

FIRST RECORD OF SWAINSON'S HAWK FOR LONG ISLAND

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On Friday, September 18, 1998 Helen Hays and a volunteer crew of sixteen arrived at Great Gull Island, Suffolk County for three days of maintenance work. Great Gull Island, a field station of the American Museum of Natural History, lies seven miles east of Orient Point on the north fork of Long Island and is the site of a long-term study of nesting Common and Roseate terns (Heilbrun, 1970). After unloading the boat, Hays led the group on a tour of the island. On the way to the eastern end they encountered a large, very dark, buteo which landed atop one of the wooden blind towers. The bird was unafraid and allowed close approach. Several people, among them Margie Haggerty and Lisa Neild, were able to take pictures of the bird. There were lots of comments and tentative identifications including a barely audible "Swainson's?" from Doug Kopsco, but no definite identification was made.

The bird remained on the island all weekend. Whenever the work crew moved down the island in a line, picking up traps and nest markers, the hawk would land on one of the blinds ahead of the group. It would stay there until people were within twenty feet of it and then it would fly. On Sunday the hawk flew down from a tower about 200 feet away from where volunteers were sitting at an outside table. They heard the sound of its wings as it flew by them to seize a live Meadow Vole, (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) just beyond the table. The hawk then flew back to the tower where it ate the vole. The hawk often hovered while hunting over brushy and open areas on the island. The bird was still on the island when everyone left on Sunday, September 20.

When Alan Poole arrived on Great Gull Island on Monday, September 28 he found a buteo there matching the mystery bird in plumage and behavior. It was still on the island on Saturday, October 3 when Hays arrived with another work crew to close the island buildings for the winter. The bird continued to be inquisitive, and to land on blinds and buildings not far from people. On the last day of the weekend everyone swam off the South Beach of the island. The hawk landed on a blind overlooking the South Beach remaining there until the swimmers headed for the buildings at the center of the island. As they approached the buildings

they looked up to see the hawk landing on a tower overlooking the area. The bird seemed surprisingly unafraid, however, there were no bands or jesses which would suggest it was anything other than a wild bird.

Migrant hawks (Sharp-shinned, *Accipiter striatus*, Red-shouldered, *Buteo lineatus*, Broad-winged, *B. platypterus*, Red-tailed, *B. jamaicensis*) sometimes remain on Great Gull Island for periods of time waiting for just the right weather conditions to move on. While on the island they feed on the meadow voles and sometimes a young tern. The mystery hawk was still on the island when everyone left October 4.

Though DiCostanzo was not on the island for either of the weekends when work crews visited, he did hear about the mystery hawk from Helen Hays. When copies of photographs arrived at the Great Gull Island office at the museum in November, DiCostanzo immediately suggested it was a dark-morph, juvenile Swainson's Hawk (*B. swainsoni*). Lisa Neild's close-up color photograph (Fig. 1) shows a very dark buteo, chocolate-brown above and very heavily streaked dark chocolate-brown below. The bird has a very prominent white patch on its face immediately above the bill. The tail is marked with alternating gray and dark brown bands with the dark bands getting slightly larger toward the end of the tail. The terminal band is gray. The wings are long with the wing tips reaching slightly beyond the end of the tail when the bird is perched. A check of the collection at the museum by DiCostanzo confirmed his first impression that the bird was a dark-morph, juvenile Swainson's Hawk. The next day DiCostanzo again examined specimens, this time in the company of Dean Amadon, George Barrowclough, Carol Griffiths and Manny Levine, who all concurred in the identification. The dark-morph, juvenile Swainson's Hawk is not illustrated in the standard field guides but Wheeler and Clark (1995) describe and picture this plumage.

Swainson's Hawks are characterized by Bent (1937) and Palmer (1988) as being among the tamest of hawks. Preston (1885) reported a Swainson's Hawk boldly pouncing upon a field mouse close to his horse-drawn plough. As we moved about Great Gull Island on both weekends the hawk was always nearby. As there are over 30 blinds on the island it was easy for the bird to find a perch near us. We were not aware of frightening voles that the hawk could pick up, but it might have happened.

The Swainson's Hawk is a buteo of the open spaces (grasslands, shrublands and open woodlands) of western North America which migrates south through Mexico and Central America to its chief winter range in

southern South America (England, *et al.*, 1997). The species migrates primarily west of the Mississippi River. However, Howell (1932) noted Swainson's Hawk as a casual migrant in South Florida. Brown and Amadon (1968) report that since 1950 up to 300, almost all immatures, have wintered in South Florida. They note the birds occur on trees or fence posts overlooking fields that are being plowed, flying from these perches to pick up insects or rodents forced into the open by the plowing activity. Having examined banding records as well as specimens of Swainson's Hawk from south Florida, Browning (1974) concludes most of the birds are immatures. Roberts and Woolfenden (1992) point out numbers of Swainson's Hawk occur regularly in winter in the Keys and mainland southeast Florida, with a good deal of variation in the numbers from year to year.

Swainson's Hawk has been reported in eastern North America with increasing frequency since the 1970's (England, *et al.*, 1997). Dodge and Nicoletti (1998) note that of the fifty-three New York State records of Swainson's Hawk, forty-seven have been since 1979, two years after the formation of The Hawk Migration Association of North America. They underline the coincidence of increased sightings of Swainson's Hawk in the northeast and midwest with the increase in numbers of hawkwatching sights during the same period. Nearly all sightings of Swainson's Hawk in New York State have been at upstate hawkwatches, most in the spring. This is the first record of Swainson's Hawk from Long Island.

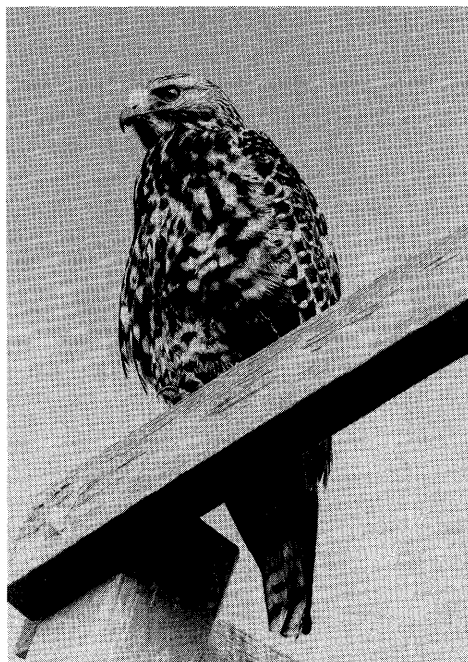
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Swainson's Hawk on Great Gull
Island 18 Sep 1998

Fig. 1 Photo by Lisa Neild