

Four Men in an R.V : - Part 2

Cape May - New Jersey 16th - 23rd September, 2009



A weeks visit to this prime east coast hot spot by Tony & Paul Stewart, John Willis and Chris Knox. Having successfully travelled around the Great Lakes in May 2008 [see report here](#) we again decided to use the flexibility of an R.V as our accommodation. However this time we parked up the R.V as a static 'caravan' for the week at Holly Shores Campground and hired a car to travel around the Cape May area. Holly Shores can be thoroughly recommended being quiet and just a short drive from all the Cape May sites. Cape May town has everything you would need for a birding holiday, after early starts we found lots of reasonable places to have brunch, and plenty of choice for our evening meals, although on several occasions we just opted to BBQ at our R.V which proved a great success.



Our home for the week

If you read the 'hype' Cape May in autumn can be awesome with tens & tens of thousands of birds passing over the area on a daily basis, however movement on this scale is weather dependant, ideally NW winds and more importantly the passing of a cold front. We had warm and sunny weather all week with winds predominantly from the south, our best morning at the Higbee Dyke produced several thousand birds just after dawn on the 19th although in fairness variety was good with 10+ species of Warbler noted.

Given the lack of NW winds our Raptor watching at the Cape May Hawkwatch was piecemeal, however most days we called in birds were always passing albeit in small numbers. To be honest the lack of movement was a little disappointing, however there were always good birds to watch and a host of sites within an hours drive, non more so than Brigantine which impressed us all. A word of caution about 'critters', they were prevalent and I personally suffered from mozzie bites so take protection, I was also unfortunate enough to be bitten by a spider which I reacted badly too and had to seek medication.

Resources

[Holly Shores Campground](#)

[Cape May Bird Observatory](#)

[Cape May Times - Places to Eat, Accommodation etc](#)

[Birding Cape May - A super read, what to see and When](#)

Itinerary.

Wednesday 16th September.

Flight early am Newcastle to Philadelphia via Paris. Arrived 1630 local time, taxi to R.V pick up then slow drive to Holly Shores campground Cape May, arriving 1830.

Thursday 17th September.

Early am - Higbee Dyke Morning Watch & Area.

Mid am - Picked up hire car.

Early afternoon - Beachfront.

Mid afternoon - Hawkwatch - State Park.

Friday 18th September.

Early am - Higbee Dyke & Hidden Valley.

Afternoon - Nummy's Island - Stone Harbour Point.

Late Afternoon - The Meadows.

Saturday 19th September.

am - Higbee & Area.

pm - Hawkwatch - State Park.

Sunday 20th September.

Early am - Higbee Dyke & Area.

Mid am - CMBO sponsored Backwater Cruise.

Late pm - The Beanery Flash. - The Meadows.

Afternoon - Cape May - Lewes Ferry drive to Cape Henlopen / Gordon's Pond in Delaware.

Monday 21st September.

Brigantine (Edwin B Forsyth NWR)

Tuesday 22nd September.

Early am - Higbee Dyke.

Mid am - Brigantine.

Afternoon - Jakes Landing

Late afternoon - Cape May beach.



Species List.

(Order & Nomenclature follows ABA checklist.)

Brant - *Branta b hrota*.

An adult 'Atlantic' bird which had over summered was seen in Cape May harbour from cruise on 20th. A group of 3 were noted at Brigantine.

Canada Goose - *Branta canadensis*.

Noted in small numbers.

Mute Swan. - *Cygnus olor*.

Common.

American Wigeon. - *Anas americana*.

Only noted at Cape May meadows - group of 15 throughout.

American Black Duck. - *Anas rubripes*.

Small numbers noted at Brigantine.

Mallard. - *Anas platyrhynchos*.

Commonly encountered.

Northern Shoveler. - *Anas clypeata*.

A handful noted at Brigantine.

Cinnamon Teal. - *Anas cyanoptera*.

A bird found at 'the Meadows' during our stay caused much debate amongst Cape May locals eventually being identified as a 1st winter male.



Presumed 1st w male Cinnamon Teal



Blue-winged Teal. - *Anas discors*.

10 +birds noted at the 'Meadows' with a similar number noted at Brigantine and Gordon's Pond Delaware.

Green-winged Teal. - *Anas carolinensis*.

Small numbers most sites except Brigantine where 1500 + noted.

Northern Pintail. - *Anas acuta*.

Handful at the Meadows, with 30 + Brigantine.

Pied-billed Grebe. - *Podilymbus podiceps*.

Singles the Meadows, and Gordons Pond, Delaware.

Brown Pelican. - *Pelecanus occidentalis*.

Only 3 noted, Nummy's Island on 18th.

Double-crested Cormorant. - *Phalacrocorax auritus*.

Common, with some very large gatherings at Brigantine.



Juvenile Double-crested Cormorant

Great Blue Heron. - *Ardea herodias*.

Not uncommon.

Great Egret. - *Ardea alba*.

Common most sites.

Snowy Egret. - *Egretta thula*.

Common most sites.

Tricolored Heron. - *Egretta tricolor*.

5 + adults noted on CMBO backwater cruise



Snowy Egret - a common site

Yellow-crowned Night Heron. - *Nyctanassa violacea*.

5+ noted at Nummy's island, 2 on the CMBO cruise, and several Brigantine.

Black-crowned Night Heron. - *Nycticorax nycticorax*.

Small numbers observed at Nummy's island, CMBO backwater cruise, and Brigantine

Green Heron. - *Butorides virescens*.

Singles noted Cape May State Park and Gordons Pond.

Glossy Ibis.- *Plegadis falcinellus*.

7 observed from CMBO sponsored backwater cruise and a further 8 at Brigantine.

Roseate Spoonbill. - *Platalea ajaja*.

A long staying young bird noted at Brigantine on 21st.



Roseate Spoonbill - a New Jersey rarity

Turkey Vulture. - *Cathartes aura*.

Common, good numbers noted daily.

Black Vulture. - *Coragyps atratus*.

Regularly observed when looked for in Cape May area.



Osprey - a staple Hawk watch species

Osprey. - *Pandion haliaetus*.
Common.

Sharp-shinned Hawk. - *Accipiter striatus*.
Noted daily in small numbers with no large 'flights' recorded in unfavourable weather.

Coopers Hawk. - *Accipiter cooperii*.
As above, best day was 19th with 8-10 recorded during an hour from Hawkwatch.

Northern Harrier. - *Circus C. hudsonius*.
Single male noted Stone Harbour, with a juvenile at Jakes Landing. 3+ noted Brigantine including one in same scope view as Peregrine and Osprey.



Northern Harrier - 'Marsh Hawk'

Bald Eagle. - *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*.
Noted daily, especially from Hawk watch.

Broad-winged Hawk. - *Buteo platypterus*.
2 noted above Higbee on 17th, best Hawkwatch count 6+ in an hour on 19th.

Red-tailed Hawk. - *Buteo jamaicensis*.
The roadside buteo of New Jersey, recorded daily.



Juvenile Red-tailed Hawk

American Kestrel. - *Falco sparverius*.

Singletons noted from Hawkwatch on two dates. A group of 6 noted at Holly shores Campground.

Merlin. - *Falco columbarius*.

A staple species from Hawkwatch with 10+ birds noted daily during 'snapshot' watches.

Peregrine . - *Falco peregrinus*.

Late autumn is better for movement. Singles noted from Backwater cruise, with probably 2-3 birds hunting Brigantine

Clapper Rail. - *Rallus longirostris*.

First noted from a local stakeout at Two mile restaurant just outside Cape May. 2-3 noted on CMBO backwater cruise and easily seen at Brigantine.



Clapper Rail

Common Moorhen .- *Gallinula chloropus*.

2 noted at the meadows, an uncommon species in the Cape May recording area.

Killdeer. - *Charadrius vociferus*.

Just a single observation at 2130 hours, two birds present in the Cape May ferry terminal car park, illuminated by street lighting.



Piping Plover - a speciality of the NJ Breeding season

Semipalmated Plover. - *Charadrius semipalmatus*.

Away from Brigantine appeared uncommon, several birds noted at Stone Harbour Point. 20+ observed at Brigantine attention drawn by spot shank like -'cher-wee' call.

Piping Plover. - *Charadrius melodus*.

Noted only at favoured Stone Harbour Point - 7 birds seen well on beach.

Grey Plover. - *Pluvialis squatarola*.

Common with 25+ noted from Backwater cruise and a roost of 250 + at Brigantine.

American Oystercatcher. - *Haematopus palliatus*.

Noted only at Nummy's island mudflats - 10 birds.

American Avocet. - *Recurvirostra americana*.

Two birds at Brigantine on 21st.

Spotted Sandpiper. - *Actitis macularius*.

Singles Nummy's Island and Brigantine.

Solitary Sandpiper. - *Tringa solitaria*.

Well recorded including regular group of 4 at small flash near Beanery at junction of Bayshore/ Stevens.

Lesser Yellowlegs. - *Tringa flavipes*.

Widespread and common

Greater Yellowlegs. - *Tringa melanoleuca*.

Fairly common, especially so at Brigantine.

Western Willet. - *Tringa semipalmata inornata*

A great majority of the Eastern ssp (*T.s semipalmata*) depart the eastern seaboard early, thus most that were scrutinised were identified as the larger, paler , finer billed and generally more 'godwit' like Western ssp. A handful noted at Nummy's island, the backwater cruise and lots at Brigantine.



Solitary Sandpiper



Lesser Yellowlegs

Hudsonian Wimbrel. - *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*.

Only noted on the CMBO sponsored Backwater cruise, two birds. As well as the obvious dark rump, the birds seemed to show a much cleaner - whiter supercillium than Eurasian birds.



Hudsonian Wimbrel

Marbled Godwit. - *Limosa fedoa*.

Scarce, singles noted Nummy's island, and south past the Hawkwatch. Three noted Brigantine.

Hudsonian Godwit. - *Limosa haemastica*.

A single at Brigantine on 21st.

Turnstone. - *Arenaria interpres*.

A handful noted at Nummy's island.

Sanderling. - *Calidris alba*

Only noted at Nummy's island.

Semipalmated Sandpiper. *Calidris pusilla*.

A few noted at Stone Harbour point. Common at Brigantine where several thousand present.



Semipalmated Sandpiper. (juvenile)

Western Sandpiper. - *Calidris mauri*.

40 + at Stone Harbour with 100's among above species at Brigantine.



Western Sandpiper (Adult)

Least Sandpiper. - *Calidris minutilla*.

The most uncommon of small peeps, however still noted daily and in fair numbers e.g 50+ Brigantine.

White-rumped Sandpiper. - *Calidris fuscicollis*.

10+ noted at Brigantine and had to be searched for among flocks of peeps. Size apart, birds picked out by habit of pointing tail almost to 11 o'clock when feeding this differing from the much 'flatter' feeding on e.g Semipalmated Sandpiper. This aid illustrated well below.



White-rumped Sandpiper feeding alongside Semipalmated Sandpiper

Pectoral Sandpiper. - *Calidris melanotos*.
A single bird on flash at junction of Bayshore / Stevens most days checked. 7-8 birds noted at Brigantine.

Dunlin. - *Calidris alpina*.
50+ Brigantine.

Stilt Sandpiper. - *Calidris himantopus*.
2-3 Bayshore / Stevens flash with a handful Brigantine.

Short-billed Dowitcher. - *Limnodromus griseus*.
Common at Brigantine.

Long-billed Dowitcher. - *Limnodromus scolopaceus*.
Single observed well at Higbee Dyke pool, and noted at Brigantine without consideration of numbers.



Pectoral Sandpiper



Long-billed Dowitcher

Ring-billed Gull. - *Larus delawarensis*.
Relatively uncommon, with only odd birds noted, although 20+ Brigantine.

American Herring Gull. - *Larus a smithsonianus*.
Common and allowing scrutiny of several plumages.

Great Black-backed Gull. - *Larus marinus*.
Fairly common

Laughing Gull. - *Larus atricilla*.
Common



Ring-billed Gull acquiring 1st w plumage



Laughing Gull -moulting to 1st w

Forster's Tern. - *Sterna forsteri*.
Fairly common.



Forster's Terns



Royal Terns

Common Tern. - *Sterna hirundo*.
Handful noted on Cape May seafront and Brigantine.

Royal Tern. - *Thalasseus maximus*.
50 + regularly observed on Cape May peninsula with roosting flock among Black Skimmers on town beach.

Caspian Tern. - *Hydroprogne caspia*.
30 + Brigantine and 15 at Gordons Pond Delaware.

American Black Tern. - *Chidonias n surinamensis*.
A single juvenile Brigantine

Black Skimmer. - *Rynchops niger*.
Common, 400 + regular on main Cape May beach.

Mourning Dove. - *Zenaida macroura*.
Common.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird. - *Archilocus colubris*.
Singles noted Higbee Dyke on 19th and nearby Hidden Valley on 20th.

Belted Kingfisher. - *Ceryle alcyon*.
Noted most days from Hawkwatch, also the Meadows and several at Gordons Pond Delaware.

Downy Woodpecker. - *Picoides pubescens*.
Single noted at the Hawkwatch, Jakes Landing and several Holly Shores Campground.

Hairy Woodpecker. - *Picoides villosus*.
A pair showed well at Cape Henlopen State Park.



Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker. - *Colaptes auratus*.
Common, and noted daily from Morning flight at Higbee, maximum 20 + on 17th.

Least Flycatcher. - *Empidonax minimus*.
A single Higbee fields on 20th.

Eastern Wood-Pewee. - *Contopus virens*.
Single Higbee on 20th.

Eastern Phoebe. - *Sayornis phoebe*.
Singletons Higbee and Brigantine.

Eastern Kingbird. - *Tyrannus tyrannus*.
2 near two mile restaurant on 18th the only record.

Red-eyed Vireo. - *Vireo olivaceus*.

One noted near Higbee on 20th.

Yellow-throated Vireo. - *Vireo flavifrons*.

Noted only at Brigantine.

Blue Jay . - *Cyanocitta cristata*.

Fairly common.

Fish Crow. - *Corvus ossifragus*.

Only positively identified by 'sunken ship' where handful of birds present. Clearly different call than American Crow.

American Crow. - *Corvus brachyrhynchos*.

Common.

Barn Swallow. - *Hirundo rustica*.

A handful noted.



A swarm of Tree Swallows alight to feed.

Tree Swallow. - *Tachycineta bicolor*.

Abundant, great swarms of several thousand feeding along the coast gorging themselves on the fruits of Northern Bayberry and Wax Myrtle.

Purple Martin. - *Progne subis*.

Uncommon, only odd birds noted all week.

Carolina Chickadee. - *Poecile carolinensis*.

Noted Higbee, Jakes Landing and Cape Henlopen State Park.

Tufted Titmouse. - *Baeolophus bicolor*.

Small numbers noted daily.

White-breasted Nuthatch. - *Sitta carolinensis*.

A pair noted at Jakes Landing Reserve .

Brown-headed Nuthatch. - *Sitta pusilla*.

A special trip over to Delaware in search of this declining species proved succesful, with 6+ birds eventually seen by the main visitor centre to Cape Henlopen state park. This area is about as far north as this species breeds.



Brown-headed Nuthatch - a declining species

House Wren. - *Troglodytes aedon*.
Fairly common, noted daily in small numbers.

Carolina Wren. - *Troglodytes ludovicianus*.
Noted daily most sites visited and vocal every morning at Holly Shores campground.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. - *Polioptila caerulea*.
Fairly common.

American Robin. - *Turdus migratorius*.
A handful noted daily.

Swainsons Thrush. - *Catharus ustulatus*.
A single noted Hidden Valley Higbee on 19th.

Veery. - *Catarus fuscescens*.
Single near the Morning flight platform on 20th



Northern Mockingbird

Northern Mockingbird. - *Mimus polyglottos*.
Noted daily in small numbers. A common 'backyard' bird in Cape May.

Grey Catbird. - *Dumatella carolinensis*.
Noted daily in small numbers.

Cedar Waxwing. - *Bombicilla cedrorum*.
Noted every day from Higbee morning flight, max count 70 north on 19th.

Tennessee Warbler. - *Vermivora peregrina*.
2 Higbee on 19th, with a single on 20th.

Northern Parula. - *Parula americana*.
5 + noted at Higbee on 19th /20th.

Yellow Warbler. - *Dendroica petechia*.
Small numbers noted at Higbee dyke.



Yellow Warbler

Palm Warbler



Prairie Warbler. - Dendroica discolor.

Having missed this species at Pelee in May 2008 it was pleasing to watch a single well at Higbee on 19th.

Palm Warbler. - Dendroica palmarum.

The commonest warbler at Higbee throughout week, dominating the morning flight with e.g 200 + noted in 90 minutes on 19th. Interestingly most seen well were assigned to the duller western race D.p palmarum, although a handful noted in dunes at Cape May beach were assigned to the 'yellow' race D.p hypochrysea.

Cape May Warbler. - Dendroica tigrina.

Several noted from Higbee Dyke 19⁺

Magnolia Warbler. - Dendroica magnolia.

2 + noted Higbee Dyke on 20th.

Black-throated Green Warbler. - Dendroica virens.

5 + at Higbee on 17th, 19th & 20th.

Blackburnian Warbler. - Dendroica fusca.

A single bird at Higbee beach on 20th.

Pine Warbler. - Dendroica pinus.

2+ seen and heard singing at Jakes Landing. This species is known to sing all year round.

Blackpoll Warbler. - *Dendroica striata*.

Uncommon, several over Higbee Dyke and a single below the platform on 20th.



Blackpoll Warbler

Black-throated Blue Warbler. - *Dendroica caerulescens*.

A handful most mornings from Higbee Dyke.

Black -and-white Warbler. - *Mniotilta varia*.

Noted daily with 10+ logged at Higbee on 20th.



Black and White Warbler



Common Yellowthroat

American Redstart. - *Setophaga ruticilla*.

Fairly common, noted most sites with max 20 + Higbee area on morning of 19th.

Northern Waterthrush. - *Seiurus noveboracensis*.

Single noted at Holly Shores on 18th, and 5 + over Higbee on 19th.

Common Yellowthroat.- *Geothlypis trichas*.

A handful noted throughout week mainly Higbee.

Ovenbird. - *Seiurus aurocapilla*.

Several over Higbee Dyke during morning flight and a single at Holly Shores Campground.

Canada Warbler. - *Wilsonia canadensis*.

Single at Hidden Valley Higbee on 17th.

Scarlet Tanager. - *Piranga olivacea*.

A handful noted 19th at Higbee and Hawkwatch.

Eastern Towhee . - *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*.

Noted daily in small numbers.

Chipping Sparrow. - *Spizella passerina*.

A handful noted Gordons Pond Delaware and 25+ at Brigantine visitor centre.

Lark Sparrow. - *Chondestes grammacus*.

Good views were obtained of this Cape May area scarcity at Stone Harbour point on 18th.



Lark Sparrow- a scarce NJ visitor

Savannah Sparrow. - *Passerculus sandwichensis*.

Fairly common , particularly so at Brigantine.

Saltmarsh (sharp-tailed) Sparrow. - *Ammodramus caudactus*.

We were informed by locals that this species was easily seen at Brigantine - " just watch for them flying over the road ". Every 'sparrow' we checked during the 8 mile drive turned out to be either Savannah or Song, on our second drive of the loop we decided to adopt an alternative method, to see this bird well (at this season) you must enter the saltmarsh itself and search for them on the mud between water and vegetation. Once found they are reluctant to flush instead preferring to run mouse like away from you, however by remaining still they will become quite confiding. 20+ birds noted in two visits to Brigantine.



Seaside Sparrow - Photo :- Tony Stewart



Saltmarsh (Sharp-tailed) Sparrow

Seaside Sparrow. - *Ammodramus maritimus*.

Found as above species although appeared less numerous, preferred to fly rather than run away from observer. 5-10 noted Brigantine .

Song Sparrow. - *Melospiza melodia*.

Noted only at Brigantine and The Meadows.

Swamp Sparrow. - *Melospiza georgiana*.

Small numbers observed at Brigantine.

Northern Cardinal. - *Cardinalis cardinalis*.

Noted daily in small numbers.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak. - *Pheucticus ludovicianus*.

A handful noted from Higbee platform.

Blue Grosbeak. - *Passerina caerulea*.

A single female seen at Jakes Landing on 22nd.

Indigo Bunting. - *Passerina cyanea*.

A handful logged through week mainly Higbee dyke.

Bobolink. - *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*.

As we learnt this birds flight call , a distinctive rising 'wenk' we connected with a handful over Higbee most mornings.

Common Grackle. - *Quiscalus quiscula*.

Widespread and Common.

Boat-tailed Grackle. - *Quiscalus major*.

Widespread though limited to tidewater marshes, 10+ noted on CMBO cruise and Brigantine.



Boat-tailed Grackle - female

Red-winged Blackbird. - *Agelaius phoeniceus*.
Common, with 300+ noted at Brigantine.

Yellow-headed Blackbird. - *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*.

We found a female among the above species at Brigantine on 22nd - a rare visitor.

Baltimore Oriole. - *Icterus galbula*.
Noted in small numbers most mornings at Higbee .

House Finch. - *Carpodacus mexicanus*.
Only observed at the Cape Henlopen visitor centre, although not really looked for.

American Goldfinch. - *Carduelis tristis*.
Common.

House Sparrow. - *Passer domesticus*.
Widespread and common.



Dawn at Higbee Dyke

Chris Knox - October 2009.