

Governors Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
New York



A Cedar Waxwing perched on a tree in Nolan Park. This bird prefers wooded areas and is probably just passing through.

July 4, 2009

Today marked the launch of my kids birding program with a July 4th Star-Spangled Birds for Kids excursion. Four kids came along with their guardians. I'm not sure who had more fun, the kids, their adults....or me. The birds came too, putting on an avian show for everyone.

Star-Spangled Birds



barn swallow photo credit
naturespicsonline.com.

I especially have to thank the barn swallows, who circled our group in acrobatic arcs as we crossed the Parade Ground. They were attracted by insects kicked up by our feet as we walked across the grass. And the common terns on the Yankee Pier provided a special surprise, for many of the nesting pairs now have nestlings. Little down-covered terns were scattered over the pier waiting for their parents to deliver meals of small fish and providing a wonderful learning experience for kids and adults alike. One child, a little girl of 5 or 6, asked me a terrific question as we watched the terns. She wondered, "Is nature art?" Another, child, a girl of about 10, and her mother chose to stay with me to look for birds after all the other children decided it was time for a snack. All in all, I think everyone learned a little bit about birds today, and enjoyed the experience of birding on Governors Island.

I also did a little birding before the excursion. Most of what I saw today was the usual crowd of summer residents, and there isn't much to report, with one big exception. The house wrens from the nest inside Fort Jay are now out and about, getting foraging lessons from their very attentive parents. Last week, when I found the nest, I thought there were at least 3 young. Today, I saw that there are 4! So there is a family of 6 house wrens living in Fort Jay. I had hoped to show them to the kids, but I they were long gone by the time the birding excursion began. Wrens are very quick and busy little birds!

July 12, 2009

9:30-11:00 and casual observations throughout the day

Today was again uneventful. I am happy to report that the common tern colony on the Yankee Pier is thriving. Adult and juvenile terns abounded there today. I was able to get a closer look this week because the pier was open to visitors, and I was able to walk out to the crook of the Y to get a new view of the birds. I also got a better look at the nests, which really are just a bunch of shells, sticks and trash scraped together into a flat nest and which doesn't look much like home at all. Apparently for terns, though, it's pretty cozy!

July 18, 2009 - City of Water Day

The common tern colony on the Yankee Pier is going strong. There are more terns on the piers at the southern end of the island, but I have chosen to limit my birding to the Historic District. For geographical integrity, I will only consider the Yankee Pier birds part of my observation area until I have greater access to the south end of the island. But it is terrific to know that several spots support terns.

July 25, 2009

9:40-10:45 and casual observations through the day



Egret flying across New York harbor Photo credit naturespicsonline.com.

The common tern colony on the Yankee Pier is thriving. The little ones seem so vulnerable, having so little shelter from the hot sun and every storm that comes through (we've had a lot of them this summer). But the nestlings are doing fine, raising a ruckus whenever their parents come back to Yankee Pier with something to eat. They are not the only young on the island, of course. This summer I have seen juvenile and immature house wrens, house finches, robins, starlings, double crested cormorants, and gulls. And though I haven't seen or heard their young, I am pretty certain that cardinals, indigo buntings, barn swallows, chimney swifts, house sparrows and crows are breeding on the island as well. Governors Island a great place to raise a family!

All those breeding birds are wonderful, and not so hard to find. But if I want to see more great shore birds at Governors Island, I should look up more often. I know that herons criss-cross the harbor, moving between Jamaica Bay, the islands around Staten Island and up the East River, New Jersey and all the parks with water features scattered throughout the 5 boroughs. And today I spotted a great egret flying from somewhere in Brooklyn, it appeared, northward toward New Jersey, or perhaps even Central Park. I love to watch great egret in flight. They fly so slowly that it seems like they could fall right out of the sky, as if their engine had stalled. But on this bird flew, passing over Governors Island toward a marshier

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location. Perhaps when the wetlands of the 40 acre park are built on the island, great egrets will stop here too.

I saw fewer chimney swifts today, but I think that was simply a matter of timing. They are certainly still around. Barn swallow numbers seem the same. They still swoop and soar over the Parade Ground all day long. Today the eastern kingbird made an appearance again. I know it has been around the north end of the Parade Ground all summer. I just haven't been spotting it. It was joined by a brown thrasher in the trees just to the south of Ft. Jay. I'm not as sure about this bird. It doesn't seem likely that it's been here all summer, since the island has so little underbrush or leaf cover. I'll try to find it again next weekend to see if it's sticking around, or just passing through.



*Eastern Kingbird Photo credit
naturepicsonline.com*