

VIEW FROM MOUNT PETER

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"All the birds in Canada and New England are bailing out. Not a day passes that we don't see streams of titmice, chickadees, both nuthatches, and finches moving past Mount Peter." A severe summer drought caused a food shortage that presumably may have precipitated mass movements of birds during the fall of 1995, and birders positioned on northeast lookouts, had a front row view of the spectacle. The view from the Mount Peter Hawk Watch was particularly impressive that October. Witness my notes from October 19: "In the low 70's. Wind light out of the northwest. What a day! Everything suddenly got the urge to move: parids, nuthatches, Yellow-rumps, and White-throats. Red-tails took off. Hermit Thrushes stirred up the leaves around the platform. A Common Loon flew over, and nine male Evening Grosbeaks came up out of the valley. They were as bright as buttercups. Tacked onto the end of a string of Brant was a huge, brown bird, large bill hanging down. Suspected a pelican. Almost missed the Golden Eagle..." I recorded 29 different species that day, ten of them raptors. Sometimes, hawk watching from Mount Peter can be as good as it gets.

1995 also brought record Red-shoulders and Red-tails over Mount Peter. On October 30, Red-tailed Hawks broke a daily record on light, northeast winds. Ken Witkowski and I counted 226, with 102 Red-tails noted between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Writing in the *HMANA Journal*, Steve Walter called that record "absolutely stunning for the Northeast region" (which includes sites east of the Appalachians). Walter continued, "This was a big year (1995) for Red-tailed Hawk. Every full time watch (in his Northeast region) had either its highest total ever or the highest in years." Over its long history, Mount Peter's fall watch has reflected raptor population trends as consistently as the combined statistics from all other Northeast watches. Our final tally for that fall, a record 828 Red-tailed Hawks and 105 Red-shoulders.

HISTORY

Located in Orange County, Region 9, along 17A between Greenwood Lake and Warwick, Mount Peter is a few miles north of the NY-NJ border and adjacent to the Appalachian Trail. At 1210 feet, it offers a sweeping view west of the still rural Warwick Valley, that has made the site popular with sightseers since before the turn of the century. The Mount Peter House was built below the lookout in 1890 to accommodate visitors and was later replaced by the Valley View Inn. The first hawk watch was conducted there in 1958 by Stiles Thomas and members of the Fyke Nature Association of Bergen County, NJ as part of the "Across the State Hawk Watch of 1958" sponsored by the Montclair Bird Club of NJ. The two-day watch, on September 20 and October 18, produced 349 raptors of 10 species for Mount Peter and enough excitement to propel volunteers into a full-time count.

In 1971, the Highlands Audubon Society of Oak Ridge, NJ took over the count. That year remains special for the 6,658 Broad-winged Hawks counted on September 21, a daily record for Mt. Peter that still stands. In 1981, the watch was extended into mid-November. Over the years, two microwave towers were installed approximately 600 feet in front of the lookout. At first considered a catastrophe, these 235 foot towers have become an integral part of the watch, marking the exact NNE spot where the majority of migrant hawks first appear. In 1990, the lookout was threatened by development. Thanks to the efforts of many groups and individuals, but especially to former Mount Peter volunteers Fred and Wava Abbott of Orange County Audubon, the five-acre site was purchased by New York State. Also in 1990, serendipity brought Warwick Eagle Scout John Barrack to the lookout in search of a project, and with the guidance of volunteer Lew Dumont, he fulfilled one of our dreams by constructing a viewing platform across the south end of the lookout rock. This fall, Mount Peter will conduct its 42nd annual watch. It is the third longest running hawk watch in the country.

GEOGRAPHY

Situated at 41° 15' latitude and 74° 17' longitude, Mount Peter is the highest point on Bellvale Mountain in Warwick. It is part of a broken, eroded ridge that begins approximately 16 miles to the northeast as Skunnemunk (also Schunnemunk) Mountain near Cornwall- on- the- Hudson. The narrowness of the ridge and its southwest direction effectively concentrate migrant hawks until they reach the lookout. Here, they

have two choices. Most take advantage of the height they achieve over the lookout and strike out west/southwest towards the Kittatinnies. Others, especially eagles, pursue the ridge south down the west side of Greenwood Lake. However, south of the lookout the ridge spreads out considerably and updrafts and lift are lost.

The lookout faces up the ridge, NNE. To the west is the town of Warwick and a rural valley that runs for approximately 20 miles to the Shawangunk and Kittatinny mountains that are part of the Appalachians. Like a private weather channel, the miles of sky over the valley keep volunteers informed about incoming weather. The westerly winds can race unchecked until they hit the flank of Bellvale Mountain. The updrafts they create can send Sharp-shins up so fast, you'd think they were shot from cannons. To the east is a narrow valley and Tuxedo Mountain. Because of the restricted view, hawks approaching from the east can slip through undetected if a hawk watcher is alone.

WEATHER

Like most fall hawk watches in the Northeast, Mount Peter can get good flights after a cold front moves through. But if the front is followed by westerly winds, migrants will often leave the ridge north of the lookout and strike out over the valley and become lost in the haze. This is especially true of Broad-wings and Red-tails. November 12, 1983 was such a day. Mount Peter tallied 48 Red-tails on very strong west winds, while closer to the Kittatinnies west of us, Neil Currie counted over 300 raptors, mostly Red-tails, from Route 84. In September, it is the Broad-wings we lose out in the valley as hundreds kettle up and melt into the haze before they can be counted.

Sometimes south winds are good. In 1986 they brought two record Sharp-shin days, 317 on September 28 with mild SSE winds, and 337 the next day with winds out of the SW. East winds are also productive at times. They brought a near record 46 Ospreys on September 19, 1964 and 43 more on September 27, 1986. That latter date also produced a record 15 Northern Harriers, 93 Sharp-shins, and four Peregrine Falcons, altogether 243 raptors, and that was in light rain! As these examples indicate, Mount Peter's hawk migration is often unpredictable. Nevertheless, most of our daily records have been set on more traditional northwest winds.

MONITORING RAPTOR POPULATIONS

For the last 21 years, Mount Peter's fall watch has averaged 7,864 raptors and vultures of 16 species in 63 days between September 1 and November 15. Although not impressive statistics, and in spite of the low volume, Mount Peter's numbers have mirrored the ups and downs of most raptor populations detected by other Northeast sites. The watch was begun 42 years ago when the effects of DDT were just becoming apparent, and it has monitored the comeback of both Ospreys and Bald Eagles. An average of 85 Ospreys was counted prior to 1978 at Mount Peter, but that figure rose to 159 over the last 21 years, an 87% increase. Bald Eagles increased from 1.4 to an average of 8.8 since 1986, with yearly records set in 1996, 1997, and 1998 of 13, 15, and 13 respectively, records that probably reflect the successful introduction of Bald Eagles in New York State. It is especially encouraging that half of these eagles were immature.

Mount Peter recorded a dramatic increase in Sharp-shinned Hawks in 1978 when 1,073 were tallied in 280 hours. That was a 76% increase over the 462 counted in 271 hours in 1974. Other Northeast sites recorded this increase in the early 1970's. Sharpie counts remained high through the mid-1980's, when many lookouts began to record a decline. Again trailing, Mount Peter didn't detect a decline until 1992 when 921 sharpies were counted in 415 hours. Primarily adult sharpies use this ridge, so the numbers more closely reflect a breeding population and quite possibly a unique population not monitored by other sites.

Two years before sharpie numbers began to drop, Cooper's Hawks increased at Mount Peter. 1990 saw triple digits for the first time ever at the site with 118 Cooper's tallied. 1994 and 1995 toppled that record with 134 and 150 respectively. This increase in Cooper's Hawks was detected at many sites in the Northeast, and perhaps is related in some way to the decrease in sharpies.

In 1980, the watch was extended into mid-November and an increase in Northern Harriers was recorded, averaging 81 between 1980 and 1989. Since then, that average has dropped to 48, although coverage remained constant. There is no doubt that this species is in trouble. There has also been a decline in American Kestrels. Mount Peter's best daily kestrel count was 210 way back on October 11, 1965, and seasonal records (above 450) for kestrels were all made prior to 1982.

Like most eastern inland hawk watches, Mount Peter records low numbers of both Merlins and Peregrine Falcons, while coastal sites such as Fire Island, NY and Cape May, NJ log the bulk of the falcon migration.

One reason for this disparity might be that both Merlins and Peregrine Falcons, unlike the American Kestrel, winter along the east coast of the United States and not inland. Mount Peter, along with other inland watches, recorded an extraordinary number of Merlins (30) and Peregrine Falcons (21) in 1990, far above our 21-year average of 11 and 8 respectively.

Both Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawk numbers increased when the watch was extended into November. Both species are affected annually by weather patterns in late October and early November. When few fronts move through before the watch shuts down in mid-November, low numbers are recorded. The site's best year for both species was 1995, when 828 Red-tails and 109 Red-shoulders were tallied.

Turkey Vultures were first monitored at Mount Peter in 1980, and the first Black Vultures appeared five years later. Both species frequent farm fields in the valley and come and go over the lookout throughout the watch period. It isn't until mid-October, when we detect the first vultures moving directly south, that we begin to record their numbers; consequently, both are probably undercounted. Prior to 1997, the highest count of Black Vultures at any one time was six. On October 31, 1997, a record 31 thermaled over the lookout and headed south. Both 1997 and 1998 saw record numbers of this species moving south with 66 and 68 recorded, respectively.

Mount Peter records too few Rough-legged Hawks to draw any conclusions from numbers recorded. Golden Eagles were also in this category until 1993 and 1994 when 9 and 12 inexplicably used the ridge. Eight more went through in 1996, and then things returned to normal in 1997 and 1998 with one and four recorded. Mount Peter's Broad-winged Hawk flight is too erratic to be meaningful in itself, but it is exciting to see the site's tallies supporting the annual BROADWING SEPT project of Kirk and Lois Moulton. The acronym SEPT stands for SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA TRANSECT. The Moultons analyze data from all the Northeast sites, and when weather patterns push the Broad-wings westward, Mount Peter sometimes has the only significant flight.

UNUSUAL SPECIES

Including raptors and vultures, 145 different bird species have been seen from Mount Peter. The most unique include: Wood Stork, Tundra Swan, Iceland Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Western Kingbird, "Audubon's" Warbler, Pine Grosbeak, and White-winged Crossbill., almost all seen in October. The first Common Raven was recorded in 1968. The next one

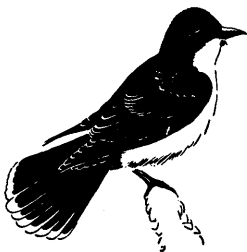
wasn't seen until 1982. Four years later, a pair was noted. By 1997, ravens were observed frequently over Mount Peter and suspected to be nesting up the ridge.

Mount Peter is conveniently located, scenic, and often not crowded in spite of increased publicity that has brought visitors from all over the country and the world. Although not wheelchair accessible, the lookout is an easy climb up a stairway and short trail from the parking lot. Anytime between September 11 and 21, after inclement weather has held back the migration, a cold front can open the floodgates and release thousands of hawks, primarily Broad-wings, but exceptional flights are rare and require patience and luck. October and November offer more variety, a stronger chance of rarities and closer encounters. From 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., September 1 to November 15, this grand procession of migrants can be enjoyed from Mount Peter. Volunteers are welcome.

Come enjoy a front row view. To reach the lookout, take Route 94 to Warwick and follow 17A up the mountain. Just past the Mount Peter ski sign, you will come to Kain Road on your left. Turn here. The entrance to the lookout is on your right, marked by a NY State sign. You can also reach the lookout from Greenwood Lake. North of the center of town, turn west up 17A. When you reach the top of the mountain, you will see "steep grade" signs on your right. Kain Road is a short distance further on your right.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since 1958, Mount Peter has been manned each fall by volunteers. It was their commitment and dedication that made this report possible. I would like to thank Stiles Thomas and Drew Panko for reviewing this report and making suggestions.



SUMMARY OF FALL MIGRATION (1958-1998)

Species	Maximum Daily Count	(Date)	Maximum Annual Count	(Year)	21-YEAR AVERAGE 1978-1998
Black Vulture	31	(10/13/97)	68	(1998)	7
Turkey Vulture	49	(10/22/98)	269	(1998)	71
Osprey	48	(09/19/93)	233	(1990)	159
Bald Eagle	4	(09/13/92)	15	(1997)	7
Northern Harrier	15	(09/27/86)	101	(1980)	67
Sharp- shinned Hawk	337	(09/29/86)	2,440	(1986)	1,483
Cooper's Hawk	28	(10/13/91)	150	(1995)	73
N. Goshawk	4	(10/13/91)	12	(3 years)	6
Red-should- ered Hawk	23	(10/16/83)	109	(1995)	54
Broad- winged Hawk	6,658	(09/21/71)	10,944	(1971)	5,097
Red-tailed Hawk	226	(10/30/95)	828	(1995)	432
Rough- legged Hawk	2	(10/22/76)	5	(1990)	1
Golden Eagle	3	10/13/94)	12	(1994)	3
Peregrine Falcon	5	(10/17/92)	21	(1990)	8
Merlin	8	(10/17/92)	30	(1990)	11
American Kestrel	210	(09/11/65)	592	(1981)	279
Total Hawks	6,787	(09/21/71)	14,468	(1981)	7,864