by a visit to Cape May Bird Observatory, Goshen; brief stop at Cook's Beach; lunch at Lucky Bones, Cape May; afternoon back bay boat cruise aboard the Osprey; dinner at Freda's Café, West Cape May.

Day 3, May 17: Optional early outing to Cape May Point State Park. Breakfast at Pier House, Cape May; 2nd Avenue Jetty and Cape May beachfront; Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area; lunch at Bella Vida, West Cape May; Cape May Bird Observatory Northwood Center; seawatch at Coral Avenue, Cape May Point; dinner at Panico's, West Cape May.

Day 4, May 18: Breakfast at Southville Corner Diner, Dennisville; land birding in Belleplain State Forest; marsh birding at Jake's Landing; back to Southville Diner for lunch; Beaver Dam Road; Cook's Beach and Norbury's Landing for the shorebird and Horseshoe Crab spectacle; dinner at Lucky Bones, Cape May.

Day 5, May 19: Optional early outing to Cape May Point; breakfast at Uncle Bill's, Cape May; visit Louise's house on Steven's Street, West Cape May; walk at The Nature Conservancy's South Cape May Meadow; lunch at Sunset Beach Grill; Reed's Beach for last look at shorebirds and Horseshoe Crabs; marsh birding at Stipson Island Road; dinner at Tuscano's, Mullica Hill; drive to Philadelphia.

Day 6, May 20: Departures for home.

BIRD LIST (134 species)

ALL CAPS = tour highlights in

(h) = heard only

Brant – 20 in Jarvis Sound during back bay cruise

Canada Goose

Mute Swan – cygnets with adults in several locations

Gadwall – South Cape May Meadow

American Black Duck – several seen in the salt marshes

Mallard

Surf Scoter – 6 from Coral Avenue seawatch

Black Scoter – 20 from Coral Avenue seawatch

Ruddy Duck – 5 at Heislerville WMA

Northern Bobwhite – a male along side of the van at Heislerville WMA

Wild Turkey – 4 spotted in a pasture near Stipson's Island

Common Loon – a non-breeding bird seen in Sunset Lake from "The Osprey"

Double-crested Cormorant – nests on island at Heislerville WMA

Great Blue Heron – one at Heislerville WMA

Great Egret – nests on island at Heislerville WMA

Snowy Egret – nests on island at Heislerville WMA heronry

Little Blue Heron – uncommon breeder; 1 seen from "The Osprey"

Tricolored Heron – uncommon breeder; 1 seen from "The Osprey"

Green Heron – 2 seen from "The Osprey" and one at Stipson's Island

Black-crowned Night-Heron – nests on island at Heislerville WMA

Glossy Ibis – lots of flybys, finally saw a few on the ground at Stipson's Island

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey – common breeder after near extirpation; many nests seen from "The Osprey"

Bald Eagle – another success story; 4 seen including a nest

Northern Harrier – Jake's Landing and Stipson's Island

Cooper's Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

Clapper Rail – seen from "The Osprey" and heard in the marshes

Black-bellied Plover – many at Heislerville WMA

Semipalmated Plover

Piping Plover – endangered species; nest at South Cape May Meadow

Killdeer

American Oystercatcher – several seen from "The Osprey" and a nest at South Cape May Meadow

Greater Yellowlegs – 2 at Heislerville WMA

Willet – Eastern subspecies that breeds in the coastal marshes

Whimbrel – back bay cruise

Ruddy Turnstone – common migrant on the bayshore

Red Knot – many seen during our visits to Cook's and Reed's Beaches and Norbury's Landing

Sanderling – many with Red Knots

Semipalmated Sandpiper – common migrant; over 1200 at Heislerville WMA (though the population is in decline)

Least Sandpiper – many seen on both the bayshore and oceanside
White-rumped Sandpiper – uncommon migrant; 2 at Heislerville WMA
CURLEW SANDPIPER – rare migrant; 2 at Heislerville WMA
Dunlin – common migrant on the bayshore: over 1000 at Heislerville WMA
Short-billed Dowitcher – common migrant; over 2000 at Heislerville WMA
Laughing Gull – Cape May contains the largest colony in the world
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull – common resident; nest seen from “The Osprey”
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL – one seen on beach in Cape May
GLAUCOUS GULL – rare; one seen on beach in Cape May
Great Black-backed Gull
Least Tern – threatened in NJ; nests in Cape May
Common Tern – nests seen from “The Osprey”
Forster's Tern
Black Skimmer – 100 at Heislerville WMA and 15 on beach in Cape May
Rock Pigeon
WHITE-WINGED DOVE – rare; one on wire in Cape May Point
Mourning Dove
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird – male displaying to female at CMBO Northwood
Red-bellied Woodpecker
(h) **Downy Woodpecker**
(h) **Hairy Woodpecker**
Northern Flicker
Eastern Wood-Pewee – witnessed several having a territorial dispute at Belleplain State Forest
Acadian Flycatcher – found one building a nest in Belleplain State Forest
Great-crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
(h) **White-eyed Vireo**
Red-eyed Vireo – one at Belleplain State forest
Blue Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Purple Martin – large colony at Cape May Point State Park
Tree Swallow – many about including one in a nest box at South Cape May Meadow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow – Cape May Point State Park
Barn Swallow – many about including a pair nesting at Cape May Bird Observatory in Goshen
Carolina Chickadee
(h) **Tufted Titmouse**
Carolina Wren
House Wren – Cape May Point State Park
Marsh Wren – wonderful views of a male singing near his nest at Jake’s Landing
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – nest in Belleplain State Forest
Eastern Bluebird – male and female near nest box at the Mosquito Commission
(h) **Wood Thrush** – several in Belleplain state Forest
American Robin – common; watched one try to use a long piece of plastic for it’s nest
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing – several in trees near Coral Avenue dune crossing, Cape May Point

Yellow Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler – one at Norbury's Landing

(h) **Yellow-throated Warbler** – Belleplain State Forest

Pine Warbler – Belleplain State forest

Prairie Warbler – beautiful views of a singing male at Higbee Beach WMA

Blackpoll Warbler – Cape May Point State Park

Black-and-white Warbler – nice views of a singing male in Belleplain State Forest

Prothonotary Warbler – male singing at Lily Lake

Ovenbird – common breeder in the forest; scope-filling views of a singing male in Belleplain State Forest

Common Yellowthroat

(h) **Hooded Warbler** – Belleplain State Forest

Yellow-breasted Chat – singing male at Cape May Point State Park

Eastern Towhee – excellent views in Belleplain State Forest

Chipping Sparrow

(h) **Field Sparrow** – Higbee Beach WMA

SALTMARSH SPARROW – nice views from “The Osprey”

Seaside Sparrow

Song Sparrow

Scarlet Tanager – spectacular male taking a bath in a puddle at Belleplain State Forest

Summer Tanager – 4 at Belleplain State Forest including a multicolored young male

Northern Cardinal

Blue Grosbeak – uncommon; close views of a pair feeding on flying insects on Cook's Beach Road

Indigo Bunting

Red-winged Blackbird

Common Grackle

Boat-tailed Grackle

Brown-headed Cowbird

Orchard Oriole – Higbee Beach WMA

Baltimore Oriole – one at Higbee Beach WMA

House Finch

American Goldfinch

House Sparrow

MAMMALS

Eastern Cottontail

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Common Muskrat – cute little guy watched us birding at Cook's Beach

White-tailed Deer – Cape May Point State Park

Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin

HERPS

Eastern Box Turtle – two beauties

Eastern Mud Turtle

Snapping Turtle – in puddle on Beaver Dam Road

Eastern Painted Turtle

Ribbon Snake – Cape May Point State Park

(h) **Carpenter's Frog** – Clint's Mill Pond at the end of Beaver Dam Road

BUTTERFLIES

Eastern Tiger Swallowtail

Black Swallowtail

Orange Sulphur

Red Admiral

Pearl Crescent

OTHER CRITTERS

Bronzed Tiger Beetle – scope view at South Cape May Meadow

Horseshoe Crab