

Hawkwatching at Braddock Bay—by Jeff Dodge, Founder of BBRR

Hawkwatching, in general, and specifically, at Braddock Bay, can be exciting, aesthetically appealing, intellectually satisfying, and just downright fun. It appeals to people of all ages, those with the widest range of interests, and from any background. If you are reading this newsletter, you most likely realize this, and hopefully, hawkwatching at Braddock Bay has been as rewarding an experience for you as it has been for me. I have watched hawks for thousands of days and seen over a million hawks at Braddock Bay and it has given me the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and from all over the world. It has also given me an understanding of the importance of watching hawks at Braddock Bay and its place in the hawkwatching world. I want to give readers of the BBRR newsletter some history about hawkwatching at Braddock Bay. It will be anecdotal in nature, but I hope it will be interesting and informative, nevertheless. This will be the first in a series of articles.



Hawk watchers at Braddock Bay, 1985. Pictured left to right: Frank Dobson, Carolyn Cass, Laura Moon, Jeff Dodge, Ray Ludwig, and Neil Moon

I suppose, and that's all it can be, that hawks have been migrating over Braddock Bay for as long as both hawks and Braddock Bay coexisted. Hawks evolved out of the few bird ancestors that survived the mass dinosaur extinction 64 million years ago. It wasn't until 10,000 years ago that the Great Lakes were formed when the glaciers of the last ice age retreated north. The Great Lakes were not in their present form and shape until three thousand years ago. I would assume at some point after that hawks began to migrate as environmental changes allowed. Though I can't help but believe that the migration of hawks was noticed by inhabitants at points of high concentrations of migrants like Braddock Bay, I know of no source that identifies the migration of hawks until the twentieth century.

Early in that century, Dr. Elon Howard Eaton, author of *Birds of New York, 1910-1914*, wrote in *The Auk* (1904), "We wish to present some of the conclusions which have been reached as the result of observations made near Rochester during the spring of 1903. First, regarding the yearly migration of hawks, it has been confirmed that an incredible number of these birds pass each spring along the southern shore of Lake Ontario and move toward the east over the country south of the lake, evidently making their way around its eastern end toward the north. The height of the migration occurs during the latter part of April and the first week in May." Dr. Eaton goes on to describe the various species and then says, "Many [buteos] are often seen together or in the same field of view and, as far as I have noticed on these occasions, they are absolutely silent, and when one party has passed off the scene another appears going in the same direction. Thus there is a constant whirling stream passing over, sometimes during the greater part of the day . . . One morning at least one hundred of these birds [Sharp-shinned Hawks] passed over a single observer within two hours, and on another occasion we saw twenty-five of this species lying in

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one pile back of the little hotel on Buck Pond, where the proprietor had been trying his marksmanship after breakfast.”

Unfortunately, many of the first observations of hawks in our area were made in this same manner, over the barrel of a gun. As far as it is known, none of the shooting at Braddock Bay has been reported in the literature, but over the years several of the old time hunters have come to the Braddock Bay Hawk Lookout and told Laura and Neil Moon, the founders of the modern hawkwatch at Braddock Bay, that they did shoot a lot of hawks. Though the attitude toward hawk shooting has changed, none of the hunters wanted to be identified or wanted to tell exactly what took place. The last known shooting incident in the Braddock Bay area was of a Red-shouldered Hawk shot in 1950 on the West Spit, reported by Richard O'Hara (1950), who resided on Manitou Beach Road and was an avid birder. I find it interesting that the last known shooting of a hawk at Braddock Bay occurred while there was a hawkwatch being conducted.



Sharp-shinned Hawk. Photo by David Brown

Many birders from the Rochester area would travel to Hawk Mountain in the fall to participate in their pioneering hawk watching efforts. At Braddock Bay there was some effort to report the hawk migration. The Genesee Ornithological Society (now defunct), a section of the Rochester Academy of Science, was established in 1938 and the large flights of hawks along the shore were well known to members of the organization at that time. The Genesee Ornithological Society published its first issue of their newsletter, *The Goshawk*, in November 1947; and the following spring it began to publish hawk migration data.

It wasn't till 1949, that an official hawkwatch was started at Braddock Bay. Walter Listman, Donald Wolf, and Donald Bieber set up this first hawkwatch. As stated in *The Goshawk*, they had discovered "that a point on the East Manitou Road, about three-eighths of a mile south of Lake Ontario, was ideal. It was chosen because it was in the direct line of flight and afforded an excellent view in almost all directions." That spot was very close to the location of where the hawkwatch is still conducted. Walt Listman told me that East Manitou Road at that time was on the site of the current access road that now leads to the park pavilion. The current East Manitou Road was built in the 1950's when Braddock Bay State Park was developed. Walt said they watched from a curve in the road that is at the same point as the curve in the current access road. It was slightly elevated with some grassland and marsh facing north. The area around the hawkwatch consisted of orchards, farm fields, and a few wood lots. I have aerial photos of the hawkwatch site from every decade from 1930 to 2009 and you can really see why this was such a good site. Also, at that time there was no Lake Ontario State Parkway.

They covered the lookout on 50 of the most promising days during the spring of 1949 and recorded 21,621 raptors of 14 species. The following year they did a similar study, covering 55 days and recording 21,488 individuals of 15 species. Their data, with weather conditions, number of observers, and hours of observation, were published in *The Goshawk*. The 1949 records were published that year, but the 1950 records were not published until 1984.

In my mind, the establishment of a hawkwatch at Braddock Bay was a monumental event. I often wonder why

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these three pioneers took on such an effort. I never had the pleasure of meeting Don Wolf, but I did get to meet Don Bieber and had the distinct pleasure of counting a few hawks with him on the hawkwatch platform. Walt never expressed to me why he started the hawkwatch. I can only surmise, that he followed his own mantra, “bird where you are”. And he did. Walt was a birder from a different mold. Just recently, I read a reference in a Buffalo newspaper stating that “Walt Listman, in one of his jaunts through the cattail marsh at Braddock Bay in February, spotted a Greater Yellowlegs”. Who goes through the cattail marshes in February looking for shorebirds? Do we have birders who do that anymore? Walt was a birder’s birder and he is missed. BBRR was able to recognize Walt in 1991 when he received The Pioneer Hawkwatching Award.

What happened after those two years of hawkwatching? I’ll cover that in the next BBRR newsletter.
