

Trip Report- Hawk Mountain and Cape May September 28 – October 5, 2021

We all arrived in Philadelphia by means of plane, train and automobile and met at our hotel on the banks of the Delaware River. With a group of us and the somewhat interesting logistics in today's restaurant world, we made reservations for our group well ahead of time as much as possible. Our first meal was at the Gatehouse at the Navy Yard, an interesting restaurant just inside the gates of this facility where we talked about the upcoming tour and managed to eat most of our meal before the rain started!

Our first birding was the next morning at the wonderful John Heinz NWR at Tinicum. Even in the shadow of Philadelphia International Airport, the birding was excellent and a walk around the woods and wetlands produced over 50 species, including: Mute Swan, Little Blue Heron, Caspian Tern and a very obliging Black-throated Green Warbler. Our second stop of the day was well inland at the Peace Valley Nature Center in Bucks Co. The brushy habitat was pretty good for sparrows and as well as the expected species, we added our first White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco and one of our only Scarlet Tanagers of the trip.

Our next few nights were in the Allentown area, which is fairly busy with heavy traffic most of the town on the major roads. Thankfully we picked our restaurants to stay off the major roads and enjoyed a couple of very nice meals in the center of Allentown, as well as nearby.

We started the next day with a visit to some parkland surrounding a local quarry. We couldn't access the quarry at all (which was just as well), so just birded the adjacent woodland where the highlights were our first (of many) Blackpoll Warblers, a pair of Peregrine Falcons and a good migration of over 50 Blue Jays. It was then up to our first major destination of the tour – Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. This escarpment and forest can be very good for migration and we spent some before lunch time on the South Lookout before hiking up the rocky trail to find some comfortable rocks at the North Lookout. It wasn't a super active hawk migration day, but we did get Bald and Golden Eagle, Northern Harrier, both Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Black Vulture who came to visit for a short while. The official spotters from HMS were outstanding and invariably saw many of the birds way ahead of the rest of us.

We were planning to have a repeat visit to Hawk Mountain the following day, but the general consensus was to go somewhere else instead. With some quick overnight planning we ended up at Beltzville State Park and Leaser Lake – both in the general area of Hawk Mountain.

Beltzville was very nice and a big push of migrant sparrows must have come through. We had Lincoln's, White-crowned, Chipping, Song and Swamp, as well as more Blackpoll Warblers. A female Wilson's was a nice find and allowed us to get a few photos of her as she fed in the bushes along the lakeshore. Leaser Lake was quieter, but that was due to being there in the heat of the afternoon!

The next morning found us heading back towards Philadelphia and our final destination in Delaware. Marsh Creek State Park was our first stop this morning and this somewhat busy park in Chester County was quite good with Osprey, Bald Eagle, and good numbers of Blackpoll Warblers. The rest of the day was spent at the wonderful Bombay Hook NWR near Dover, Delaware with large flocks of ducks and shorebirds in the shallow wetlands. A surprise was the groups of 4 Roseate Spoonbills which had been present for the last week or so - a strange sighting this far north, but something that will happen more often as the climate changes.

Another example of changing times and expanding populations of southern species was the flock of 11 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at a pond in a nearby housing development! The Port Mahon Road was good for migrating sparrows and some sea and shorebirds along the coast, but we had to drive south for our afternoon ferry from Lewes DE to Cape May NJ. Lunch was at Cape Henlopen State Park in Delaware which is a pretty reliable place for Brown-headed Nuthatches and Pine Warblers; both species uncommon this far north. We also saw Brown Pelicans at the northernmost part of their range as well as they rarely stray north into New Jersey – and we didn't see any during our time at Cape May. The ferry trip over was beautiful; blue skies and barely any wind – the best bird was only glimpsed by some of us, a male Common Eider out near some rocks in Delaware waters. The rest of the afternoon was spent in around Cape May Hawk platform. There were Mute Swans in the pond and a pair of Bald Eagles doing their spectacular cart-wheeling display- we watched them tumble down several times before parting company – what a treat. There was also a male Eurasian Wigeon that had been hanging around for the last few weeks. He was feeding along the back of the pool, along with several Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and American Black Duck. We also stopped by the Nature Conservancy's Cape May Meadows Preserve- where a Peregrine was hassling all of the shorebirds and keeping them down in front of the blind. Those of us who had their cameras with us managed to get some incredible photos, including Stilt and Semipalmated Sandpipers, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and even a Sora. A couple of stops at the normally- excellent Higbee Woods produced a handful of migrants but nothing spectacular; a Black-and-white Warbler was our only warbler!

We finished the tour in Cape May before driving back to Philadelphia the next morning and dropping folks off at hotels, airports and railway stations. The combination of Hawk Mountain, the Delaware Bayshore and Cape May makes for a great trip and gave us a snapshot into raptor, shorebird and passerine migration in some of the best areas of the Central Atlantic.

Thanks to everyone for making the trip so enjoyable.

Simon Thompson