Possible Origin of the Term 'Kettle'

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Ed Fingerhood had been working on this article for some time prior to his death in 1998. Although Ed's constant search for answers has been stilled, his efforts remain worth pondering.

If I were to announce at a DVOC meeting in Philadelphia some January evening that I had just seen a kettle of 100 Broad-winged Hawks, people would look at me in astonishment and sadly shake their heads (or hoot, knowing the DVOC as well as I do), wondering what had happened to good old Ed. The dismay would be not only because they know that this hawk is extraordinarily rare in Pennsylvania in winter, but because they have a full understanding of the word "kettle." Had the same thing happened 30 or more years ago, the same head-shaking would have occurred, but this time, not only as a result of the rarity of Broad-wings in winter, but puzzlement over the word "kettle." What in the world is a kettle of hawks, they might have wondered. He's really gone batty!

For the moment, here's Donald Heintzelman's (1975) eminently succinct and useful definition of a "kettle": "a group or flock of hawks milling around inside a thermal." Now, let's go on.

In an idle moment of chit-chat several years ago, Louis Bevier posed this question: Where does the expression "kettle of hawks" come from? That sent me off on a word chase; here's what I found.

None of the early observers of American birdlife, such as Alexander Wilson or John James Audubon, used the word to describe the behavior of hawks. Nor is it one of the classical nouns of assemblage, such as "raft of ducks" or "parliament of crows" or "gaggle of geese."

In the modern era, it is not used by Witmer Stone (1937) in *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*, nor in the Bent series (1938), nor in Forbush 1929, nor in Todd 1940, nor in Broun 1948 nor in the early field guides by R. T. Peterson (1934), R. Pough (1946–53), or C. Robbins et al. (1966). It is used by neither M. L. Grossman and J. Hamlet in *Birds of Prey of the World* (1964) nor Peterson in the same year. Here's what the latter had to say about the phenomenon: "The thermals develop when hot sun warms blobs of air close to the earth, causing them to bubble up into the cool atmosphere above … Slowly the tiny specks wheel round and round, staying within the supporting shaft of air …"

I could not find the term used in any of the other likely references I checked up to and through 1967. So far, the word seems not to appear in the ornithological literature. Can it be, I wondered, that so widespread and universally understood a word among birders is so recent an addition to the English ornithological lexicon?

I'm off to my 1936 edition of the *Unabridged Webster's Universal Dictionary of the English Language*. There we find: "Kettle — noun. Middle English. *ketel, kettyl*; Anglo Saxon … diminutive of *catinus*, a deep vessel, bowl, pot.

"1. A vessel of iron or other metal, of various shapes, with or without a cover, used for heating and boiling water or other liquids.

"2. Figuratively, any cavity or depression resembling a kettle, as (a) a deep rounded-out hole at the bottom of a river; (b) in geology, a cavity in solid rock made through erosion or other causes; as the kettle of the Sierra Nevada."

Okay, a good starting point. But, in the modern birding sense, it hadn't made it into the English language.

I was particularly struck with the second definition of "kettle," because I remembered something

Maurice Broun wrote in his classic account of Hawk Mountain, *Hawks Aloft* (1949). His field notes for September 17, 1935: "When the birds reached the Kettle (the great bowl of the forest below the Lookout, on our right), having been strung out along the ridge, they would concentrate into swirling flocks, and then ascend gradually on the updrafts. After milling round and round, sometimes over our heads, until sufficient altitude was gained, the birds would 'peel off' in long glides towards the southwest, again strung out in long lines."

Here, Broun not only describes Broad-wings in a thermal, but their location at Hawk Mountain as well. But, alas, his only use of the word "kettle" was in reference to the geographic formation. I tucked that away, however.

Now, I am not a master of the literature of hawks and make no pretense to be one, so my search for the first use of "kettle" in reference to hawks in a rising thermal of warm air is limited by resources and know-how. I was unable to search through many of the published and unpublished journals that might hold the truth.

I searched through old copies of *Hawk Mountain News* one by one, from 1960 forward. I finally found what I thought, at the time, was the first use of the term in reference to hawks. In the *Hawk Mountain News* #42 (1970), Alex Nagy, then sanctuary curator, described the flight of September 18, 1969, as follows:

"The thermal-loving broad-wings were enjoying the rising bubbles of hot air off the ridges [September 14–16, 1969], moving along and building up in respectable numbers … [after a rapid cold front passed through on the 17th] … We could see kettles of hawks at the limit of our vision, in all directions and can only guess at the numbers we were missing."

Finally, I thought I had it. 1970 looked like the year the word was first used in print as a noun to describe Broad-wings in flight.

A new word is born. Neologism strikes again! Whoa, what's that, neologism? My handy 1936 *Webster's Unabridged* defines it as "the use of a new word or of old words in a new sense." Old words in a new sense. The old word was "kettle," a cooking pot; there was the Kettle at Hawk Mountain, a large depression in the Kittatinny range; and a kettle of hawks.

But, how does one get from a pot and a geographic formation in the ground to an avian formation in the air? Neither Nagy's nor any of the subsequent attempts to define "kettle" that I could find make any reference to this unlikely connection. The answer to this question remains speculative; but before I try to answer it, I shall turn over all my cards and reveal the results of my search.

I was temporarily thrown off course by a reference in Paul Kerlinger's *Flight Strategies of Migrating Hawks* (1989). In the chapter "Flocking Behavior," Kerlinger notes that the term "kettle" was in use by North American hawk counters to refer to groups of migrant raptors. He states that Brown and Amadon (1968) chose the terms "aggregation" and "flocks" to describe the behavior of migrant raptors and that J. R. Haugh used the word "kettle" in 1972. While the reader of this paragraph may infer that Haugh used the term and Brown and Amadon did not, in fact, Leslie Brown and Dean Amadon's *Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World*, published in 1968, appears to be the first publication — most likely, the first book — to use the term "kettle." The authors wrote on Page 582, "Usually, they [Broad-winged Hawks] are in loose, wheeling flocks or 'kettles,' often at a great height …" Furthermore, contrary to Kerlinger's assertion, I could not find the term in Haugh's 60-page monograph dealing with hawk migration at Lake Ontario.

With the reference to Brown and Amadon, I now had to revise my whole working theory as to the subsequent evolution of the word "kettle." Apparently, it was not Hawk Mountain's Alex Nagy who first committed the word to print; but, with Kerlinger's verification that the word was in use by hawk counters, it seems certain that the origin of the term is to be found floating on a ridge somewhere, perhaps in the eastern United States.

By 1973, Nagy added a little to the use of the word by employing it as a verb in his and James Brett's

Feathers in the Wind: "Broad-wings are said to 'kettle' under these conditions [thermal updrafts]. A 'kettle' of broad-wings resembles a swarm of bees …"

That same year (1973), Michael Harwood, in *The View From Hawk Mountain,* his sublime account of Hawk Mountain, wrote, "Gradually they [Broad-winged Hawks] begin to collect in large groups — dozens, hundreds and sometimes thousands — and they swirl upward on the thermals in a mixing and crisscrossing of individual spirals that give such flocks the nickname 'kettle' or 'boil.' " We've already seen that Heintzelman used the term in 1975.

Here's Jim Brett's 1986 definition in *The Mountain and the Migration*: "Heated air expands but is held to the ground by cooler, heavier air, much like the bubbles on the bottom of a kettle whose water approaches the boiling point. After being sufficiently heated, the expanding air pocket rises from the ground …" and "Hawk watchers refer to a flock of thermaling broadwings as a 'kettle' — from the boiling churning of birds in the heated bubble … As the sun rises and thermal activity quickens, broadwing after broadwing will begin to kettle in the rising air."

Several years later, Kerlinger (1989) expressed reservations about the term and recommended against using it. Whatever his objections were, they seem to have been ignored. Pete Dunne (1995: 216) defines the word with the standard formula, "birds climbing in a thermal — a convolution that recalls water boiling in a kettle," and continues to meticulously describe the process. The 1996 account of the Broad-winged Hawk in The Birds of North America series (Goodrich et al. 1996) freely uses the term.

Moreover, as if to prove the legitimacy of the word, it has made a major leap into usage for other species. Read, for example, an excerpt from Greg Butcher's (1996: 2) account of his visit to Cape May in October 1996 for the American Birding Association's convention: "Nearby, I saw for the first time in my life a kettle of Laughing Gulls. More than a hundred of them found a thermal, rose up in it until they were almost out of sight, and then left the thermal in a beeline flight over Delaware Bay toward Delaware." A perfect melding of word and phenomenon.

Among these usages there are various attempts to define "kettle," and most are somewhat accurate in their description of the process. But they are what might be called "back formations": That is, seeing that the meaning of a word is obscure or sensing that it is not quite legitimate and that the writer is not totally comfortable with it, one looks back to find connections between the word and the thing it describes. By a happy coincidence, the bubbles in a boiling pot of water and Broad-wings rising in a thermal are vaguely suggestive of one another. Voilà!

But not so fast — that would be too pat, too convenient. Maybe something else is at work here. Human beings are rarely so logical as to so methodically create a word. Particularly because the shape of a Broad-wing kettle is more like an expanding spiral, a funnel, or inverted cone than that of a fat-bodied kettle. Moreover, bubbles rising in boiling water do not swirl, they bubble with wiggles, straight up. Only if the water in the kettle is stirred do they swirl.

C. Leahy's definition (Leahy 1982), seems to get the description just right: "A flock of migrating hawks or other soaring birds spiraling upward on warm air currents. Because of the form of the rising 'thermals,' the birds riding them take on the form of an inverted cone and suggest the whirlpool effect created when one vigorously stirs a kettle of liquid." Leahy notes that "in parts of Europe the formation is called a 'screw.' " Certainly, all those keen-eyed hawk watchers at Hawk Mountain could discern the differences between the shape of a kettle and an inverted cone and knew the difference between a "whirlpool" and straight up! While I was satisfied with the definition, I was not satisfied with the explanations of the word's sources.

I was still suspicious that Kettle (as in a place at Hawk Mountain) = kettle (a phenomenon). But how to successfully connect the two words? It seemed that I needed two things; first, verification that kettling, indeed, took place over the Kettle at

Hawk Mountain. The site verification was easy. See Broun's description above or the illustration in *The Mountain and the Migration* (1986: 59).

And second, a language model. I found my source just over my head. Consider the word "bird." It is an old Anglo-Saxon noun usually referring to a flying animal with feathers and wings. In days gone by, the ingenious, enriching but frustrating flexibility of the English language allowed for its projection from a noun into a verb, "to bird," which meant "to hunt or trap birds," and the gerund "birding," meaning "to seek out birds in the hunt." These were natural extensions of the original noun, as was "birder," meaning "one who hunts or traps birds." Our modern use of these terms to mean "bird watcher" is a further extension. A parallel example might be "surf" to "surfer," one who rides the waves at the seashore.

And so it was with "kettle." Who can tell for how many years birders at Hawk Mountain used the word before it was committed to print? Oral traditions are persistent, as are the specialized words of any small group of practitioners of an obscure art like hawk identification. Imagine my saying to the uninitiated, "There's a kettle of 25 Wings, 3 Tails, a Shoulder, a Sharpie, and a Coop over the east slope of one." All understandable (although "Sharpie" is probably slang) English language words. But only the Hawk Mountain regulars would fully understand all of it, and only hawk watchers would know how to correctly decipher that sentence as Broad-winged, Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, Sharp-shinned, and Cooper's hawks over the east slope of the first of five numbered reference points straight out from the North Lookout.

Here's how I imagine it happened: One balmy September day at Hawk Mountain after 1934 (year unknown), an anonymous hawk watcher, noticing the build-up of Broad-wings over the Kettle, shouted out, "Broad-wings over the Kettle!" The word passed on, "Broad-wings over the Kettle, over the Kettle, … the Kettle." More shouts of "kettle." Then the moment of transformation. Some unsuspecting genius, or novice who did not know the lay of the land, by the peculiar alchemy of the human mind, made the leap from Kettle to kettle. It became, "there's a kettle …," and ultimately, "a kettle of Broad-winged Hawks over the Kettle."

And from there it spread. As the hawk watchers returned to their own communities and birding buddies, they not only carried away memories of the Broad-wing flight that day, but also the memory and usage of a new word, a word with the acceptance and imprimatur, no less, of Hawk Mountain. Meanwhile, at Hawk Mountain, the word was used again and again, and finally committed to print.

Great theory, all tied up! But what to do with the fact that the first use of the word in print (1968) comes from a source unconnected to Hawk Mountain? Back to the libraries and the weary pursuit of this thankless and increasingly boring task I had given myself.

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