

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

THE CAPE MAY PENINSULA

*Is Not Like the
Rest of New Jersey*

Fall migration of monarch butterflies

Photographs: USFWS

Unique Ecosystems

If you have noticed something “different” about the Cape May Peninsula, particularly in regard to its vegetation types, of course you are right! The Cape May Peninsula is not like the rest of New Jersey. The primary reason is climatic: nestled at low elevation between the Atlantic Ocean and the Delaware Bay, the peninsula enjoys approximately 225 frost-free days at its southern tip compared to 158 days at its northern end. The vegetation, showing strong characteristics of the Pinelands flora in the northern portion of the peninsula, displays closer affinities to the mixed hardwood forest of our country’s southern Coastal Plain. Southern tree species such as the swamp chestnut oak (*Quercus michauxii*) and loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) reach their northernmost distribution in Cape May County, while the common Pinelands trees such as pitch pine (*P. rigida*) and short-leaf pine (*P. echinata*) are less evident in the southern portion of the County.

Key Migratory Corridor

The Cape May Peninsula is well-known as a migratory route for raptors such as the sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), and northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), as well as owl species in great numbers. The peninsula’s western beaches within Delaware Bay provide the largest spawning area for horseshoe crabs (*Limulus polyphemus*) in the world and, as a result, sustain a remarkable portion of the second largest spring concentration of migrating shorebirds in North America. The increasingly rare red knot (*Calidris canutus*; a candidate for federal listing) as well as the sanderling (*C. alba*), least sandpiper (*C. minutilla*), dowitcher (*Limnodromus* spp.), and ruddy turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) are some of the many bird species that feed on horseshoe crab eggs to gain weight for migration to their summer breeding grounds in the arctic. The peninsula is also renowned for the early fall migration of thousands of monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*).



Red knot



Black skimmer



Piping plover chick



Swamp pink



Least tern



Box turtle



American oyster catcher with chick

Habitats for Endangered, Threatened, and Rare Species

Profound changes have occurred in the peninsula's environment since the first European colony was established in 1640. The expansive Atlantic white-cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*) and red maple (*Acer rubrum*) swamps were cut, in some cases three times, by the 1850s. Current stands are recovering but are fragmented. Further, the Cape May Peninsula is home to a large number of rare species (27 bird species, 2 mammals, 3 amphibians, 4 reptiles, 30 invertebrates, and 147 species of plants). A few of these species are federally listed (the bald eagle [*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*], piping plover [*Charadrius melodus*], swamp pink [*Helonias bullata*], and seabeach amaranth [*Amaranthus pumilus*]), and many are State-listed as threatened or endangered. The killing of thousands of northern diamondback terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin terrapin*) by vehicular traffic every nesting season (June-July) has prompted efforts by Richard Stockton State College and The Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor to salvage and incubate eggs from carcasses. The Cape May Peninsula also supports nesting colonies of the State-listed (endangered) black skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) and least tern (*Sterna antillarum*); however, these beach-nesting species are highly vulnerable to predation by invasive species such as feral cats and Norway rats, and to the use of recreational vehicles on beaches. Foresight by the State of New Jersey has put aside considerable areas of the peninsula as public lands, including thousands of acres as State forest (Belleplain) and wildlife management areas (Tuckahoe, Peaslee, Beaver Swamp, Cape May Wetlands, Dennis Creek, Highbee Beach, Heislerville, and Cape Island).

Cape May National Wildlife Refuge

The Cape May National Wildlife Refuge consists of 11,683 acres with 4,583 acres in the Delaware Bay Division, 6,576 acres in the Great Cedar Swamp Division, 514 acres in the Two-Mile Beach Unit, and an authorized acquisition boundary of an additional 21,191 acres. The refuge is actively involved in protecting the ecology of the Cape May Peninsula, providing necessary habitat to 317 bird species, 42 mammal species, and 55 reptile and amphibian species. The Delaware Bay Division protects salt marsh, forested uplands, forested wetlands, vernal pools, shrub/scrub, and grasslands. The Delaware Bay Division attracts large numbers of shorebirds, waterfowl, and other migratory birds. The Great Cedar Swamp Division has the largest contiguous forest on the refuge and is part of the Pinelands National Reserve and the Great Egg Harbor National Scenic and Recreational River. This division protects hardwood swamps, salt marshes, bogs, forested uplands, and grasslands. Unique viewing opportunities exist for Atlantic white-cedar stands, a variety of warblers and other songbirds, bald eagle, wintering owls, and northern diamondback terrapin. The Great Cedar Swamp Division also supports large numbers of marsh and water birds, songbirds, raptors, reptiles, and amphibians. The Two-Mile Beach Unit along the Atlantic Ocean offers opportunities to view barrier islands, maritime forests, tidal ponds, and beaches used by beach-nesting birds and thousands of migrating shorebirds. The piping plover, least tern, and American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) nest on adjacent property and feed and rest onsite during the seasonal beach closure from April 1 to September 30.

Cape May National Wildlife Refuge is on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance as "of significant value not only for the country . . . in which it is located, but for humanity as a whole." The Convention on Wetlands signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971 developed and maintained an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global biological

diversity and for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform. Refuge lands are also included in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and are recognized by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, and the American Bird Conservancy, which support partnership approaches to conserving waterfowl throughout North, Central, and South America. Finally, the Cape May Peninsula and the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge are designated on the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail Route, which extends south for nearly 300 miles from Perth Amboy to Cape May and westward along the Delaware Bay to the Delaware Memorial Bridge.

Fishery Resources

All of Cape May Peninsula's marshes and tidal creeks provide important nursery areas for sport fish such as summer flounder (*Paralichthys dentatus*) and bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*), American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) and blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*). Seventy percent of the species sought by recreational and commercial fishermen depend on shallow water habitats for at least part of their life cycle.

The Service is a committed conservation partner in protecting the Cape May Peninsula and invites you to visit, study, and enjoy the unique resources that are sustained and safeguarded for your benefit, and for future generations.



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