

Birding Mount Agamenticus

Scott Cronenweth

Mount Agamenticus is my mountain: I love and appreciate it in every way I can. Nearly every week, in every season of the year, I visit my dear Mount A to bird-hike, dog-walk, snowshoe, cross-country ski, census frogs, stargaze, watch fireworks, picnic, or just sit and watch the leaf-peepers, mountain bikers, horseback riders, kite-flyers, and ORV-ers. There are many ways to connect with this lovely place. Still, whenever I think of my mountain, I think first of the hawks. Local Red-tails kiting on territory. Broadwings streaming out of distant kettles. Sharpies and Coops hugging the summit contour. Ospreys drifting coastwise, carrying fish. A lone Peregrine Falcon loping south in a snow squall. An American Kestrel preening as I lift a child toward my scope. Merlin on a tree-top bomb run. A far-off Bald Eagle, rock-steady on the screaming wind. Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle, Black Vulture, Gyrfalcon. They all visit Mount A. For me, the drama of their lives is where the story of my mountain begins and ends.



Although Mount Agamenticus is Maine's most well-known fall hawkwatch site, the mountain and its trail network are infrequently birded in other seasons. Most folks come for the views or the hawks and never leave the summit. But for those who don't mind venturing down a trail or two, Mount A is the nexus of a natural area whose diversity and gentle beauty offer solitude, adventure, and yes, outstanding birding. This write-up describes the local hawkwatching scene, along with some recommendations for general birding on the mountain in any season. Whenever you get here, you'll be glad you came.

A 692-foot monadnock, Mount A rises like one of Popeye's biceps from the surrounding coastal plain. "Agamenticus," by the way, is ostensibly a Native American word meaning "the other side of the river" – but I have no clue what river they meant! A mere hill by peak-bagging standards, Mount A is nevertheless the highest terrain in southwestern Maine. The view from the drive-up summit is wonderfully panoramic. On the finest fall mornings, Mount Washington and the peaks of the Presidentials loom in the northwest, while the coastal vista arcs from Halibut Point north to Cape Elizabeth and beyond. When the fog rolls in off the ocean, you'll do well to relocate your car in the parking lot.

Most reasonably clear days reveal Mount Chocorua to the west, the Kennebunks to the northeast, and Kittery to the south. Punctuating your view are a fire tower (a favorite roost for Turkey Vultures), a horse stable operated by the Town of York, and the obligatory cell tower array. During World War II the mountain was home to a radar base, and up to twenty-five military personnel were stationed here. The summit was also home to a ski area. Defunct since 1974, little remains but the lodge building

and a concrete lift stanchion that we hope will soon serve as the base for our hawkwatch platform. From the elevated porch of the summit lodge you can take in all of this, plus the serene woods and ponds of the surrounding towns of York and South Berwick.

Nearly 30,000 acres in size, the Mount Agamenticus region represents the largest intact coastal forest between Acadia National Park and the New Jersey Pine Barrens. More than 8000 acres on and around the mountain are currently under some form of environmental protection, and organizations like The Nature Conservancy, the York Land Trust, and the Great Works Regional Land Trust have made the rapid acquisition of up to 8000 more acres one of Maine's top land conservation priorities.

Several varieties of southern hardwoods, including chestnut oak, shagbark hickory, and flowering dogwood, reach the northern limit of their range on Mount A and are found nowhere else in Maine. Equally important are its wetlands. The Agamenticus region may have the highest concentration of vernal pools on the planet – critical breeding habitat for obligate species like wood frog, spotted salamander, and fairy shrimp. For state-endangered plants and animals such as Blanding's turtle, spotted turtle, swamp darter, and ringed boghaunter (a dragonfly), Mount A's ponds and cedar swamps may soon represent the last refuge of a viable population.

In short, Mount A is a natural gem equal to any place on the New England coastline, and a must-visit spot for birders and other naturalists. It is only a ninety-minute drive from metro Boston, and it is easy to combine a visit to Agamenticus with a trip to other nearby birding hot spots like Kennebunk Plains, Biddeford Pool, Scarborough Marsh, the Cliff House, or the Marginal Way.

Hawkwatching on Mount Agamenticus

To join the Mount A hawkwatch crew, simply drive up the short, twisty summit road to the end. Park in the gravel lot on your right (no fee); the lot on the left is for those renting horses. Pull up a picnic table, deploy your optics, and enjoy! An organized watch has covered Mount A in the past. Currently our coverage is a more ad hoc affair. Chances are you will find a kindred spirit or two, although on a weekday morning you might have the place to yourself.

If you are here for a peak Broadwing experience, your tally of hawks could well be in the thousands. But Mount A is not Cape May. A hundred hawks make a good fall day here. Perhaps twenty-five birds in a morning make for a solid spring flight. Even under decent conditions, the virtual absence of raptors is less than rare. What this site offers, more often than sheer numbers, is an opportunity for great looks at a wide range of raptor species. The mountain's location, five miles from the coast, east of the White Mountains, and considerably higher than the surrounding wooded terrain, brings on everything from ridge-hugging accipiters to thermal-seeking buteos to wandering eagles. Many individuals use the summit itself for whatever thermal or reflected lift it offers or exploit more powerful thermals that form on the comparatively flat ground to the north. Often, birds are in view for several minutes as they come on toward the summit, allowing for leisurely IDs.

As at most hawkwatch sites, local weather conditions play a key role in the strength of the hawk flight. Not surprisingly, the best winds are north-to-northwest throughout the fall, and south-to-southwest in spring. Early migrants that rely on optimum soaring conditions, in particular, Broadwings, typically are seen in higher numbers on mild days with moderate northwest winds (12-



RED-TAILED HAWK, SHAWN CAREY

20 mph). These conditions allow thermals to form and also provide a tailwind for birds gliding south. A westerly component to the wind, particularly when sustained over several days, helps push birds traveling east of the White Mountains closer to the coast. By the same token, an overabundance of west winds (above 20 mph) in late September can make the Mount A summit a raptor-free zone, while coastal spots like Laudholm Farm in nearby Wells are racking up nice accipiter flights.

As the fall season progresses, higher wind velocities become increasingly favorable. The mountain and its adjacent north-south ridges reflect these winds upward, creating significant lift. Hawkwatch stalwarts have been heard to say that the best October flights on Mount A happen when strong cold fronts bring brisk northwest winds that make the guy wires on the fire tower hum. On days like this you might want to anchor your scope with tent stakes! By mid-October most of the birds have gone by, and those that remain are increasingly spread across the region. Conditions become harsh, and hawkwatch reports dwindle. Yet this is a time of strong Red-tail flights, perhaps accompanied by surges of the larger falcons and a smattering of Coops and Shoulders. And there's nothing like a distant, would-be Red-tail gradually transforming itself into a summit-hugging Goshawk to warm the heart and fingers of the hardy raptor fan.

To give you an idea of how awe-inspiring the mountain can be on the best of days, here's an unofficial report from Friday, September 22, 2000: 3,000+ Broad-winged Hawks, 92 Ospreys, 43 American Kestrels, 24 Merlins, 43 Red-tailed Hawks, 22 Sharp-shinned Hawks, 3 Cooper's Hawks, 2 Northern Harriers, 1 Northern Goshawk, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk (possibly local), and a lone Bald Eagle. This was one of the best hawk flights ever recorded on Mount A, leaving us exhausted with sheer happiness. I recall that the strongest push came on around 11 a.m., and that the birds kept moving well into the evening, with kettles still forming as I staggered home around 4 p.m., leaving my colleagues glued to their scopes.

As can be true of stellar flights at many New England hawkwatches, this one-day tally eclipses the site totals for more than a few entire seasons on the mountain. Data reported to HMANA (the Hawk Migration Association of North America) for the

years 1981 to 1994, for example, show an average of about 40 birds per observer hour, with annual totals averaging about 4100 raptors (including Turkey Vultures) over 129 observer-hours. Broad-winged Hawks were by far the most numerous species seen, with 2159 counted annually on average. Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, and Osprey are the next most common species, averaging 733, 471, and 330 counted, respectively. Less common species during that time included Northern Goshawk (16 per year), Red-shouldered Hawk (18 per year), and Peregrine Falcon (16 per year). More recent data – at least what I was able to obtain for this article – may be less comprehensive, but it would be interesting to note whether comparative declines and increases might be noted for species like Goshawk, and Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, in line with speculated regional trends. With regard to the true rarities, a Golden Eagle is spotted perhaps once every couple of years on Mount A, and a bona fide Gyrfalcon maybe once a decade. Black Vulture is not unprecedented and will no doubt be seen more often as the species expands its range to the north.

Here's a cross section of recent outstanding daily totals for various species: 1836 Broad-winged Hawks (9/16/00); 4 Northern Goshawks (10/12/99); 5 Red-shouldered Hawks (9/15/96); 93 Sharp-shinned Hawks (9/25/99); 20 Cooper's Hawks (9/23/99); 99 Ospreys (9/25/99); 21 Bald Eagles – wow! (9/14/99); 15 Northern Harriers (9/13/89); 32 Turkey Vultures (9/25/99); 6 Peregrine Falcons (9/25/99); 31 Red-tailed Hawks (10/12/99); 3 Rough-legged Hawks (11/6/99); 2 Golden Eagles (10/22/87); 129 American Kestrels (10/1/87); 30 Merlins (10/12/99); 1 Gyrfalcon (10/3/99).

Perhaps it's just my experiential bias, but my sense is that migrating raptors exploit thermal lift around Mount Agamenticus in many of the same ways they do at my former scoping grounds on Mount Watatic, in Ashburnham, MA. Both peaks constitute big bumps on comparatively flat terrain, flanked by one or more north-south ridges, and are positioned to attract birds moving east of the White Mountains. Both mountains generate thermals on their flat, tree-free summits, and both create similar reflected lift by virtue of their topography. Both also produce their share of surprise raptors (notably Sharpies, in my experience) behind the observers on the back side of the summit, particularly late in the day. This is a result of the uplift created by the rejoining of wind currents disrupted by the north-facing side of the mountain itself.

One difference between Agamenticus and Watatic, I suppose, is that conditions around Mount A are regularly affected by onshore breezes. According to the lore of glider pilots, when the temperature differential between the warmer land and the cooler water is great enough, and the ambient wind speed is low, a rising wall of air,



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK. SHAWN CAREY

essentially a convection current, may form along the coast, creating a narrow plateau of lift. On some days these conditions might steer birds inland far enough to be seen from Mount A. And, indeed, we frequently spot birds soaring, or gliding at high altitude, between Mount A and the ocean. No doubt many birds that choose that route go undetected.

Before we leave the hawkwatch and begin our general birding hike, please bear with some practical reminders. Bring water and food: there is none for sale on the summit. A port-a-john may be present in summer through early fall, but don't count on it. Bring extra clothing layers, too. Mount A's weather can be surprisingly distinct from the nearby coast, with comparatively lower temperatures and stronger winds on many days. This is especially true in the chillier months, which here in Maine can extend from October through April. Gloves and warm boots are a good hedge against discomfort, since you'll be standing on grass that may be wet or muddy and has been known to harbor both deer and wood ticks.

General Birding Suggestions

With its broad diversity of forest cover and pocket wetlands, Mount A offers an interesting mix of migrants, nesting species, and winter visitors. My most surprising find on the mountain so far is two Sandhill Cranes, seen at a distance one fine hawkless morning in late September 2000. Just as my mind finally wrapped itself around what my eyes were seeing, I managed to knock my scope over. Personal favorite sight records also include Evening Grosbeaks in June, Common Redpolls in winter, and a fine mix of boreal warblers in spring. Other observers have reported Whip-poor-will, American Golden-Plover, Common Nighthawk, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Purple Martin, Northern Shrike (typically in November), American Pipit (October), and Snow Bunting (November). Both cuckoos are regular, if elusive, as is Great Horned Owl. Irruptive finches are as likely here as anywhere, especially during the breeding season.

The renovated, well-marked Mount A trail system is highly birder-friendly. You can walk any distance you like and cover a range of interesting terrain without retracing your steps. The routes I'll suggest offer maximum flexibility, with tips for early morning strolls in the spring, when passerine diversity is likely to be highest. Please keep in mind that many of the trails are rocky, steep, boggy, heavily eroded, and quite possibly all of the above. In other words: it is best to wear boots. Please remember also that this is a multi-use area, and that trails are open to a combination of bikes, horses, and off-road vehicles in addition to hikers. You'll do well to pick up a trail map and stay on the marked trails. The informal trail network in these parts goes on for miles in every direction, and false trails abound. Many people (including me!) have gotten very, very lost around Mount A.

The Summit and Summit Road

No birding visit to Mount A would be complete without a stop at the summit area. Whatever the season, scan the sky for raptors: Red-tailed Hawk, Turkey Vulture, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, and

probably Sharp-shinned Hawk are all local nesters and/or winter residents. Ditto Common Raven. Other nonraptors we've seen from time to time at the fall hawkwatch include Snow Goose, Common Loon, Double-crested Cormorant, and Great Blue Heron. Watch also for Chipping Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, White-throated Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Dark-eyed Junco, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher, Baltimore Oriole, Tree Swallow, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow-rumped Warbler, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, and Cedar Waxwing. Less common visitors include Indigo Bunting and Red-breasted Nuthatch. Golden-crowned Kinglet may be present in early winter during some years, while Ruby-crowned is most likely in spring. American Pipit is quite possible in October.

While you are here, don't neglect to climb the steps on the right side of the summit lodge and enjoy the view to the east. You might also want to take a few strides along the Vulture View Trail, which tumbles down the north face of the mountain. I've spished up Nashville, Wilson's, Canada, Prairie, Chestnut-sided, and Magnolia warblers here in spring.

If you are around on a chilly spring morning, you can find some of the most productive birding in the east-facing trees right along the summit road (0.4 miles one way, end-to-end). Walk down as far as you like and simply head back up, keeping an eye out for warblers and other migrant passerines in the sunny spots. You could happen upon just about anything here. Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Tennessee, Cape May, and other boreal warbler species are all distinct possibilities in season. Birding the summit road by car is strongly discouraged, since the road is full of tight, blind turns and there is no shoulder.

Here's another option, if you'd rather not retrace your steps: at roughly 0.25 mile from the summit, you will see a small pull-off on your right, with a trail marker and a box for trail maps. This is the Ring Trail (described below), which circles the mountain below the summit and enables you to walk as far as you like before returning.

The Ring Trail

One excellent way to bird-hike Mount A is via the Ring Trail, which girds the mountain and serves as a hub for the region's official trail network. The Ring Trail itself covers a total distance of 1.5 miles. You can bird it at a leisurely pace in under ninety minutes, hiking back up any one of numerous marked side trails to return to the summit at any point.

My favorite way to access the Ring Trail from the summit is via the Witch Hazel Trail, a short (0.1 mile) spur that begins on the east side of summit, near the east-facing corner of the lodge. It is an easy, downhill hike through second-growth mixed woodland. Near the junction with the Ring Trail is one of the largest hemlock trees you will ever stand under. Witch hazel is abundant near the summit end of the trail, and the generally uncommon chestnut oak is easy to find along the way. As you move from the grassy summit into the woods, be on the lookout for the likes of Ruffed Grouse, Pine, Black-throated Green, and Black-throated Blue warblers, Ovenbird,

Northern Parula, Red-eyed and Blue-headed vireos, Hermit Thrush, Veery, Wood Thrush, Brown Creeper, Scarlet Tanager, Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, and other species typical of northern New England mixed woodlots. Wild Turkey was first reintroduced to Maine in this general area in 1977-1978, following its extirpation many decades earlier. (If the number of turkeys I've seen in my yard is any indication, the species has rebounded handily.)

At the end of the Witch Hazel Trail, turn left onto the Ring Trail and proceed northwest across the former ski slopes. In general, trails on the east side of the mountain are steeper and rockier, while those on the west side offer more gradual ascents. Hemlock and other conifers seem to constitute an increasingly high percentage of the forest as the trail jogs downslope. The mix of woods and understory changes constantly as you move across cut-over remains of the old ski slopes, which feature dense pockets of ferns and saplings. After you pass the Horse Trail on your left, the mountainside becomes increasingly steep, and the canopy opens up somewhat. As you move along, watch for signs of resident mammals like coyote, red fox, raccoon, striped skunk, porcupine, black bear, moose, white-tailed deer, southern flying squirrel, Virginia possum, snowshoe hare, and fisher.

Just past the Wintergreen Trail on your left, there is a fine overlook out to the west, where you might easily spy a local raptor cruising its territory. The view encompasses Bickel Mountain, Warren Hill, and the woods, ponds, and marshes of South Berwick.

If you are hungry and it happens to be midsummer, keep your eyes peeled for the aptly named Blueberry Bluff Trail, which leads up behind the stables and back to the summit. The



SOUTHERN FLYING SQUIRREL. DAVID LARSON

crop varies from year to year, but if you hit it right you'll have more of those yummy little low-bush blueberries than you could ever eat. The trail itself, 0.3 mile in length, winds steeply over the exposed rocky flank of the mountain, offering fine views to the southwest. This is the place to look for bear tracks and scat.

Where it crosses the paved summit road, the Ring Trail jogs downhill to the right before reentering the woods. To continue on the Ring Trail, walk down on the summit road for about thirty yards. Reenter the woods at the unmarked trail junction on the left (east) side of the road. A few steps thereafter you will come to an unmarked Y-intersection. Bear right, and you will shortly see a trail marker. Turn left here to proceed along the Ring Trail as it moves steeply upslope and skirts the east side of the mountain, initially paralleling the summit road. This is a surprisingly lively birding area where I have consistently heard or seen Yellow-Billed Cuckoo, Great Horned Owl, various warblers, and Purple Finch. Be alert, and yield to mountain bikers

coming downhill here. At the unmarked Y-intersection partway up the hill, keep to your right. The left fork returns you to the summit road.

When you come to the little wooden bridge, your loop on the Ring Trail is complete. Turn left to take the Witch Hazel Trail back to the summit.

A Longer Hike

For those wishing to take a longer hike to one of the prettiest parts of the Mount A area, try the Chestnut Oak Trail. Its unmarked west end, which can be hard to spot, veers off from the Ring Trail about forty yards past the marked junction with the Goosefoot Trail, just before the trail levels out and turns to the left. Follow the Chestnut Oak Trail to its end, then turn left and follow the Porcupine Trail over to Second Hill (555 feet). This two-hour round-trip hike will reward you with pretty views and looks at vernal pools amid the northernmost oak/hickory forest in New England. But please don't undertake it without a trail map, compass, water, and sturdy boots.


Field Notes

If you are inclined to keep a daily field card or HMANA data sheet when you visit Mount Agamenticus or other spots south of Portland, the York County chapter of the National Audubon Society would be interested in your observations. Please forward sightings of general interest to Donald Tucker at dtucker@gwi.net. Thanks in advance!

Getting to Mount Agamenticus

The Mount Agamenticus summit is located in the town of York, Maine. Those coming from the south should proceed up I-95 North through New Hampshire and into Maine. Just before the first tollbooth in Maine, turn off at Exit 4 (The Yorks / Ogunquit). Take the left fork off the exit ramp. (For those coming down I-95 from the north, this same exit is numbered Exit 1; turn right at the top of the ramp, and follow these same directions.) Proceed 0.2 mile; turn right just before the park-and-ride lot onto Chase's Pond Road. After 3.8 miles, Mountain Road intersects Chases Pond Road from the right; thereafter it is called Mountain Road. Don't turn right here, or you will cross back over I-95; instead, follow the road around to the left as it climbs uphill. Continue another 2.7 miles to the base of the Mount A summit road. If the road turns to dirt under your tires, you've gone a few yards past the summit access.

An alternative route, if you happen to be on Route 1 (the "coast road" hereabouts), is to turn onto Mountain Road across from the famous Flo's Hot Dog stand in York. Follow Mountain Road until it intersects Chase's Pond Road, and follow the directions above. All these roads are shown on Map 1 of the DeLorme Maine Atlas.

As you leave the mountain, you may wish to honor the spirits of this gentle land by placing a stone on the ever-growing cairn that marks the grave of Saint Aspinquid, a legendary local medicine man. The placard commemorating his burial is adjacent to the northeast corner of the summit parking lot. 

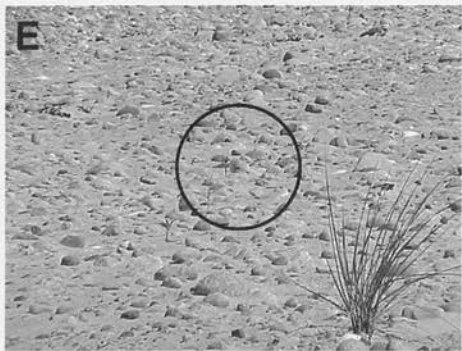
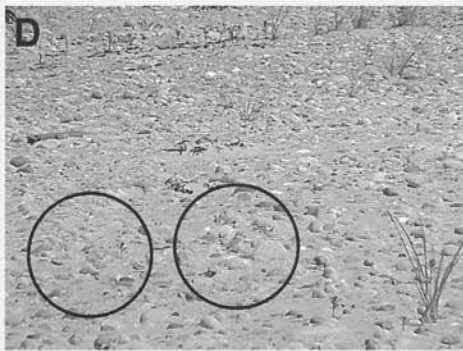
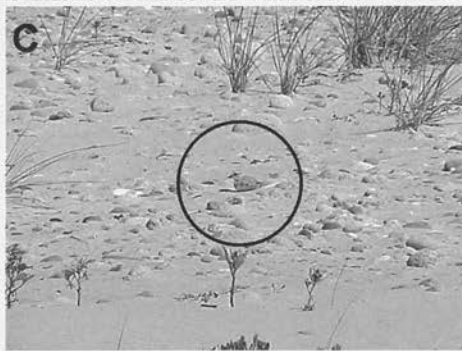
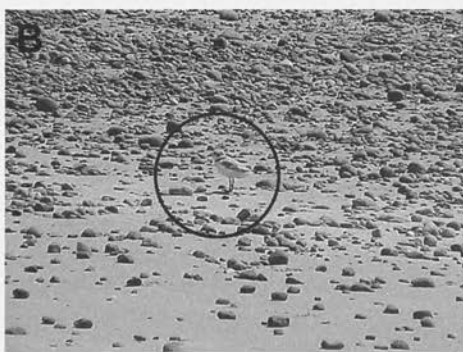
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Alternate Photo Quiz Answers: Piping Plovers on the Beach

(from *Bird Observer* 30 (4), p. 257)



DAVID LARSON

Locating the birds in images A, B, and C is fairly straightforward. Not only are they centered, but they contrast fairly well with the background. Image D is tricky since it includes two plovers, and they are both juveniles. In image E, the single bird is centered again, but it is facing away, sitting, and partially obscured by a rock.