

WHERE TO WATCH HAWKS IN MASSACHUSETTS:

An Introduction

by Paul M. Roberts, Somerville

Traditionally during September most Massachusetts birders devote at least one day to hawk-watching. Usually that time is spent in the Connecticut River Valley at Mount Tom, long recognized as one of the best hawk observation points in the northeast. Not only is it an excellent place from which to watch the large broadwing flights of September, it usually produces good numbers of every species of hawk commonly seen in the northeast. Goat Peak Tower is the best observation point on the mountain during the fall migration. The birds often come in towards the tower at or below eye level. A new lookout has recently been cleared near the old steel structure but it does not offer the view available from the tower, which is often packed with birders during the season. (For specific directions to Mount Tom and the other lookouts mentioned below, see the conclusion of this article.)

If you want to avoid the crush on Goat Peak, there are two excellent but less famous observation sites within relatively short driving time of Mount Tom. Quabbin Reservoir is well-known among birders for its winter residents, Bald and occasionally Golden Eagles, but it is also an excellent location from which to observe the fall hawk migration. The best observation point there is the Quabbin Hill Lookout Tower. A less well-known site is "Blueberry Hill" in West Granville, approximately three miles west of Granville Center off Route 57. If you normally take the Mass. Pike to Mt. Tom, "Blueberry Hill" is not much farther from the Pike than Mount Tom, though in a different direction. It regularly produces some of the largest Broad-winged Hawk counts in the state, and offers plenty of space.

However, there is no need to drive to the Connecticut Valley or beyond to observe the hawk migration. Last year the Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch learned that there were substantial hawk flights through the eastern half of the state, especially the northeast quarter. Though our data is limited to one year's migration, probably the best observation point within an hour's drive of Boston is the Mount Wachusett State Reservation in Princeton. Wachusett possesses several advantages for the local birder, not the least of which is that it is relatively close to home. This prominent monadnock offers clear views in all directions and appears to be especially rewarding during the broadwing migration. One can drive to the summit, where there is ample space for a large number of birders. Picnic tables and charcoal grills are scattered about the mountain for those who enjoy leisurely hawk-watching. (The summit road does not open officially until 10 a.m. If you want to reach the summit before 10, park at the reservation gate, being careful to avoid blocking the road. Hike southeast down Mountain Road a short distance, past the park headquarters, and take your first obvious trail up the mountain to your right, Pine Hill Ski Trail. This trail follows a fairly steep old ski slope for 1/2 mile to the summit.)

Some fifteen miles to the north of Mt. Wachusett is Mount Watatic, off Route 119 in Ashburnham. The southern terminus of the Wapack Trail,

Watatic also offers clear views in all directions, but its summit is accessible by foot only. A steep half-mile hike to the summit is the quickest ascent. A much more gentle climb, 1 1/2 miles long, is furnished by an abandoned road up the west slope of the mountain.

If you are willing to drive a short distance into southern New Hampshire, the northern terminus of the Wapack Trail, Pack Monadnock, offers two excellent observation sites. Located on Route 101 east of Peterborough, South Pack Monadnock, in Miller State Park, has an auto road to the summit. The park charges a 50¢ per person admission fee, but the birder has the convenience of sitting at picnic tables with clear views to the north. Charcoal grills, water fountains and washrooms are close by. If you're an ambitious hiker, you might consider hiking slightly more than two miles across a ridge joining the south and north peaks of Pack Monadnock. One often finds the hawks swooping in quite close to the barren summit of North Pack.

Returning to Massachusetts, there are a number of good observation sites within half-an-hour's drive of Boston. Boston Hill in North Andover and Holt Hill (Charles W. Ward Reservation) in Andover both proved to be good locations last year. Boston Hill can be reached by an easy climb up a ski path from the Boston Hill Ski Area parking lot on Route 114, or by a more circuitous route from the Ward Reservation parking lot. Holt Hill is reached by a leisurely hike from the Ward Reservation parking lot on Prospect Road off Route 125. If you prefer a site wholly accessible by automobile, Silver Hill in Haverhill should prove worthwhile during September. Its one drawback is that its summit provides an unobstructed view of the less attractive features of the urban landscape.

During September and October, you may see good numbers of accipiters, eagles, northern harriers, Osprey and falcons from a number of locations along the coast, including Salisbury Beach State Reservation, Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island and Crane's Reach, Ipswich. The salt pans on Plum Island are one of the best locations from which to spot Merlins.

Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of good hawk observation sites in the state. There are a number of popular birding spots, such as Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Concord, where good hawk flights are often seen. Any hill, ridge, dune or mountain which permits a clear view of the north, especially the northeast, is potentially a good site. (Although our knowledge of buteo flights in eastern Massachusetts is quite limited, it seems likely that large flights are less common in the southeast corner of the state than in the northeast. One of the goals of the hawk watch this year is to obtain more data on the southeast region, including Cape Cod and the islands.) Anyone interested in hawks should always keep one eye skyward during the months of September and October. Migrating hawks might be seen anywhere, in any weather, at any time of day. Two years ago a birder decided to spend the day repairing the roof of his house. While on the roof, he saw more than 4,000 Broad-winged Hawks and good numbers of several other species pass over his home. My first kettle of broadwings was seen coasting down Massachusetts Avenue, through Harvard Square, despite adverse winds. Another large flight was seen there

last year.

Wherever you go hawk-watching, there are several facts which you should keep in mind. The timing of hawk flights varies considerably from day to day. A site that does not yield a single hawk during the first eight hours of the day might produce a sizeable flight after 4 or even 5 p.m. Michael Harwood, President of the Hawk Migration Association of North America, fondly recalls one day spent at Hawk Mountain when only 21 hawks (including one Bald Eagle) passed over that famous sanctuary between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Shortly after a number of disappointed observers had retreated down the mountain, more than 1,000 broadwings passed the lookout in less than fifteen minutes. Similarly, a site which doesn't yield more than a handful of birds one day might produce hundreds if not thousands of birds the next day, depending on the vagaries of the weather and, of course, the hawks themselves. Never give up hope. Hawks are where you find them.

* * * * *

MOUNT TOM: From Boston, take either the Mass. Pike or Route 2. From the Mass. Pike take Route 91 North out of Springfield. Turn off 91 at exit 17 W, and continue west on Route 141 until you see the reservation sign on your right. Take the park drive for a distance of 2.9 miles. Not far beyond the park headquarters you'll find a large parking lot on your right. Park here and walk up the surfaced road which climbs the hill at the rear of the parking lot. A fairly steep 10 minute hike will take you to the Goat Peak Observation Tower. To reach Mount Tom from Route 2, take Route 2 west to Route 202. Turn south on Route 202 to Pelham, where you will see a sign noting Amherst to the right. Take this right turn, which will eventually run into Route 9. Continue on Route 9 through Amherst to Northampton, where you will take Route 10 south. Continue on Route 10 until you reach Route 141. Turn left onto Route 141, and you will soon see the reservation sign on your left.

QUABBIN RESERVOIR: Take the Mass. Pike to Palmer and follow the signs to Route 181. Take 181 north to Route 9. (A cut-off marked on the right will reduce the distance to Route 9.) Follow Route 9 east (to the right) to the well-marked entrance to Quabbin, which will be on your left. Follow signs to the summit and the lookout tower. Maps and washrooms are available at the headquarters near Windsor Dam.

WEST GRANVILLE: Take the Mass. Pike west to Exit 3 at Westfield. Turn south onto Routes 10-202, to Southwick. Take Route 57 west to North Lane #2, a right turn about three miles west of the center of Granville. Take North Lane #2 about a mile north to what is locally known as Blueberry Hill, which will be obvious on your right. Park at the base and walk approximately 1/4 mile to the summit.

MOUNT WACHUSETT: From Boston, take Route 2 west to Route 140. Take Route 140 south to Wachusett Lake, where you will take a right turn, following the signs to the Mt. Wachusett Ski Area on Mile Hill Road. Drive past the ski area, to the park entrance on your right. Washrooms are available in the information center at the base of the mountain. Water is not available at the summit. Follow the road signs to the summit. Remember that this road is open to auto traffic from 10 a.m. to dusk and is closed for the season after October 30.

MOUNT WATATIC: Take Route 2 west to Route 31. Take Route 31 north to Route 12 (a very sharp turn). Follow Route 12 to Ashburnham, where you will make a right turn onto Route 101. Follow 101 to Route 119. Turn left on 119. About .7 mile on the right you will find the Wapack Trail, marked by yellow blazes, following power lines up the mountain. This is the quickest but also the hardest way to the summit. Park your car well off the road. If you prefer a less steep though longer hike, continue another .7 mile past the Wapack Trail until you see a dirt road turn off to the right. Park off the highway and follow the roadbed. After .75 mile, you will come to an intersection where the Wapack Trail intersects the road. Do not take the left turn downhill. Continue straight ahead. The trail will gradually turn to the right and take you into a clearing, Nutting Hill, with a view of Watatic. Follow the yellow blazes of the Wapack Trail down Nutting Hill and up the gentle northern slope of Mt. Watatic. This route is 3 miles long, round-trip.

PACK MONADNOCK: Take Route 2 west to Route 12. Follow Route 12 into Fitchburg, where you will turn right onto Route 31. This intersection is not well-marked. Route 31 north is found at the west end of the city center. Take Route 31 north onto Route 45 near Greenville, New Hampshire. Turn left onto Route 45 and continue through Temple to Route 101. Turn left on Route 101 and look for the entrance to Miller State Park on your right, just past the Temple Mountain Ski area on your left. Take the park road to the summit. (50¢ per person admission fee.) To reach North Pack Monadnock, follow the Wapack Trail blazes from the northern edge of the summit at South Pack. The trail to North Pack is 4 1/2 miles long, round-trip.

HOLT HILL, ANDOVER: Take Route 125 north from Route 93. Several miles past Route 28 you will see Prospect Road on your right. Look for the sign to the Charles W. Ward Reservation. Take Prospect Road to the reservation parking lot. Carefully read the maps posted in the parking lot and select your trail to the summit of Holt Hill, an easy hike.

BOSTON HILL, NORTH ANDOVER: Take Route 114 south from Route 495, or from the intersection of Route 125 and 114. Southeast of the intersection with Route 125 you will see the Boston Hill Ski Area on your right. Park alongside the road or in the parking lot (if open) and hike up the ski trail to the summit. If the owner of the ski shop is present, it would be advisable to ask his permission, though he has indicated that he doesn't mind birders using his slopes. Boston Hill can also be reached by trails from the Ward Reservation parking lot.

SILVER HILL, HAVERHILL: From Boston, take Route 93 north to Route 495. Take 495 east to the intersection of Routes 110 and 113 in Haverhill. Take Route 110 south a number of blocks to Maxwell Street, which will be on your left. Take Maxwell north several blocks to Washington Street. Turn right onto Washington and continue to Observatory Avenue, which will be on your left. Turn left and follow Observatory Drive to the summit. No facilities are available at the summit, Be careful to avoid broken glass and ruts.