

Birdwatch #7, September 2005

Birding Mistakes and Hawk Mountain by Phil Krajewski

A few years ago my daughters Vinca and Evangeline screamed in unison as I drove up our driveway, “Quick! A hawk hit the window and we have it in a box!” Upon investigation I was stymied as to what species of hawk this was. I checked the bird books and after much consternation decided that I would take it to Bob Ross for identification. The next morning before I left and with my inadequacy factor running high, I aggressively picked the hawk up, spread it out before me, and went over each part of its body – beak, wings, breast, legs, etc. Grey legs ... hmmm. Dead birds can fool you especially when life and the holistic ingredient of species specific movement are missing. The hawk wasn’t a raptor after all. The “hawk” turned out to be a Ruffed Grouse. Investigation into truth is sometimes prejudiced by preconceived notions.



I witnessed another poignant example of mistaken identity when a friend and I came upon a group of birders bayside in Sandy Hook, New Jersey. A bird flew off in the distance and over the water of the very expansive Raritan Bay. Being on a bay, the choices shouted out ranged from immature Herring Gull and Northern Gannet all the way to the Brown Pelican.

Experience in similar situations has taught me to be patient, so I remained silent and watched...and watched...a white rump!...no! it can’t be...it was... a Northern Harrier on the bay, flying to catch a mouse somewhere. Hasty mistaken shouts are always embarrassing but even the best of birders are guilty of it.

A paramount example of a major misidentification was by the longtime curator, founder, and eminent hawk watcher of Hawk Mountain, Maurice Broun. On September 17, 1935, Broun erroneously identified 978 Broad-winged Hawks as Red-shouldered Hawks. Using the newly presented [1934] Peterson field identification method Broun meticulously tried to determine the width of tail bands on each hawk as it passed sometimes very high overhead. Broun realized later and after much frustration that all of these hawks were indeed Broad-winged Hawks. Why? While field marks with birds are unquestionably of ultimate importance, the way a bird behaves, how it flies, and its

relationship to its environment must be considered. And, with raptors which often are seen at a great distance this holistic method very often takes precedence.

The fall migration season and especially September is a great time to take a trip to Hawk Mountain and try out this procedure. There are usually official hawk counters and other experienced birders who will be using this method and calling out the names of each passing raptor so that you will be able to familiarize yourself with this approach. Regardless of the reason, a trip to Hawk Mountain in Autumn is an essential destination for any birder who has an interest in fall hawk migration. Hawk Mountain is one of the premiere places in the country to witness this awesome avian spectacle, and fortunately for us it is only 2½ hours away.

Travel on Interstate 80 east to exit 256. Take Route 93 South and get on Interstate 81 south. Get off at exit 138 and proceed on Route 309 south. Go through Tamaqua and 2 miles south turn right onto Route 443 west. About 7 miles southwest you will come into the town of New Ringold and Route 895 will merge with Route 443. Take a right at this junction and bear left at about 1 mile onto Route 895 and continue west. In 3 miles look for signs to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and make a left onto Hawk Mountain Road. Wind your way up the hill and enter the parking lot. Spend some time at the visitor center which is devoted to the history of the sanctuary and has educational material on hawks, birds, and other nature oriented subjects. Then take the approximately ½ mile hike past a number of viewing points out to the north lookout.

During the fall months anytime will usually produce hawk sightings but the best time is a windy day following a cold front. Mid-September is the best time to witness the Broad-winged Hawks in flight. Unlike other hawks Broad-winged Hawks converge in great numbers right above north lookout and “kettle” before flying off on their migration route. The lay of the land along the Kittatinny Ridge is such that the north lookout is the point where bubbles of heated air spiral up from the valley floor and produce thermals permitting the hawks to gain the necessary lift for a more efficient migration. I have witnessed Broad-winged Hawks stopping above north lookout, congregating in numbers as high as 750, circling and rising directly overhead before peeling off one by one for the continuation of their journey to southerly wintering grounds. This incredible display can take over an hour with the best time for viewing between 10:30am and 2:00pm.

Each raptor’s migration numbers peak at different times in the fall [Red-tailed Hawks and Golden Eagles are about November 1] although the opportunity for sightings remain prevalent throughout the season. Although raptors are the main attraction at Hawk Mountain I have seen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Monarch Butterflies migrating past north lookout as well as many other birds in the surrounding woods. If you are thinking of making this birding mecca be sure to take a box lunch and water with you. It is also a great place to introduce children to birding.

If a trip to Hawk Mountain is not a possibility I suggest going to Hyner Run and Hyner View State Parks in Clinton County between Lock Haven and Renova for great raptor fall migration viewing or simply look to the skies above you.

Bird identification should be a relaxing adventure; be honest, patient, and wait until the next sighting if you are unsure as to what bird you saw. And...don't be afraid to make a mistake or to be able to say "I don't know."