

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



A snapshot of the Maurice River at peak migration taken from Waltman Park in downtown Millville. – Joe Moore

Migration on the Maurice

For birdwatchers, autumn is a wonderful time of the year.

By. J. Moore, CU Maurice River

In South Jersey, fall is a welcomed occurrence that many associate with the changing of the foliage, apple-picking, and pumpkin spice coffee, but for a small and steadily growing section of the population that enjoys the

natural world it means one thing –
birds!



A northern harrier scans the wetlands along the Maurice River for rodents. Photo by Anthony Klock.

Migration is a complex shift or upheaval within different species of the animal and insect kingdoms that occurs twice a year across North America in both spring and again, now, in autumn. Across the globe, migration happens in a whole host of animal and insect species 365 days a year and in every season.

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Regionally, songbirds such as warblers, birds of prey of all kinds, and around two dozen species of waterfowl, to name a few, make their way along the Maurice River on a migratory journey engrained in most birds' DNA. From as large as the tundra swan to as small as our only nesting hummingbird – the ruby-throat - millions of migratory birds descend upon the Garden State in the fall on southern and western journeys.

Some will remain in local environments, but the majority will move on, merely passing through. Migratory birds take trips of thousands of miles in some cases, back to winter foraging grounds that some will be visiting for the very first time but know instinctively how to find.



Long-tailed duck gather at the mouth of the Maurice hoping to score a quick meal. Photo Anthony Klock.

The journey, whether it be five miles or 5,000 miles, presents many challenges. Birds collide with the windows of skyscrapers in larger cities as well as getting thrown off course by lights in urban and rural areas of the country. Migratory birds use the moon to navigate at night in order to avoid predation and artificial lighting often impacts the ability for the birds to find their way. An easy way for people to lessen these impacts is to turn off or minimize outdoor lights at night when migration is occurring, especially in spring or fall.

Another impact on a bird's fall migration is hurricane season in the Atlantic, which runs from June to November. Storms can push off-course or drown birds in an instant, but nearly all species can sense these storms and will prepare or divert their route accordingly. Often, birds dodge bad weather by changing altitude.

Of all the challenges faced by migratory birds, the one that kills over half a billion each year is the feral or outdoor cat. They should be kept inside, and leashed, or otherwise controlled when outdoors to prevent needless avian deaths. It is beneficial to your cat as well because, as was the case this year, occasionally a bird virus makes its rounds and can adversely affect your feline friend should he or she grab hold of an infected individual.

One of the best places to catch the bi-annual migratory show is along the

Maurice River in Cumberland County. Portions of the Maurice River and its tributaries are part of the Wild & Scenic Rivers program overseen by the National Park Service. These segments were designated Wild and Scenic in 1993, and are part of the larger Maurice River Watershed that dominates the landscape from southern Gloucester County to the Delaware Bay with tributaries in both Salem County to the west and Atlantic County to the east. The diverse population of migratory birds that call this region home be it for a few hours or for a whole season over the course of the year - is one reason the river is nationally acclaimed as Wild and Scenic.

All along the Maurice River there are great places to stop, take a walk-through nature, and witness the miracle that is fall migration while taking in some spectacular views of the

river. Accessible locations such as Peek Preserve and Maurice River Bluffs, managed by Natural Lands and The Nature Conservancy respectively, host hundreds of thousands of birds during migration. Excellent views of the remarkable Wild and Scenic Maurice River can also be seen further down-river in Mauricetown, Port Norris, and Leesburg.



A male common yellow-throat pecks around the dead leaves in search of an insect to snack on. – Anthony Klock

South of the Mauricetown bridge there are additional convenient stopping points on the east shore such as Heislerville Wildlife Management Area,

East Point Lighthouse, as well as the trails at the Bayshore Center at Bivalve on the western shore of the river. All three locations boast great views and even greater wildlife interactions!

Migratory birds follow the Maurice out into Delaware Bay southbound on their way to rich and often tropical winter resources in faraway places we only wish we could simply fly off to. Small neo-tropical insect-eating specialists such as common yellow-throat and Cape May warbler make their way south to Central America. Northern pintail and hooded mergansers fly here from the north to take up seasonal winter residence along the river, using the Maurice offers great habitats to dabble and dive for invertebrates during the cold months.

Right now, you may be wondering to yourself how you too, can get the most

out of nature through bird watching and wildlife appreciation.

It is relatively simple to get started but does take practice and patience to understand what you are seeing. What you need is a good pair of binoculars, a field identification guide or phone application (Merlin is great AND its free!) and most importantly the gumption to visit one of the above-mentioned locations or join a local organization that leads walks in the area. CU Maurice River is a perfect example!

About the Author: Joe Moore has been the Program Coordinator at CU Maurice River since July of 2021 and holds a Masters in Science in Environmental Management.