

ONE EXCITING HOUR AT GREAT MEADOWS, CONCORD

by H. Christian Floyd, Lexington

Thursday, October 30, dawned clear and crisp, and I looked forward expectantly to my lunch-hour hawk watch at Great Meadows. Having the advantage of working nearby at Hanscom Air Force Base, I had been enjoying the Great Meadows for lunch-hour birding on many of the fair-weather days during September and October. The highlight of September had been the locally famous immature Purple Gallinule, so unexpectedly lovely in its brown plumage glowing subtly with aquamarine, and so amusing with its antics of leaping to strip strands of wild rice among the cattails. As September had given way to October, my attention had turned more to the sky, and my lunch-time visits had become something of a hawk watch. The typical visit had produced a nice variety of hawks: a soaring group of local Red-tailed Hawks, a Northern Harrier quartering over the cattails, one or more Sharp-shinned Hawks migrating over the Concord River, an Osprey circling over the lower pool. Twice I had had a distant but clear view of a Goshawk soaring up and sailing away to the southwest over the sewer beds. The hawk-watch atmosphere had been increased on many of these visits by the company of fellow hawk watcher Paul Roberts, who had happened to choose the same days for his lunch-hour outings to Great Meadows.

The weather this Thursday morning promised a particularly good hawk day. Wednesday, a clearing front had just gone through, and the northwest wind had been so strong and gusty that I had decided to stay at the office. Today, the wind had moderated to about 5-15 mph and had shifted to the west, perhaps slightly south of west. As the morning advanced, huge fairweather clouds darkened the sky outside my office window; but, by noon, the trend had reversed, and the sky was again mostly clear. I wolfed down my sandwich, escaped from the office, and drove my ten-minute back-road route to the Meadows.

As I walked from the parking lot to the dike, scope over my shoulder, I thought back over the birds I had seen at Great Meadows this fall. A particularly exciting one from less than two weeks before was still vivid in my mind. On the fine Sunday evening of October 19, about half an hour before sunset, as Paul, Dave Lange, and I had stood talking just beyond the blind at the parking-lot end of the dike, an immature Bald Eagle had suddenly appeared at the east end of the lower pool, powered its way low over the trees toward the parking lot, and passed within just a couple hundred yards of a thrilled crowd of Great Meadows strollers. Since that evening, I had almost instinctively looked immediately off to the right whenever I walked past the blind and onto the open part of the dike. And to the right was where I looked immediately again this noon.

I must have doubted for an instant the reality of what I saw, for it was an image too similar to the one I had just been tracing in my mind--toward the eastern end of the lower pool, a huge dark bird flying low. But this was closer--maybe two hundred yards away--and lower--perhaps just twenty feet above the marsh. I hesitated a couple of seconds before lifting my binoculars--sometimes birds seen with naked eye seem more real. And then I was sure. "Eagle!" I shouted, partly to vent my excitement and partly to alert a gentleman with binoculars coming down the path behind me.

As I focused in on the bird, I became aware of some whiteness in the plumage, something I expected. But as my eye fixed that whiteness not as diffuse mottling, but as sharply defined white areas in the wings and tail, my excitement jumped another quantum leap. Could this really be? I repressed the thrilling temptation of the immediately obvious identification, and concentrated on absorbing every possible detail as the eagle drifted in leisurely circles low over the marsh. The tail was strikingly long when seen from the side, its extent at least twice as long as the head's projection from the leading edge of the wing. The upper surface of the tail was white for two-thirds of its length, with a broad dark band occupying the terminal third. The under surface was mostly dark, with the white of the upper surface replaced by a suggestion of several evenly spaced transverse gray bands. The white area in the wing appeared from below as a broad tapered stripe running through the bases of the flight feathers, its ends being difficult to determine clearly. My eye searched the wing linings and underside of the body for more white, but found only deep dark plumage.

As the bird turned away from me, my eye traced the broadly curving contour of the trailing edge of its wings--an S-shaped contour, tapering inward along the primaries near the wrist, outward along the middle secondaries, and deeply inward as the secondaries attenuated toward the body. Turning back toward me and into the wind, the bird soared upward on broad wings set in a pronounced dihedral which stretched not only upward but forward.

I had seen enough to let my sharply checked expectation explode. "My God, it's a Golden Eagle!" The other birder had now seen the eagle, too, but I probably distracted him with extravagant exclamations of my excitement. "I can't believe it!" I gasped several times. The gentleman accepted the identification and took in the scene with a composure which I found improper and impossible for myself.

The eagle was moving gradually to our right, toward the trees which line the south side of the lower pool. Now, about a minute after I had spotted the bird, it reached a position where the oaks next to the blind obscured it from us. I ran down the dike to a new position, setting up my scope as I



went. Unfortunately, my scope had not been ready to use in those precious first few seconds, and perhaps I had missed an opportunity to see the golden hackles of the nape, which may even be present in the immature plumage of the Golden Eagle, the plumage worn by this bird.

The eagle, still in view above the trees, was now powering upward and away to the southwest. Two of the soaring local red-tails took notice and closed rapidly on the intruder. As I watched in my scope, one of them swooped from above past the great bird, which continued its steady flight in seeming unconcern. It was now about half a mile to the southeast of us and passing from left to right at an altitude of about 500 feet. The effort of its flight soon diminished as, apparently finding a strong thermal, it began soaring upward toward the clouds on fixed wings.

As my excitement moderated, I voiced a thought of regret which came to me. "What a shame that Paul Roberts should miss being here today." A minute or so later, still enjoying the eagle through my scope, I heard footsteps on the path, and then a familiar voice. "What do you have, Chris?" "Paul, a Golden Eagle!" I shouted, somewhat amazed at the timing of his arrival. Paul quickly set his scope on the eagle, which was still in good enough view for him to enjoy and to confirm the identification on the basis of the head-tail proportions. We continued to watch as the eagle soared on motionless wings to an altitude of several thousand feet, and finally sailed away and vanished as a speck in the southwest sky. In all, the bird had been in view nearly fifteen minutes.



In the east, anything after a Golden Eagle may seem anticlimactic. But the parade of raptors which now followed was truly remarkable. Paul and I had hardly finished a ritual handshaking in celebration of the eagle when a Peregrine Falcon, a Great Meadows first for both of us, cruised over the parking lot and off toward the sewer beds. More handshaking, and an adult Red-shouldered Hawk appeared over the upper pool, drifted toward us in lazy circles, and passed just a hundred feet overhead. Then came a nice assortment of the more usual hawks: a juvenile Northern Harrier over the cattails, an Osprey over the lower pool, a Sharp-shinned Hawk flying along the river, and an American Kestrel hovering near the sewer beds.

It was now one o'clock, and both Paul and I would be back to work late. "Which of us is going to call this in to Audubon?" I asked, but then added, in answer to my own question, "Paul, you call. They're more likely to believe you." Paul laughed and replied, "I must admit that I would have had difficulty believing this if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

On December 1, I went to Great Meadows again. The first freeze-over had occurred a couple of weeks before, and most of the water birds had left. A remnant of fifty or so Canada Geese and a few ducks, unidentifiable in the glare, rested at the far end of the upper pool. Most of the marsh seemed lifeless, but still beautiful in the subdued browns and golds of late fall. The blue sky was empty of hawks, even the usually reliable local red-tails. But the day was fine, and I stood in the warmth of the sun, looked toward the east end of lower pool, and beheld in imagination the passage of an eagle.

H. CHRISTIAN FLOYD, a resident of Lexington for the past five years, is a devoted hawk-watcher. Chris is a systems engineer with Mitre Corporation and has been on the staff of Bird Observer for one year.