

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Ospreys are common migrants seen over Cape May in August and September. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Jersey's Eastern Shore

The off-season is on at the Jersey Shore. Now that the tourists have gone home, it's time to explore and enjoy. Part 3 of 3.

By J. Morton Galetto (with C. Brown),
CU Maurice River

Last week we ended our narrative with the Nature Conservancy's Cape May Meadows preserve. The Meadows abuts our next site, the 244-acre Cape May Point State Park. To enter the main hub of activity and take advantage of parking you will want to drive down Sunset Blvd. and make a left on



Higbee Wildlife Management Area has viewing platforms and grassland meadows for viewing wildlife as well as Delaware Bay beachfront access, for fishing and relaxing. Photo: JMG.

Lighthouse Ave. to the main entrance (driving distance eight-tenths of a mile). At this point it is appropriate to mention that when the road becomes Sunset Blvd. you are on the *Bayshore Heritage Byway*, a State and Federal Scenic Byway known for its historic and natural intrinsic qualities.



The Nature Conservancy's Cape May Meadows preserve has interpretation signage at the entrance to the watery impoundments. Photo: JMG.

According to birders you have just arrived at the Raptor Capital of North America. If you want to interact with knowledgeable birders there is no better place than NJ Audubon's Hawk Watch, located at the northern end of the Park's parking lot. Cape May's typical raptor sightings include accipiters like the sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, and northern goshawk; buteos like red-tailed hawk, red-shouldered hawk, broad-winged hawk, rough-legged hawk, and Swainson's hawk; and falcons like the peregrine, merlin, and American kestrel. Also seen regularly are osprey, northern harrier, bald eagle, golden eagle, as well as turkey vulture and black vulture. Each season offers natural history opportunities, with dolphin in the summer, ducks in the winter, and the

most celebrated events being the fall bird and monarch butterfly migrations.

Clearly the most prominent feature is the imposing Cape May Lighthouse. It was built by the Coast Guard in 1859 and rises over 157 feet, making it one of three “tall towers” along the New Jersey coast. Restored and opened to the public in the 1980s, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors can climb the 199 steps for a spectacular panoramic view of the peninsula.



The iconic Cape May Point Lighthouse State Park Lighthouse towers over the famous Hawk Watch platform. CU Maurice River file photo.

There are also remnants and visitor interpretation of two military features.

One is the gun emplacement – Battery 223. Built in 1942, it was originally 900 feet inland. It was covered by soil and grasses, making it look like a hill to disguise the gunnery in the event of invasion. Today it is now exposed on the beachfront due to rising waters coupled with land subsidence.

The Park has a nature center/office, some picnic shelters - one with great beachfront views - and wonderful bird-watching impoundments with connecting trails. These allow you to access a variety of habitats; whether it be the Atlantic Ocean beach, sand dunes, pondside or woodlands, flora and fauna abound.

The Park offers excellent opportunities to view migrating monarch butterflies from the last week of September to the first week of October. We also recommend adjacent areas for good monarch viewing. Strolling along Leigh, Harvard, Ocean, and Lincoln Aves., you may glimpse monarchs clinging to red cedars and seaside shrubs while they await favorable conditions to cross the Delaware Bay. In good years people describe them as “dripping from the trees.”

A number of home owners have embraced wildlife-friendly space on their properties, where you may spot

butterflies and birds. Triangle Park across from the State Park has an abundance of native plants that attract butterflies and other pollinators. Remember that buckeye butterflies are also migrants and provide additional opportunities to learn and marvel at their beauty.



Triangle Park bordered by Lighthouse Rd., Coral Ave. and Oxford Ave. has a fantastic assortment of native plants that attract pollinators. Photo: JMG

While you're in this section of the Point stop by the NJ Audubon Northwood Center for books, optics, and visitor opportunities. If you have not invested in a good pair of binoculars, a telescope, or wish to upgrade your equipment, the knowledgeable staff can

assist you in meeting your needs and budget.

Behind the Northwood Center is a garden and small trail that offers property owners an example of how you might create a wildlife-friendly space in a small backyard. There are feeding stations, a wildlife viewing blind, a pond, and other water features.

While we are highlighting NJ Audubon, here's a good tip: during 2022 they will be hosting the 76th Cape May Fall Festival from October 13-16. They offer field trips to many of the places mentioned here, plus speakers and lots of workshops for beginners as well as for longtime nature enthusiasts. You can register for the activities on line, but know that things fill up fast and people will be registering already.

We suggest crossing over to the bayside of the Point to explore the 1,100-acre Higbee Wildlife Management area at the end of New England Rd. Here there are viewing platforms and trails that traverse multiple habitats: forest, old fields, hardwood swamp, coastal dunes, scrub/thickets, and a mile of bayfront beach. There is vast amount of mast here for songbirds. Raptors which pursue them are especially attracted to the area as well. NJ Fish and Wildlife biologists also

suggest monarch watching in the fall, while the spring and summer are good for bayside glimpses of dolphin.

You will want to return for the spring songbird migration at all of these sites. Each has an outstanding showing of a vast variety and abundance of birds including the birder's greatest challenge: the famed warblers.



Monarchs congregate on shrubs in bayside dunes awaiting favorable winds and weather to cross the bay.

In previous stories we discussed taking the Cape May Ferry to Cape Henlopen State Park, Lewes, Delaware and back to view gannets. March is when you

may wish to bundle up to see hundreds or even thousands of them on the Bay. November and December are good times to view southbound gannets from the shore at the Avalon Seawatch.

The Point offers many more opportunities to watch wildlife, like Sunset Beach and the Rea Farm Beanery. We hope you enjoy your adventures.

For all of the suggested locations, check websites for fall and winter hours. You may wish to call in advance to verify.

New Jersey Audubon has a great presence at the Point, offering visitors great natural experiences.

CU Maurice River has interpretative opportunities around southern NJ including some trips to the Cape May Peninsula.

Great Sources

Where to Watch Wildlife, New Jersey Wildlife Viewing Guide, by Laurie Pettigrew and Sharon Mallman

NJ Audubon, Delaware Bayshore, Birding & Wildlife Trails -hardcopy or internet version.