

Cape May in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Philadelphia
Day 2/8	Excursions from our base in Cape May
Day 9	Transfer to Philadelphia and depart for London
Day 10	Arrive London

Departs

May

Focus

Birds, butterflies and dragonflies

Grading

A. Easy walking only.

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code USA21)

Highlights

- Enjoy a relaxed tour of the birding mecca of Cape May in spring
- A splendour of summer songbirds, with a rainbow of American wood warblers including Cape May Warbler
- Spectacular northbound shorebird migration, with mass-flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers & Red Knot
- One of the largest diversity of waders, herons and other shorebirds in North America
- Brilliant Cardinal, Blue Grosbeak & Baltimore Oriole add to the myriad of colour



From top: Black-and-white Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Piping Plover



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

Cape May is heralded as one of the most exciting migration hotspots in the eastern United States. Each spring and autumn over 300 species of North American birds – many in huge numbers – pass through and over the point as they migrate between their wintering and breeding grounds, along the so-called 'Eastern Flyway'. In spring, the proximity of Delaware Bay to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east, as well as the annual Horseshoe Crab spawning, acts as a magnet for northbound shorebirds that pause to feed up before continuing their journey. Numerous Semipalmated Sandpiper, Red Knot, Short-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin, plus Stilt and White-rumped Sandpipers can be seen on the shore and bay pools. As the trees come into leaf, many migrating warblers drop in, joining the local breeding birds, and combined, they we can get superb views of up to 25 species of brilliant American wood warblers, plus a host of colourful orioles, tanagers, buntings and vireos. Such a concentration of birds in a relatively small area attracts plenty of keen naturalists too and presents us with the opportunity to enjoy a week of outstanding, and easy, birding!



Magnolia Warbler

After a flight to the city of Philadelphia, we drive southeast to the coastal town and birding mecca of Cape May, where we spend the next eight nights in Cape May. Our plans for each day will be kept flexible to make the most of weather conditions and recent sightings, but our base is perfectly positioned and most excursions will be within half an hour's drive of the hotel. Given the right weather, mornings can find the woodlands and bushes around Cape May active with warblers, vireos, buntings, orioles and tanagers, either singing or seeking a place to rest and feed after their nocturnal flight. These include Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, plus splendid Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Cape May, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue and Black-and-white Warblers and much more. Early May also sees the Horseshoe Crab spawning in Delaware Bay and northbound shorebirds gather in large flocks on its shore to fatten up on this bounty. Our tour is



Greater Yellowlegs (B.Small)

timed to experience this 'feast' at its peak, with 1000s of Semipalmated Sandpipers, Red Knot, Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers, joined by a multitude of others including Stilt and White-rumped Sandpipers, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, as well as a good chance of breeding Piping Plover. With minimal driving, visiting nearby wetlands and woodlands brings daily changes as innumerable waders, herons, gulls and terns – including the dainty Least Tern – settle to breed. A visit to

Belleplain State Forest can bring Hooded, Blue-winged and Worm-eating Warblers, plus newly emerged butterflies, such as Eastern Tiger and Black Swallowtail or Brown Elfin and Horace's Duskywing; dragonflies are newly on the wing, too, and we will look for the likes of Lancet Clubtail,

Banded Pennant and Blue Corporal. You can even end your day with a stroll along the promenade or beach, perhaps with binoculars in hand as you never know...

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available. There lots of 'hidden' spots at Cape May, too, which are always worth checking out in passing and we also make more than one visit to several, as migration can often bring in new things to see each day...

Day 1

Fly Philadelphia

We depart London Heathrow on a direct British Airways flight to Philadelphia (where possible) arriving in the mid-afternoon. On arrival in Philadelphia, we will pick up our minibus for the week and then make the two-hour journey southeast to Cape May. After checking in at our comfortable seafront hotel, will have a prompt dinner and retire for the night.

Days 2 – 8

Cape May, Delaware Bay, Belleplain

Most days will start in roughly the following way: an optional pre-breakfast walk at a nearby location, then return to the hotel for breakfast at c. 08:00am, departing at c. 08:45am for the rest of the day's activities. As mornings are often the best time to be out at Cape May, with warblers in



Cape May Warbler (B.Small)

particular being most active at this time, we will make the most of this time to check local spots usually within c. 5km of the hotel.

Compared with the UK, spring arrives quite late at Cape May despite its latitude being more or less the same as Madrid. The trees are beginning to leaf and many warblers and other songbirds are just arriving to set up territories or still passing through on their way to the

boreal forests in Canada (just now clearing of the snows of winter) – the lack of leaves on the trees helps in finding the birds! Shorebirds, too, are pouring towards their tundra breeding grounds and pause to fatten up on the shores of Delaware Bay.

From our hotel we will make daily excursions to local spots about Cape May and since bird migration is very weather-dependent, our daily activities will be planned to take best advantage of local conditions. We'll be sure to visit birding hotspots in the immediate area, including: South Cape May Meadows and adjoining Cape May Point State Park; Cape May Bird Observatory at Northwood; Higbee Beach and Hidden valley; 'The Beanery' at Rea Farm and Sunset Point. Such is

the variety of habitat at these local spots that it is not difficult to see over 100 species in a day within a 10-minute drive of the hotel.

The Cape May Point State Park, close to the lighthouse, is extremely active for birds in May: 100s of swallows include Barn and Tree Swallows – the latter nesting in boxes, but it is the Purple Martins perching about their nestboxes that initially draw the eye. The grassy areas can be dotted with American Robins gathering food for their young, and about the marshy vegetation fringing the car park Blackpoll and Myrtle Warblers are most numerous, alongside Common Yellowthroats and American Redstarts; Eastern Phoebe catch flies as Eastern Kingbirds sit atop short trees. It will not be long before we pick up our first dazzling Yellow and Magnolia Warblers, as we set out for a gentle walk about the park on the level trails and boardwalks. Groups of Cedar Waxwings sweep about the trees, but we will be keeping an eye out for a real ‘prize’, Blackburnian Warbler, which like to feed in the short oaks.



Tree Swallow (B. Small)

Such is the wealth of the Cape May Point State Park that we will visit more than once and each time expect something different. Small warbler flocks about the ‘arboretum’ can include Magnolia, Prairie and Pine Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chat or Great Crested Flycatchers. Handsome male



Least Tern (B. Small)

Indigo Buntings, Carolina Chickadees collecting food, maybe an elusive Swainson’s Thrush or a fine Veery. Sometimes it is hard to know what to look at! Heading out towards the beach, many Red-winged Blackbirds display in the marshes, whilst on the beach, many Least and Forster’s Terns patrol up and down the shore or come to hunt over the shore pools. Careful checking of the pools

can produce the diminutive Least Sandpiper, close Killdeer, American Oystercatchers and Greater Yellowlegs, joined by the odd Willet or Grey Plover in the dank conditions.

South Cape May Meadows are good to visit at the end of the day, and if water levels are right can often be a great place to quietly observe both shorebirds, gatherings of swallows and some interesting sparrows. It is not unusual to find Black Skimmers dropping in to scythe through the calm water as Stilt or White-rumped Sandpipers pick flies from the edges.

The woods and field edges at Higbee’s Beach are a good place to stroll in the morning. These are often good



Stilt Sandpiper (B. Small)

spots for Blue Grosbeak, Prairie Warbler and Baltimore Oriole, or perhaps a Bobolink or White-eyed Vireo. Cape May Bird Observatory is an attractive spot for birds and birders, with the tall trees sometimes alive with feeding birds and a good place to get another chance to practise your warbler ID skills. Cape May, Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Blue Warblers can often be found here and we will also hope for stunning Black-throated Green and Wilson's Warblers. High in the trees we may find calling Rose-breasted Grosbeaks; or down at our feet maybe Common Yellowthroat, Ovenbird or White-throated Sparrows. Nearby gardens and flowers attract a few early butterflies such as Common Buckeye, Pearl Crescent and Eastern Tailed Blue... and there is a shop!



Common Yellowthroat (B. Small)

Other local spots on Cape May Island include The Beanery, where in a small patch of flooded woodland, amongst diverse species, we might find Green Heron, Black-and-white Warbler and Red-eyed Vireo; at Sunset Point, sometimes small flocks of duck gather on an old sunken concrete boat and can include Eider, Black Scoter, whilst both Surf and White-winged Scoter are also possible passing by. Given the right wind conditions, sometimes shearwaters and petrels can be seen offshore.



American Oystercatcher (B. Small)

Fifteen kilometres north of Cape May, up the Atlantic coast, lies Stone Harbor Point. The wide sandy beach is very attractive to shorebirds and feeding terns. Timing is important to ensure the tide is in a perfect state and we will hope to see Little Blue Heron and Semipalmated Plover, but the key species here is Piping Plover. A species under threat by human disturbance, we will hope to find it amongst the Sanderling and American Oystercatcher chasing about the shoreline. Pale-bellied Brent Geese can be seen moving north, whilst numerous Osprey patrol the area and Great Northern Diver and Gannet are

both possible. On the breakwater we may find Purple Sandpiper or colourful Turnstones. Amongst the blossoming Beach Plum we could well pick up a handful of warblers, such as Magnolia Warbler or the odd Song Sparrow. A short distance away are the Wetland Institute and Nummy Island, where shorebirds gather on the mud – often mainly Short-billed Dowitchers, but also Willet, Grey Plover and Dunlin. Clapper Rails may show well and perhaps Tricoloured Heron and Black-crowned Night Heron.

Along the eastern shore of Delaware Bay are a string of refuges that are great in spring for superb numbers of shorebirds, but are also attractive to species such as Seaside Sparrow or Marsh Wren singing amidst the saltgrass. Cooks and Reed Beaches are excellent for good numbers of Red Knot amongst screaming flocks of Laughing Gull, joined by Ruddy Turnstones and Boat-tailed Grackles. Further north is Heislerville, where on two large 'impoundments' – large, shallow lagoons – huge flocks of shorebirds gather at high tide. Sometimes on arrival it is almost too much to take in: with 1000s of Semipalmated Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher and rusty-backed and long-billed Dunlin; mixed in can be 100s of Semipalmated Plovers, Least Sandpipers and Turnstones, smart black-bellied Grey Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs all adding to the mix. On an island in the mud a black-and-white mass of 200+ Black Skimmer can be seen roosting with Ring-billed Gulls, the whole area sometimes buzzed by hunting Northern Harrier or Peregrine Falcon. There is a rookery of Double-crested Cormorant and Great Egret often watched over by a pair of Bald Eagles! A small patch of woodland can hold White-eyed Vireos, Eastern Towhee, Yellow Warbler and Orchard Oriole.



Seaside Sparrow (B. Small)

For a change of scenery, we head northwest of Cape May driving 40-minutes inland to the Belleplain State Forest. This large managed forest will give us a chance to find a variety of more localized species in the mixed woodland. Here in spring, species such as Acadian Flycatcher, plus Hooded,



Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Yellow-throated and Worm-eating Warblers sing along narrow streams; there is a chance of the elusive Louisiana Waterthrush and we may even find a Ruby-throated Hummingbird on its nest. Hermit and Wood Thrushes, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Pine Warbler and Chipping Sparrow are likely to be in song and cryptically patterned Brown Elfin and Horace's Duskywing butterflies skip over the ground. Another spectacular warbler is the unbelievably yellow-bodied Prothonotary Warbler, which breed here. At another local

spot, we will check for Blue-winged Warbler, Yellow-throated Vireo and Eastern Wood Pewee singing its plaintive song.

Day 9

Transfer Philadelphia and depart

Our last morning in America will be spent exploring hotspots around Cape May, putting our new-found skills to the test on local bird or migrants. After freshening up back at our hotel and lunch in Cape May, we will drive north to Philadelphia in time to check in for our overnight flight home.

Day 10

Arrive London

We will arrive back into London this morning, each heading home with our memories of a wonderful place.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Brian Small

Extensions

If you would like to extend your time in the USA, this tour can be combined with our Spring Birding in New York City tour (USA07) - <https://www.naturetrek.co.uk/tours/spring-birding-in-new-york-city>

Tour grading

Grade A. In Cape May, we will offer optional early starts to most days to make the most of early morning bird activity and song, but return to the hotel at c. 08:00 for breakfast. We will then head out for the morning's excursion at c. 08:45, picking up lunch at a local deli or occasionally have a sit-down lunch (weather dependent). During the middle of the day we will have the option of resting at the World-famous hawkwatch platform and beach overlooks or returning to the hotel. Further optional late afternoon jaunts for more birding will make use of the afternoon light, but we return to the hotel in plenty of time to freshen up before we head to dinner. The tour is comprised mainly of easy walks on even and well-maintained trails, always taken at a gentle pace as we look for birds; expect walks of up to 3km, but often less. On a couple of days, we travel a little further afield, but will plan to return to Cape May for lunch. Driving time between locations will be less than 30 minutes on average; one drive will be up to 1 hour.

Focus

The best of the birdlife of eastern North America plus newly emerged butterflies and dragonflies.

Accommodation and food

We spend each night of our stay in a seafront hotel in Cape May. All rooms will have en-suite facilities. There may be the option to upgrade to a sea view room (subject to availability).

Breakfasts and lunches are included in the price of the tour. We will either enjoy breakfast at our accommodation, in a café or take a packed breakfast with us. During the day, we will enjoy taking our lunch from a local café or picking up lunch from a deli. You will be free to eat as you wish in the evenings, and are very welcome to join the leader(s) for an evening meal. There is a choice of good local restaurants in town, with fine seafood often on the menu.

Extra Expenses

You will need to budget for just the following additional expenses on this tour:

- Evening meals (allow around \$40-50 per person per day)
- Drinks, souvenirs, and all items of a personal nature
- ESTA (visa waiver programme) fee – currently \$14 and valid for two years (or until your passport expires, if sooner). Please check you are eligible for the ESTA scheme at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/>.

Weather

Early May in Cape May is not too warm, with daytime high temperatures reaching the mid to high 20's C. Early mornings can be coolest and most wildlife is active then. Occasional cold fronts can bring clouds, rain, and wind (as well as birds!). Rain occurs on average once or twice a week, and usually falls intermittently in the afternoon in the form of heavy downpours. Skies range from overcast to clear, depending on the day. In short, we hope for some lovely, warm, spring sunshine, but should be prepared for anything!

Flights

We aim to fly directly to Philadelphia from London Heathrow with British Airways. We are also able to add connecting BA domestic flights from regional airports; please contact Naturetrek for timings and prices.

Your Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to the USA. A visa, or ESTA, is required for entry. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice> regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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