



Many birds are seen in mid-molt like this Black-bellied Plover



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

Fall Migration on the NC Birding Trail

Fall migration is an exciting time for bird watching at Brunswick County's NC Birding Trail sites. 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 a fresh set of feathers. Warblers for example are molting from their alternate plumage to their basic winter plumage which may look dramatically different. Also, many birds are seen in mid-molt like the Black-bellied Plover shown above.

The best birding, near the coast, features southbound songbirds, shorebirds, and raptors; incoming birds that will overwinter in our area; and rarities from western states. Also, some species that have temporarily dispersed into our area after breeding to our south, like the wonderful Wood Storks at Sunset Beach, will hang around awhile before moving south to their winter ranges.

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 visitors start arriving to usher in the winter birding season and may be found in the ocean or the tidal basin between the rocks and dunes.

The best migration experience may be the "bird du jour". On a given day, a large number of one species, traveling together, may be present...Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Northern Flickers, Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, sparrows, and others.

This area is also a good place to look for vagrant western species like the Lark Sparrow and Western Kingbird. While they may not show up every year, they have made multiple appearances in the past few years.

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.

Wading birds such as the Green Heron and Glossy Ibis and Painted Buntings may be found in early fall before they head south. Cape Fear Point and the tidal mudflats are excellent sites for observing the shorebird migration.

Southport Riverwalk

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

The ibises of Battery Island...both White and Glossy species...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.

Due to their limited availability, the Rusty Blackbird may be a highly desired "lifer" for visiting friends and family...those of the birding persuasion. Rusties roost overnight in trees above wetlands and move out to forage at sites that provide good sources of mast...a site like the top of the bowl around the wetlands area in Brunswick Town has many tasty acorns.

Boiling Spring Lakes Preserve

Boiling Spring Lakes is for woodpeckers! In addition to having several colonies of the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, the preserve and town area is a good place to find North Carolina's six other resident woodpeckers. By fall, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker has joined the party and stays with us through the winter.

A nature trail is located at the back of the community center's parking lot and is excellent for a late summer walk to see wildflowers, butterflies, and birds. In late fall, look for overwintering ducks in the lakes and beaver ponds around town. Also, Fox, Savannah, and other winter sparrows may be found around the community.

Sunset Beach

Wood Storks, the avian celebrities of Sunset Beach, arrive by mid-summer and stay through much of the fall. Our storks are part of a northward post-breeding dispersal of birds breeding in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

They may be found roosting in trees around the Twin Lakes and wetland area at the head of the Calabash River. 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! Storks will return to roost in front of impending thunderstorms as well as high tide.

The 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 area lakes.

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 sites in Brunswick County, is now available in area bookstores. More information on the birding trail may be found at their website: <http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/>.

It's time for us to hit the trail and be fooled again by molting migrants and confusing fall warblers. Love the challenge, hate the misidentifications!



Many raptors, including this Merlin, travel south following the coastline and some stay the winter



This male Bufflehead is one of the ducks that arrive in late fall to spend the winter with us



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