

United We Count

Stephen Anderson

I've never been much of a joiner. Aside from AAA I currently belong to exactly one organization. I'll leave it to others to speculate on what that says about me, but I can state with some small measure of pride that the other organization to which I belong is Eastern Mass Hawk Watch (EMHW). To call us a club would be accurate but insufficient. For me, this diverse band of brother and sister hawk watchers is more like a close-knit family. We're not blood relatives but we all seem to share the common gene that predisposes a person to a condition I like to refer to as "raptorphilia." Those affected, or perhaps I should say afflicted, range from mere enthusiasts to full-blown fanatics about hawks. They love to observe, watch, count, talk about, and maybe even dream about raptors. In its more extreme form the condition approaches an obsessive-compulsive disorder. I myself am known to get to that stage every fall.

EMHW got its serendipitous start in the early 1970s when two people and a bird crossed paths at the proverbial right place and right time. A young couple, avid hikers but not yet avid birders, had just moved to the Boston area from Chicago. On one of their outings in the Middlesex Fells, they heard and then observed a very loud, medium-sized bird with a slightly downcurved bill, darkly streaked off white underparts, and a long tail. Its incessant, varied song and striking form totally captured their attention. The fascinated couple was Paul and Julie Roberts. After checking a field guide back at home, they determined that the bird was a Brown Thrasher, and so began a lifetime of love and dedicated study of all things avian. Over time, that gene I mentioned began to manifest itself and their interest began to turn increasingly and especially toward birds of prey.

The Roberts' raptorphilia really began to set in on a trip to Mount Tom in 1974, when they were among a group of hawk watchers who witnessed the sublime spectacle of 1700 migrating Broad-winged Hawks flying so low over the observation tower that the use of binoculars became a hindrance. Once the birds had passed, a few moments of stunned silence were followed by an outburst of spontaneous applause. In Paul's own words, "The hook was in and the event altered my life."

During the following few years the duo's budding interest in the amazing phenomenon of hawk migration began to blossom. They focused mainly on fall migratory flights, encountering others along the way who possessed more experience and knowledge and were eager to freely pass it on. Before long, Paul was not only watching the migrants but also counting them and compiling data, which he submitted to the newly-formed Hawk Migration Association of North America and to the Northeast Hawk Watch. He began recruiting others to participate, although their numbers were still small and activity was mostly limited to weekends.

Meanwhile, hiking remained an important part of Paul and Julie's life. They



Scanning the skies from the eastern lookout on Mount Watatic (all photographs by Shawn Carey)

regularly traveled the Wapack Trail which runs through parts of eastern Massachusetts and continues on up into southern New Hampshire. On one fall excursion, they met an organized group on South Pack Monadnock Mountain. These people had binoculars raised and spotting scopes trained in every direction, and they were kept busy as many birds came through. Paul had an epiphany of sorts and a pivotal question came to him, “If places as far apart as Mount Tom and this little mountain are within the wide flight path of migrating raptors, why not Mount Wachusett in Princeton as well?” On September 13, 1978, he and a few fortunate others who were present, including Nancy Clayton and Leif Robinson, got the emphatic answer. In a three-hour time span, a continuous stream of Broad-wings, stretching from horizon to horizon, passed over and in front of them. They tallied a stunning 10,076 birds, and a new hawk watch site was discovered.

Exhausted but exhilarated, Paul and friends came down from the mountain and proceeded directly to a birders’ meeting held that night at Mass Audubon’s Drumlin Farm Sanctuary. As they spread the news of the day’s events, there may have been a few skeptics, but most who heard the news became equally excited. They wanted in on the action. On September 13, 1983, and then again on September 17, 1984, they got more than they could have hoped for or even imagined. On each of those two remarkable and memorable days, in excess of twenty thousand birds were counted within a period of about three hours. Each of the tallies accounted for more than 90% of their respective year’s totals. Hawk migration is an extraordinary and unique aspect of animal behavior. As it has been more fully witnessed, studied, and understood

worldwide, any remnants of skepticism about the possibility of seeing birds of prey in numbers nearly too great to count have vanished. Interest, awareness, and research are now global.

Paul Roberts officially founded Eastern Mass Hawk Watch in 1978. The original logo, created by Julie Roberts two years earlier, is still in use today. Prior to the creation of the club, all funding for expenses related to watching, counting, compiling, and disseminating records, as well as to general promotion of the cause, came directly from their personal finances. When someone suggested the formation of a club with dues-paying members, the Robertses jumped at the idea. EMHW today boasts approximately two hundred dedicated members.



Close range Cooper's Hawk flyby

Over the decades since his brainchild came into being, Paul has become a well-known and respected authority on hawk identification and migration. Moreover, the database from Mount Wachusett is one of the most important of its kind in the eastern United States. Over a month's worth of continuous daily coverage and reporting during the peak of the fall flights has been carried out annually for more than thirty years. In addition, other key fall hawk watch sites have been

established and maintained at such places as Mount Watatic in Ashburnham and Barre Falls in Hubbardston. EMHW stalwarts Tom McCullough and Donna Schilling have spent thousands of hours searching the skies and feverishly clicking their counters at the former; more recently, Donna, Bart Kamp, and David Grant continue similar steadfast efforts at the latter. Spring doesn't produce flights of staggering proportions, but monitoring migration patterns and trends at that time of year is no less important than it is in the fall, and it can be just as rewarding. Many raptors, especially accipiters and falcons, seem to favor the coastal route on their trip north. For this reason, sites have been set up and manned (or womanned—a plug for Melissa Lowe, but with no slight whatever intended to Don Manchester) at places such as Pilgrim Heights, Truro, and Plum Island. Your best chance of seeing a Mississippi Kite in Massachusetts is to be stationed somewhere on Cape Cod in April or May.

The stated mission of our all-volunteer organization is to “promote the study, conservation and preservation of birds of prey by monitoring their presence in and migration through eastern Massachusetts.” A secondary purpose is to share our data with the larger regional and national bodies previously mentioned. Paul Roberts started this practice on his own even before EMHW came into existence. Sometimes the passing on of information has a certain element of urgency. Following Paul Revere's example, phone calls or electronic communications may go out to fellow hawk watchers in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania immediately after a big day here at home.

Educating the public about hawk identification and all issues related to raptor conservation is also one of our main goals. We hold watches, conduct classes, and publish seasonal and annual reports. Occasionally, one of our members publishes an article.



Red-tailed Hawk gliding low overhead

Although we are a small group with modest means, EMHW has always been willing to put its money where its mouth is. We allocate a portion of our limited funds to support several worthwhile individuals and organizations involved in raptor conservation. A cheerful and engaging woman from Middleboro, Joey Mason, is one beneficiary. She is the president of Keeping Company with Kestrels. Since 1989 her Kestrel Project has worked to reverse the population decline of our smallest falcon throughout southeastern Massachusetts. Until recently Joey owned a pair of these swift little birds and she took them to many different gatherings for up close and personal presentations. Sad to say, the two kestrels have died, but she plans to acquire a Peregrine Falcon to carry on her well-received programs. In addition, Joey has become a strong and much needed voice in the relatively new effort to have protective covers installed on top of external burners used to eliminate excess industrial gases. Many innocent and unsuspecting birds have been injured or killed by perching on or simply flying over these dangerous devices.

Tom Sayers, a jovial retired teacher from Connecticut, also receives our financial assistance. For more than five years he has been single-handedly building, installing, maintaining, and monitoring more than fifty kestrel boxes. Last season alone, his hard work resulted in nearly one hundred fledglings flying the coop. He also has started color banding the chicks for a possible future study of new nest location proximity to hatching location, and he tracks adult banded birds to learn more about nest site fidelity. In addition to supporting these two tireless individuals, we have contributed to the Raptor Population Index and the Wellfleet Bay Audubon Sanctuary, which applies some of the money toward the cost of paid hawk watchers and to various educational programs.

It would be a disservice to you the reader and an injustice to the loyal membership of EMHW if I neglected to say a few words about our annual meeting. Always free of charge and open to the public, it is typically held on the first Friday following Labor Day at the First Congregational Church of West Medford, MA. The date is timed to coincide with the approaching peak of the fall Broad-wing migration. The event is a combination get-together, pep rally, entertainment platform, and raptor information forum. The list of guest speakers reads like a who's who in American hawk watching circles. The roster has included, to name only a few, Pete Dunne, Bill Clark, Steve Hoffman, Mark and Marcia Wilson, Kate Davis, Rob Bierregaard, and local legend Norman Smith. (There have been several invitees from abroad as well,



During a lull in the action on Mount Watatic, site coordinator Tom Pirro logs the hourly count and records wind and weather conditions.

from countries as far apart as Costa Rica, Mexico and Israel.) This year's festivities will start at 7:00 p.m. on September 7th. The featured speaker will be Todd Katzner, a professor at West Virginia University. He is a world-renowned expert on Golden Eagles and Red-footed Falcons. He will gladly autograph copies of the recently published book *Eagle Watchers*, which he co-edited. Refreshments will be available during a social hour prior to the calling of the meeting proper. Lucky raffle winners will walk off with prizes ranging from a field guide cover to an authentic framed and signed raptor photo by Shawn Carey or Eric Smith, two of our members who really know which end of a telephoto lens to look through and where to point it. Our members and some of the vendors who attend have generously donated the raffle items.

You are welcome to join us as a guest or become a full-fledged member. Annual dues for an individual remain at an amazingly low \$10.00. So please come—we need all the help we can get. If you can't be there in person, visit us online at <http://www.massbird.org/EMHW>. Remember, you won't know what you're missing until you've tried hawk watching. See you on the mountain. 🦅

Stephen Anderson has been a member of Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch for nearly two decades. He joined the board of directors several years ago, and currently serves as recording secretary. Steve is a self-employed carpenter/woodworker from Northborough, MA. He has a great love of the natural world, and does his best to pass it on to his amazing nine-year-old grandson. His other interests include wilderness canoe camping and strumming his vintage Gibson guitar.