

## NORTH CAROLINA & THE GULF STREAM

*Sunday 20th May – Sunday 27th May 2012 (8 days)*

*Leaders: Matt Denton and assistant*

*Group Size Limit: 12*

*Tour Category: Easy*

The waters off Cape Hatteras in eastern North Carolina offer some of the best pelagic birding in North America.

The happy juxtaposition of the cold, south-flowing Labrador Current and the warm, north-flowing Gulf Stream, and the presence of the Continental Shelf as little as 20 miles (32km) offshore, make for perfect conditions for attracting a very wide selection of seabird species. The proximity of the shelf to the coast means that only a little time is spent travelling out to the best area, and at this time of year the conditions are often relatively calm, making for an easier pelagic birding experience than is typically the case on the Pacific Coast of the United States.

Undoubtedly the best area on the East Coast for seeing unusual seabirds, the waters off Cape Hatteras in late May routinely attract Black-caped and Fea's (or Cape Verde) Petrels, Cory's, Sooty, Audubon's and even Manx Shearwaters, and Wilson's, Leach's and Band-rumped (or Madeiran) Storm-Petrels. We also have a very good chance of seeing Pomarine, Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers (or Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas). Rarities that regularly turn up at this season, but which we would be lucky to see more than one of, include the critically endangered Bermuda Petrel, Herald Petrel, the lovely Red-billed Tropicbird and both Bridled and Sooty Terns.

The eastern part of North Carolina has a lot more to offer than its fantastic pelagic birding, so we will happily take the opportunity to

explore its pine woodlands, hardwood forests, remaining meadows and coastal beaches and marshes.

We will start our journey at Raleigh/Durham and from there travel south to Southern Pines so that we can explore Weymouth Woods, the best place in the state for the declining Red-cockaded Woodpecker and also home to such interesting species as Red-headed Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Pine, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Bachman's Sparrow.

At Howell Woods near Smithfield we will be targeting the superb Prothonotary Warbler, Swainson's Warbler and Mississippi Kite, while further towards the coast, the uncommon Henslow's Sparrow still nests in one of the few surviving areas of prairie.

Our visit to Cape Hatteras will undoubtedly be the highlight of our North Carolina journey. In addition to our two full-day pelagics, we will have time to explore the coastline in search of such interesting birds as Wilson's and Piping Plovers, Least Tern, Black Skimmer, Fish Crow, Seaside Sparrow and Boat-tailed Grackle. There is even a slim chance of a Black Rail.

All in all, eastern North Carolina has a lot to offer the visiting birder: some extraordinary seabirding combined with a long series of landbird specialities.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins in

mid-afternoon at Raleigh/Durham airport in eastern North Carolina, from where we will drive south to the small town of Southern Pines for a two nights stay.

**Day 2** Weymouth Woods near Southern Pines is part of the Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve that protects about 900 acres (364 hectares) of predominantly Longleaf Pine and broadleaf woodland.

This varied and pleasant sanctuary is probably the best place in North Carolina for seeing the uncommon and declining Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and indeed it is even possible to see them here without leaving the car park! Two other species endemic to the southeastern United States are also straightforward here: Brown-headed Nuthatch and Bachman's Sparrow. The latter is generally quite a secretive bird, but at this time of year the males sing from prominent perches in the bushes or lower pine branches.

In the broadleaf woodland, which includes some beautiful swampy sections, and some more open grassy areas we will look in particular for Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, the smart Yellow-throated, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, the beautiful Summer Tanager and the dazzling Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak.

At dawn or dusk, Chuck-will's-widows call from their perches in the less open parts of the piney woods., while Common Nighthawks patrol overhead. We also have a good chance of seeing the impressive Barred Owl.

Additional species that we may well encounter include Green Heron, the attractive

Wood Duck, Turkey Vulture, Cooper's and Red-shouldered Hawks, Mourning Dove, Chimney Swift, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Yellow-throated, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Blue Jay, American Crow, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Northern Mockingbird, Black-and-white, Pine and Prairie Warblers, Eastern Towhee, Northern Cardinal and Common Grackle.

**Day 3** After some more birding at Weymouth Woods we will drive to Smithfield for an overnight stay. This afternoon we will explore Howell Woods, a 2856-acre (1156-hectare) property that protects a diverse range of habitats including hardwood and pine forests, creeks, swampy bottomlands and abandoned fields.

Our main targets here include the stunning Prothonotary Warbler, which haunts the swampy areas in the woods, and the secretive Swainson's Warbler. In the overgrown fields, bushy areas attract Yellow-breasted Chats, and we could well see Mississippi Kites catching dragonflies and other insects on the wing as they sail over the woods and fields.

Other likely species include Black Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk, Killdeer, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Eastern Kingbird, Purple Martin, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, House Wren, American Robin, Chipping and Field Sparrows, Orchard Oriole, House Finch and American Goldfinch.

**Day 4** We will return to Howell Woods again this morning if we need to and then head for the coast. Along the way, we

will visit one of the few areas of natural prairie left in North Carolina, which holds one of the few remaining populations of the localized and declining Henslow's Sparrow east of the Appalachians. With a little persistence we should be able to have good views of this interesting bird as it sings from the rank herbage. Afterwards, we will continue northeastwards towards Cape Hatteras, where we will stay for four nights. If we failed to see Mississippi Kites at Howell Woods, we will make a detour along the way to visit an area of wooded bottomlands along the Roanoke River where a healthy population spends the late spring and summer months. We may arrive on the Atlantic coast in time for some initial birding.

**Days 5-7** We will travel offshore by boat twice during our stay at Cape Hatteras, heading offshore early in the morning and staying out for most of the day. As we travel out across the cooler waters of the Labrador Current we will be looking out for lingering Northern Gannets, Red-necked Phalaropes, Royal and Common Terns and migrant Pomarine, Parasitic and Long-tailed

Jaegers (or Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas). Tubenoses are sparse in these cooler waters, but we will likely have a taster of what is to come.

Once we reach the warmer waters of the Gulf Stream the picture changes and petrels, shearwaters and storm-petrels are the birds to concentrate on. Cory's, Sooty and Audubon's Shearwaters are the commonest shearwaters here, but we may also see Manx Shearwater and perhaps an early Greater (or Great) or two. Amongst the *Pterodroma* petrels for which Cape Hatteras is so famous, Black-capped is much the most numerous species, but we should also see small numbers of Fea's (or Cape Verde) Petrels and with luck Herald Petrel. If we are very fortunate indeed the rare Bermuda Petrel (or Cahow) will swing past, causing the kind of adrenalin-rush excitement that you can only experience on offshore pelagics!

The petrels and shearwaters often come quite close to the boat, making for great photographic opportunities, but the stars in this regard are the Wilson's Storm-

Petrels, which on calm days form a large flock, attracted by chum, right next to us. Literally just a few feet off the boat! Amongst the many Wilson's we will be looking out for both Leach's and Band-rumped (or Madeiran), both of which we should see in reasonable numbers. There is also a chance of Bridled and Sooty Tern, and if we are really in luck a Red-billed Tropicbird will turn up.

Cape Hatteras also offers some good birding onshore. Among the notable species here are Fish Crow, Seaside Sparrow and Boat-tailed Grackle, all endemic to the East Coast of the United States. The sandy beaches of the area hold nesting American Oystercatchers, Wilson's Plovers, Least Terns and Black Skimmers, and with some persistence we should be able to find the fast-declining Piping Plover. The extensive saltmarshes are home to Clapper Rails, which we could well see, and even a few Black Rails, although we would have to be lucky to even hear the latter, let alone see one.

Other species we are likely to see in the area include Brown Pelican, Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricolored

Hérons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Glossy Ibis, Canada Goose, Mallard, Osprey, Black-bellied (or Grey) and Semipalmated Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone, Willet, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Sanderling, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, Laughing, American Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Forster's Tern, Barn Swallow, Savannah Sparrow and Red-winged Blackbird.

**Day 8** We will head for Raleigh/Durham airport, where the tour ends in the late morning.

### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus/passenger van or car.

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy throughout.

**Climate:** Warm to hot, with a mix of sunny and overcast weather (some rain is likely). It can feel quite cool offshore, especially early and late.

### **Bird Photography:**

Opportunities are quite good.