

Big Day at Pelham Bay

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*Many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first
Matthew 19:30*

I vaguely remember arriving at the hawkwatch on that Monday morning, September 17, 1990: it was 5:25am, still dark. Someone had once told me that at Fire Island, the falcons moved in the twilight. So on this day I did not want to miss a Merlin, much less be accused of favoring the soaring hawks over those that cut the air.

At 6:02am, ring-billed and herring gulls began flying from their offshore roosts in the Long Island Sound toward feeding grounds of the west Bronx. At 6:06am a nighthawk emerged from oak/sassafras woods and 6:10am brought the first signs of flying insects. Crows began making short flights at 6:16am, while a lone osprey passed about 35 feet overhead at 6:35am. Nothing much happened in terms of migration for the next two hours or so, save a loon heading west at 7:15am.

Local ospreys began hunting for fish at 7:18am, and they returned carrying 8 to 12 inch fish from other areas of the park at 7:22, 8:00, 8:20 and 8:34am. (During the previous two weeks, Ospreys had been observed hitting the water 222 times in the area of the hawkwatch and catching 70 fish, about a 32% success rate.) Joe and Virginia Sbano arrived at 8:30am. Mike Culhane drifted in at 9:15am. By 10:00am we had only counted 11 Osprey, 1 Northern Harrier, 4 Sharp-shinned hawks and 6 American Kestrels. We passed the time watching model airplanes zoom overhead and a flock of Canada Geese walking in procession to pools of freshwater in the parking lot. A Police Department helicopter practiced landings and takeoffs with Dobermans until 9:45am. Joe Sbano spotted a small kettle of 46 Broad-winged Hawks at 10:30am, but overall, it remained quiet.

The flight hit between 11am and Noon in the strong 12-20mph north-northwest winds. Kettles of Broad-wings would come in low over Hunter's Island from New Rochelle (north) and proceed to thermal up over Orchard Beach and the parking lot. Two Bald Eagles, one an adult, arrived at the fore of 1,080 streaming Broad-wings. Another immature eagle, being dived at by Broad-wings came through. Tom Renner, Bob Ruckh and Ernie arrived. A fourth eagle passed low overhead also being bombarded by Broad-wings. I decided to ask Mike Culhane to count hawks for a few minutes so that I could take some photographs of what we were seeing. I figured I'd better get some evidence because no one would believe what was happening.

Mike would start out counting just fine: "One, two, five, ten, etc." Then there was a pause and the numbers would get more spaced out: "Twenty-five, one hundred, A Lot! Too Many! Holy Bleep! Bleep-Bleep Bob! There are at least bleeping bleep-bleep hundred! No wait! Maybe bleeping, bleep-bleep-bleep thousand bleeping hawks.

I finally got finished taking the bleeping photographs and got back to counting the chaos in the skies above. There were indeed a lot of hawks at all heights above us. There were more birds than any of the people who stood there had seen before in their collective lives. Huge masses of birds were swirling up and streaming away, and we could still see more to the north on their way. Later I would happen to look over again at Mike. He had the most delightful expression of joy and pain in his eyes. In essence he was right. Trying to put a number on what we were witnessing did seem beside the point...

In the Noon to 1:00pm hour the cloud cover increased and the kettles became easier to see. From Noon till 4:00pm we tallied a conservative 10,210 Broad-wings. Interestingly, as the Broad-wings gained altitude over Hunter's Island and the parking lot, they were pushed by the wind to the southeast (and toward the Long Island Sound). Although some kettles continued along the shore of the Sound, the majority of the Broad-wings

streamed out to the west and northwest -- almost directly into the wind. It is my guess that these Broad-wings chose a route following Pelham Parkway/Fordham Road. These birds may then have crossed the Hudson River somewhere in the area of Inwood Hill Park or Riverdale. Indeed, on the following day, Paul Rodewald from Wildlife Conservation International of the Bronx Zoo told us that on his lunch hour he had counted about 1,500 Broad-wings going west over the Zoo and nearby Botanical Gardens.

At 4:30pm, Peter Gustas spotted a lone immature Bald Eagle soaring overhead. It was our fifth eagle of the day. At 4:35pm, Hugh Martin pulled in and we followed this eagle for several minutes before it also went west. Pete then began watching some Broad-wings going west over us at 4:44pm. It was the beginning of a streaming kettle. At 5:05pm we counted the last of this group, roughly 2,575 in all. After another kettle of about 350 Broad-wings passed at 5:25pm, the hawks stopped coming. At 5:40pm, we packed up and left.

The final tally of the day:

Osprey - 61
Bald Eagle - 5 (two adults; three immatures)
Northern Harrier - 5
Sharp-shinned Hawk - 69
Broad-winged Hawk - 15,459
American Kestrel - 26
Total - 15, 625



Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)
First-year Bird on migration south