

Fall Migration Hot Spots

If you're eager to hit the highways and flyways this autumn, these six places offer some of the nation's best birding.

Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park, Florida

When Hurricane Andrew struck in 1992, it toppled most of the Australian pines and other exotic greenery that covered this preserve at the southern tip of Key Biscayne. Park managers took the opportunity to replace the exotics with native plants, so the site is now rich with the distinctive flora of south Florida and the Caribbean—a verdant habitat that supports large numbers of native birds. For migrants moving down the east coast of Florida, Key Biscayne is the last of the barrier islands before a long gap of open water, causing the travelers to pause here and pile up in huge numbers. At times in late fall the park may swarm with warblers, including black-throated blue, Cape May, and palm warblers, as well as thrushes, vireos, hawks, and a wide variety of other migrants. Because of its location and habitat, the site serves as a magnet for lost birds that have strayed from the Bahamas or Cuba, and rare U.S. finds have been discovered here on several occasions. **For more information:** Visit www.floridastateparks.org/capeflorida/ or call Key Biscayne Park at 305-361-5811.

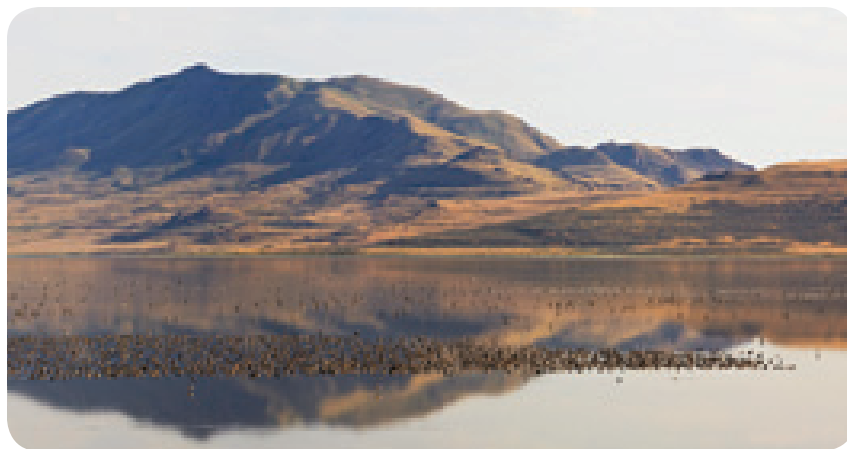
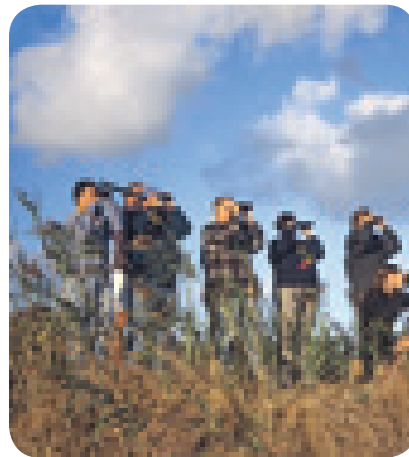
Cape May, New Jersey

Local boosters will tell you that Cape May is the best birding spot in the world, and if you visit on the right day in fall, you may be inclined to agree. Southbound migrants following the Atlantic seaboard funnel into a narrow peninsula in southern New Jersey. When they reach Cape May Point, facing the open waters of Delaware Bay, they often pause, building up in concentrations that can reach phenomenal numbers. The immediate Cape May area has habitat for almost all major migrant groups. Shorebirds gather on local meadows and mudflats in July and August, while warblers and other warm-weather songbirds peak in September. Temperate-zone migrant songbirds, from robins to kinglets to sparrows, may swarm here in October and November. Days with northwest winds bring major hawk flights throughout the fall; during October this is one of the best places in the world to see impressive numbers of merlins and peregrine falcons. Late-season northeast winds may bring flights of scoters, loons, and other coastal and oceanic birds close to shore. **For more information:** Visit <http://birdcapemay.org> or call the Cape May Bird Observatory at 609-884-2736.

Great Salt Lake, Utah

The vast oasis of the Great Salt Lake teems with life all year, especially during the fall, when literally millions of birds stop over. The water is too intensely salty for most aquatic creatures but perfect for brine flies and brine shrimp, which swarm here in incredible abundance, feeding huge numbers of birds. As many as 500,000 Wilson's phalaropes and 1.5 million eared grebes—or a third of their North American populations—come here after nesting to spend weeks or even months putting on weight and molting their feathers before they continue south. For the phalaropes, the next leg of the journey may be a nonstop flight to South America. Other species of water birds gather by the thousands along the lake's edge or in areas where freshwater flows. Access to the huge lake is best accomplished through a few key sites, especially the famous Bear River Refuge on the eastern shore. This is the place to find the greatest variety, from avocets, stilts, and sandpipers in late summer to a multitude of other shorebirds and ducks throughout the fall to amazing flights of swans in November. **For more information:** Visit www.fws.gov/bearriver/birds.html or call the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge at 435-734-6426.

This page, clockwise from top: Key Biscayne's Cape Florida Lighthouse; black-throated blue warbler; Cape May birders; migrating shorebirds at the Great Salt Lake; palm warbler.



Monterey Bay, California

Many sites along the edge of this large bay are known for interesting migrants that stop over here, from stray eastern warblers in the pines at Point Pinos to shorebirds on the estuary at Moss Landing. But for the most striking visitors, the bay's real attraction is one we can't see. Just offshore, the Monterey Submarine Canyon, which plunges more than a mile in places, brings very deep water close to the coast. Upwellings from the depths bring nutrient-rich cold waters close to the surface, and these in turn bring seabirds close to shore. Some of the most amazing long-distance migrants in the world are birds of the open sea. Buller's shearwaters from New Zealand, pink-footed shearwaters from Chile, and millions of sooty shearwaters from throughout the southern oceans all migrate to California's offshore waters. On Monterey Bay during the fall, they cross paths with parasitic jaegers and Sabine's gulls that nest in the high Arctic and migrate to southern oceans, with black-footed albatrosses that nest in Hawaii and range throughout the north Pacific, and with a variety of other long-distance champions. Some of these pelagic travelers may be seen from vantage points on shore, but even more can be enjoyed on popular whale-watching or birding boat trips on the bay. **For more information:** Visit <http://creagrus.home.montereybay.com/MtyBay.html>.

Izembek Lagoon, Alaska

The Alaska Peninsula extends more than 300 miles to the southwest from the 49th state's mainland before breaking into the stragging chain of the Aleutian Islands. Izembek Lagoon, located near the peninsula's tip, is perfectly situated to serve as the jumping-off point for birds setting out on long migrations across open water. It's also the perfect spot for the birds to fuel up for their journeys. This shallow lagoon's 150 square miles support some of the world's largest beds of eelgrass, a favorite food of many waterfowl. It's estimated that at least 90 percent of the western population of brant, up to 150,000 birds, gathers here to feed for several weeks every fall before these small geese take off on long overwater flights to the California coast. Also taking a break here are tens of thousands of emperor geese, Taverner's cackling geese, and Steller's eiders. Shorebirds use the area as well, with tens of thousands of rock sandpipers, dunlins, western sandpipers, and others making this their major feeding site every autumn as they bulk up for their flights south. **For more information:** Visit <http://izembek.fws.gov> or call the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge at 907-532-2445.

Hawk Ridge, Duluth, Minnesota

North of Lake Superior, the vast landscape of forests and prairies stretching north toward Hudson Bay provides ideal habitat for nesting birds of prey. When many of those raptors start south in autumn, they migrate on a broad front—until they reach Lake Superior's northern shore. Then their aversion to crossing open water leads many to turn and hug the shoreline. Their numbers build as they move west-southwest, and on some days impressive flights turn the corner toward the south, where the lake ends at Duluth. From Hawk Ridge, which sits above the city, watchers often get eye-level views of the raptors as they glide past. Counters from the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory keep the official tally, which varies from year to year but averages more than 94,000 birds per autumn. The most prevalent species is usually the broad-winged hawk, which peaks in September, but Duluth also sees substantial numbers of sharp-shinned hawks in September and October, red-tailed hawks in October and November, bald eagles in November, and lesser numbers of a dozen other raptors. In late fall this is one of the best places in the world to see the big, powerful northern goshawk: in the best years, counts have topped a thousand in a day. **For more information:** Visit www.hawkridge.org/ or call the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory at 218-428-6209.

This page, clockwise from top: Sandpiper stilt; pink-footed shearwater; Alaska's Izembek Refuge; eared grebe; sharp-shinned hawk at Hawk Ridge, Minnesota.