

Bird watching: Cape May festival goes virtual

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And now for something completely different. NJ Audubon's famed Cape May Spring Festival will be one of the first virtual birding events ever.

Every May since the late 1970s, the festival has drawn hundreds and hundreds of nature lovers. The attraction: an incredible array of migrating warblers and shorebirds in one of world's the premier birding destinations.

But with the Covid-19 storm clouds hanging over all major gatherings, NJ Audubon will present the event live online via Zoom Pro on Saturday, May 23, and Sunday, May 24.

"Necessity becoming the mother of invention, we realized that people couldn't come to Cape May for the festival, so we had to bring Cape May to them," says Brett Ewald, director of NJ Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory. "With people stuck at home and in many cases not even able to experience the local parks, nature is more important than ever. Canceling was not an option."

The virtual festival will feature the top bird-watching locations, identification workshops, a question-and-answer



Black skimmers stay in the Cape May area for much of the summer.

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panel, and keynote talks. The goal is to make birders and others appreciate Cape May even more and to attract them after the current situation ends.

"There's going to be a migration, and we want to capture it as well as we can," says Lillian Armstrong, the nonprofit's special events director. "We've tried to put together something that will capture the essence of the experience but is far less risky. We have very talented people who are going to be bringing their best, and we're really excited to see how it goes."

Why is birding in Cape May such a huge attraction this time of year?

"A whole amalgam of things come to-

gether at the same time," says Ewald. "First of all, it's location, location, location. We're on the midpoint of the Atlantic Flyway, and we're at the tip of the peninsula, so you have water focusing the birds from three sides. This time of year, things start to open up to insects and other things the birds are going to feed on."

Ewald also points to the horseshoe crabs spawning along the Delaware Bayshore, which makes the region an important stopover for threatened red knots and other shorebirds.

Helping to bring the festival into birders' homes is a lineup of world-class birders, photographers and artists who work and live in the region.

The experts will give online presentations about such famed birding spots as the Higbee Beach, South Cape May Meadows and the Beanery, as well as shorebird migration locations along the Delaware Bayshore and the Atlantic Ocean.

A virtual back-bay birding boat trip will offer close-up views of herons, egrets and shorebirds.

Presenters include noted nature photographer Kevin Karlson (on warbler identification) and Warbler Guide author Scott Whittle (on bird sounds).

The Sunday keynote speaker is Jason Ward, who grew up in the projects of the South Bronx and became a bird expert and the host of a popular online series on the birds of North America. The topic of his talk: "Hope is the Thing with Feathers."

(Full disclosure: I've volunteered to present a talk on my new book, "The Real James Bond," about the birding explorer whose name was stolen by Ian Fleming.)

The plan is to also record the sessions and make them accessible on a password-protected YouTube channel for registrants only after the festival. That way, participants anywhere in the world can see everything without tuning in at, say, 11 p.m. or 4 a.m.

"For this festival, you don't need rain gear," says Ewald. "You don't need bug spray. You don't need to worry about maps or getting to a place. You don't even need binoculars. You can just stay at home, relax, and enjoy birds and birding in Cape May."

The festival costs \$30 for Saturday or Sunday; \$50 for both days.

More information: <https://njaudubon.org/cape-may-spring-festival/>.

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