

The 2018 spring season marked the 41st consecutive season that standardized hawk counts have been conducted at Braddock Bay. It also represented the 32nd year that the hawk count was conducted by Braddock Bay Raptor Research. A total of 523.92 hours were tallied over 84 days (February 27 through May 31).

February

The 41st consecutive season for hawk counting at Braddock Bay began at the end of February, as the 27th and 28th were warm with southwesterly winds. With 167 raptors over two days in February, including one of two Black Vultures on the season, it was a great start and looked to be a positive sign of things to come. We even had our first six Red-shouldered Hawks and first two Peregrine Falcons for the season.

March

Despite the good start in February, a full month went by before the temperature topped 50°F, on March 29th. We barely topped 3,000 birds in March with a monthly total of 3,026, the lowest since 2005.

Record low species counts for March over the last 15 years included Northern Harrier (23) and Red-tailed Hawk (275). Rough-legged Hawk totals (19). Northern Goshawk was missing for the second year in a row. Northern Goshawk was reported every year in March until the last two years, a sign that the eastern populations of this species may be in serious trouble. Turkey Vulture was the most numerous raptor, with 2,390 counted during the month. This species was especially difficult to count this Spring due to cold weather and strong northeast winds that kept them hunkered down around the Braddock Bay area for quite some time. Each day, we would observe hundreds roosting out on the “island” of trees in the middle of the bay, Burger Park, and the East and West Spits. Further, there were roosts at Owl Woods, the north end of East Manitou Rd., Lowden Point, and the north end of Long Pond. Many birds roosted in trees, but we consistently observed many vultures hunkering down in the cattails at Braddock Bay and Long Pond. The vultures would lift off from these roosts each day, mill about, and then go back to the roost in the evening or go to a different roost just down the lakeshore, making counting difficult. After watching this odd vulture behavior all month, we learned their movements pretty well and made judgment calls about whether birds had truly moved past the hawkwatch or not. With vultures moving about between roosts in the area, we may have easily not counted some birds that may have moved between roosts late at night.

April

The poor “Spring” weather continued into April, as there was snowfall on 14 of the first 19 days of the month. Despite the generally poor weather, the flight picked up during the month and we had 25,720 raptors, with the count topping 1,000 birds on eight days. However, the overall count was still below average for the month. Turkey Vulture was once again the most numerous bird, with 14,640 recorded on the month. Broad-winged Hawks finally arrived on 21 April, about a week later than in recent years. Over the last 15 years, the April Broad-winged Hawk total of 8,860 was the lowest since 2010. Other low species totals included Osprey (31) with the lowest total since 2005, Cooper’s Hawk (45) with the lowest total since 2004, Sharp-shinned Hawk (1,022) with the lowest total since 2005, Red-tailed Hawk (552) with the lowest total since 2012, Rough-legged Hawk (17) with the lowest total since 2012, and American Kestrel (120) with the lowest total since 2005. Despite the low Red-tailed Hawk total, we had a beautiful dark morph adult Calurus Red-tailed Hawk, part of the western population, on 21 April. We only observed one Northern Goshawk during April, the only one for the entire season. However, the bird zipped right over the platform, providing excellent views. Twelve Golden Eagles were on the lower end of normal, but still a nice treat considering all of the poor conditions during the month. Our second Black Vulture on the season was also a highlight, and we had excellent views of that bird as well.



*Broad-winged Hawks. Adult on the left, juvenile on the right.
Photo by Kelly Wicks*

Braddock Bay Hawkwatch Monthly Totals by Species—Spring 2018						
Species	Feb	March	April	May	TOTAL	Season
Black Vulture	1	0	1	0	2	2
Turkey Vulture	84	2390	14640	4779	21893	11231
Osprey	0	2	31	66	99	225
Bald Eagle	4	30	181	586	801	219
Northern Harrier	5	23	161	79	268	826
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	30	1022	887	1941	5923
Cooper's Hawk	8	50	45	7	110	530
Northern Goshawk	0	0	1	0	1	39
Red-shouldered Hawk	6	183	61	0	250	735
Broad-winged Hawk	0	0	8860	12658	21518	29156
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	0	1	1	1
Red-tailed Hawk	49	275	552	208	1084	4100
Rough-legged Hawk	5	19	17	6	47	345
Golden Eagle	0	2	12	3	17	25
American Kestrel	1	18	120	61	200	573
Merlin	0	2	13	11	26	24
Peregrine Falcon	2	2	2	10	16	14
Mississippi Kite	0	0	0	1	1	0
TOTAL	167	3026	25720**	19363	48276	54411

* season averages are from 1977-2018. **includes 1 unidentified buteo species recorded

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May

After predominantly poor weather in March and April, we had very pleasant conditions for the month of May. Temperatures in May were the warmest on record, and just three days were below average. The beginning of the month was excellent with a nice string of days with southwest winds and warm temperatures, ushering in the best hawk flights of the season. There were 7,260 birds on 1 May, and 4,375 birds on 2 May, with Broad-winged Hawks making up the majority of the flight, and Turkey Vultures the second most abundant raptor. The counts on those two days made up over half of the May total of 19,363 birds. Species totals in May were all around average. Totals for all falcon species, including American Kestrel, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon, were all back up to normal after being low for the earlier portion of the season. On a positive note, we had the second highest monthly Bald Eagle total on record (586), eclipsed only by last year's May total of 700. We also eclipsed the daily Bald Eagle record count, with 115 on 31 May, a great way to end the season. 1 May brought

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us our second dark morph adult Calurus Red-tailed Hawk of the year. A Mississippi Kite on 14 May was another highlight of the season. While eating lunch at Frisbee Hill, Mike Tetlow spotted a bird in a group originally found by Shelly Rackovsky that had pointed wings and looked much different. After getting scopes on the bird, we confirmed that it was a Mississippi Kite, and we watched it from a distance as it broke away from a small kettle of raptors. The other rare bird of the season was on 23 May, when Bridget Watts and I watched an immature light morph Swainson's Hawk circle over the platform with a small group of immature Broad-winged Hawks. Being May, most birders were in the woods looking for warblers, but Steve Taylor ended up spotting the bird over the parking lot at Firehouse Woods, just a few miles down the lakeshore. Lastly, we had a dark morph immature Broad-winged Hawk on 21 May, one of only a handful of records from the hawkwatch.

Overall, we counted for 523.92 hours from 27 Feb through 31 May. The season's raptor total was a bit below average and the total of 48,276 was the lowest since 2010. Besides the incomplete 2006 season, it was only the fifth season since 2000 that did not eclipse 50,000 raptors. The season total for Osprey (99) was the lowest since 2005 (102). The Northern Harrier season total (268) was also well below average and the lowest since 2012 (355). Similarly, 1,941 Sharp-shinned Hawks was the lowest since 2005 (1382), 110 Cooper's Hawks the lowest since 1998 (221), and 250 Red-shouldered Hawks the lowest since 2005 (200). On a positive note, 801 Bald Eagles was the second highest season total ever, with last year's 1,094 the only higher total.

We recorded only 1,084 Red-tailed Hawks on the season, which is the lowest total on record outside of a couple incomplete seasons. In fact, Spring Red-tailed Hawk counts at Braddock Bay have decreased since 1986 (Figure 1). Since there are changes in effort at the hawkwatch each year, I calculated the number of Red-tailed Hawks per observer hour. When considering effort, the data are more variable, but a negative trend in Red-tailed Hawk counts per observer hour is still apparent (Figure 2). For the 2018 season, it is likely that some Red-tailed Hawks went around us during the poor weather during their peak migration time, but recent research suggests other factors are also influencing Red-tailed Hawk count trends. Paprocki et al. (2017) suggests that Eastern North American Red-tailed Hawk populations have shifted their wintering ranges north over the last 30 years, resulting in more Red-tailed Hawks migrating shorter distances or not migrating at all. Red-tailed Hawk counts per party hour during Christmas Bird Counts in New York State have increased since 1986 (Figure 3), supporting the hypothesis that more Red-tailed Hawks are wintering in New York State, and in northern latitudes in general (Paprocki et al. 2017, National Audubon Society 2018). Similar distributional changes in American Kestrels (Heath et al. 2012) could also result in changes to American Kestrel counts at Braddock Bay. Long-term data sets from sites like Braddock Bay are crucial to understanding distributional shifts that are already evident in many species of North American Birds, specifically raptors (La Sorte and Thompson 2007, Paprocki et al. 2014). Further, an increased effort to count natal dispersal flights in late summer could help understand Red-tailed Hawk nesting success and population trends in the region.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who came out to the hawkwatch this season. Having spent countless hours here in the past, I know what an incredible community of birders we have around Braddock Bay. You are the ones who make enduring the long stretches of cold weather that much easier and the "big days" that much better. I appreciate that many of you were eager to help spot birds and keep track of the lines of raptors, and even scout out the inland hawk flight on the lake breeze days. I would also like to thank Mike Tetlow for counting on the days that I was away and to Daena Ford for the opportunity to count here this Spring. I look forward to seeing many of you out in the field in the near future.

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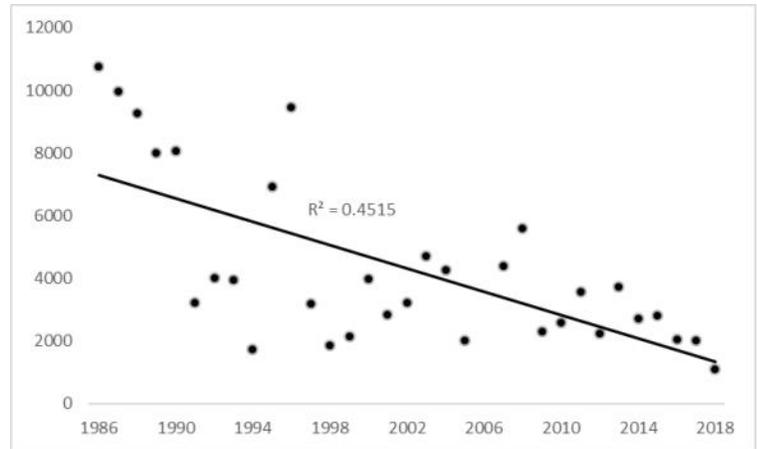


Figure 1. Regression analysis of Red-tailed Hawk Counts 1986-present at Braddock Bay Hawkwatch. Note: 2006 total removed due to incomplete season

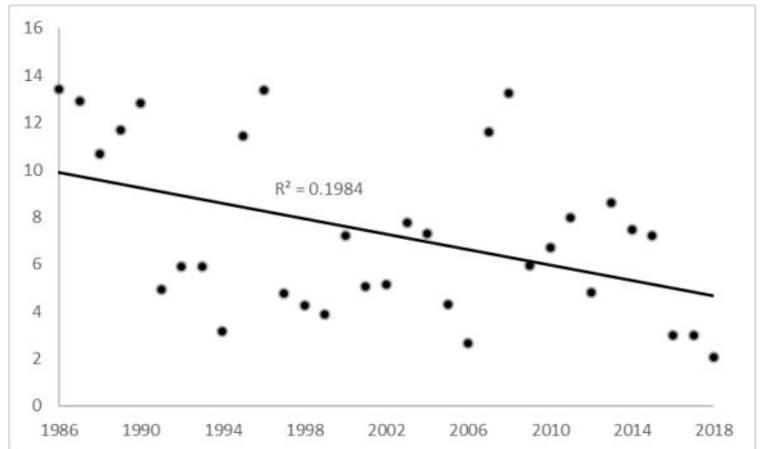


Figure 2. Regression analysis of Red-tailed Hawk counts per hour 1986-present at Braddock Bay Hawkwatch.

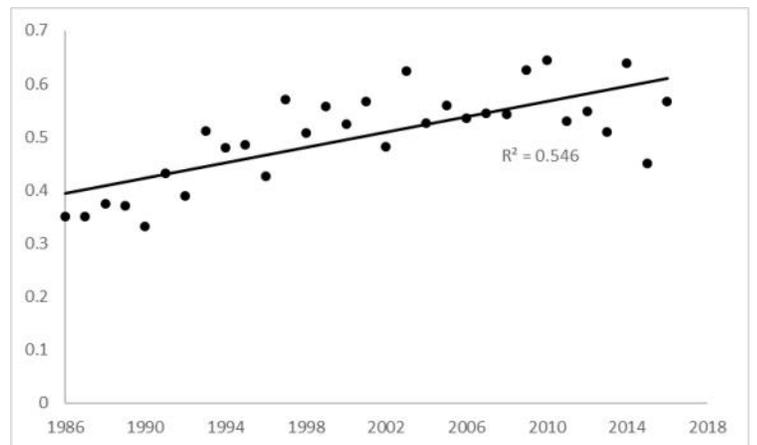


Figure 3. Regression analysis of Red-tailed Hawk counts per party hour 1986-2016 for Christmas Bird Counts in New York State.