

AN UNFORGETTABLE SATURDAY  
Larry Rosche

Year after year, each weekend gains importance in a birder's life. The chance to seek out the rarities and lost vagrants that appear periodically along the south shore of Lake Erie provides a stimulus that only a few can understand. Saturday, October 6, 1984 was a beautiful day, but with southerly breezes the hopes of seeing a Sabine's gull vanished. It was a day to take a leisurly walk among the cottonwoods at Headlands State Beach to see what migrants lingered there.

I encountered a few warblers and good numbers of winter wrens. Suddenly there was immediate stillness and I looked up to see a majestic peregrine falcon resting in a tree less than 100 feet from me! The immature tiercel allowed people to pass below unnoticed. I eagerly showed him to Elinor Elder and Lois and Harold Wallins' group of novice birders. I thought to myself that the novices must have felt the birding hook that has caught more than a few of us.

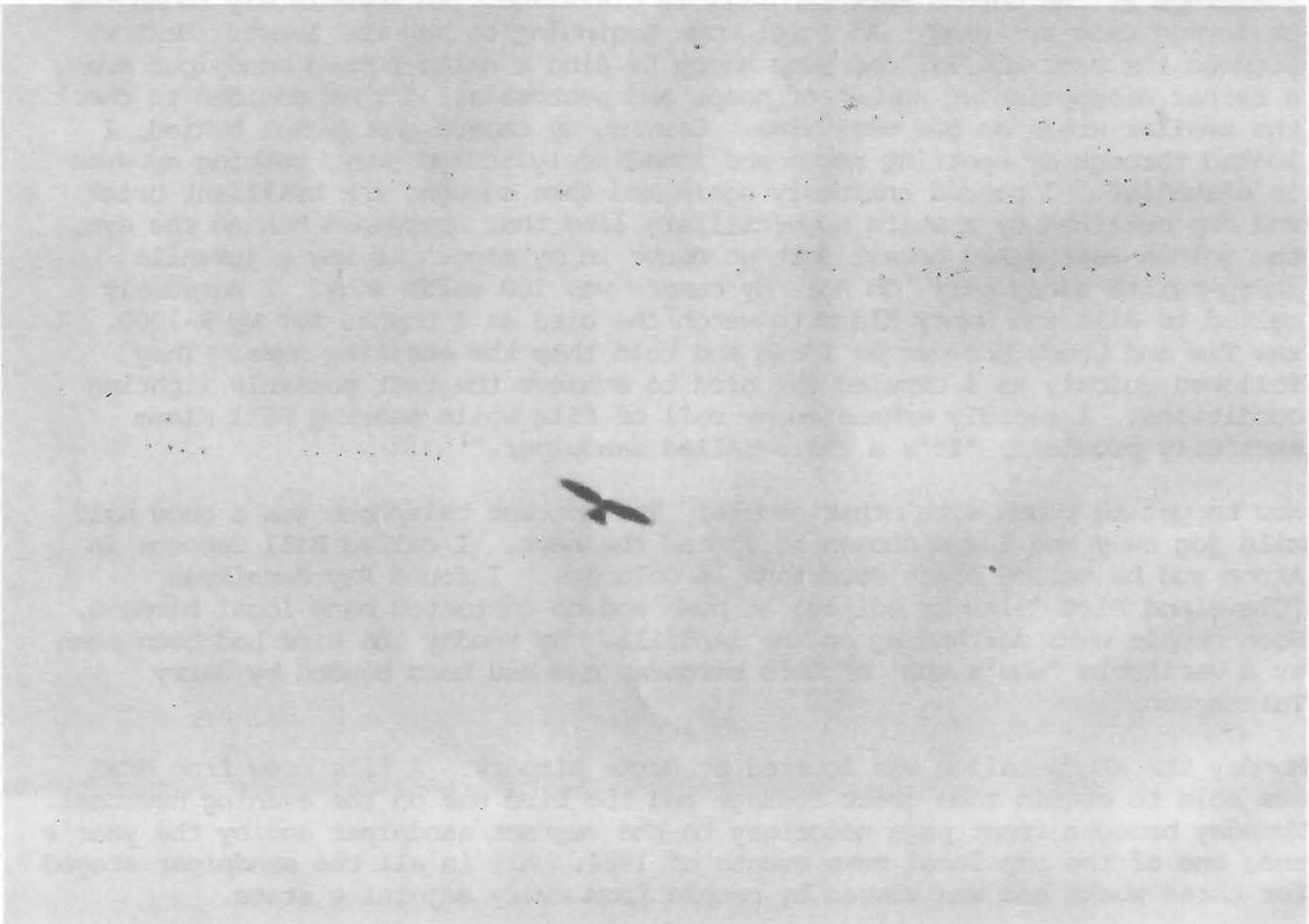
After an hour with the falcon Elinor and I decided to inspect a reported red phalarope at the Gordon Park Landfill in Cleveland. We immediately found the phalarope upon arriving. As auspicious beginning to say the least. Next we scanned the east mudflat and were happy to find a white-rumped sandpiper among a rather disappointing number of peeps and pectorals. I then decided to check the smaller areas on the west side. Leaving my camera and jacket behind, I looked through my spotting scope and immediately backed away, rubbing my eyes in disbelief. I peered anxiously again and sure enough, the brilliant brick red cap outlined by a white supercilliary line that broadened behind the eye, the golden unstreaked breast left no doubt in my mind. It was a juvenile sharp-tailed sandpiper! Oh no! My camera was 100 yards away. I nervously called to Bill and Nancy Klamm to watch the bird as I dashed for my K-1000. I saw Tim and Chuck Hocevar as I ran and told them the exciting news. They followed quickly as I circled the bird to achieve the best possible lighting conditions. I rapidly exhausted my roll of film while hearing Bill Klamm excitedly proclaim, "It's a sharp-tailed sandpiper."

Now to get in touch with other people! The nearest telephone was a good half mile jog away and I was chosen to spread the news. I called Bill Osborne in Akron and he called Bruce Peterjohn in Columbus. I found Ray Hannikman (Cleveland Bird Calendar editor) at home and he contacted many local birders. Soon people were descending on the landfill. By Sunday the bird had been seen by a veritable "who's who" of Ohio birders, and had been banded by Jerry Talkington.

Monday the sharp-tailed was located at Burke Airport. A film crew from WEWS was able to obtain some great footage and the bird was on the evening newscast. Tuesday brought front page notoriety to the vagrant sandpiper and by the year's end, one of the top local news events of 1984. All in all the sandpiper stayed for three weeks and was viewed by people from every adjoining state.

Reflecting back on these events I find a great deal to appreciate. Not since the ill-fated varied thrush at Findley State Park in 1979 had so many birders been able to see a rarity. This truly was a rare bird. On the west coast, they are considered regular but still rare. The first record in the East was not until 1967 when a specimen was procured in Florida. There are only about 10 records from the east coast and fewer than 10 records from the interior United States. All records were of juvenile birds with the exception of an adult in July 1981 at Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge in New York City (which I was fortunate to see). The prolonged stay enabled many people to get an opportunity to really study a bird that, in all likelihood, will never be seen in the greater Cleveland area again.

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Mississippi kite at Oak Openings, Lucas County, Ohio on May 16, 1982 photographed by Jon L. Seymour. See adjoining article.