

THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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Along with an unusual number and variety of shorebirds, and a curious lack of warblers, one of the striking characteristics of this fall's bird migration has been the occurrence of several noteworthy hawk flights. No doubt such flights occur each fall but for the most part they pass over our region without being seen by many people, probably sometimes not being noticed by anyone if they happen to come on week days. They may appear anytime from the beginning of September to the middle of November depending chiefly upon favorable winds and weather. In many years there are three large flights: one in early September in which broadwings predominate; one a little later when accipitrine hawks, especially sharpshins and Cooper's make up the bulk (these two flights may be interchanged in time of occurrence); and one in mid-October composed largely of the big buteos - redtails, red shoulders, and roughlegs. Between the larger flights on suitable days will come smaller movements of anything from a dozen or so to several score hawks. There are years when the big flights do not seem to occur, and the hawks go through our area in many small flights. Possibly we miss seeing the great flights in those years, but it is equally possible that weather conditions favoring a large flight do not arise, and hence they do not happen. After all, there are some seasons when no "waves" of warblers appear, but when there is a general movement of small groups through the region there seems no good reason why other types of birds should not also pass by in a similar way at times.

The greatest flight so far this fall occurred on September 16th when the Toronto Ornithological Club was holding its annual fall field day, this year at Cherrywood and Frenchman's Bay. It was a perfect day. The sun rose whilst we were on our way to the meeting place, creating a vast panorama of molten copper pushing up into a roseate sky. The early morning wind was chill but invigorating, blowing from the north-east. A few insubstantial clouds hurried across the sky most of the day, but there were times when they were almost absent, and the sky stretched above us an immaculate dome of blue.

With the wind in that quarter we had little expectation of a hawk flight. Hence it was to our great astonishment that the greatest hawk flight we had ever seen developed around 8 a.m. and continued unabated until about 4 p.m. when the wind dropped, and the sky cleared for good. Before eight o'clock we surprised a few hawks perched in trees, but during the rest of the day the only hawk we saw perched was a sparrow hawk on a telephone pole.

By the time we got to Frenchman's Bay at ten the flight was in full force. Most of the migrants were broadwings, - in fact, one may say, it was their flight. During the day we saw over 1400 broadwinged hawks. Representatives of other species brought the total of hawks counted to upwards of 2000. These figures, it should be remembered, represent but a fraction of the birds that passed over for we made no concerted effort to watch hawks exclusively, and much of the time we were intent upon other birds. The broadwings came over mostly in great wheeling flocks that contained scores of birds circling and soaring, weaving in and out amongst their fellows. Like crazy, erratic, yet lovely pinwheels, they rotated across the sky, riding the winds toward their winter homes in the south. With the broadwings were many other hawks - sharpshins, Cooper's, red shoulders, red tails, an osprey, a peregrine falcon - but certainly it was the broadwings' day. For this day the others were just associates and also-rans. That is with one exception. Bringing up the rear of one of the great circling flocks, and apart from its gyrations, was a glorious bald eagle. Beside its majestic size the broadwings looked like sparrows; even a red shoulder was dwarfed. A fully mature bird, the eagle displayed a brilliant white head and tail, gleaming in the sun. Its bulky black body and wings, with their shining white adornments, seemed like some fantastic new aeroplane as it swept over our heads in a rushing power glide. Such a noble bird could not be over-

shadowed by more numbers. Rather, it seemed at that moment as if all the myriads that had passed during the preceding hours were but an advance guard, a proper procession, heralding the approach of the King, who now appeared in person.

Hawks were flying again on September 29th, the day of the field trip at Highland Creek, and again on a north-east wind. There were, however, no very large numbers this time, but some of those who were on the trip had the good fortune to see two bald eagles.

A year ago the largest flight of big buteos was on Saturday, October 14th. With this precedent in mind several of us went out to Frenchman's Bay and Scarborough Bluffs on the equivalent Saturday (October 13th) this year. The wind was very slightly west of north, and therefore not particularly favorable for a hawk flight. Nevertheless we spied several flying as soon as we reached the point where the route crosses O'Connor Drive. Near Highland Creek there was a big fellow beating low over the fields, first seen by Doug Miller, which we all recognized as a roughleg - the first of the fall season. Across the viaduct were two more, and one of them was the dark phase, with a black body and triangles of black reaching down to the lower body from the shoulder joints as in the turkey vulture. True, we did not see a great many hawks on this trip, but amongst those noted were seven roughlegs. One of these especially we watched for several minutes as it hunted over a meadow near the road to Frenchman's Bay. For long moments it would hover over a single spot, at times extending its legs and talons preparatory to a lightning plunge upon some hapless mouse, but drawing them in again as the prospective prey darted into a hole or some tunnel in the grass. Once it did plunge, and remained on the ground for several seconds looking carefully in the grass, only to arise without a catch. One noteworthy fact is that during the hovering process there were several occasions when this great hawk appeared to be suspended in air for a second or more without obvious vibration or other movement. At such moments its wings would be extended at a nearly perpendicular angle above the body. It gave one an uncanny feeling that the law of gravitation was being momentarily suspended for the bird's benefit. As this was a dark-phase bird another interesting phenomenon was that as its wings rose and fell the white lower parts of the underwings seemed to be narrowed in extent, and to be edged with black, appearing thus as sharply contrasting white stripes in a black wing. That this was an optical illusion could be seen as soon as the bird slowed its wing beats, or wheeled so as to be seen from directly underneath.

Seven roughlegs on the 13th of October was a very satisfactory observation. We all felt that we had done very well, for the roughleg is rarely a common sight, and in this region a year may easily go by when not a one is to be seen. None of us foresaw that on the next day a truly extraordinary flight of such hawks would occur. But so it turned out when the Saunders family was driving out with Mr. and Mrs. Greer Roberts to join other members of the club at a "woods warming" on the new estate of Dr. and Mrs. L.E. Jaquith near Terra Cotta. Over the fields near the DeHaviland airport we saw the first hawks, stopped the car, got out, and observed at very close range several rough-legs mousing. All of Saturday's sights were repeated to the delight of a new audience.

A mile beyond the airport we stopped again, this time for crows as much as for hawks. From our first observation point we had seen untold quantities of crows dotted against the clouds in a vast migration. On this second stop we were directly under the huge flocks. It was an incredible sight. As Mrs. Roberts suggested, the commonplace when multiplied to such an extent becomes the extraordinary thing. I have seen many large crow flights, but never have I known anything to compare with this. Quite literally, the sky was covered from horizon to horizon with a moving ribbon of black dots, from half a mile to a mile in width. At a most conservative estimate between 3000 and 4000 crows were in sight at one time. Considering that this migration was proceeding at a good speed, possibly 25 to 30 miles an hour, the numbers involved must have reached an almost astronomical figure. Unfortunately we had to go on, and could not stop to make a count over a longer period. Several other observers saw a part of this flight at other times during the day.

Just before we got back into the car our contemplation of the vast crow flight was interrupted by Greer's discovery of a tremendous falcon speeding from the east at a lower altitude than the crows. Its huge size was obvious at once, but a more satisfactory means of estimating its comparative size was given when a red-tailed hawk appeared alongside it. Then it was quite clear that the falcon was markedly larger than the redtail. In that case there could be no doubt that we were looking at a gyrfalcon, an extremely rare bird in this region. A few of these large falcons probably come down from the Arctic area in the later fall hawk flights with more or less regularity, but are rarely seen. The records at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania show that a few pass by almost every year. As Toronto is on one of the main hawk migration routes there is no reason why this hawk should not be seen here as well as at Hawk Mountain. The chief difficulty in observing this bird is to distinguish it from the peregrine falcon or duck hawk. With regard to this, a few measurements may be in order. They are taken from Forbush, Birds of Massachusetts and the New England States, and from May, The Hawks of North America.

<u>Species</u>		<u>Wingspread</u>
Peregrine Falcon	Male	38" - 43"
	Female	43" - 46"
Gyrfalcon (sexes not differentiated in authorities cited)		44" - 52"
Redtail	Male	46" - 50"
	Female	48" - 58"
Roughleg	Male	48" - 52"
	Female	52" - 56"

From the figures it will be seen that a large female peregrine may have a larger wingspread than a small (male) gyrfalcon, and may attain the minimal spread of a male redtail. This means that a large falcon seen alone would be impossible to identify as one or other species on the basis of wingspread alone. But, it also means clearly, that a large falcon seen in company with large buteos, when comparison is feasible, and which has a larger wingspread than a redtail, or a wingspread equal to that of a roughleg must necessarily be a gyrfalcon. The difficulty of comparative size arises, of course, only with the black gyrfalcon, the type usually seen in migration. The specimen on October 14th was such a black bird. The white gyrfalcon should be easily recognizable. Clearly, any identification of this species should be made with the greatest care, and, in the case of the dark phase only when reasonable comparison of sizes is possible.

Now that we have diverged from roughlegs to crows and to gyrfalcons let us return to our original interest. As bird watchers members of the club will understand how other birds are likely to intervene while one is watching something - hence divergences in the records. Really, it was on our return trip in the early afternoon that we got our great surprise with respect to the roughlegs. We had counted over 30 of these hawks by the time we again reached York Downs at Wilson Avenue. Then though we were in a hurry to keep an engagement, we just had to stop once more, for all over the fields, everywhere you looked were roughlegged hawks - circling, hovering, beating low over the ground, sitting in trees!! Greer and I counted 20 in sight at once with the greatest ease. And this for a bird so normally uncommon as to make the sight on one or two a thrill. Before we had left the fields via Bathurst Street we had pushed the count to a total of 68 roughlegs seen on the trip. As the Downs are a great place for meadow mice no doubt many of these hawks will stay for quite a while, some perhaps all winter. Thus this is a first-class opportunity for club members to see and study an interesting and uncommon bird.

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Since the last number of the Newsletter I have received interesting letters from two of the members of the club who have been paying early autumn visits to the Huntsville -- Parry Sound area. Mr. Eric McNeillie, writing on September 20th from Limberlost Lodge, where the F.O.N. Summer Nature School has been held on occasion, tells us that: "Following Tuesday's heavy rain yesterday brought a good-sized bird movement from the

north. We saw a number of myrtle and black-throated green warblers, and red-breasted nuthatches. I counted 40 juncoes in one group (as I write a white-throated sparrow is singing nearby).

"Frequently bluebirds are to be seen or heard in the abandoned clearings. White-breasted nuthatches, chickadees, flickers and bluejays are numerous. Yesterday a flock of 28 bluejays flew overhead at Interlaken. We had just stopped our car at the edge of Long Lake to admire the view when, not 12 feet from us, around a bend in the shoreline, stepping carefully, came a great blue heron. Everyone concerned was amazed. When the heron recovered from its surprise it flew a few yards along the shore and there continued its hunt for food. Later it flew to the roof of a boat house where it perched for a few minutes, but not liking the look of things it flew across the narrow stretch of land to Oxbow Lake and carried on its hunting. We were able to watch it for some time and the last we saw of the heron was when it was flying over the water to the far shore of Oxbow ...

"We have not been fortunate enough as yet to see a bear or deer although their marks are plentiful on the trails. We flushed a pair of ruffed grouse on the edge of the road yesterday afternoon. Five American mergansers inhabit the lake in front of Limberlost. Most of the small lakes hereabouts boast a pair of loons. Their cries add an extra touch to this scenic paradise for all those who truly love the out-of-doors."

Writing from Beaver Lake, Parry Sound, On October 6th, Mrs. Elma F. Williams says: "...after enduring very frosty weather (but no snow) and a couple of days of steady rain, we have had delightful days of weather so mild that we could eat out on the screened porch.

"Added to all this we have watched the forest turn from solid green on our arrival to a lovely panorama of gold and russet and red mingling with the dark green of pines and gleaming trunks of white birches.

"The bird world has been most interesting too, surprisingly so for this late in the season. The broadwinged hawk is in his usual haunts, also the great blue heron. At the same marsh a pair of phoebes were seen one day, and of course the white-throated and white-crowned sparrows are along the roadways and in the adjacent shrubbery.

"In the pines at the cabin we have a daily morning call from a male hairy woodpecker, and yesterday morning after much calling from the woods the pileated flew over our lake and cabin. A flock of golden-crowned kinglets arrived in the pines at the cabin one day. Ten to eleven seemed the hour for bird activity. I noticed here. Chickadees are here all the time. This morning to my delight we had a small detachment of thrushes arrive, in which we picked out hermits, olive-backed and a veery. It was a great treat to watch them as I washed them, or at any rate was there at the same time.

"On October 3rd, I had quite a thrill in observing a flock of pipits, about 30 or 40 I should say, some very close at hand down by the marsh. I had never seen them well before. That same day my son Vaughan called me out to see a tremendous V of wild geese, I would think easily 100 in number, flying in perfect formation quite high up, going westward. He had heard them honking and looked up to see what was making the noise."

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Richard M. Saunders

Editor.