

AUDUBON MAGAZINE

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED
TO THE PROTECTION AND PRESER-
VATION OF OUR NATIVE WILDLIFE

Our Motto: A BIRD IN THE BUSH IS WORTH TWO IN THE HAND

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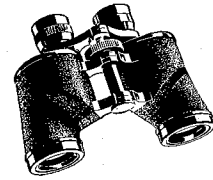
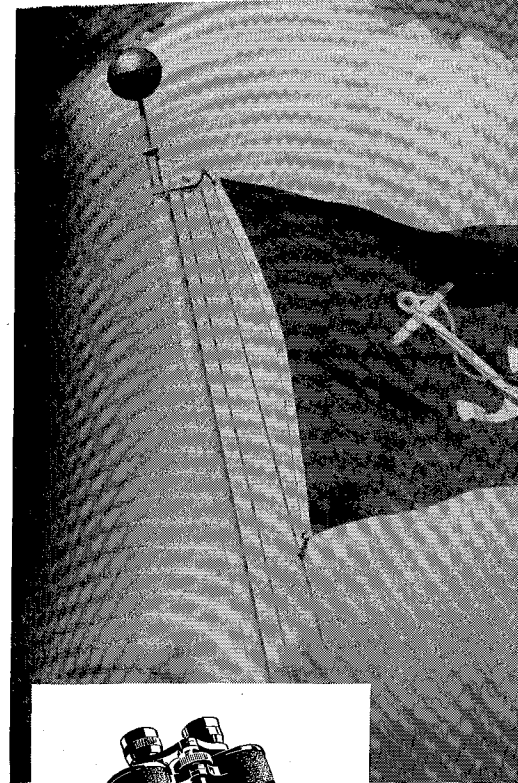
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THE WITMER STONE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By Richard H. Pough

AT THE southern tip of New Jersey, where the "Garden State" tapers off in the Atlantic Ocean, you will find a port of embarkation outrivalling the greatest harbors of the world. Whereas busy New York City counts human migrants by hundreds of thousands, the woods and dunes of Cape May Point greet and bid farewell to millions of avian travelers. There are no bands to welcome them as they stream into the funnel that is Cape May, nor confetti to speed them on their way as they take off for distant Delaware; yet their histrionic display in migration at Cape May relegates a luxury liner sailing to Class Z rating.

This spot has been famous among ornithologists for a century and a half. With one side exposed to the Atlantic Ocean, and the other facing Delaware Bay, with salt and fresh water ponds, sandy beaches, pine woods, catbriar tangles, beach plum and bayberry thickets, sand dunes and picturesque woodlands of Spanish oak and cedar providing a wide diversity of habitat within a relatively tiny area, Cape May acts as a magnet for the migrating birds of eastern North America. Here gather birds of the sea and shore, birds of the meadows and farmlands, birds of the swamps and marshes, birds of the mountains and plains, and accidental visitors from the seven seas and the flyways of the world.

You will find Cape May exciting at any season of the year, but the autumnal flights, beginning with the warblers in early August and ending with the Woodcock flight in late November, are the Point's greatest attraction. The key to these extraordinary flights lies in Cape May's geographical location. Along the Atlantic coast migrating land birds must fly southwest in the fall to avoid being carried out to sea. These land birds seem to fear water and many hesitate to cross even small bays until they have a favorable wind. As a result many birds, once they reach southern New Jersey, find further progress to the south blocked by the wide expanse of Delaware Bay and so are funneled down to Cape May Point. Here, once favorable winds spring up, they find a shorter crossing than at any point for forty miles up the bay shore.

Most land birds migrate chiefly at night. In the fall their departure for the south is stimulated by sharp drops in temperature. Usually these drops occur when a mass of polar air flows down over the continent from the

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northwest. Birds, flying south through such a body of air, tend to be carried eastward far out over the ocean unless their flight on a westward course is strong enough to counter both the westerly trend of the shore line and their own easterly drift. In the early morning you can see night migrating land birds of all kinds flying in from the ocean. Others can be seen coming down from great heights to the

Point from all directions, because, as daylight overtakes them, Cape May is the only land they can see for miles around.

Paradoxically, spring might be termed the only "off" season in the Cape's bird-life cycle. True, you see the many local breeding species returning to their old haunts, but the air is innocent of autumn's rush of wings; trees and shrubs, in spite of new spring finery, seem only half alive in the absence of last fall's twittering excitement. For its unique geographical location is as uncondusive to spectacular spring flights as it is attractive to southward migrants.

With the coming of summer this slackened tempo shifts into second gear, preparatory to an all-out migration display. The earliest fall flights are those of the warblers. Thirty-one species have been recorded in the mixed flocks that start streaming through as early as the last week of July. Nearby, George Ord collected in 1809 the beautiful little warbler on which Alexander Wilson bestowed the name of the Cape.

The first northwest wind in August brings Tree Swallows, which concentrate by the tens of thousands on the low bushes in the sanctuary area before they leave on their southward journey. The very different Barn Swallow migration gets under way at about the same time, but it occurs without any marked concentration as a continuous morning flight along the narrow strip adjacent to the beach.

By mid-August the great Kingbird flight is underway. These daytime migrants pile up at the Point by the thousands during periods of northwest winds, and you see them beating their way back northward into the wind along the bay shore, as though looking for a place where it might narrow sufficiently for them to venture with

safety across the water to the western shore. Among the common Eastern Kingbirds there are always a few Western or Arkansas Kingbirds, readily distinguishable by their lemon-yellow breasts. Late August and early September bring the Reedbird (Bobolink) flights, but unless there is an unusually strong northwest wind they fly directly out from the Point toward Cape Henlopen in Delaware. Only in the heaviest winds do they hesitate to cross and resort to beating back up the bay shore in the manner of Kingbirds.

The first northwester in September starts the famous hawk flights. These are composed of two types of hawks—the regular coastal migrants and the off-course mountain ridge migrants. During late August Ospreys can be seen drifting south along the coast, but the characteristic coastal migrants are the falcons. Sparrow Hawks are seen in numbers from September through the first week of October, and the Pigeon Hawk flight commences about mid-September and continues until mid-October. A few Peregrines may be seen in September, but the great flight of these rare birds comes in October. Hawks that are normally mountain ridge migrants—*Buteos*, and especially the *Accipiters*—are seen all through the migration period from late August to November, whenever the flow of cold air from the northwest is rapid enough to drift them east down the coast. Usually over 90 per cent are young birds of the year and this has given rise to the theory that it is chiefly the inexperienced birds that fail to make allowance for wind drift and are carried to the coast.

The last week in September and the first in October bring one of Cape May's most spectacular flights—that of the Flickers. Until recent years, these birds were regarded as game and were shot in great numbers. Flicker poles,

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