

Governors Island

National Park Service
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National Monument
New York



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

Start of the Season

Today I took the 10:00 ferry to Governors Island on a sunny and still morning with the temperature around 60 degrees. I birded from 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with a ½ hour break for lunch at 1:00. By afternoon, the temperature had risen to 70 degrees.

May 15, 2009

On the ferry I saw my first birds of the day, including an apparently breeding pair of herring gulls on top of Castle Williams (they spend a lot of time defending the place), laughing gulls and double crested cormorants on the pilings at Soissons' Dock, and brant geese between the Dock and the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel ventilation tower. I expect the brants will be leaving soon for parts north, but they are already being replaced by common terns, which have begun to colonize the right side of the Y on the Yankee Pier. Today I saw just 18 terns, but I expect a much larger group to arrive before long. A few ring-billed and great black-backed gulls were also at the water's edge, as was a single male mallard and a few Canada geese. Many more Canada geese would be spotted on land, in Colonel's Row and on the Parade Ground. I spotted an adult black-crowned night heron roosting in a tree near the crumbling Omaha Dock, and was surprised to see two semipalmated sandpipers on the dock's edge. They prefer mudflats to old docks in a busy sea channel, but I suppose these two needed a place to rest on their journey to their summer grounds.

The usual crowd of year-round residents was here today, with robins, crows, cardinals, starlings, brown-headed cowbirds, grackles, house sparrows, house finches, mockingbirds, mourning doves, rock pigeons, song sparrows, and a red-bellied and downy woodpecker all making appearances. Blue jays, noticeably absent during my last visit on April 9, were back, though in modest numbers. I only saw eight today. I spotted a single female goldfinch in Nolan Park. I may have missed a larger flock, but I have never seen more than one goldfinch at a time on the island. Also in Nolan Park were three white-throated sparrows. I was surprised to see any of these birds at this time of year, but there are always stragglers in the bird world. Soon, they too will leave for their summer homes in Canada or New England.



Mourning doves are common residents on Governors Island.
Photo courtesy of naturespicsonline.com.

I never saw a catbird on Governors Island...until today..Scattered about the Historic District were seven of these slate-gray birds with black caps, either mewling like upset cats or singing their rambling songs. Catbirds prefer brushy understorey, so I suspect these birds will soon move along, though they will likely settle somewhere in the region for the summer. The same is true of the Eastern towhees I saw, both males, which also enjoy thick underbrush for foraging and nesting, as do the veery, hermit and wood thrushes seen around Nolan Park and on Colonel's Row. It is wonderful to hear the haunting song of wood thrushes on the island, if only for a short time.

An Eastern wood pewee and a blue-gray gnatcatcher were also seen in Nolan Park. The wood pewee is likely on its way to a nearby forest, where it will spend its summer days flying out from the middle part of the understorey to catch flies. The blue gray gnatcatcher will also find a forest home, where it will flit about constantly among leaves at the tips of branches searching for

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insects.

Last summer I saw cedar waxwings only once, on July 5, when about 10 were moving between the blue spruce and yew trees around the *glacis*. Today I saw three, and heard the *sree sree sree* of at least 10 or 15 more as they busily foraged on tree buds in Nolan Park. I hope to see these beautiful birds often this season, but waxwings are nomadic birds, moving where food is most plentiful. Seeing them on Governors Island could be an irregular, but always special, experience.

On April 9 I saw at least 80 northern flickers, most of them on the Parade Ground. Today I did not see one. Instead I was delighted to find a mated pair of killdeer doing their best to draw me away from a most wonderful sight, their three young killdeer scurrying about the field not far from the site of the old Super 8 Motel. It was tempting to stay all day and watch these young birds rush about with their long legs and tiny bodies, but I knew my presence was stressing their parents, and so I moved on.

Last, but not least by a long shot, are those little birds we love so much to see and hear each fall and spring as they migrate north or south, the wood warblers. I expected to see them in greater numbers than I actually did today, but I did see warblers all over the Historic District, from Nolan Park to Division Road.

May 29, 2009

It was a mostly gray and dreary day in New York City. What little sun there was peaked through the misty haze of the harbor, where the water is still much colder than the air, which today reached a temperature of around 70 degrees. It was a tough day for spotting birds, as the gray sky washed out colors, but I managed to see a few. I birded the entire Historic District, not with as much deliberation as on May 15, which fell in the midst of migration. But I took my time none the less, working around the district between 12:30 and 4:30 pm.

Today I saw no brant geese. They have finally all departed from around Governors Island. And now there is a full summer flock of common terns on the right part of the Y of the Yankee Pier. I counted 64, and I am sure I missed some, since I could not get a clear view of the entire area. Many of them are nesting, providing an illustration of how some birds adapt built environments to their own needs. Also around the edge of the island were 5 male mallards, an American black duck (a first for me here, though probably common enough visitors), and the usual double-crested cormorants and gulls**.



Annie commonly spots Northern Mockingbirds. Photo courtesy of naturepicsonline.com.

Like the terns, barn swallows and chimney swifts have reached their summer numbers, and I was glad to see a few northern rough-winged swallows again. The flock of cedar waxwings was still around today, feasting on the flowers of tulip trees in Nolan Park. A few warblers were also passing through, including northern parulas, a male black and white warbler and a female blackpoll warbler.

The killdeer pair was on the Parade Ground. I could not locate their young, though I heard a third killdeer in the distance, and the adults, whenever I approached, performed the broken wing display. I tried to minimize contact with them to stress them as little as possible, but they seemed to follow me all over the Parade Ground, pretending to have broken wings in an effort to draw me away from a nest or their young. Since I never saw the young, perhaps the display is effective!

The eastern kingbird that I saw in the trees just to the south of Ft. Jay on May 15 was there again today. But there were also two firsts, at least for me, on Governors Island. A great crested flycatcher was perched in the little stand of trees at the northwest corner of the dry moat around Ft. Jay. And a warbling vireo sang and flitted about a tree outside the fort's entrance. The vireo shared the tree with a house wren.

Beyond that, I saw the usual crowd of year-round residents, including robins and house finches and their young, cardinals, mockingbirds, crows, starlings, house sparrows, mourning doves, and grackles. I did not see or hear any blue jays.

An immature red-tailed hawk soared into a tree inside Ft. Jay, mightily harassed by a group of crows. It gave up its perch after just a few minutes and flew off towards the south end of the island. There was still no sign of the kestrels. I fear they have either moved on to another nesting location or one or both has died. I will continue to look for them.

**It appears that gulls are nesting on the south end of the island. Large groups of them occupy the north end of the field. Since I am restricting my survey to the Historic District, at least for now, I do not record them in my statistics or reports.