



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Birds stop to take a breather from migration

Thursday, October 18, 2007

James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

Birds are a lot like people. Both tend to congregate along scenic beachfronts and neither like to travel in nasty weather.

I spent four days last week at an idyllic resort on the East Coast that, every autumn, attracts birders from all over the world to witness a breathtaking migration phenomenon.

Nowhere else will you find a greater concentration of migrating birds than Cape May, N.J., the self-proclaimed Raptor Capital of North America located on the southern tip of the state.

Falcons, hawks and eagles, joined by multitudes of sparrows, warblers and swallows, follow a migratory flyway down the Atlantic Coast on their journey southward. Birders congregate at a succession of beaches, fields and overlooks to enjoy the sights and sounds of the aerial spectacle.

Inclement weather the first day of my visit spelled sadness for the crowds of tourists who flocked to Cape May for the annual Victorian Week festival, but caused excitement for all of the birders who congregated at the hawk watch platform by Lighthouse Point.

Stiff winds and skittering dark clouds out of the northwest made air travel treacherous, and forced the raptors out of the sky and down to the treetops for ideal viewing conditions.

Birders pray for these days, thrilling to the sight of merlins, American kestrels and peregrine falcons diving at eye level like F-14 fighter jets at an air show.

It was difficult to look in any direction without spotting a bird of prey. Northern harriers glided across the tops of marsh reeds, ready to pounce if they encountered a rodent or snake left exposed. Ospreys hovered over the salt marshes, occasionally diving and rising with fish locked in their talons. Bald eagles, broad-winged hawks and vultures circled overhead, riding the wind currents.

On our second day, the skies cleared, the winds calmed and the temperatures warmed - perfect conditions for migrating buteo and accipiter hawks. Falcon numbers waned while Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks became abundant, some zipping past in pursuit of prey, others leisurely buffeted by breezes.

Cape May's leading ambassador, Pete Dunne - the bard of birding - welcomed visitors to the hawk watch platform, sharing wisdom and renewing old acquaintances. His trained ears picked up a bobolink flying overhead with a flock of Eastern meadowlarks, several indigo buntings and an American pipit - birds we otherwise would have missed.

Dunne assisted birders having difficulty distinguishing Cooper's hawks from sharp-shinneds at a distance, pointing out that sharp-shinneds sometimes travel in pairs or groups, and often flap their wings, appearing like a flickering candle. Cooper's are gliders that disdain flapping, and almost always fly solo.

The official hawk-counter on the platform tallied more than 400 sharp-shinneds and kestrels, more than 100

ospreys, Cooper's and merlins, and dozens of peregrines and harriers.

Not included in the count were the masses of songbirds, shorebirds, waterfowl and passerines that also migrate through Cape May. Parasitic jaegers, surf and black scoters, and common loons dashed by over the waves in the ocean. Flocks of greater and lesser yellowlegs, willets and marbled godwits congregated in the marshes. Palm and yellow-rumped warblers flitted about with swamp, white-throated and Savannah sparrows, ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets, and red-breasted nuthatches.

If you decide to take an October vacation to Cape May, remember to pack sweaters and rain jackets along with your shorts and Hawaiian shirts because you wouldn't want to miss what may be the birding trip of a lifetime.

For information, check out these Web sites: www.njaudubon.org, www.birdcapemay.org.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

© 2007 The Plain Dealer

© 2007 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.