



Eye candy! This male Indigo Bunting bred in Brunswick this summer. It will soon molt into a dull, mottled blue and brown plumage before heading south for winter.



Yellow-throated Warblers are one of the fifteen plus species of warblers that stop to rest and forage on their way south

## **Fall Migration offers Great Birding in Brunswick County**

My favorite time of the birding year! Fall migration is upon us. It is an exciting time for birding. From mid-July to mid-December the avian mix changes every few days and, to make things more challenging for us humans, birds are molting into fresh sets of feathers.

The best coastal birding features southbound songbirds, shorebirds, and raptors; incoming birds that will overwinter in our area; and rarities from western states. To observe the fall migration at its finest, visit the following NC Birding Trail sites.

### **Zeke's Island National Estuarine Research Reserve/Fort Fisher**

Fall migration treats include shorebirds, warblers, sparrows, and Bobolinks plus other songbirds like orioles and tanagers. Raptors such as Merlin and Peregrine Falcons pass by frequently and one or more may stay the winter. Winter sparrows are numerous! Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows are easily located in the marsh grass at Federal Point.

By the first of December, scoters, buffleheads, mergansers, and other ducks begin arriving to usher in the winter birding season and may be found in the ocean or the tidal basin between the rocks and dunes.

This area is also a good place to look for vagrant western species like the Lark Sparrow and Western Kingbird. While rarities may not be found every year, they have made multiple appearances recently.

### **Bald Head Island Conservancy**

Bald Head Island is a continuation of the Zeke's Island migrant trap so expect the birds noted above. The large oaks of Middle Island may be loaded with warblers, vireos, and other songbirds.

Waders such as Green Heron and Glossy Ibis plus other species including Painted Buntings may be found in early fall before they head south. Cape Fear Point and the tidal mudflats are excellent sites for observing migrating shorebirds.

### **Southport Riverwalk**

Migrating terns, gulls, shorebirds, and songbirds may be seen from the boardwalk that transverses the marsh and from the gazebo at its end. Check sand bars and mudflats for waterbirds, including overwintering Bonaparte's Gulls, and look for Northern Harriers flying over the marsh.

Ibises...both White and Glossy...will hang around for much of the fall; however, most will eventually head south. Occasionally, not every year, White Pelicans or a Golden Eagle may pass through.

### **Brunswick Town State Historic Site**

As winter approaches, numerous sparrows arrive. Overwintering songbirds and residents may be found foraging in small, mixed-species flocks. By December, Rusty Blackbirds have arrived to stay the winter. This is a species of special concern. Ornithologists and birders have noted a steep decline Rusty numbers and researchers are racing to determine the cause.

Rusties roost overnight in trees above wetlands and move out to forage at sites that provide good sources of mast...a site with many tasty acorns like the grounds at Brunswick Town.

### **Boiling Spring Lakes Preserve**

Boiling Spring Lakes is for woodpeckers! In addition to endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, the preserve and town are good locations to find North Carolina's other resident woodpecker species.

By fall, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker joins the party and stays with us through the winter, making it possible to find all eight North Carolina woodpecker species on a given day.

A nature trail is located at the back of the community center's parking lot and is excellent for an early fall walk to see wildflowers, butterflies, and birds.

### **Sunset Beach**

Wood Storks, the avian celebrities of Sunset Beach, stay through much of the fall. Our storks are part of a northward post-breeding dispersal of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida birds plus storks that breed in North Carolina.

They may be found roosting in trees around the Twin Lakes. A good time to find them on roost during the day is when the tide is high. At lower tide levels storks may be found fishing in shallow pools on mudflats...pools that concentrate fish.

The best stork watching is seeing them come in for a landing as they return to roost...wings and feet spread to slow their airspeed while maintaining enough lift to glide in. This relatively slow, circling decent provides for great photo opportunities!

Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret, and Purple Gallinule, relatively rare visitors that have dispersed northward, are uncommon but possible in early fall. Sunset Beach also has migrating shorebirds usually found on the mudflats and winter sparrows like the Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows that may be found along the causeway. As fall turns to winter, many species of ducks take up winter residence in the twin lakes.

### **Ft. Caswell**

Though it is not on the birding trail, Ft. Caswell deserves to be included. It is owned by the North Carolina Baptist Assembly and open to the public from 8 AM to 5 PM on weekdays plus Saturdays with reservations.

From the pier, watch for gulls, terns, and pelicans feeding along tidelines in the inlet and then take a nice long walk on the pristine beach that begins on the ocean side of the pier. You will see ocean birds and keep an eye out for winter sparrows lurking in the dune grass.

Many species of shorebirds such as Pectoral Sandpipers may be found foraging on earth worms on the massive lawns after heavy rains. When the grass is waterlogged during rough weather in the fall, I head for the fort!

*The North Carolina Birding Trail - Coastal Plain Trail Guide* with descriptions and maps for all 102 sites on the coastal birding trail, including the ten Brunswick County sites, may be found in area bookstores. More information on the birding trail may be found at their website: <http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/>.

John Ennis



**This Pectoral Sandpiper is passing through on its way from arctic breeding grounds to their grasslands winter home in southern South America...for some it will be a roundtrip of over 18,000 miles**