

Hawkwatching at Braddock Bay, the Start of the Modern Day Hawkwatch

by Jeffery Dodge, Founder of BBRR

The period between 1950 and 1976 saw no organized or formal hawkwatch of any kind at Braddock Bay. That doesn't imply that there wasn't a keen interest in the hawk migration. Birders in the area continued to observe the migration of hawks at Braddock Bay throughout this period and reported any big flights in *The Goshawk* and *The Kingbird*, two publications that reported bird sightings. Additionally, many birders from the Rochester area would travel to Hawk Mountain, PA every fall to observe the hawk migration along the Kittatinny Ridge. One of those was Joseph Taylor, a life long resident of Rochester, who was instrumental in the formation of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Two other Rochester birders were also regular visitors to Hawk Mountain, Laura and Neil Moon. They were also very interested in the spring flights at Braddock Bay and encouraged Maurice Braun, the founder of Hawk Mountain and the hawk counter there for years, to visit Braddock Bay to observe the spring flight. When he did visit one spring, the Moons expressed that he was impressed with the Braddock Bay flights.



The modern day view off the hawkwatch platform looking towards the mouth of Braddock Bay. The West Spit, an important landmark for counting migrant raptors, is pictured in the background, just above the spotting scope.

When I first moved to Rochester in 1978, I heard about the Braddock Bay Hawkwatch in conversation with other birders. It was described to me as a place to see huge numbers of hawks and that there was “some crazy lady who stands out there in late winter and all spring and counts them!” In the spring of 1979, I observed some of those hawk flights and that “crazy lady” for the first time. I was hooked. The hawk flights were magnificent and the “crazy lady” was Laura Moon, a truly remarkable and fascinating woman.

Laura Moon and her husband Neil were active birders and were especially interested in hawks. They travelled to Hawk Mountain most falls and on one occasion even bicycled there all the way from Rochester. That must have been some adventure. But they were an adventurous and determined couple. They made things happen. Laura was afraid of heights. So to overcome that fear, Neil suggested that they climb the forty six highest peaks in New York State. They became Adirondack Forty Sixers relatively quickly. Next, they climbed many high peaks in other parts of the Appalachian chain. They continued their adventures on to the Swiss Alps. I still have a bell from Switzerland that I use as an ornament on my Christmas tree that the Moons gave to me after one of those climbs. With all this strenuous climbing, they still found time to bird and watch hawks. In the 1970's, they became

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interested in continuing the hawkwatch that Listman, Bieber, and Wolf started decades earlier. They were to bring their passion and determination off the mountains and out to the bay so to speak.

I am sure that Laura and Neil were interested in making the hawk flights at Braddock Bay more well known. And there was most likely some competitiveness with Derby Hill, a hawkwatch that was being conducted on the east end of Lake Ontario. During this time, there was also a blossoming of interest in the hawk migration throughout the entire northeast. A smattering of sites were discovered at which migrating hawks could be observed. In the early 1970's, these hawkwatchers were starting to communicate and organize. The end result was the formation of the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA). They met formally, for the first time, in Syracuse, NY in the spring of 1973. At that meeting, HMANA set as a goal to increase the number of hawkwatches throughout North America and to standardize the collection of data. Needless to say, Laura Moon was inspired by that conference and started a hawkwatch at Braddock Bay in the spring of 1977. Neil, who was a chemist at Kodak, assisted on weekends and vacation days. As you are well aware of, the hawkwatch is still in operation t this day. Pictured below is one of Laura's data sheets from her first official season.

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2 Great Egrets flew by the Hawk Lookout Observations from 6:15-2:10 P.M. Then from 3-4 P.M.

HAWK MIGRATION ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA - DATA SHEET

Date: *Mon, April 27, 1977* Location: *Braddock Bay Hawk Lookout, Monroe County, Rochester, New York* Leader(s): *Laura Moon, Jean Skelly, William Symonds*

Time (Standard) *6-8* 7-8 8-9 9-10 10-11 11-12 12-1 1 1/2 2-3 3 1/2 4-5 5-6 6-7 TOTALS

Max. Vis. (Miles)		<i>sunny</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>sunny</i>					
Air Temp.		<i>55°</i>	<i>55°</i>	<i>60°-64°</i>		<i>66°</i>	<i>64°</i>							
Wind Speed (mph)		<i>5 mph</i>	<i>5 mph</i>						<i>0-5 mph</i>					
Wind Direction		<i>SW</i>	<i>WSW</i>	<i>SW</i>		<i>WSW</i>			<i>SW</i>					
% Cloud Cover		<i>10%</i>			<i>95%</i>	<i>99%</i>	<i>100%</i>		<i>50-75%</i>					
Precipitation		<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>		<i>0</i>					

Turkey Vulture			<i>5</i>			<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>		<i>2</i>				<i>12</i>	TV
Black Vulture															BV
Goshawk															GOS
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>1</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>5</i>			<i>23</i>				<i>132</i>	SSH
Cooper's Hawk				<i>1</i>						<i>1</i>				<i>2</i>	CH
Red-tailed Hawk		<i>4</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>			<i>2</i>				<i>54</i>	RT
Red-shouldered Hawk										<i>2</i>				<i>2</i>	RS
Broad-winged Hawk			<i>36</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>7</i>		<i>571</i>				<i>774</i>	BW
Rough-legged Hawk			<i>8</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>1</i>		<i>6</i>				<i>24</i>	RL
Swainson's Hawk															Sw
Golden Eagle*															GE
Bald Eagle <i>6:15-6:30</i>														<i>1</i>	BE
Marsh Hawk	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>			<i>2</i>		<i>1</i>				<i>14</i>	MH
Osprey		<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>					<i>1</i>		<i>1</i>				<i>4</i>	OS
Peregrine Falcon*															PF
Merlin															M
American Kestrel						<i>3</i>								<i>3</i>	AK
Unidentified accipiter				<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>							<i>5</i>	UA
Unidentified buteo			<i>17</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>38</i>			<i>6</i>		<i>279</i>				<i>343</i>	UB
Unidentified eagle															UE
Unidentified falcon															UF
Unidentified type unkn.					<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>							<i>6</i>	UU
Other Hawk (Specify:)*															OH

Totals	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>179</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>25</i>		<i>888</i>				<i>1376</i>	T
No. of observers			<i>5</i>			<i>6</i>				<i>1</i>					Ob
Gen. Alt. of Flight**		<i>2</i>	<i>2-3</i>	<i>2,1</i>	<i>2</i>			<i>1,2</i>		<i>3</i>					Alt
Gen. Flight Direction		<i>East</i>		<i>East</i>					Dir						

*Time, sex, age of eagles, peregrines, other rarities (add other comments on reverse of white sheet): *The adult Bald Eagle was seen sitting in a tree on the edge of Hawk Lookout Woods by Mike Menuhin between 6:15-6:30 A.M.*

** A late flight developed and was observed by Mike Menuhin from 3-4 P.M. They were still flying after that, but Mike had to leave.

Observers: *Laura Moon, Jean Skelly, Wm. Symonds, Andrew Foster, Mike Menuhin, Patti Reviller, Neil Mosher, Ed Spahn, Joe Taylor, Clayton Taylor, Enya Hale*

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The hawkwatch site in 1977 was only a hundred yards from the 1949-1950 count site. After all, the landscape had changed. Between those years, the farm land composing the majority of the area was purchased by, or in some cases given to, New York State which developed it into Braddock Bay State Park. A pavilion, parking area, seasonal rest room, and picnic area were built by the state. The state park included Cranberry Pond, Long Pond, Buck Pond, and the upland and wetland surrounding areas. The old East Manitou Road became the road leading to the parking lot in the park and East Manitou Beach Road was moved to its current location. The watch was conducted in front of the pavilion in which Bird of Prey Days is held now. During cold windy weather sometimes the hawkwatch would move to the rear of the building which conveniently had a fireplace! I can testify that it came in handy on those cold March days with brisk winds out of the northwest. It also kept a few hawkwatchers sustained with hot dogs cooked on a stick.

In the early 1980's, the trees around the pavilion had grown to a point at which they were hindering the view of the migration. A better site was needed. After some experimentation, a high point in the field to the east of the pavilion was chosen as the best site. The Moons were responsible for getting the observation platform constructed at its current location. It was modeled after the observation platform at Cape May State Park in New Jersey. Interestingly, it is only a few yards from the original 1949 site.

Laura, who in subsequent years and after his retirement, was joined by Neil, standardized the count, taking weather data, noting all the visitors and helpers, and taking detailed notes on anything they thought effected the hawk flight. Most importantly, the count received consistent coverage by experienced observers. It was conducted on all days in March, April, and May, regardless of the weather conditions. Laura felt strongly that it was just as important to record the migration on those days with no or a few hawks as it was on those days with big flights. They also noted several interesting things about the movement of hawks. Strong southwest winds produced the largest flights at the site especially those produced by a low pressure system moving east and north of Lake Ontario. They also noted that on days when lake effect occurred, the flight line of the migrating hawks would move off the lakeshore inland. The Moons would travel south to observe that flight line as it moved further inland as the lake breeze grew stronger. Many inland sites were used by the Moons. These were Hogan Point Road, Frisbee Hill, the Northwood Elementary School parking lot, Schmidt's Farm Market on Manitou Road, Bailey Road, and Ridge Road at Manitou Road. They also made note of significant numbers of kestrels and accipiters, particularly Sharp-shinned Hawks, that flew across the water towards Webster at the West Spit. These birds were mostly not observed from the main site of the hawkwatch.

As you can see, the hawk flight at Braddock Bay was spread out over a relatively large area. Hawkwatches are normally conducted at one location, so the question became is this one hawkwatch site or several? It is an interesting question philosophically. Does a count of the migration consist of just those hawks that fly over a specific location, or is it a count of the hawks that move along a particular flight line, even if the location shifts a bit. For the most part, it has been resolved that a hawkwatch site is a count of a flight line that moves under variable conditions, and as a result counts from multiple locations on the flight line count as one hawk count total. Of course, only one location at a time could be included in the totals. Braddock Bay was instrumental in establishing this protocol.

This was accomplished by the Moons and a small group of hawk enthusiasts who I call the Hawk Wranglers. That

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group consisted of Dick Mather, Bill Wegman, Bill Symonds, Brett Ewald, John Beilman, and Jeff Dodge. But first the number of sites had to be reduced to something more manageable. After much observation, it was determined that some of the sites being used were redundant. For example, what you could observe at Hogan Point Road could just as easily be observed at Frisbee Hill. Eventually, the number of usable sites would be reduced to four: Main site (the platform at Braddock Bay Park), Frisbee Hill, Bailey Road, and Ridge Road. The thought behind this plan was to gain an understanding of the dynamics of the flight, so as to make consistent decisions on which site to conduct that particular hourly count. To put it simply, they would try to figure out at any given time which flight line was the main flight line, and what conditions would determine that.



American Kestrel. Photo by David Brown

The plan was to corral the hawks in. Counters would observe at multiple sites simultaneously to see what counts were most indicative of what was occurring on that particular migration day. The Hawk Wranglers would station themselves at all the count locations simultaneously. This gave a complete picture of the hawk movement throughout the day. Once this was done under various conditions, a protocol was established to determine which count site was to be used on any given day based on specific weather conditions. Over time, the decision was made to only have two sites, the platform at Braddock Bay Park and Frisbee Hill. This is consistent with other hawkwatch sites around the continent. It was determined that Bailey Road is just too far away, over 5 miles from the lakeshore, and it has stopped being used. Though it must be noted that many golden eagles and Broad-winged Hawks can occur at this site. The highest Bailey Road total was over 5,000 raptors in just one hour. Additionally, an adult Mississippi Kite was observed at that site one year in late April!

The Moons also noted that many migrating accipiters and falcons, could not be seen from the principal lookout at the Main site, because they fly low along the shore of Lake Ontario or out over the lake for some distance, more or less parallel with the shore. The best place to see these raptors and count them is the West Spit of Braddock Bay. It was discovered that a significant part of the migration can occur at this site. For example, on 14 April 1983, 1,057 American Kestrels were counted from the West Spit, while only 109 were counted at the Main site. If an observer had not been at the West Spit, only 109 American Kestrels would have been tallied, and the biggest one day flight (1,166) of American Kestrels ever recorded in the area would have been missed. Currently, the West Spit is not used as a count site since future observers with improved optics were able to record a significant part of the hawks flying low over the water or along the shoreline from the Main site.

Another accomplishment of the Moons was the important discovery of the significant hawk migration that occurred in June. The Moons would continue the count through June 30, as a result of observing big flights of immature Broad-winged Hawks and immature Bald Eagles during that month. Currently, the spring count period does not officially include June as it nearly impossible to find a counter to continue the job for that period of time. However, occasionally volunteer counters will venture out to tally on favorable days in June.

In the early 1980's the Moons were considering retiring from their position as hawk counters. The question then arose—would the hawkwatch cease to exist? And if not, who was going to take the place of the Moons? For the answer to those questions you will have to wait till the next chapter in this history.