

BANDING SHARPSHINS AT POINT PELEE

By Leslie Gray

(This article is taken from a letter from the author to Maurice Broun -Ed.)

The Ontario Bird Banding Association, of which I am a member, have, for some years, operated a banding station at Point Pelee National Park, in Ontario. The big attraction for many banders has been the fall migration of Sharpshinned Hawks off the Point since this is one of the few places where they consistently fly low enough to be mist-netted in any numbers. Since 1955, between 100 and 125 Sharpshinned Hawks have been caught and banded each fall. The returns have been zero since only young birds migrate off the point. The recoveries have been quite high, averaging about 15%. Until this fall, the maximum number of birds banded in any one day had been 40. This was considered quite a high figure since the daily average is about 4 or 5.

On September 17 of this year (1960), Bill Wasserfall, Bas Richardson and I arrived at the Point before dawn. We had rented a cabin for the month of September for use by the banders but, unfortunately, due to the press of other business, no banders had been operating there previously that month. Hence all the banding equipment was locked up in the cellar of the chap who owned the cabin. Though he lived nearby, we were reluctant to wake him so early in the morning.

I was exhausted, having had no sleep the night before since I had spent that night atop the Long Point lighthouse banding birds. The only thing I wanted was about four hours sleep, so promptly turned in. The other two wanted to go down to the tip on the odd chance there might be a Sharpshin about since there is often a bit of a movement of these birds just at dawn. We fortunately had some duck nets in the trunk of the car and so, while I went to bed, they headed for the tip.

I suppose I had been asleep for half an hour when Bill Wasserfall came charging into the cabin with sweat pouring down his face. His first words were, "Come on! Get your clothes on! There's the darnedest migration of sharpies at the point I've ever seen!" While I climbed groggily out of the sack he went on, "Any sacks or bags around? I've got seven of them inside my shirt and they're clawing the hell out of me!"

We found some lunch bags and shoved as many of them into the bags as we could. Bill's stomach looked like chickens had been running a foot race around it. How he ever managed to keep the birds there as long as he did, I'll never know.

We then roused the owner, collected bands and gathering boxes from the cellar and then raced down to the top where poor old Bas was in similar agonizing straits. We unloaded his birds and ran to the nets.

It is difficult to describe how many sharpies there were around the Point that morning. The first net had 12 birds in it, the second had 9. The birds were overhead, in the trees, at eye level and were literally flying between our knees. We would work at one net and as we took birds out, more Sharpshins would fly in. We organized so that one man banded, the other two ran between the four nets trying to keep them clear of Sharpshins. And, boy, were they ugly! There were absolutely no small birds around the point at all and I suppose they were pretty hungry. The females particularly were hard to handle and though we would try to first grip their legs in taking them out of the net, they had the nasty habit of twisting just as we grabbed for them and sinking the talons of both feet into our arms and hands.

We started banding at 7:00 am., and by 11 had banded the somewhat staggering total of 177 Sharp-shinned Hawks. The flight slackened as the morning wore on and we took few birds after noon, but finished the day up with 192 Sharpies. We did not trap one small bird all day.

We believe that the reason for the large numbers was the strong and steady southwest wind blowing all day. I do not know how many days the wind had been from this direction but believe that the birds must have been filtering down the point for some days and because of this strong wind, would not migrate further. None of the birds migrated this day, instead they gradually turned back up the point as the day progressed.

This was borne out by the events next day. We were back at the point at dawn and again encountered the birds in large numbers. However, as the sun rose, so did the wind and it was apparent that it was now blowing strongly from the northeast. There were now many small birds at the tip this morning and there was considerable kill by the Sharpies. By 8:00 am. they began rising and soon were migrating southeast off the point in flocks of 15-25 birds. By 9:00 am. we had stopped taking birds completely. And the flocks migrating overhead increased in number. As many as 60 were counted in the air at one time. Our total for that morning was 56 banded, including two adults.

Since I had to catch a plane at Toronto in the afternoon, we could not stay to count the flight but before we folded the nets at 9:30 am., over 300 Sharpshins had already passed over and other flocks were moving steadily down to the Point.

We were all staggered by the numbers we had banded. I do not know of any similar incident in which so many Sharpshins were banded in such a short time. We should have many recoveries from this lot.

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