

AUTUMN BIRD MIGRATION AT BAER ROCKS, 1986-1987

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1986

Warblers outdid hawks during the normally dull days of late August and early September, but traveled in far-apart spurts and didn't linger. Other small passerines were unimpressive.

On September 9, two observers enjoyed the fall's first large hawk movement, about 650. Three fair-weather cold fronts, in rapid succession between September 12 and 17, left the skies empty most hours. We managed just one flight within that period and, by the 17th, hoped those fronts hadn't wiped all Broadwings from the Northeast, via routes far east of here.

A cold front alone does not spell hawks; on the contrary, mild fronts with large highs minutes behind may bring the poorest days. We look for a front with a day or so of windy, unsettled skies, ideally, on the tail of rain and packing true northwest winds.

A weather-blocking pattern ensued, with cool air staying to our north and a warm air mass just south. Despite such unremarkable conditions, the month's third week featured four Merlins, four Bald Eagles, and, one day, almost 2,400 Broadwings.

The stationary front held weather motionless for another week before yielding to a struggling, rain-filled cool front. This system, which moved by on September 27, stalled overnight and returned the next day, carrying along drier air and 810 hawks. The inclusion of 555 Broadwings was quite surprising for the late date.

And two days later, in shirtsleeve weather, Al Grout saw about 2,600 birds, including 81 Ospreys, 757 Sharpshins and 1,701 Broadwings. Unprecedented. At September's end the summary sheet listed more than 10,000 hawks.

October began with continuing warmth, and it remained so until the 5th, when a surge of cold air propelled 759 hawks and over 12,000 geese our way. A reinforcing blast of Canadian air maintained good numbers for the next few days.

Success with Peregrine Falcons at Baer Rocks depends on wind direction during October's first week. No other raptor displays a greater liking of southerly breezes for ridgetop travel. The right winds were scarce then, and so were Peregrines. Since late September had more favorable weather for the species, we finished the season with an average total.

By mid-October, Cooper's Hawks, with a high of 133 on October 5 and no shortage most other days, had a good fall. Ospreys showed in numbers unmatched in recent years. Northern Harriers, too, were doing well.

From mid-October through early November, no exciting movements devel-

oped on days covered. We lost considerable coverage this fall because of rain. Pine Siskins peaked rather nicely in late October and dribbled through afterward. After noting a record early flock of 20 Evening Grosbeaks on September 18, I anticipated a lot more early migrants, and then waited eight weeks before seeing another flock. Grosbeaks arrived almost daily through late November, but waterfowl came only with sharp temperature drops.

The season's strongest cold front cleared early on November 13, giving Dave Simpson and others 140 raptors that day, and me, just 17 the next. Conditions improved overnight, or so Jerry Schappell and I thought the following morning, yet we saw nothing all day.

Redtails stayed light in the remaining two weeks, but most other cold-weather species passed in near-average abundance. Al Grout's frigid, blustery, and lonely vigil of the 20th was also the month's choicest: five eagles, ten Goshawks, three Roughlegs and others.

1987

Late August weather favored weekend hawk watchers. Four Bald Eagles drifted by on the windy 23rd, and two others appeared the next Saturday. Not since the early or mid-'70s had we collected six so fast. Warblers were abundant on the more tranquil days, because when eagle-producing winds blow, small passerines and swallows seldom congregate along the ridgetop.

Rain arrived for the Labor Day weekend, the start of a cycle that later dampened all but one other September weekend, leaving counts for a few midweek persons. Despite light coverage all month, they accumulated fair numbers of hawks. Ospreys, in particular, maintained encouraging signs. Since they, more than most other migrating raptors, proceed well into evening, often long after counters quit for the day, many go unrecorded. This fall marked the second straight time that Sharpshins had their best day at September's end instead of in early October. Largest Broadwing score: 2,185 on the 22nd of September.

Rain worked into the first two October weekends as well, but the midweek observers turned in good tallies. Cold, windy air made the 4th feel more like a November day. Cloud-packed morning skies helped us find over 18,370 Canada Geese, and no sooner had blue replaced gray overhead than a flock of Snow Geese shone in it. Coastal birders or those who frequent inland refuges might not understand mountain people's enthusiasm for waterfowl. At Baer Rocks we consider any sighting of Snows an event, and even search hard for gulls. Other waterbirds of the 4th included a Great Egret, Black Ducks, one Red-throated and three Common Loons.

Hawks increased the next day, and as that day's westerly breezes shifted southwestward overnight, possibilities looked still better for the 6th. Brian Hille-gass and his dad, Ron, tallied 718 hawks, 10 Peregrines among them. Just once—October 7, 1937, at Hawk Mountain—had that number of Peregrines been surpassed, by one. Other hawk watchers joined ours in having an excellent season for Peregrine Falcons and Merlins.

High pressure moved in, and through the third week in October, most days were peaceful and bright, or pleasing to all outdoors people except avid hawk watchers. Extra-rich foliage alone compensated for mediocre airborne activity. Pine Siskins, first noticed at October's start, now numbered a few hundred almost each watch.

While Sharpies waned and Redtails awaited their call, common Crows flooded the skyway, as they customarily do during October's final ten days. Comfort afield outlasted the month. Yellow-billed Cuckoos, not heard past the 20th previously, clucked in early November.

The weather, probably responsible for holdovers like Cuckoos, blocked waterfowl movements into this latitude. Only a Tundra Swan merits note, because of the early date, October 17, and its choice of Canada Geese as traveling companions. Jerry Schappell and I watched the swan emerge from the northern valley among the geese and then become their leader.

Day-apart cold fronts, the second one crossing at mid-morning, November 6, activated the final and, to some, most exciting phase of fall migration. Seven eagles, two Roughlegs, and 240 other hawks delighted a host of bird watchers the next day.

About 1:15 p.m., I left a low-flying Golden Eagle in time to spot a hawk gliding moderately high above the lookout. Its strange shape prompted everyone to abandon the eagle. Neck strain and unsteadiness afflict anyone staring straight up, and besides, the hawk had begun angling away, diminishing chances for identification. I'll not call out "Harrier" unless the view improves, I thought. Perhaps the bird will circle. At that moment, it looked too *buteo*ish. Some observers present had seen this profile before, from above and below, and after it did circle, we knew—a young Swainson's Hawk.

Other data place Swainson's as a September migrant, its southward journey paralleling the Broadwing's. Yet two of our four entries for this bird were observed in November.

Redshoulder flights reflected no problem with their numbers, but the low percentage of immatures might suggest problems ahead. And Golden Eagles—why so many this year? Lookouts manned daily reported five to ten birds routinely all month. Tim Kline of Audubon, Pennsylvania, having tried a few other sites during mid-November, sought his third consecutive double-figure eagle day here. Not too disappointed, he left with just five Golden and three Balds. A Veteran's Day snowstorm rendered the mountain road impassable. Hence, this outcropping was observerless the following day when Hawk Mountain had 14 Golden. Even a week before Thanksgiving those round-the-clock counting stations were aiming for 100! As that eagle-generous period was mainly dry and mild, however, no one had a clear weather-related answer.

Little mystery, however, surrounds the best waterfowl passage on the 21st. After plummeting the previous night, temperatures hovered in the mid-teens all day, and overcast skies blended with gale-force winds to complete the classic mi-

gration pattern. Cheerful, despite numb hands and feet, four watchers persevered. They saw gulls, ducks, loons, geese, and a few wind-battered, struggling hawks.

Thanksgiving week held first a warm-up, then, from Thursday to Sunday night, intermittent light rain, low clouds and northeasterlies, and no bird flight.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors: Ray Barnes, Rick Geary, Al Grout, Brian Hillegass, H. "Doc" Houston, Tim Kline, and Dave Simpson.

I extend a special thank-you to Jerry Schappell.

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TABLE 1

AUTUMN RAPTOR MIGRATION AT BAER ROCKS, PENNSYLVANIA, 1986-1987

	AUGUST		SEPTEMBER		OCTOBER		NOVEMBER		TOTAL		BEST FLIGHTS	
	1986	1987	1986	1987	1986	1987	1986	1987	1986	1987	1986	1987
Osprey	9	17	345	182	83	125	0	0	437	324	81-9/20	59-9/29
Bald Eagle	4	6	5	3	1	2	7	11	17	22	3-8/24	4-8/23
Northern Harrier	2	4	81	42	81	53	27	57	191	156	21-9/30	17-11/1, 16-9/29
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3	3	1,530	1,407	2,622	2,705	31	104	4,186	4,219	757-9/30	764-9/29
Cooper's Hawk	0	1	59	72	371	243	3	13	433	329	133-10/5	64-10/6
Northern Goshawk	0	0	1	0	20	6	27	31	48	37	13-10/18	5-3 Nov. days
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	0	1	2	144	83	19	135	164	220	25-10/18	28-11/14, 27-11/1
Broad-winged Hawk	80	73	8,024	4,530	23	94	0	0	8,127	4,697	2,380-9/20	2,185-9/22
Red-tailed Hawk	0	0	46	44	976	511	558	952	1,580	1,507	223-10/18	222-11/5
Rough-legged Hawk	0	0	0	0	3	0	7	5	10	5	3-11/20	2-11/7
Golden Eagle	0	0	1	0	14	6	8	31	23	37	3-10/6, 10/25, 11/19	6-11/7, 5-3 Nov. days
American Kestrel	7	8	27	68	43	41	0	2	77	119	14-10/5	19-9/23
Merlin	0	0	8	7	13	19	0	0	21	26	3-9/28, 10/4	5-9/29
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	5	7	3	18	0	0	8	25	3-9/28	10-10/6
Unidentified	0	1	12	18	55	73	8	18	75	110		
TOTAL	105	113	10,145	6,382	4,452	3,979	695	1,359*	15,397	11,833		

Coverage: 1986-63 days, 406 hours
1987-54 days, 334 hours

*Plus Swainson's Hawk, 1-11/7

TABLE 2

OTHER BAER ROCKS MIGRANTS, 1986-1987

SPECIES	1986	1987
Red-throated Loon	1-11/20	1-10/4
Common Loon	125	158
Double-crested Cormorant	1	—
Great Blue Heron	16, 11 on 10/5 in flock	5
Great Egret	—	1-10/4
Tundra Swan	—	1-10/17
Snow Goose	70-10/5	22
Brant	220-10/30	—
Canada Goose	17,590	23,667
Green-winged Teal	—	3
American Black Duck	—	32
Mallard	12	153
Northern Pintail	—	18
Bonaparte's Gull	—	5
Ring-billed Gull	158	416
Herring Gull	12	28
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	36	—
Red-headed Woodpecker	4	5
Common Raven	2	5
Eastern Bluebird	78, 52 on 11/22	49
Snow Bunting	1	—
Pine Siskin	570	5,500+
Evening Grosbeak	683	124