



# DELAWARE

## TRIP REPORT

May 13 - 16, 2019



*Photos: Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Bald Eagle, Short-billed Dowitcher, Ruddy Turnstone, Shorebirds at Slaughter Beach.*



**Sunrise Birding** LLC

[www.sunrisebirding.com](http://www.sunrisebirding.com)

## **DELAWARE: Shorebird Spectacular TOUR REPORT**

**May 13 - 16, 2019**

Sunrise Birding's inaugural tour to the Delaware Bay was indeed a shorebird spectacular featuring thousands of migrating shorebirds feeding on the beaches and viewed at close range. We witnessed Horseshoe Crabs coming ashore to lay eggs and learned about this important food source for many of these migrating birds. The cold, wet spring weather seemed to hamper the progression of the Red Knots, but we did have times where we saw more than 12,000 Semipalmated Sandpipers in one place and thousands of Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers and others. In addition to prime shoreline habitats, we visited several other sites including two outstanding National Wildlife Refuges - Bombay Hook and Prime Hook NWR. With the help of some local expert birders, we found most of what we were looking for and enjoyed good food, camaraderie and great birding! We look forward to doing it again next year!



Photo: Red Knot and Dunlin by Steve Bird.

## May 13, 2019

The rainy spring weather continued today as we made our way to Lewes, Delaware. By late afternoon we had settled in to our accommodation and gathered to bird the grounds. Though the weather radar showed that it had stopped raining, there was a constant drizzle. But that didn't deter us as we were anxious to get the tour started. Despite the wet weather, we had good views of Northern Parula, a pair of White-eyed Vireos, a young male Blue Grosbeak and a bright male Indigo Bunting. In the marsh behind our complex, we had 5+ Snowy Egrets, displaying Red-winged Blackbirds, and Common Grackles. We tried to convince ourselves that the rain was subsiding but it was going the other way so we walked back to the lodge and enjoyed happy hour before heading to our delicious dinner.

After dinner, the rain had finally stopped so we drove to Cape Henlopen State Park and walked down to the beach. We could see several large flocks of shorebirds coming in to roost for the night but they were silhouetted in bad light. **Holly picked up an overturned Horseshoe Crab on the beach** and gave us our first introduction to these prehistoric creatures. With that we scoped flocks of Black-bellied Plovers in the evening light. There was fencing for on the beach and soon we were looking at Piping Plovers in the scopes. One Piping Plover flew in very close offering great views and we heard the piping calls as well.



Out in the bay, there was a large congregation of gulls, mostly Herring. There were still some dark clouds in the distance but conditions had improved tremendously. We returned to the lodge in anticipation of getting closer, well-lit views of those shorebird flocks in the coming days.

## May 14, 2109

When we woke up this morning, the weather had cleared! It was still a little cool but no rain and we were ready for an adventure. By breakfast, Jen had already been out and photographed a Yellow-billed Cuckoo near the lodge. A pair of Carolina chickadees were prospecting a round hole of a plastic "smokers station" (not a good choice) and there was a lot of bird noise all around.

After breakfast, we headed north toward Slaughter Beach. We stopped at one of the parking areas and walked out to the beach where there were thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers freshly arrived after yesterday's storm cleared out. We scoped the masses and found Dunlin, Semipalmated Plovers and Ruddy Turnstones. Then all at once, a Peregrine Falcon flew through at warp speed and put up all of the birds. We watched in awe as the massive groups of birds flew out over the water and eventually back to the beach.



Meanwhile, Judy picked up a Horseshoe Crab and told us more about its incredible life history. We beachcombed for a while as the birds were returning to the beach and found Whelk egg masses and Skate egg cases. We heard a canon boom in the distance and were told that it was likely the bird researchers over in Mispillon harbor.

We spent more time watching the flock and then decided to move on to the DuPont Nature Center to take advantage of their viewing deck. We could see some researchers set up on a sandbar across the inlet and spied on them doing their banding work with our scopes. Close to the viewing deck were Spotted Sandpipers and a Black-necked Stilt and in the distance we spotted a Bald Eagle perched on the beach. One part of the beach was covered with Double-crested Cormorants and there was an active Osprey nest. We checked the museum and looked at the various cameras that were focused on the beach and the Osprey nest and this was useful for us to get to grips with shorebird identification.

Driving out of the Center we made a quick stop Seaside Sparrow and viewed them perched up on the reeds. A Bobolink flew by quickly and there were plenty of Willets around. After lunch at the Virden Center we went to Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge, a 10,144 acre refuge that serves as a sanctuary for migratory birds. On the west shore of the Delaware Bay, the refuge is designated a RAMSAR Wetland of International Significance Site, American Bird Conservancy-Important Bird Area, and a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site.

We stopped at Broadkill Marsh, an ebird hotspot and found Great Blue Heron, Forster's Terns, Black Skimmers, Black-bellied Plovers, a few Red Knots and the ubiquitous Laughing Gull. At a little bridge we got glimpses of a Green Heron and at the boardwalk trail at Fleetwood Pond we had good views of Great Crested Flycatcher and Eastern Kingbird.

At another boardwalk trail, we found a Carolina Wren feeding a chick, **Blue Grosbeak**, Yellow Warbler, House Wren, Chipping Sparrow, Orchard Oriole, American Redstart, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Parula, White-eyed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat and a Red-bellied Woodpecker.

Later in the afternoon, we headed back to Lewes and enjoyed happy hour where it was obvious that the group really enjoyed each other's company.

After a delicious dinner, we reviewed our bird list for the past two days and came up with a tentative plan for tomorrow.



### May 15, 2019

This morning at 8 am sharp we were at the van ready to load on time but the birds on the Virden Center grounds distracted us. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird darted by and a Scarlet Tanager was perched in a tree just above the van. We tracked down Carolina Chickadee, saw House Finch, and caught a male American Goldfinch feeding a female. There was Cedar Waxwing and White-eyed Vireo and eventually we set off for Slaughter Beach.



There were the same but seemingly fewer shorebirds than yesterday and while we were figuring out how to count the masses, a Merlin flew in and cleared the beach. It wasn't until days later when Steve checked his photo of the bird that it was determined that the bird was a rare subspecies of Merlin from the Pacific Northwest called the **Black Merlin** (*Falco columbarius suckleyi*). According to ebird, this was the second record of this subspecies in the East!

Since the shorebirds were scattered now, we decided to move on to the DuPont Nature Center where there were tons of birds, including more Black-necked Stilts, even better views of Forster's Tern perched on the pilings and a few Sanderlings. We enjoyed the views and the cameras on the beach and the Osprey platform and then moved on toward Ted Harvey Wildlife Area.

On the way, we passed a Cattle Egret in grass verge on Cedar Beach Road (another rare sighting) and then turned in to Ted Harvey, a state of Delaware holding that encompasses 2,600 acres of tidal marsh, forest and agricultural fields dedicated to wildlife management. We walked out on the dike trail and noted Common Yellowthroat and a Bank Swallow flying around. There were Least Sandpiper and Killdeer in the flooded marsh and a couple of Northern Water Snakes. While we were watching some Greater Yellowlegs a Northern Harrier was spotted coursing over the marsh and Gina pointed out a Northern Flicker perched on a tree. Our first Swamp Sparrows were seen here and an Eastern Meadowlark was seen on the walk back.



Photo: The Beach at Ted Harvey Wildlife Area

It was getting toward lunch time so we continued on to Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge which protects one of the largest remaining expanses of tidal salt marsh in the mid-Atlantic region. The combination of tidal marsh and freshwater impoundments make Bombay Hook a wildlife magnet, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance and a Globally Important Bird Area. We enjoyed our picnic lunch and then set off to explore the refuge. In the meantime, a bus pulled into the parking lot and some friends of Linda's parents disembarked (small world!). If that wasn't enough of a distraction, we watched a Blue Grosbeak bathing in puddle in parking lot. We drove slowly through the reserve stopping for a couple of Green Herons in a small pond. Along a **boardwalk trail**, we finally had good views of **Marsh Wren** and Yellow Warbler.



Our next stop was at Raymond Pool, a freshwater impoundment that held Mute Swans, Mallards, Black-necked Stilts and a (rare) Black Tern. We moved up to get closer looks at some Lesser Yellowlegs at the far end near the Canada Geese. At the next impoundment, Sheariness Pool, there were three more Black Terns to Holly's delight.



The tide was out at Leatherberry Flats and there were shorebirds galore! Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plovers, and Semipalmated Plovers, at least 27 Bald Eagles and some **Great Blue Herons** offering entertainment as they tried and mostly succeeded eating rather large fish. After studying the sprawling mud flats we moved on to Parson Point where we had found 7 Black-crowned Night Herons roosting in the trees and



one Yellow-crowned Night Heron. On the way out, we passed an active **Red Fox** den with two pups fighting over a bird carcass. A quick stop at the Visitor Center had us watching a pair of Brown Thrashers making a nest and then we were off to Pickering Beach in the hopes of finding some Red Knots. There were several breeding Horseshoe Crabs on the beach and a few flocks of smaller shorebirds in the distance but no Knots.

Back at the Virden Center we enjoyed a quick happy hour and then a nice barbecue dinner outdoors. We said thank you and goodbye to Judy, reviewed our list and planned our last day.

### **May 16, 2019**

This morning we woke up to bright sun which quickly faded to gray clouds and rain. On Slaughter Beach Road we saw two Snow Geese in an open farm field and checked the shorebirds in the pools of the flooded fields. On the road to DuPont Nature Center, the weather was starting to clear and the Clapper Rails were perched up preening. A Whimbrel quickly disappeared as we got out of the van but the Clappers cooperated and we had good views of those and several Seaside Sparrows, a Northern Harrier, Short-billed Dowitchers, Ruddy Turnstones and Black-necked Stilts. We noticed that the tide was really high and there were hundreds of shorebirds perched up in the marsh edge along the inlet.

We walked down toward the Center and found a little fall-out of warblers in the few trees at the end of the road. On show were Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, and Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroat and American Redstart. At the Center proper, the high tide made for close views of the shorebirds and large flocks were moving around apparently trying to find land not covered with water. The scene was amazing as hundreds of birds were on the move back and forth on the rocky breakwater and slightly exposed beaches.

We made one last stop at Slaughter Beach and once again tried to count the shorebirds estimating around 12,000 in the group of mostly Semipalmateds on the beach. An Eastern Phoebe was working the shrubs at the beginning of the dunes and the Purple Martins were busy. Then we worked our way back to Lewes and said our goodbyes. We especially thanked Holly and Steve for their efforts at finding the spots and getting us on the birds. The shorebirds certainly were spectacular and we look forward to returning next year to witness the remarkable migration that occurs here in spring.

