

AUTUMN BIRD MIGRATION AT BAER ROCKS,
PENNSYLVANIA* 1983-1985

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1983

Coming in fairly good numbers, warblers kept us awake the first half of September, and we spent more time looking into trees than at skies. On the best days we had a few hundred birds. Though comparisons usually mean little, this one is interesting. On September 5, 1982, over 6,000 Cape May Warblers (*Dendroica tigrina*) passed within our view; this year's largest count was 23.

Red-eyed (*Vireo olivaceus*) and Philadelphia Vireos (*V. philadelphicus*) exceeded expectations. We saw Eastern Wood-Pewees (*Contopus virens*) often, Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) now and then, and Olive-sided Flycatchers (*Contopus borealis*) twice. The bird of the month was a Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*), seen closely and clearly by Jerry Schappell and me the morning of the 18th. A flock of Wild Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*), more than 30 birds at times, fed each morning in a field to the north. And Eric Wiener flushed 27 Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) during a walk to the lookout.

Hawk tallies are a different matter. What went wrong with the Broad-wing Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*), American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) and Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) migration is difficult to explain. But hawk-watchers at little-known sites east of here seem able to perform magic with Broad-wings.

On the afternoon of September 18 a memorable event occurred. Birders heard two Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), an immature circling above an adult, call out in soft, musical voices. Slowly drifting on thermals, they then disappeared into the southwest.

Our luck changed in early October. From the 3rd to the 6th we recorded 500-plus hawks each day, and three of the four flights occurred off the south shoulder. Because of mild weather through the first half of the month, no real surges of geese developed then. And none would form later, resulting in a record-low count.

My favorite October day was the 8th. I do not regard the hawk-filled (1,087) 15th as the most memorable, nor would I vote for the 29th, despite its eight Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and some 400 hawks. October 8 had warmth, sunshine, southerly winds, many pleasant people, and a daylong procession of hawks. Surprises began early. At 9:17 a.m. Helene Knox of Muhlenberg College asked whether I see ravens in fall, and a minute later, as I was answering, two Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*)

*For the location of Baer Rocks, see *Cassinia* 60, p. 19.

sailed low along the south side. At mid-morning Brian Hillegass and Dan Klem spotted a Yellow-throated Vireo (*Vireo flavifrons*). Soon after 11:00 a.m., feeling a bit prankish, I announced that a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) was a few miles upridge. Imagine everyone's astonishment, not the least my own, when one appeared at 11:14 a.m.

The flight did not taper down till late afternoon. At 5:10 p.m., with the activity seemingly over, Brian started descending the outcropping, leaving just Nancy Wottrich and me to soak up the nicest part of the day, the serene hour before sunset. Poor Brian—at 5:15 p.m. another Peregrine passed, and twenty minutes later two more came, side by side. Nancy and I kept a vigil till 6:13 p.m., about twenty minutes after the last hawk had flown by. Here's the count: four Peregrines and three Merlins (*Falco columbarius*), about 600 other raptors, 1,600 geese, the ravens, and plenty of small passerines.

All ten Peregrines appeared with southerly winds and, so far as I could tell, all were adults. For that matter, during the last decade we have not seen an immature. About accipiters, Cooper's (*Accipiter cooperii*) had an off year, compared with the previous two, but Sharp-shins (*Accipiter striatus*) migrated very abundantly. So the ratio dropped to 1:18. Ospreys straggled through in September, usually the key migratory month for this species, but they staged their best flights in October.

Whenever we see a skirmish in the sky, we immediately assume a Sharpie is involved. Occasionally a Sharp-shin comes so close that I flinch, and once one brushed against my head. As tough as these spirited accipiters are, they cannot intimidate Merlins—as we learned the morning of October 15. The "pigeon hawks" were clearly the aggressors, making rapid, straight-line attacks from behind unsuspecting Sharpies and forcing them to dip toward the cover of trees.

Mild weather controlled early November and affected the migration predictably. Cold, windy conditions on the 4th didn't help the hawk count, but flocks of grosbeaks and the first crossbills passed, and Al Grout got a glance at a Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*). At the start of the second week, weather returned to a warming cycle.

Coatless at the Rocks three days earlier, I stood and shivered with five others on the 12th. Here was the first real endurance test of the season. We watched hawks and eagles struggle to stay along the ridge, so strong were northwest winds, and under dark gray skies many flocks of waterbirds appeared. Ducks and geese flew abundantly, and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) put on a record-setting show. Even shorebirds got into the act when a flock of 13 Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*), powered by 30 mph tailwinds, sped by.

On our return to the parking lot, at twilight, we saw Ring-bills still moving southward. The day's count included 303 raptors, 1,055 Ring-billed Gulls, four Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), 150 unidentified ducks, one

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*), 13 Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), 97 Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*), the plovers, one Red-throated (*Gavia stellata*) and 32 Common (*Gavia immer*) Loons, eight Pine and 90 Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*), and many thousands of Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

Occasionally I see Bald Eagles cut smoothly through winds that rock Golden Eagles. That day's performance, like those of the other windy days having a few eagles of each species, indicates that the Bald easily outflies the more-prized Golden Eagle.

Is November the most likely month for Bald Eagles? The question is a good one, for texts tell hawkwatchers to look for Balds at the beginning of a season. We have always observed a second batch of them in November, but a decade or more ago late summer still carried rewarding days. After a further decline in August and September birds and a slight increase in the cold weather sightings, the scale has tipped decidedly toward November—here, anyway.

The last major hawk-push occurred November 17. Dave Simpson and Bob Massey counted 263 raptors, many of them flying through falling snow. Though rain stops the migration, light snow may not, and watching a flight under such conditions is a mildly emotional experience. And snow affected my mood the afternoon of the 25th. The hike up the trail, in four inches of hours-old snow, placed me in a wintry scene so beautiful that I unconsciously overwalked the lookout!

With clear skies and moderate westerly winds, the next morning looked right for hawks. The ten observers on hand did not see many hawks, but they witnessed something more spectacular. As ridgetop waterfowl-movements go, this one's unbeatable: seven flocks of Tundra Swans (*Cygnus columbianus*), 242 birds.

We expect eagles in at least one watch after Thanksgiving Day. How well I recall November 30, 1981, a day with seven eagles, and last year the 27th came through with three. This year's November 27 had two Golden Eagles and a Bald, plus 59 hawks and 48 loons—a good finale.

1984

Of the several August observers, just Brian Hillegass found a watch interesting. On the 25th he saw a Brewster's Warbler and the month's only Bald Eagle. The Eagle's probably doing better than these reports indicate. Our coverage then is sparse, usually less than 30 hours.

September started well when, on the 1st, hundreds of Cliff Swallows (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*) darted by. Hawk movements were light during early September, and even warblers did not liven up those days. Notwithstanding generally favorable weather, poor warbler-watching persisted.

Large high-pressure areas dominated mid-month, bringing day after day of monotonous sky-gazing. After still another year without a notable

Broad-wing push, I am tempted to conclude that a flight of under 1,500 is about it for here anymore. Other raptors associated with the September migration appeared in unimpressive numbers, but we counted the Peregrine Falcon, mainly an early October migrant, a record six times.

About 11:00 a.m. on September 30, a few people saw a strange woodpecker fly around the east side of the outcropping. I jokingly said to Jerry Schappell, "Let's call it a Three-toed." Everyone grinned. What woodpecker has no white on its back? we wanted to know. After a check in a field guide, no one was grinning. Still, we concluded nothing. Two mornings later, while alone, I noticed apparently the same bird fly from one hemlock to another. The view was good, and this time I was more prepared. Yes, a Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*).

As September wanes, we think of the weeks just ahead, because the first half of October is often the most reliable time of the fall. Sharpies cooperate nicely, and their statistics of late look good.

What a disappointment! The migration collapsed at the end of September and lay dormant throughout October. Numbers compared closely to those of the 1960's. Back then ornithologists knew what was wrong: Sharpies and Cooper's were not plentiful in the Northeast. Gunners and DDT-users had seen to that.

A look at the weather may explain the 1984 dilemma. Cold fronts either stalled or died in the Midwest, while warm fronts and highs controlled Middle Atlantic weather. When cool air masses broke through, northeast winds usually followed. Indian summer lasted right through the month.

With the exception of geese, few waterbirds appeared in October. Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) had their day on the 5th—over 11,100 in three hours.

For reasons known only to Dave Simpson, he climbed the lookout at 7:15 a.m. the 28th. Early-morning fog enshrouded the mountaintop. An hour later a blackbird perched atop a nearby hemlock. Many birdwatchers would have paid no attention to a bird seemingly so common, but Dave saw something different about this one. Because of his vigilance, as well as his familiarity with the species, a Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) joined the Baer Rocks list.

Still another new bird—this, too, in black dress—appeared a few days later. At mid-afternoon on November 3, eight observers watched a dark buteo slowly soar down the ridge, circling much of the way. Everyone was silent as it lingered overhead, less than 200 feet away. Its plumage, profile, and manner of flight excluded all North American raptors except Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*). Fancy starting off with the rare dark phase.

November was not especially cold or windy, yet the month had spurts of promising weather. Trouble is, nothing helped hawk tallies. Did winter finches find food so plentiful in the northlands that they stayed there?

Waterfowl, too, may have spent the month north of here, perhaps needing an icy December blast for motivation. Anyway, a sighting of either finches or fowl was an event.

November's low eagle count may be misleading, because nothing less than a daily all-fall watch can show the complete picture. Had someone been present the 2nd, things would look a lot better. From data gathered elsewhere, the eagle total on the 2nd and 20th surpasses our 19-day effort.

Thanksgiving week began cold and breezy. Three Bald Eagles the morning of the 21st eased the shortage a bit. The count sheet for Thanksgiving Day lists a mere four hawks, and just 26 passed during the next three days.

1985

Typical of August, balmy weather prevented any notable bird movements except those of swallows. We owe the appearances of three Bald Eagles to increased coverage and a bit of luck.

September's activity set several records that no one cares to remember. Despite ample mid-month coverage, the highest Broad-wing count was 670, and the season's total, a mere 1,718. Worse, the month went eagleless. Six straight days of north winds, from a stationary high, contributed, but the main problem seems deeper. Perhaps, instead of guessing what's wrong each season, we should consider rewriting the books.

Warblers and other small passerines flitted by in near-average numbers. In one group of small fry, on September 7, Jerry Schappell and I spotted a Summer Tanager, an Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*), and at least two Philadelphia Vireos. Eastern Wood-Pewees filled in during hawkless times, and parents still fed a full-fledged youth as late as the third week. Red-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta canadensis*) moved early, then almost disappeared. A low-flying Lesser Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*), seen by Brian and Ron Hillegass, marked this season's first new species.

Ten minutes before eleven o'clock on September 20, a medium-sized hawk approached low along the south side. It resembled a Northern Harrier in flight, yet looked equally like a buteo. After studying it, we mentioned a name, without certainty because the sun had erased its marks and colors. Twenty minutes later another bird, identical in size and profile, followed that path. This one circled to our west, where sunlight worked for us. The dark chest and white belly were distinct, as were other features. Its identity—and the other's—no longer remained in doubt. Swainson's Hawks.

From early September, the frequency of Sharpies indicated that, under good weather, they would do quite well in early October.

The cold front of October 5 ushered in the month's first patches of blue, and changed our fortune. Over 730 hawks the next day proved that large flights still exist here. And for several days afterward counts ran high. Only October 8 had day-long south winds, and Dave Simpson took advantage,

TABLE 1

AUTUMN RAPTOR MIGRATION AT BAER ROCKS, PENNSYLVANIA, 1983-1985

	AUGUST		SEPTEMBER		OCTOBER		NOVEMBER		TOTAL		BEST FLIGHTS				
	1983	1984	1983	1984	1983	1984	1983	1984	1983	1984	1983	1984			
Osprey	10	10	132	203	109	125	45	155	1	0	0	0	34-10/8	24-9/15, 9/18	59-10/8
Bald Eagle	1	1	3	7	8	7	0	3	10	7	3	3	3-11/12	3-11/21	1-10/16
Northern Harrier	4	2	5	49	57	84	80	117	33	16	38	170	22-10/8	18-9/22	26-10/8
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3	5	8	716	855	3930	1843	3975	54	44	88	4703	850-10/15	432-10/7	921-10/8
Cooper's Hawk	1	1	1	55	39	199	119	243	2	1	10	257	71-10/15	27-10/6	50/10-6
Northern Goshawk	0	0	0	0	0	30	20	26	38	19	26	68	10-10/29	10-10/9	5-10/8, 10/28
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	0	0	0	4	125	64	97	71	63	40	196	31-10/20	21-11/3	34-10/20
Broad-winged Hawk	65	48	55	3301	4843	56	2	25	0	0	0	3422	876-9/16	1489-9/19	670-9/17
Red-tailed Hawk	0	0	0	21	2	986	333	733	1113	866	531	2120	340-10/29	181-11/4	138-10/28
Rough-legged Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	2	2	—	—	—
Golden Eagle	0	0	0	0	0	17	3	7	12	5	18	29	8-10/29	3-11/17	7-11/6
American Kestrel	2	5	10	46	85	57	14	72	0	0	1	105	24-10/15	17-9/24	26-10/6
Merlin	0	0	0	1	1	14	4	15	0	0	2	15	5-10/15	2-10/21	3-10/9
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	0	1	6	9	6	13	0	0	0	10	4-10/8	3-9/23	4-10/10
Unidentified	1	0	4	32	19	120	35	72	17	14	3	170	—	—	—
TOTAL	87	72	102	4361	6122	5760	2568	5553	1352	1038	762	11560	—	—	9688

Coverage: 1983-68 days, 420 hours

1984-66 days, 405 hours

1985-59 days, 381 hours (prolonged rainy spells)

TABLE 2
OTHER BAER ROCKS MIGRANTS, 1983-1985

SPECIES	1983	1984	1985
Red-throated Loon	5, 10/27-11/27	1, 11/13	—
Common Loon	179, 9/24-11/27	75	47
Double-crested Cormorant	52, 9/12	—	50, 10/16
Great Blue Heron	1, 10/3	9	8
Tundra Swan	242, 11/26	3, 11/12	—
Snow Goose	1, 11/26	—	—
Brant	—	—	40, 10/20
Canada Goose	8700, 10/6-11/12	18,701	15,620
Green-winged Teal	6, 10/29	—	—
American Black Duck	97, 11/12	8	16
Mallard	13, 11/12	12	21
Northern Pintail	33, 10/5-11/12	8	25
Black Scoter	1, 10/29	—	—
Unidentified ducks	180	—	—
* Lesser Golden Plover	—	—	1, 9/20
* Dowitcher species	—	—	4, 9/21
Bonaparte's Gull	2, 10/29, 11/20	1, 10/14	5, 11/2
Ring-billed Gull	1217, 10/29-11/25	168	58
Herring Gull	52, 10/29-11/17	32	6
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	—	—	21
* Belted Kingfisher	—	—	1, 10/6
Red-headed Woodpecker	7, 9/15-10/9	3	7, 11/6 - late
Black-backed Woodpecker	—	1, 9/30, 10/2	—
Common Raven	7, 10/3-11/6	—	3, 10/11
Eastern Bluebird	—	22	—
Summer Tanager	1, 9/18	—	1, 9/7
Snow Bunting	61, 11/6-11/19	28	—
* Brewer's Blackbird	—	1, 10/28	—
Pine Grosbeak	9, 11/4, 11/12	—	3, 11/23
Red Crossbill	5, 11/4	—	4, 11/24
White-winged Crossbill	54, 11/4-11/10	—	—
Crossbill species	—	4, 11/23	—
Pine Siskin	68, 10/22-11/8	—	4, 10/27
Evening Grosbeak	891, 11/4-11/19	15, 11/9	1291

*New species for Baer Rocks.

tallying 1,174 hawks among 11 species. That is our best October count in seven years and the second highest ever. Hawkwatchers who prefer quality to numbers might find his Bald Eagle, three Peregrine Falcons, five Northern Goshawks, and 59 Ospreys interesting. By month's end, we had record-highs of Sharpies and Peregrines. Cooper's Hawks, though not near their 1981 level, looked good, and October's Ospreys far outnumbered September's. Rick Geary totaled 652 hawks, four eagles, and about 50 Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) on the 16th, the last exceptional movement recorded this season.

About 9,700 Canada Geese migrated within view on October 11. Groups of Evening Grosbeaks had appeared by then, and soon became regular, with 200-plus a day possible. Had a great migration of northern finches begun?

November's first five days brought clouds, mists, and some rain. While fronts stalled or weakened in the Midwest, mild temperatures persisted here. Eight eagles came with a cold front on the sixth day, and four more straggled by the next afternoon. But few hawks. Imagine an eagle for every nine hawks those two days! Drab, mild weather soon returned and then remained, keeping our best count at 214. And frequent rains kept our coverage low. Grosbeaks had about given up in late October, and showed erratic interest afterward. What fun, though, to see a few Pine Grosbeaks and four Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) the weekend of November 23-24.

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