



*At Two Mile Beach Refuge trails that have raised boardwalks such as this allow visitors to keep their feet dry and minimize exposure to ticks and chiggers. Photos: by Author*

## **Jersey's Eastern Shore**

*The off-season is on at the Jersey Shore. Now that the tourists have gone home, it's our time to explore and enjoy. Part 2 of 3*

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

Last week our seaside venture down New Jersey's coast ended at Hereford Inlet Lighthouse. This episode's narrative begins at Cape May National Wildlife Refuge's Two Mile Beach Unit on Ocean Drive, in Wildwood Crest; afterwards we'll head south of the Cape May Canal to give you a few select natural locations to check out. Once again these snippets are intended to whet your appetite and are in no way

inclusive, so pack your binoculars, a nature book or two, maybe some bug repellent, don a few layers, and head to our sandy coast.

Cape May National Wildlife Refuge's Two Mile Beach Unit is 507 acres of maritime habitat including beachfront, sand dunes, tidal marsh, and forest. During spring and summer the beachfront is closed to protect beach nesting birds. Each year it reopens by September 30. Once threatened by a development proposal, this site was added to the CMNWR properties in 1999, when the US Coast Guard finally transferred the property to the US Fish and Wildlife Service.





*The Two Mile Beach has dune walks that allow people to traverse the beach strand (transitional sandy shoreline area between the land and ocean) to enjoy the coastal beachfront. The beach itself is closed from April 1 to September to protect beach nesting species. Photo: Author.*

From August through November migrating songbirds will make use of forested habitats. Raptors and seabirds fly the site and the oceanfront. In winter the beachfront and its jetty afford opportunities to scan for wintering ducks, loons, cormorants, and scoter. The boardwalk trail that leads to an observation blind is a good choice for a short hike as we go into chigger season. This is a good spot to photograph marsh birds. Interpretation on-site explains why wetlands are considered one of the most productive ecosystems in the world, providing benefits to wildlife, plants, and people. We will return to those aspects as our travels unfold.



*The blind at Cape May National Wildlife Refuge's Two Mile Beach Unit offers shaded views over the marsh plain in which to take wildlife photographs. Photo: Author.*

We continue down Ocean Drive, crossing Jarvis Sound and Bennet Creek, skirting Cape May Harbor, and ending on Route 109 or Lafayette St.

Before we cross the Shellenger Creek Bridge there are charter boat opportunities. Captain Bob Lubberman's pontoon boat *The Osprey* is docked at the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, with a skilled naturalist on board to help cruisers explore Cape May Harbor and Jarvis Sound's marsh wildlife.

If you're interested in whales and dolphins, charters to spot them are available just off Lafayette St., running out of Cape May Harbor. Most boats run two trips a day until the end of October.



*The Nature Center of Cape May has a three story tower that offers views of Cape May Harbor. Photo: Author.*

Now we'll continue to loop around the Harbor to end up at our next destination. The Nature Center of Cape May on 1600 Delaware Ave. is an example of a great partnership between a city and an environmentally-dedicated nonprofit organization. The City provides the building and since 1995 NJ Audubon has run the center, offering a full schedule of natural history programs throughout the year which utilize local habitats. The Center's upstairs is used by naturalists to host children's programming. There's a three-story observation tower connected to the building offering views of Cape May Harbor, along with classrooms, garden interpretation, and a gift shop. Families can explore nature books for children and adults. Monthly the staff features a local artist in a

show. These events bring other natural perspectives to the Center and raise awareness for new groups of people.

Outside the center is a native plant interpretative garden which attracts birds and butterflies.



*Plants like trumpet vine grace the Nature Center of Cape May's native garden. Photo: Author.*

Northern breeding birds tend to fly east and then migrate south during fall migration – along New Jersey's coast. Think of New Jersey as a geological funnel climaxing at Cape May Point and the Delaware Bay. This migratory path is called the Atlantic Flyway, an expressway for birds.

Migrants are somewhat reluctant to cross large bodies of water. Just north

of Cape May Point a bay crossing can be up to 25 miles, but from the Point to Cape Henlopen, Delaware, the distance is halved. Birds tend to hole up on the Point awaiting favorable winds and weather to make the shorter crossing, thus concentrating their numbers south of the canal. But you will learn that they are not our only migrants.

Birds use different strategies to cross. Some, especially hawk species, will fly high in a kettle, an aerial silo of sorts which makes use of thermals to gain height. Then they simply soar across versus expending energy flapping. Some species will traverse enmass at night when winds are light, allowing them to utilize drafting similar to racing cyclists. Whatever their crossing strategy, food and rest in coastal habitats at the Point give them the necessary energy to continue on their journey.

This is what makes the locations discussed in this narrative a mecca of sorts for wildlife enthusiasts. When do you want to visit? Pettigrew and Mallman in NJ's Viewing Guide put it like this, "[T]he fall migration is downright phenomenal; summer and winter are merely excellent. Spring migration can begin as early as mid-February and fall migration can begin in August." This year fall seems to be

arriving early. "So when?" you ask. Well, now through November.

We will stick with our southerly movement, heading back to Lafayette Street from the Nature Center and traveling south 3 miles to W. Perry/Sunset Blvd., 692 Sunset Blvd., to see the 200-acre South Cape May Meadows, one of the Nature Conservancy's flagship preserves. This site is the result of a very complex restoration project that offers visitors excellent trails across both marsh and beachfront.

Endangered piping plovers have commonly used the site during nesting season. In the watery impoundments be sure to scan the edges carefully; many of the herons and waterfowl are masters of camouflage. Water levels can be controlled here depending upon seasonal species usage. This is one of the Nature Conservancy's most popular preserves, and offers a large loop path and observation tower to get a better view of the impoundments.

There is a small interpretation of a living roof, plus display boards to orient visitors to the wildlife that they might observe and in what habitats they may be found. Some likely species include osprey, kestrels and other hawks, Baltimore orioles, kingfishers, Carolina



wrens, egrets, terns, waterfowl,  
killdeer, and American oystercatchers.

Next week we will begin our travels at  
the Cape May Point State Park,  
considered by biologists to be one New  
Jersey's five premier coastal sites for  
viewing wildlife.

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