

Cape May, NJ- Part I

For nearly 3/5ths of my life, the state of New Jersey was little more to me than a concrete river (I95/295) that moved cars from the Maryland western shore metropolises to New York City and beyond. I had learned in school that Jersey's nickname was The Garden State, but I always wondered why. Since I had not traveled to any other part of the state, all I knew was concrete roads, concrete sound barriers, and concrete travel plazas. A sea of concrete, a garden does not make... so what was I missing?

A few years before Jersey Shore ruined any non-Jersey native's idea of the state, I made my first trip to Cape May, and, lo and behold, I found the gardens. I also found the forests, agricultural fields, wetlands, and beaches. This first trip was an eye opener to be sure. I had heard tales about the mythical, magical bird Mecca on the east coast, but I wasn't really prepared for the reality. It was such a powerful experience that the first few years of trips all sort of blurred into one.

Initially, I went on a Mother's Day weekend with a team of fellow birders to compete in the World Series of Birding, where we competed four straight years winning two Cape Island Cups and losing a third by a single species. Those experiences will require their own post, but it is safe to say that those competitions and the fall visits between them were the foundation of my love of (gasp!) New Jersey. Since then, I have been to Cape May at least once almost (thanks COVID) every year.

It's hard to describe to people that haven't been to Cape May on a truly great day of birding what it is like. There are few places on Earth that provide such spectacles, and Cape May is one of the few where any given day at nearly any time of year can be spectacular. That said, it is known for its fall birding, and, if you have seen a good fall day, you would understand why.

Each year I pick a weekend in September or October and reserve days off from work on both sides. I have found that, during the 6-week period from September 1 through October 15, it is hard not to get at least one good migration day if you give yourself a 4 to 6-day window for your trip. If you keep your eye on the long-range forecast, you can pick the best days out of those reserved to make your trip. What I look for is a cold front that will reduce temperatures and switch the wind to the north or northwest direction while I plan on being there. This year things worked out perfectly...