

## HMANA Raptor ID Tour April 6-12 2014

### Sunday April 6<sup>th</sup>

With the entire group deciding to arrive the evening before our official starting date, Frank and I pushed our first day's start forward in order to maximize our time together and picked everyone up bright and breezyish for the start of our HMANA Raptor ID workshop in Western New York.

The first day we made our way to Braddock Bay, just northwest of Rochester, our home for much of the next week. We were treated to something approximating light westish winds and soon found ourselves with high birds and overly blue skies. There was however movement and we started to work up identifying a few of the passing raptors – looking for the subtle clues that lead to correct identifications. Everyone was at their own levels with participants such as Holly and Norann, who were volunteer counters at well known hawkwatching sites through to relative newcomers to the art like Jane and Roy, our enthusiastic Canadian contingent.



The day gave us the chance to get to grips with a few of the more expected species at the watch as twelve different species passed the watch. However, with the raptors not coming thick and fast we took the time to also share some of the other highlights of the area as we picked up ducks on the bay, a highly desirable **Northern Shrike** perched adjacent to the platform and the group also

trotted off to the suitably named Owl Woods to pick up a rather nice collection of three roosting **Long-eared Owls**. After that the group decamped to a local spot to enjoy some long staying **King** (and queen) **Eiders**. At least a couple of these birds were lifers for the majority of the participants and were much enjoyed. After that we just had enough of a flight left for Frank to point out a distant **Golden Eagle** and to reveal the distinct flapping style that helps separate these birds from their Bald brethren.

With the flight dying and an unsuccessful hunt for Snowy Owl (which at least brought us some great views of an equally white and beautiful **Glaucous Gull**), the late afternoon saw us winging our way south for an appointment with some **Short-eared Owls**. The owls had been relatively findable in the southern Rochester suburbs until a few days before the tour, but recent reports were not wildly promising. That said the opportunity to see these stunning creatures led Frank and I to roll the dice and go on a hunt for these feathered gems. The farm fields of Lima (watch your pronunciation non-Rochesterians – it's like the bean not the Peruvian Capital) can be home to a wealth of open country

raptors and that particular evening did not disappoint. First off we spotted a close and accommodating light **Rough-legged Hawk** that put on a fair showing for the group as it flitted from tree top to tree top in an adjacent field. We also had the opportunity to point out their proclivity for perching on incongruously delicate twigs.



After some tooting and froing we finally connected with our first **Short-eared Owls**. Many oohs and ahhs emitted from the group as we enjoyed lengthy and excellent scoped views of perched and flying birds as they began interacting. We eventually tallied seven birds and were also able to ponder the sex of each individual, noting helpful patterning and coloration, especially of faces. Having such an experienced hawk bander as a trip leader made for many fascinating discoveries as the week wore on.

Our evening wrapped up with a hearty meal and a local beer or two at a charismatic local eating establishment. We were joined by BBRR head Daena Ford and her husband Randy for a fine

ending to an excellent day. Next time we need to make sure to bring our instruments along so that we could join their Open Mic session!

Flight Day 1

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=06](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=06)

### **Monday April 7<sup>th</sup>**

Day two saw us off to an early start as Frank and I had made the informed decision to take a two hour trip eastwards to Derby Hill. What had drawn us there was a potentially perfectly set up day with strong southeast winds. Where Braddock thrives on winds from the west Derby does so on winds from the east, and we wanted to take best advantage of that.

There has always been something of a friendly rivalry between the two big Lake Ontario counts, so it was great to receive such a warm welcome from the old hands at Derby Hill including Bill Purcell, Gerry Smith and Tom Carrolan; we even got offered one of their famous apples. The area is rightly well known for their apple produce and we had enjoyed a nice coffee stop on the way there at an awesome farm stand.

As we stepped out the car, we were almost immediately decapitated by a passing **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, proof that we had made the right call. As the day wore on we realized

that we struck raptor gold as the strong winds and overcast skies were producing a stunning flight of excellent birds including good numbers of **Rough-legged Hawks** in a myriad of ages, sexes and color morphs. It's hard to beat a nice flight of these beautiful raptors but there was plenty else to entertain. The numbering system at Derby also helped us to pin down single birds and start to work on them



individually. We started by just trying to get people to the correct species identification and then from there started to take leaps into aging and if possible sexing birds. The group were working hard and coming on in leaps and bounds and I was impressed by everyone's rapid improvements and especially Anne's keen eyes.

As well as the birds we were working on there was much else to just enjoy as a steady stream of raptors passed close to the Derby Hill watch. Highlights surely included a couple of close passes of light morph adult male **Rough-legged Hawks**, a handful of **Red-shouldered Hawks** and two jaw-droppingly close **Golden Eagle** flybys. We were also lucky enough to pick up a few nice species of the non-raptor variety including **Tree, Field** and **Vesper Sparrows**.

The threatening gray clouds eventually started to douse us with rain and we turned tail and left the hardcore on the hill to complete the count as we wended our way eastward. With the rain still relatively light we swung by Oswego Harbor to see whether the Snowy Owl Gods might be shining upon us, but scanning various spots along the harbor only afforded us some nice comparison views of **Greater** and **Lesser Scaup**. We also had large numbers and a mix of **Tree, Barn** and **Northern Rough-winged Swallows** hunting bugs low over the river, a dapper adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and a handful of beautiful **Snow Buntings** picking through the fine seed heads on a gravelly path.

With the rain setting in we took our leave for the city and over a great Thai meal we all picked our favorite birds of the day, with at least one person venturing to go with the cute little Snow Buntings.

Flight Day two

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=358&year=2014&month=04&day=07](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=358&year=2014&month=04&day=07)

**Tuesday, April 8<sup>th</sup>**

With weather pretty iffy for the day we decided to both have a later start to the morning and resume our Snowy Owl hunt. They had of course been abundant in the area all winter, but as the ice and snow had thawed, so too had the Snowy Owl reports melted away. With Phil's happiness for the week perhaps resting on a Snowy Owl sighting we



started the day in earnest looking for one. After a few nice **Common Loon** sightings (birds in breeding finery), a few glossed over ducks and a few not-a-birds we finally stumbled upon our quarry – a rather distant **Snowy Owl**, but a Snowy Owl nonetheless. As we all did our little arctic owl dance, especially Phil, Frank suggested that we ask the owners of the property if we could get a closer view of the bird. Ten minutes later, a quick chat with an enthusiastic home owner and we found ourselves perched not a hundred feet from a stunning Snowy Owl. We spent a long time drinking in our incredible views, sharing our excitement with the home owner and generally smiling goofily as we enjoyed our good fortune.

Hard to top that for a kickoff to the day, but we did our best to enjoy a

somewhat raptor free day. A stop at Owl Woods had us encountering another **Long-eared Owl**, but not the hoped for Saw-whet. The mix of passerines were a treat, especially for the west coaster Holly on the tour as we picked up **White-throated Sparrows**, **'Red' Fox Sparrow** and **'Slate-colored' Dark-eyed Juncos**. Roving flocks in the woods also revealed **Golden-crowned Kinglets**, **Brown Creepers** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches** along with the vocal **Black-capped Chickadees**.

Over at the marina a mess off spizellas revealed itself to include **Field**, **Chipping** and **American Tree Sparrows**. On the water we tallied the usual wide variety of ducks as well as attractive **Caspian Terns** and a couple of **Bonaparte's Gulls**.

With the weather closing in we decided to stop in at Wegmans and take the opportunity to sit down for lunch and allow Anne and Phil to stock up on more of the stores highly prized organic almond butter.

As the weather cleared it invited a run westward including a stop to look for a **Great Horned Owl** nest which only offered up the incredibly cute owlets rather than the shy owls themselves.

As we worked our way west I spotted what looked to be a bedraggled swallow on the side of the road. Finding it to be still alive I picked it up and with it safely in Frank's mitts we took it for a little ride to my humble abode in Hamlin. It was certainly a weird way to see one's first **Purple Martin** of the season. After a couple of hours napping in a

dark and relaxing box, my girlfriend released the bird back into bright spring skies, a cheerfully happy ending.

As the martin release took place, the group was seeing their highlight of the day: the **Red-headed Woodpeckers** that are making Hamlin Beach State Park their home. These birds are pretty much at the northern edge of their range and were a treat for all but perhaps especially for Roy and Jane who were somewhat south of their usual range (Montreal). The birds put on an unbelievable show as they flitted from tree to tree and even alit on the ground as they foraged. It's hard to believe that just three simple colors make up this incredibly dashing and locally rare species.



After another excellent meal we spent our evening looking for some of the nocturnal denizens that call Braddock Bay home, though we had some success with **American Woodcock**, a brief call from an **Eastern Screech Owl** wasn't very satisfying and though endlessly fascinating as it was to talk with BBBO Saw-whet Owl banders, the birds themselves didn't put in an appearance.

Day's flight: zip!



### **Wednesday, April 9<sup>th</sup>**

Light northwest winds but clearing skies at least saw us optimistic for some movement, especially considering the movement I had tallied on April 2<sup>nd</sup> under relatively similar conditions. It was a day that Norann's keen eyesight especially came into play as we worked hard to spot birds against the palest of blue skies. She was regularly picking up groups before Frank and I in the pale blue, perhaps using skills finely honed at her home hawkwatch in New Jersey.

The day's flight really produced a strong showing of **Turkey Vultures** with almost 2500 tallied. There was just enough else mixed in to keep everyone's attention from wavering. That said by about 5pm real time we were starting to wane a little and thinking about dinner.

Thankfully we decided to stick with it and for that we were rewarded: at 5:15pm human time I picked up a high **dark morph adult Swainson's Hawk**. Adult dark morphs are probably the rarest form of this beautiful and rare hawk here at Braddock. It was in with a sizeable group of Turkey Vultures and continued to plow through with them but showed us the dark flight feathers and pale undertail coverts that are indicative of this highly distinctive species. In the same time period we also logged another immature **Golden Eagle**, a spectacular way to round out the day.

The beautiful Swainson's was the perfect way to end an enjoyable day at the watch and a sign of what an incredible place Braddock Bay can be to watch hawks. Both Frank and I were very excited about the prospects for the following day's flight after this kind of setup day. After another fine meal, and with thoughts and expectations turning to tomorrow's migration we abandoned aspirations to look for owls and woodcocks in order to get a restful night's sleep and focus our energies on an early start to the following morning.

Flight day four:

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=09](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=09)

### **Thursday April 10<sup>th</sup>**

We had already had two pretty exciting flight days for the tour, but the late push the night before had us excited about the possibilities for the day. We started the day early and full of expectation at West Spit, but though it was a beautiful morning and there were



numbers of nice migrant passerines pushing through, including good numbers of **Rusty Blackbirds, Pine Warblers** and **Blue Gray Gnatcatchers**, the early day accipiter push did not develop as expected. The lack of Sharpies and Coops early just goes to show there are no guarantees in hawkwatching even when you have to experienced watchers trying to anticipate the flight. However with early morning cover at the watch, thanks to Mike Tetlow, we did however just have time to make a brief detour to Owl Woods in order to connect with a stunning **Saw-whet Owl**. The bird offered up excellent views and allowed us to observe it at an enjoyable but discreet distance.

By the time we got to the park, the expectations had started to be somewhat borne out by reality. I guess the accipiters had either been busy feeding all morning or had just taken a little while to get as far as the lakeshore. Soon we had a nice little push happening with **Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks** and **Sharp-shinned Hawks** to the fore. Our first cool bird of the day was a very distinctively white tailed and pale Red-tailed Hawk that I picked out from the mess. Though it obviously contained many **Krider's Red-tailed Hawk** genes, and may have been labeled as such by many, we felt it safer to ID as an intergrade. It seems that 'good' Krider's are increasingly tough to find these days and this one's head was probably a little too dark and it's tail a little too red at the tip to be a 'pure' individual. Frank also spotted a second **Snowy Owl** that had gone undetected for the first couple of hours of the watch even though it was sat right out in front of the platform and relatively close too.

As a larger and larger flight developed, the Snowy Owl wasn't the only cool bird that Frank managed to pull out from the throng. He was working extra hard to find interesting birds and was rewarded when another **adult dark morph Swainson's Hawk** appeared out front of the platform. A different bird on plumage from yesterday, this one put on an excellent show for the assorted throngs who had gathered at the platform to enjoy the exhibition. I think the last thing our San Francisco based participant Holly expected was to be spending some of her week watching Swainson's Hawks.

As another great flight developed it was also nice to introduce the participants to the Braddock regulars and we even got to meet another ex-counter when Brett Ewald turned up to enjoy the day. As ever we were thankful to Mike Tetlow for helping count in the early morning and sharing his experience with the assembled throng. Not that there was too much time for chatting as the great birds continued to pile up: four **Sandhill Cranes**, a passing **Lapland Longspur** here and a **Common Raven** there.



We were there though predominantly for the hawks though, and we were not to be disappointed as more great birds appeared. First off Frank picked out a beautiful dark chocolate brown **rufous/dark morph adult Red-tailed Hawk**. Dark morphs are pretty uncommon here as it is, but this crimson tailed adult was a real treat. We were not done with

the incredible day though. Frank picked out a distant **Broad-winged Hawk** (our first of the year) to complete the possible buteo sweep at Braddock for the day, amazing!!!

An incredible day was rounded out when someone spotted our first **Black Vulture** for the season. Black Vulture is becoming a more regular rarity at the watch, but this year they have been tough to come by (a side effect of the tough winter?) and this still our only one to date (as of May 11, 2014). The bird put on quite the show as it passed us low and directly over the platform.



As the flight petered out we took our leave of the platform and went to have another nice meal down town, this time a fine Mediterranean spread at Aladdin's.

Flight day 5:

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=10](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=10)

### **Friday April 11<sup>th</sup>,**

After a long day and another sluggish looking forecast we again took the chance to stay in bed a little bit longer which I think was appreciated by tired leaders and participants alike. The watch itself was pretty unexceptional and we spent just a few hours watching the dregs of yesterday's flight, though it did contain another couple of nice **Rough-legged Hawks** and a **Merlin**), before deciding to look elsewhere for the days entertainment.

We poked around a few spots adding to our tally of species as we racked up a variety of early migrant passerines and a mix of waterfowl. We added a few species to our day and trip list as we wended our way west through Hamlin and enjoyed seeing **Red-necked Grebe** and more excitingly seeing and hearing calling **Common Loons** as we watched the lake at Hamlin Beach State Park. The morning had apparently produced an incredible flight of waterfowl and we tallied a mess of mainly **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Horned Grebes** and **Red-breasted Mergansers** as they loafed offshore.

Another run at the **Great Horned Owls** again only produced their chicks but we at least were able to share that excitement with their human neighbors.

We ended the day with some excellent food, some great stories and a couple of fine local beers at The Old Toad, a British Pub that was a big hit with the group and a mainstay of my time in Braddock Bay. It was our last evening together and we were now a close knit group of friends. It was a fun last evening for a fun and productive week. Friendships and memories had been made and people had gotten to see the best of migration along the shores of Lake Ontario and witnessed the magic of Braddock Bay Hawkwatch. Our final evening together saw us joined again by the Fords and Catherine Hamilton as we shared our favorite moments of the trip, swapped contact details and promised to stay in touch.

Flight Day 6:

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=11](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=11)

**Saturday April 12<sup>th</sup>,**



Saturday was a low key day, though an adult male light morph **Rough-legged Hawk** was a nice bird to kick the day off with at West Spit. With a weak flight trailing off as we moved inland to see if we could stay with the movement of birds we had plenty of time to enjoy a relaxing morning. We hung around chatting for a while, took some

photos to commemorate a wonderful week together before everyone started to go their separate ways. It was a great trip with a great group of people. Thanks to Frank Nicoletti for all his hard work and to Phil, Anne, Holly, Roy, Jane and Norann for making the whole week such a fun and pleasurable experience.

In a week of hawkwatching we had tallied an incredible 10928 diurnal ‘raptors’ of fifteen different species, which had included: two dark Swainson’s Hawks, Krider’s and dark Red-tailed Hawks and a Black Vulture. Everyone had honed or sharpened their skills, including myself and we enjoyed a great week of birds and friendships. Personally it couldn’t have been more perfect.

Flight Day 7

[http://hawkcount.org/day\\_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=12](http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2014&rmonth=04&rday=12)