

Braddock Bay Hawkwatch Report 2012

By Luke Tiller, Official Counter, Braddock Bay Raptor Research

The 2012 spring season marks the 35th consecutive season that standardized hawk counts have been conducted at Braddock Bay. It also represented the 26th year that the hawk count was conducted by Braddock Bay Raptor Research. A total of 469.75 hours were tallied over 82 days.

MARCH

The season got off to an early start this year at Braddock Bay, when we headed out for the official first day on February the 27th. Not that it added much to the overall season tally - just 37 birds were tallied over those three days we were active during February. It had been a very mild winter in the area, and the mild weather extended into the first full month of the watch. Where last year the weather was fairly extreme in March, this year the count was rarely interrupted by poor weather. March was an odd month in Rochester, with daily temperatures officially being declared warmer on average than April for the first time in recorded history.

This warm start led to us getting off to a flying start, and the 8,638 Turkey Vultures counted in March, outstripped our previous best by almost 2,500 individuals. Other numbers were also decent with a relatively high number of Red-shouldered Hawks (558). The shoulders were nothing like the huge flights of the early 90's, but it was the third highest count for the last ten years at least. There were three good shoulder days with the most enjoyable being the 21st when we were joined by ex-Braddock Bay counter Frank Nicoletti and his wife Kate. A count of 1,005 Red-tailed Hawks was a decent start for the first month, as was nine Golden Eagles. Rough-legged Hawks were almost non-existent locally over the winter, and this was being reflected in the flight over the watch with a mere 36 tallied—second lowest in March over the last ten years for this irruptive Arctic raptor.

In general the talk locally had been all about early arrivals due to the temperate weather and this was somewhat reflected in our four, quadruple digit raptor days in March, as opposed to zero last season.

April

As mentioned before, April was confusingly cool after a nice warm start in March. The poor winds and cool weather made April tough. Whereas last year we had the monster day plus three days that almost touched five figures, this year we had one big day and barely scraped together three days that had four figures. The one outstanding day (April 16) had the count rapidly going from zero to sixty though. It was incredible, with 37,145 birds tallied and a crazy hour which saw us tally over 20,000 birds (an all-time hour record). The numbers were hard to believe, with the sky littered with multiple 1,000 plus kettles of raptors and bunches of birds streaming through all the while, certainly a tough day to count and one where I was thankful to the help of the many excellent local volunteers who scribed and picked up birds on the day.

With the lack of good days, the Turkey Vulture numbers for the month were the second lowest in ten years (6,233) and were a staggering third the number of the corresponding month last year. Buteo numbers virtually dropped off a cliff. A mere 40 Red-shouldered hawks were tallied in April,

somewhat disappointing after a good March (perhaps they were just all through?). Red-tailed numbers were really disappointing, with less than half the lowest total from the last ten years. Unsurprisingly the Rough-legged Hawk flight continued to be minimal and we were not doing well with that other desired irruptive the Northern Goshawk. Accipiters in general were also pretty disappointing, for a site that is renowned for big flights, with the expected pushes disappearing off of the West Spit and never materializing.

More exciting news was breaking the Black Vulture season record before the immature vultures pushed through. This was helped by an incredible day on April 6th when a kettle of four Black Vultures came over the horizon together and streamed off to the south west. Although Black Vultures numbers are climbing exponentially locally, to see four migrating together was pretty special and reminiscent of seeing these birds at the fall watch in Connecticut or downstate along the Hudson River Valley.

May

In general May ticked over steadily. We got over our disappointments over early in the month when we missed the Swallow-tailed Kite that was seen at the watches to both our West and East. Somehow we had managed to miss it as it passed over us, probably as our flight broke up and drifted inland on May 4th. From then on things turned over nicely with six four-digit raptor days. Also encouraging was 368 Bald Eagles on the month, a month record that helped build another Bald Eagle season record (450), building on last year. There is nothing more enjoyable than watching an environmental success story in action. Golden Eagles also had a good season at Braddock and although we only tallied 43 of them it was actually our third highest count of all time.

May in general was the third best in 10 years and sixth all time. Helping along those numbers were a good number of Turkey Vultures (5,224), which pushed us to only our second 20k plus Turkey Vulture season. Black Vultures also continued to drift through and the 6 for the month pushed us up to 18 in total for the season. This season record had already been beaten the previous month. There were a few season disappointments as mentioned before, with Northern Harrier numbers being depressingly low (especially as they seem to be declining in general). It was though, good to see them seemingly nesting in the marsh out in front of the platform. Another declining raptor, the American Kestrel, also had a poor season (201) and the female that was hanging around the park never seemed to settle down to nest even with boxes available.

With the month going nicely, but not outstandingly, things all changed on May the 24th. The day had looked to be set up nicely, and when it had finally unfolded it had been one of those incredible days that makes one realize what a special place Braddock Bay is. The previous night at the season roundup I was telling everyone how amazing and special Braddock is as a migrant hotspot and the next day the place bore fruit.

I started out at about 6am at West Spit and rounded up 14 species of warblers including a nice Mourning. Other stops helped me discover an adult male Orchard Oriole and a Philadelphia Vireo. I

started the hawkwatch just before 9:00am, and at about 9:15am I picked up 3 doves flying low towards the platform. For some reason I decided to watch them and was shocked to see one of the three flash two prominent horizontal commas of white on its upper wing—White-winged Dove! This was only the 15th State Record for this species.

Although the rarest bird of the day was early, the goodies kept on coming. A Fish Crow vocalized as it harassed a passing raptor, the first of 3 Black Vultures soon appeared., and at about 10:15am a near adult Mississippi Kite appeared low and way inside over the parkway. A pretty incredible day was rounded out when Mike Tetlow spotted an American White Pelican gliding west as we watched the flight from the Frisbee Hill parking lot. A truly amazing day at the watch and one of the most memorable I have ever had anywhere.

Although not quite living up to the previous year (it was always going to be hard to), it was another fantastic year at this amazing spring site. We tallied an incredible 79,530 raptors overall which was the 4th highest on record at the site. Other highlights of the season for me personally were a successful and well attended series of bird identification workshops that I ran through BBRR. Including a nighttime owl prowl which allowed us to both hear and amazingly see a perched Whip-poor-will, which had been found earlier in the day by Dave Tetlow (another previous counter at Braddock), and a rather fun big day at the hawkwatch for the HMANA-backed 'Raptorthon' which saw me netting a rather rare Yellow-headed Blackbird.

When all is said and done it was another great year up at the bay. Thanks to all of those that came to join me out on the platform, to the dedicated volunteers who make all the events at Braddock Bay run so smoothly and to Daena Ford for kindly inviting me back for a second season.

Braddock Bay Hawkwatch Monthly Totals by Species—Spring 2012

Species	February	March	April	May	TOTAL	Season Average
Black Vulture	0	6	6	6	18	2
Turkey Vulture	4	8638	6233	5244	20119	8781
Osprey	0	2	80	152	234	229
Bald Eagle	1	10	71	368	450	137
Northern Harrier	0	103	141	111	355	876
Sharp-shinned Hawk	0	208	2247	927	3382	6350
Cooper's Hawk	3	145	164	62	374	561
Northern Goshawk	0	3	6	0	9	44
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	558	40	0	598	788
Broad-winged Hawk	0	0	38494	12881	51375	29092
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	1
Red-tailed Hawk	28	1005	626	590	2249	4391
Rough-legged Hawk	0	36	20	16	72	383
Golden Eagle	0	9	25	9	43	25
American Kestrel	0	75	100	26	201	611
Merlin	1	7	12	10	30	23
Peregrine Falcon	0	2	5	13	20	12
Mississippi Kite	0	0	0	1	1	0
TOTAL	37	10807	48270	20416	79530	52706