

HMANA Raptor ID Tour April 6-12 2014

Monday April 6th

With forecasts that had both participants and leaders questioning the sanity of heading to Western New York for a week the HMANA Raptor ID Workshop kicked off mid-morning on Monday the 6th of April. The weather wasn't promising much of a flight at Braddock or Derby Hill that day but a little window to our west looked enticing enough that even with a late start to the day (to allow for arrivals from Vermont and sleep ins from California) we decided it was worth rolling the dice to head an hour and a half west for a 'lifer' hawkwatch for all concerned: Hamburg.

We arrived just south of Buffalo to find the Hamburg watch tallying a nice little flight of Red-shouldered Hawks (the only really significant push of the tour), including a good number of adults. We also got treated to a few Ospreys, some Red-tailed Hawks (including a good number of heavily marked northern type birds) and got to compare a few accipiters. The volunteer crew at the watch made us feel very welcome and it was great to run into old friends (Alec Humann and Rick Bacher) and make some new ones (counter Mike Zebehazy). Though we didn't catch the whole flight, Hamburg ended the day with almost 1500 birds, a nice count by anyone's standards.

Beyond the raptors we managed to run into a couple of nice species for the trip including Vesper, American Tree and Field Sparrows and a beautiful wintering Red-headed Woodpecker.

Flight details:

http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=364&year=2015&month=04&day=06

Tuesday April 7th

With not much in terms of raptor flight promised within striking distance of our home base in Rochester, NY we spent Tuesday roaming along the lake shore north of Rochester enjoying a wealth of waterfowl and other species that use the extensive wetlands and bays as part of their spring migration. Various stops provided for different highlights but there were ducks aplenty including some really stunning ones like drake Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler.

Highlight species on the day were a stunning breeding plumaged Red-necked Grebe, an American Bittern which sadly only a couple of the group got on as it flew into the marsh and two rather unexpected Long-billed Dowitchers which had turned up in a puddle in a farmers field just west of Braddock Bay - I guess the rain was suiting some more than others! Other stops during the day saw us poking around for a couple of owl species but having to be satisfied with rather incredible views of a beautiful Pileated Woodpecker!

We ended the day discussing plans for what was forecast to be a rather damp Wednesday while eating Italian food at something of a Rochester institution.

Wednesday April 8th

With a day that promised rain, more rain and perhaps even more rain it seemed like a good day to spend some time in the car and head somewhere a little different for the day. Cayuga Lake near Ithaca had been hosting a wintering Tufted Duck and though a little bit of a drive we decided to chance out arm and head out that way to do some birding. Our morning started with us exploring a tiny regional airport while looking unsuccessfully for Snowy Owls. From there we headed south and after a brief roadside pullover for some Snow Geese we were in Ithaca in the pouring rain. Luckily the park we had stopped at had a bandstand that afforded some shelter and while half the group went off to look

for facilities and a cup of coffee the other members set about finding the Tufted Duck. Thankfully it had stuck around and the group worked hard to make sure that everyone finally got good looks at this active little duck. It was a life bird or North American species for almost all concerned and another great addition to the trips checklist.

After lunch we made our way north in order to explore the myriad of open country habitats that make Montezuma NWR such a jewel of the New York birding scene. Montezuma is also the site where much of the reintroduction of Bald Eagles to the state was done and is still a popular nesting area for these birds. We were thankful for a timely break in the days pouring rain. As well as some nice views and photo ops of the Bald Eagles we managed to dig up a few interesting gulls: Glaucous, Lesser Black-backed and Kumlien's/Iceland and an abundance of waterfowl that included cool species like Trumpeter Swans and Snow Geese.

Thursday April 9th

The promise of a decent southeast winds and a flight Thursday saw us up at 5:30am and winging our way two hours east to Mexico, New York and the Derby Hill Hawkwatch. En route we stopped to partake of some of the areas excellent apple products - always an important part of this trip! As we pulled up to the site Frank and I already had a good feeling about the day, the winds were dead right and clouds of blackbirds and American Robins were winging their way over the site. This is what birding is all about as far as I am concerned: the majesty and magic of migration. In the passerine mix were Snow Buntings, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Common Redpolls and Rusty Blackbirds aplenty, and though we had to wait what felt like an inordinately long time after a couple of hours the raptors began to pick up.

The great thing about good flights at Derby is that when the winds are right the birds are almost directly over your head. This makes for a great learning experience. Derby is also kind enough to provide you with a set of numbered posts to help you describe where on the horizon a bird may be found which is a real godsend when it comes to pointing out birds in a busy sky.

Raptor highlights of the day included killer views of multiple Rough-legged Hawks and one very accommodating Golden Eagle that came right past us. We owed a big thanks to the whole Derby Hill crew for such a warm welcome, they really went all out to accommodate the needs of the group.

Flight details:

http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=358&year=2015&rmonth=04&rday=09

Friday April 10th

Friday saw us with something of a conundrum, initially forecasts had shown potential for another good day at Derby and a day at Braddock that could be great or dismal depending on how long the rain held off. A late change to the forecast that showed potential for rain at Derby had us second guessing the two hour drive out there and back and instead focusing our energies back on Braddock Bay.

We pulled up just after dawn at Braddock Bay's renowned West Spit to be greeted by both a light adult male Rough-legged Hawk and a Alfred Hitchcockesque flight of more blackbirds and robins. We knew then that we'd made a good call for the day. Again there was a mix of interesting species in the passerine flight including a jaw-dropping number of Northern Flickers, a Wilson's Snipe and a few Purple Finches. The excitement was rapidly building but so were the clouds and after an hour or so of mainly passerine flight the skies opened and torrents of rain poured down - the perfect time to go replenish our caffeine at Tim Hortons. As skies lightened again so we headed back to West Spit and the flight started up again with a bang as a juvenile Northern Goshawk bustled

across the tree line in front of us giving great views and causing much excitement.

The winds on the day really started to pick up in the late morning and we found ourselves moving in order to stay in touch with a flight that was pushing inland - not through wind direction but from the birds desire to stay away from the potential danger of the water. From our new sheltered spot we managed to pick up the two incredible individual highlights of the day: two adult dark Swainson's Hawks! This was a repeat of last year's amazing sightings but instead of being spread over two days, this took place on one.

The push of raptors was both exciting and educational - allowing great comparisons between species - even such unexpected ones as Rough-legged and Swainson's Hawk. The flight totaled over 5000 raptors and we were positioned in such a way that most of the day's birds passed right over our heads - an incredible experience that will live long in the memory.

The raptors eventually petered out late in the day, but that just gave us the chance to stop in at Owl Woods to find a cute little Northern Saw-whet Owl. An incredible day - even more so given the early week forecast!

Flight details:

http://hawkcount.org/day_summary.php?rsite=353&ryear=2015&rmonth=04&rday=10

Saturday April 11th

Our last full day saw the group undertake responsibility for undertaking the Braddock Bay/HMANA Raptorthon fundraising event. Leader Luke Tiller was out at the hawk watch pre-dawn to check out crepuscular birds and then the group followed out later in the day. Over the day the group and leaders tallied a highly respectable 14 species of raptors (including the tour's only Peregrine Falcon and the season's first two Broad-winged Hawks) and 75 species of birds in total including both a Long-eared Owl in owl woods and a flyby Glaucous Gull! The final evening together as a group was spent sharing stories of the week and a few excellent local beers at the Old Toad Pub.

Sunday April 12th

Sunday morning saw us again pick up a small but nicely mixed flight of passerines and raptors at Braddock Bay. There were even a few nice little kettles of Broad-winged Hawks and Turkey Vultures to enjoy before the flight disappeared on the breeze inland. By that time long journeys home were starting to drag participants reluctantly to the airport or to their awaiting cars. After a less than auspicious weather forecast at the beginning of the week it had turned into a great week with incredible and memorable passerine and raptor flights enjoyed, great learning experiences shared, and new friendships made.

Over the week the group had tallied flights with almost 10,000 raptors of 16 different species and 124 species of birds overall including the Tufted Duck which was a life or North American bird for almost all concerned. Thanks to all those who took part for making it such a fun week and helping support the work of HMANA.