



## 2016 Hawkwatch Season by Ryan MacLean, Official Counter

The 2016 spring season marked the 39th consecutive season that standardized hawk counts have been conducted at Braddock Bay. It also represented the 30th year that the hawk count was conducted by Braddock Bay Raptor Research. A total of 688.75 hours were tallied over 94 days (February 28 through June 3).

### INTRODUCTION

30 years ago some folks with big ambitions and a contagious obsession with raptors set out to create an organization that not only presented reliable data on raptor populations, but also brought that obsession to others. From a creaky little platform, a young iron-man of a hawkwatcher from Westchester County named Frank Nicoletti tallied 61,449 hawks and minds were blown. 30 years later, Braddock Bay Raptor Research has achieved not just a bigger platform, but one of the most incredible sets of hawk migration records in the country, one of the most active hawk banding programs in the country, and above all hundreds of new hawk-crazed individuals. To top it all off, 30 years later BBRR was just crazy enough to hire another schmuck from Westchester County to try and live up to this pantheon of a hawkwatching legacy. With a roster of names such as Nicoletti, Liguori, Sullivan, Tetlow, Tiller and Possum lining the rafters I have to say it was a daunting challenge. The end result however was an exciting ride of a hawkwatching season, which despite its challenges had a list of highlights for the books.



*Red-shouldered Hawk—photo by Ed Sailer*

This year's season started semi-unexpectedly before it even officially began. With an all-too-deceptively warm end to February, several of the local stalwarts decided to man the platform on February 28th and ended up tallying 57 birds (including 43 Red-Tails and 3 Red-Shoulders). While not a jaw-dropping total, that's actually 18 more birds than the entire first half of March in 2015. On my arrival on the 29th, the early flight had shrunk down to only a couple Red-tails and Turkey Vultures, and colder weather set back in.

### MARCH

March 1st was what you could describe as a textbook beginning to a spring hawkwatching season: temperatures just above freezing, easterly winds, occasional snow flurries and 1 Red-Tailed Hawk as the daily total. Right from the get-go however the lack of hawks was more than made up for in the amazing spectacle of migrating Tundra Swans and Snow Geese. I was also greeted on arrival by two lingering Trumpeter Swans on the bay that hung around for at-least a week after I arrived.

After several days of temperatures below 20, snow squalls, and multiple thermoses of tea consumed we finally had our first double-digit day March 6th, including our first 2 Rough-Legged Hawks of the season and our first Peregrine. March 9th finally brought our first 100+ bird day along with 70-degree temperatures ahead of a strong southerly front bringing heavy rain with it. 154 Red-tails, 31 Red-shoulders and our first Northern Goshawk of the season all made it a worthwhile day on the platform to the delight of a slew of hawkwatchers breaking out T-shirts a bit too soon.

March 16th was set up to be a total washout with fog and eventual strong thunderstorms dashing any hopes of a flight. But around 5:45 PM the skies finally cleared and it was instant Vulture chaos over the Frisbee Hill parking lot. Between 6-7 PM alone I counted 510 Turkey Vultures along with a several Red-tails sprinkled in. The following day's WSW winds at 15-25 mph brought us 1,685 birds including 240 Red-shoulders, 141 Red-tails, 1,203 Vultures, and our first Golden Eagle of the season. But as with most northbound cold fronts, the following days meant a return to wintry weather and much fewer birds. March 18th did bring our first Sandhill Crane of the season though.

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One continuing theme throughout the season, and one that certainly has been true in other seasons, was weather forecasts that changed completely on a dime both to our benefit and turmoil. Our last two good March days were exactly the case, but for the better. On March 28th I woke up to a steady rain but arrived at the platform around 10 AM to find Dave Tetlow sitting in his hawkwatch mobile. Even with the constant drizzle he handed me a sheet of paper that showed 100+ Vultures in the last hour. As I glanced over the West Spit, that hundred turned into more hundreds as constant lines of TVs moved ahead of the rain. After the rain passed the sky cleared quickly and winds began howling from the SW. Those howling winds brought a slew of low birds zipping by which included a Golden Eagle, several Rough-legs and our first good push of Sharp-shinned Hawks. March 30th also proved to be a great day to cap off the month with strong SW winds as opposed to the predicted SE bringing 1,283 birds including another Golden Eagle.

## APRIL

If there were ever a superlative for this year's April it would likely be "The April Without South Winds." It also gave us the two words that Braddock Bay watchers would never like to hear again: Omega Block. The recurring theme for what should usually be our peak month was a continuing slew of stationary fronts, keeping the winds primarily out of the NE and temperatures far below average. Only 9 days in April contained winds with any Southerly element whatsoever. Nonetheless we did start and end the month with a bang.

April 1st proved to be our **peak Vulture day of the season with 2,409 counted.** Better yet the Braddock Bay Raptor Camp kids were able to witness some massive groups of 100+ pouring over West Spit. That large push however came ahead of a full-on return to winter with temperatures dropping back to the 20s and some snow accumulation. All of that was just in time for Luke Tiller to arrive from sunny California, along with iron-man Frank Nicoletti, for the 3rd HMANA Raptor ID Workshop at Braddock. Despite the poor forecasts and lackluster hawk flights the tour group was once again a great, enthusiastic bunch that were a big help on the platform. A nice flight of 146 Sharp-shins on April 15th was a good tour send-off.

Even with NE winds persisting, Sharpies continued to move for the next several days in good numbers. Many of them however chose to move out over the lake and a good number had to be counted as

<b>Braddock Bay Hawkwatch Monthly Totals by Species—Spring 2016</b>					
<b>Species</b>	<b>March</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>Season</b>
Black Vulture	0	1	0	0	2
Turkey Vulture	7593	12447	5678	25718	10519
Osprey	3	63	116	182	231
Bald Eagle	64	81	519	664	182
Northern Harrier	119	326	142	587	848
Sharp-shinned Hawk	143	2139	2120	3697	6114
Cooper's Hawk	130	134	47	311	544
Northern Goshawk	1	7	2	10	41
Red-shouldered Hawk	356	42	6	366	757
Broad-winged Hawk	0	13699	19233	32932	29132
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	2	2	1
Red-tailed Hawk	770	941	338	2049	4231
Rough-legged Hawk	36	23	1	60	359
Golden Eagle	4	12	8	24	26
American Kestrel	84	186	31	301	590
Merlin	9	14	4	27	24
Peregrine Falcon	4	13	34	51	14
Mississippi Kite	0	0	1	1	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9316</b>	<b>30128</b>	<b>28282</b>	<b>67726</b>	<b>54061</b>

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dots on the far horizon (thanks to Frank for picking out many of those when I had to scan the other 90% of the sky). The first 3 Broad-winged Hawks arrived on April 16th, and our only **Black Vulture of the season came by on April 18th**. Andrew Garland initially spotted the Vulture in a line of TVs far to the south of the platform as we were preparing to dash to Frisbee. Luckily Mike Tetlow was already at the Frisbee parking lot and called in to say that the Black Vulture was heading right towards him, giving us time to get there right as the bird was soaring over the park.

Our first sizeable Broad-wing push came April 22, with 791 moving mostly early in the day along with a low Golden Eagle. That push was once again ahead of a front bringing cooler temperatures and less favorable winds just in time for Bird of Prey Days. Aside from the lack of hawks, BOP Days turned out to be one of the best attended ever with an estimated 600 people and some great new additions to the festivities. One of my more memorable non-raptor highlights of the weekend was hearing an unexpected 3 Whip-poor-wills in Owl Woods, and both Sora and Virginia Rails on Buck Pond.

As April neared its end and the NE winds seemed to never subside, some of us thought we would be jipped on Broad-wings entirely for the month. April 26th however brought an entire day of steady rain and overcast skies. With the winds being NE the next day I wasn't overly optimistic, but that rain was enough to pile up enough birds for the floodgates to open. Broad-wings were up and moving right from the get go but the stiff NE winds pushed them (and us) to Frisbee early on. From the top of the hill we were treated to a daylong spectacle of multiple 200-300 bird kettles (including one that contained a Sandhill Crane) directly over the hill in all directions. By the end of the day we had **9,835 Broad-Wings and 10,391 raptors total, proving April 27th reputation as 'the magic day' once again**. After a two-day lull we were able to end the month on another high note with 3,018 birds on April 30th.

What this year's April showed us above all was just how resilient a lot of these birds can be despite adverse conditions. Seeing as most of the Broad-wings at this point were adults experienced in migration, it was amazing to watch them push as close to the lake as they could even in the face of unfavorable winds. It goes to show that you can't always rely on those SW winds to predict good days. Sometimes the birds have minds of their own when they're just that desperate to return to the breeding grounds.

## MAY

With momentum now on our side, we entered May with high hopes of South winds, and hopefully a second batch of adult Broad-wings. While the first part never fully materialized, it didn't take long for us to get our **second highest Broad-wing day of the year on May 3rd**. We were able to enjoy this flight from the platform for at least the first half of the day with multiple 100+ kettles lining the sky over the parkway. The inevitable inland rush did bring us to the parking lot of Frisbee, but the best part of the flight was viewed from there when a kettle of 300+ Broad-wings were joined by 2 Golden Eagles directly over our heads. In total we had 6,657 Broad-wings and 7,423 birds total for the day.

Enough adult Broad-wings stayed in the pipeline to give us 1,000+ totals for the next two days, but most of those flights were either picked out as specks from the platform or at Frisbee, since those NE winds never gave up. May 5th gave us our biggest Sharp-shin day of the year with 415 counted mostly over the lake. May 6th saw a drop in the Broad-wing numbers but a nice non-raptor visitor in the form of a Clay-Colored Sparrow showed up right next to the platform.

The month-long northerly spell was briefly lifted on May 7th, but in the form of light SE winds and a lot of specky high birds in mixed kettles. We did get an extremely late dark-morph Rough-Legged Hawk that proved to be our last of the season and only our 60th for the year. With the relatively mild weather in January-March its no wonder these birds didn't get down here in big numbers. Despite the difficult hawkwatching, the south winds also brought the first wave of warblers with it, highlighted by a ground-level Golden-winged Warbler in Firehouse Woods.

With adult Broad-wings mostly north of us now, those NE winds no longer worked in our favor as we waited for the juvenile Broad-wings to take over the show. In the meantime the warblers kept us more than occupied in the mornings with one of the better showings of Cape May, Bay-breasted and Blackburnian Warblers I'd ever seen in any Spring. May 13th and 14th

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did bring our first 100+ pushes of predominantly juvenile Broad-wings ahead of an incoming cold front. We also had our season record-breaking 46th Peregrine Falcon on the 14th, topping the previous record of 45 in 2004.

The following days brought one last blast of unexpected wintry weather, with highs in the upper 40s and occasional snow-showers. In the meantime a female Summer Tanager was banded by Braddock Bay Bird Observatory on May 15th and hung around that property for several days. Juvenile Broad-wings did slowly begin to trickle through in modest numbers, and I was unfortunately the only one on top of Frisbee Hill to witness a **juvenile dark morph Broad-wing** on May 22. These trickles of birds were only about 100 birds per day due to the lack of southerly winds which would normally give the young birds a needed push in our direction.

Fortunately, luck came our way with just one week to go in the watch. May 25th was one of those muggy late May days when you can tell a clear shift is happening. Winds were howling from the SW as early as 7 AM and dark clouds lined the far horizon of what was otherwise a sunny sky. Between 9:00-10:00 over 100 Broad-wings had passed over the parkway, but it didn't take long for the line of clouds to reach the platform. The next fifteen minutes had that 'calm before the storm' feeling with one part of me thinking that the flight was dead, and the other half thinking that something's brewing. At 10:25 I looked up from my clipboard to see a bird with what looked like a very pointed-winged Buteo type profile directly overhead. One look through the scope though proved that the bird was far from a Buteo, but in fact a **MISSISSIPPI KITE** that circled directly overhead before quickly breaking to the east in its unmistakable glide. While we were semi-anticipating a Mississippi Kite since one had been frequenting Port Colborne, ON, this bird was a different individual with much more flight feather wear.



*Mississippi Kite seen on May 25th, 2016—photo by Ed Sailer*

Now buzzed from the kite's visit we had to get back to work quickly once the clouds cleared and Broad-wings started moving again. By late afternoon we had nearly 1,000 Broad-wings on top of the special visitor early in the day. But it turned out that it had company. At 2:45 the ever sharp-eyed Mike Tetlow spotted an actual pointy-winged Buteo that broke into an eerily Osprey-like soar; unmistakably a **SWAINSON'S HAWK**. While the bird was distant we were able to make it out as a light morph juvenile bird with some feather wear on the wings and tail. No less than 20 minutes later Mike got on another Swainson's-type bird. While Dan Niven and I never got on it, Mike was able to ID it as a **DARK MORPH SWAINSON'S** and likely an adult. In total we wound up with 1,481 birds that day including 1,087 Broad-wings.

Our late season luck gave us one last 1000+ Broad-wing push on May 27th with nearly 1,500 counted between 9:00-10:00 and 2,172 for the day. I didn't even have time to get from my car to the platform since groups of 80-100+ were already pouring over the bay. By the time I did make it to the platform however, the flight had slowed to a trickle, but we did also manage our **best Bald Eagle day of the season with 62 counted**.

While May ended on NW winds and a modest number of birds, the promise of SW winds at 15-20 mph on June 2nd brought a lot of us out to the watch for one more day. It was a good thing we did too since not only did we get one last push of 739 Broad-wings, but also **40 more Bald Eagles giving us a new seasonal record of 664!**

Despite all the weather challenges we tallied an impressive 67,726 raptors for the season including 32,103 Broad-Wings, 25,594 Turkey Vultures, 4,402 Sharp-shins and 2,044 Red-tails. It goes to show that when the urge to migrate hits the weather conditions won't crush these birds' ambitions, we just have to find where they are.

**THANKS!!!**

Above all this season wouldn't be a success if it weren't for the legion of great people who make BBRR what it is.

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First and foremost, my thanks & gratitude goes to Daena Ford for offering me this amazing opportunity and for all her encouragement as I got behind the cockpit of this colossal hawkwatching machine. Secondly, I owe infinite thanks to both Pete Gustas & Luke Tiller who both put word in that I was somehow decent enough for the job. To Mike Tetlow, I literally would have crashed and burned if it weren't for your knowledge, mentorship and coordination on all those crazy flight days. You really were the co-pilot of this 747. All my thanks to Dave Tetlow as well for his generosity, knowledge and chocolate bunnies.

To all the banders, volunteers and all the platform regulars who helped spot, observe and provide great company: you are all the backbone of BBRR and the reason it's still going strong 30 years later. There were a million names I had to remember when I got here and forgive me if I left any of you out but you all deserve equal praise:

Suzanne Albright, Jessie Barry, Mike Ciresi, Kathleen Dalton, Peter Debes, Joe Delisle, Laurie Dirx, Randy Ford, Barb French, Cindy Garfield, Andrew Garland, Andy Guthrie, Brian Herne, Mike & Kathy Hewitt, Judy Kelly & Mike Savoy, Greg Lawrence, Gail Lazoration, Melissa Mance, Pat Martin, Dave Matthiason, Tom McDonald, Bud Morgan, Brian & Brooke Morse, Dan Niven, Andrea Patterson, Jay Powell, Shelly Rackowski, Ed Sailer, Zaph & Tanya Shamma, Carol Shay, Chris Smith, Art Tanghe, Bridget Watts & Gary Levine, Tim Willis, Chris Wood. Cheers and much love to all of you!

Many thanks to Art & Michelle Ames (and their crazy cats) for letting me live in their house for the season. The cats never did succeed in killing me but they certainly tried. To my parents who had to watch their son go off to the great white north of Rochester and stay one step ahead of pneumonia, thanks for cheering me on the whole way. Thanks to my brother Sean at SUNY Geneseo for being close enough for me to visit and have REAL New York pizza at Mama Mia's.

Final word of thanks goes to the man who set up the legacy I had to live up to, Frank Nicoletti. Never was there a brutal cold day that I felt like packing it in that I wouldn't say to myself, "What would the iron-man do?"

Only note of non-thanks goes to the Garganey that could have just shown up at Montezuma 2 days earlier before I left. No wonder I like hawks more than ducks anyway...