

THE ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK IN NEW YORK STATE

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The summer home of the American Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) is in northern Canada and in Alaska. In the late fall birds of this species move south, many spending the winter months in southern Canada and northern United States. Occasionally a Rough-leg will be found in one of our southern states, birds having been reported from Arizona, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina. Winter distribution appears to depend to a considerable extent on food supply and magnitude of the seasonal movement.

The Rough-legged Hawk is essentially an open country bird, favoring marshy coastal areas as well as inland regions with extensive pasture and meadow land. Long wings and longish tail make this appear the largest of the *Buteo* Hawks in eastern North America, being twenty to twenty-four inches in length and fifty to fifty-four inches in wingspread. Since Rough-legs are relatively unsuspicious by nature they can be observed perched in the open or flying in search of food. A typical hunting maneuver is to hover in one spot, eyes fixed on the ground.

Although individual birds show considerable plumage variation, the Rough-leg is not a difficult species to identify. The white area at the base of the tail can normally be seen when the bird is in flight. The dark spot on the underside of the wing beyond the "wrist" is an excellent field mark. This does not apply to dark phase birds, which show whitish surfaces on the underside of the wings. When perched a Rough-leg may be found in the top of a tree, but often chooses a low branch. Fence posts and utility poles are also used.

As to the distribution of the Rough-legged Hawk in our state, Eaton (*Birds of New York* 1914) writes as follows: "In New York it is a winter visitor of irregular occurrence, rather rare in the eastern and southern highland regions, but common some winters in the larger river valleys, the Lake Ontario lowlands, and the central lake region, and sometimes on eastern Long Island. At intervals of a few years there appear large flights of these hawks in western New York, especially in the Genesee valley and the extensive farm lands which lie south of Lake Ontario."

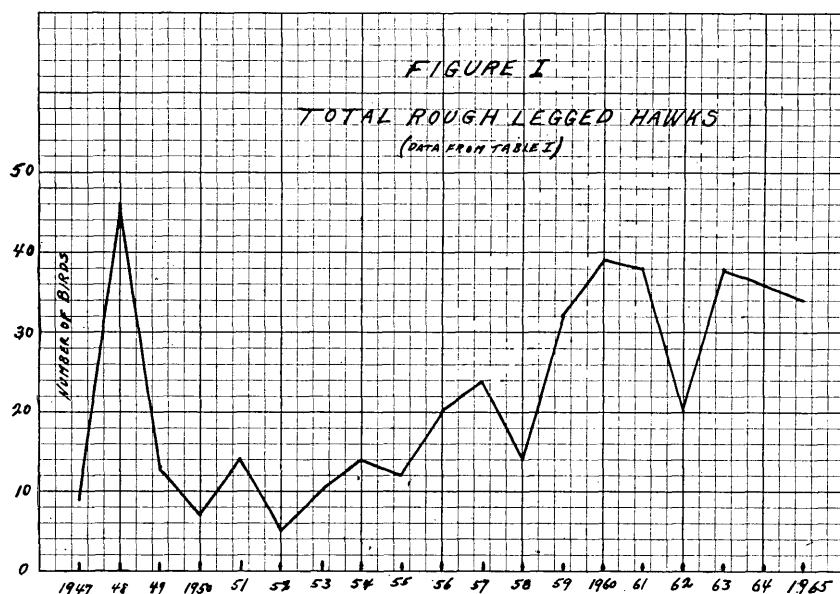
Observations made since this was written substantiate Eaton's appraisal. For specific information on the occurrence of this species in New York State use has been made of the Christmas Bird Count, published in *Audubon Field Notes*. There are ten stations (count areas) which have continuous records beginning in 1947. These are Brooklyn, Southern Nassau, Bronx-Westchester, Buffalo, Fort Plain, Geneva, Rochester, Schenectady, Staten Island and Watertown. Table I shows the number of Rough-legged Hawks reported in each of these areas for the nineteen year period 1947-1965. All are shown as occurring in December, even though a few counts were actually made in January. Yearly totals for the

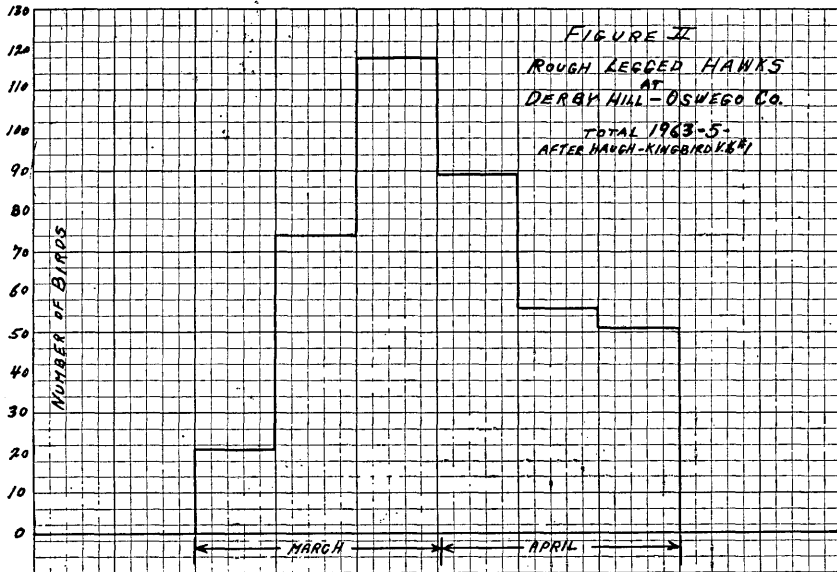
TABLE I
ROUGH-LEGGED HAWKS — N. Y. STATE
(From Audubon Christmas Counts)

AREA	YEAR																			TOTAL
	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	
Brooklyn.....	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	1	1	3	0	1	12
S. Nassau Co.....	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	2	4	9	4	26
Bronx-Westchester.....	2	1	2	0	6	1	3	3	0	2	3	0	2	4	2	2	3	4	2	42
Buffalo.....	2	27	7	6	5	1	1	8	5	2	2	2	1	12	5	0	5	1	1	93
Fort Plain.....	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	1	1	1	10
Geneva.....	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	1	4	8	8	8	2	5	5	0	2	1	0	48
Rochester.....	2	11	1	0	2	3	2	1	0	4	8	0	9	5	0	3	3	5	1	60
Schenectady.....	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2	1	9	17	0	0	6	5	46
Staten Island.....	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	0	0	11	8	6	12	47
Watertown.....	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	12	2	1	1	9	3	7	41
TOTAL BIRDS.....	9	46	13	7	14	5	10	14	12	20	24	14	32	39	38	20	38	36	34	425
Areas Reporting One or More Birds.....	5	7	5	2	4	3	5	5	4	7	5	5	9	7	8	6	9	9	9	—

ten stations are shown graphically in Figure I. It will be noted that although a heavy flight is indicated for the winter of 1948-9, the ensuing ten years show a rather low incidence of Rough-legs. Beginning in 1959 a marked change takes place, as shown by Figure I. Rough-legs have been more abundant during the period 1959-65 than in the preceding decade. Only the winter of 1962-3 does not conform to the trend. A study of Table I also shows wider distribution in the state for the period 1959-65. Since the count areas used in this analysis are ones with good coverage, it is not believed that more complete reporting constitutes a significant factor. The data here presented, together with my own observations in northern New York, lead me to believe that a marked change has recently taken place in the incidence of the Rough-legged Hawk in our state.

Most of my observations have been in the northerly part of Jefferson County, which is good habitat for the species. The portion of the county lying north of the Black River consists principally of open farm land, devoted to dairying. In common with other parts of New York State, considerable areas are no longer being used for agricultural purposes. It has been noted that areas in which Rough-legs concentrate vary from year to year. A field note in the *Kingbird* by Dr. Walter Spofford (V.8 #1 p. 6-7) refers to an area south of Oneida Lake as "Rough-leg Meadow." Along the same line attention is called to two field notes in the *Kingbird* relating to concentrations in Jefferson County. (V.10 #2 page 55 and V.12 #1 page 22)





The season of 1965-6 witnessed an early and extensive flight in Jefferson County. Two waves were noted, the first coming October 25-29, with the second a month later. By December it was evident that a concentration of Rough-legs was occupying an area immediately north and west of the City of Watertown, covering about fifteen square miles. On one occasion eleven birds were seen here along a five mile stretch of road. After the first of the year numbers dropped off but several Rough-legs were present during the remainder of the winter.

The northward movement in our area begins in late winter and continues into early spring. I seldom see a Rough-leg in northern New York after mid-April. 1966 proved to be the exception since birds were present in the area mentioned in the preceding paragraph into the third week of April. Eleven were seen on the 18th and eight on the 21st. No doubt most of these were migrants that had wintered farther south. Specific information on the spring movement is available in a recent article in the *Kingbird* by John Haugh (V. 16 #1, page 5). Statistics are given on the hawk flight at Derby Hill in Oswego County. Figure II combines the results of three years of observation at this vantage point. Rough-legs moved north throughout March and April, peak numbers being noted during the latter part of March.

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