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EAST OF THE LIGHT-house, there is a parking lot, then a long, elevated platform, then a marsh. In August, when the thoughts of American Kestrels turn south, the marsh is green and lush, and the plume grass rustles in anticipation. But now it is December. The light is frail. The marsh is brown. And the wind stirs nothing but reedy protests.

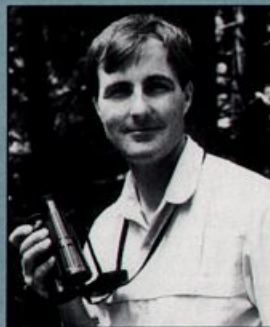
"I'll stay one more hour," he thought aloud to the marsh, and to the town on the horizon, and to the empty hawkwatch platform at Cape May Point State Park. With reflexes honed by a season, he reached for the clipboard bearing the hawkwatch field form and started filling in the blocks, answering the questions relating to visibility, air temperature, sky conditions, wind speed and direction. Sean's pencil hesitated over the box marked "altitude flight code."

"Zero," he said, bringing his head up, smiling ruefully, letting his eyes play across the horizon and a cloud-studded sky. "Less than zero," he corrected. The day's hawk flight, such as it was, had shut down better than an hour ago. The handful of hawkwatchers on hand, the regulars, had left shortly thereafter. Now, there was only Sean, an empty sky, and what little remained of the 1982 hawk count at Cape May Point, New Jersey.

"One more hour," Sean repeated to the marsh. Then Cape May Bird Observatory's official counter stood, replaced the clipboard, and strode to

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



The Loneliness of the Hawkwatcher That Went the Distance

*Illustration
by Keith Hansen*

his favorite spot near the center of the platform. Methodically, automatically, he brought his binoculars up to his eyes and began mapping a careful search of the horizon. He found nothing, and he let the binoculars fall.

"It's as bad as August," he said aloud to the marsh, but this wasn't true. The fact was, it was far worse than August. In August, when the 28-year-old Nova Scotian hawk counter had arrived, migrating hawks had been just as scarce, it's true. But in August a whole, glorious, bird-filled season at Cape May Point had stretched out before him. *His* season. And now...

Now his season was over. Now the season at the point that had terminated his museum career and put marriage plans on hold was a memory. And since there was nothing to look at, no

hawks in the sky, Sean let his mind turn in upon itself, fall back upon the encapsulated events that the birder would carry away.

He remembered the day he'd learned that he was the chosen one—heir to the platform immortalized by such hawkwatching greats as Sibley, Sutton, Bouton, and Nicolette.

He remembered the call from Cape May Bird Observatory's Director, Paul Kerlinger. How he'd worried that his credentials weren't good enough. How he tried not to let his nervousness show. How he was startled when Kerlinger asked whether they sold Olands beer in Halifax?

"Olands? Ayah," he'd affirmed. "Why?"

"Bring some," Paul, who'd spent two years doing postdoc work in Calgary, replied. "You're hired."

He remembered the envious eyes of older and more experienced Halifax birders when he'd told them the news. Recalled his anxiety when he'd arrived, how unprepared he'd been for the competition he found on the platform.

Sean, who was a capable birder, had never been to Cape May and had never even done any serious hawk-watching either. He didn't know that when a person steps into the shoes of the official counter, his skills become a target and every binocular drawn is drawn against his. During the course of the fall, every crack field birder in the world (it had seemed to Sean), had come to flex his skills, and in those first weeks on the job, Sean's pride had taken a few hits.

The thought of those early days tripped a lever, shifting Sean's thoughts into the present. He brought his binoculars up again, starting left, moving right, moving right past a suggestion of something way, way off. Sean checked his swing, backtracked half a field, and studied the distant form... a pale suggestion of a soaring raptor.

The bird was big—big enough to project its size over distance. It was broad but not bulky, and it seemed to have a quality that was accipiteresque.

Marking the bird's location against a corner of a cloud he edged over toward a 20x spotting scope and trained it on the bird. The scope confirmed what his binoculars suggested and his skills had suspected: broad but sharply tapered wings ... a broad hefty body and a tail to match ... a head that was squat.

"Mr. Gos," he said, grinning. It was a tough call, a good call, and even with a scope, it was not an identification that many birders could have made with comfort or con-



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fidence. But then, most birders don't spend three and one-half months of their lives sifting the skies for distant specs and drawing their binoculars beside some of the best hawkwatchers in the trade.

Automatically, Sean turned toward the platform, wanting to alert the gallery to a good bird. But, of course, nobody was there to share the sighting or the triumph. The hosts of birders that had packed the platform in September and October were gone. Even the regulars had finally called it a season. Dave and Rosi and Bill and Fred—all the avid members of the Cape May birding bloc. All his friends.

That was something else that had surprised Sean about Cape May. The friendliness of those who live here and those that bird here. It was a rare morning when someone didn't arrive on the platform with an offering of donuts or coffee cake for the official counter. Soft drinks and chips and candy bars came from the hands of strangers, and there were days when more hoagies were offered than even the opportunistic appetite of a poor hawkwatcher could abide.

Not many, but a few.

There were a lot of great moments, a lot of discovery and excitement that he'd shared with those people. All the great Peregrine and Merlin action. All the goshawks and jaegers and pelicans, and...

And now the year was over. Now, it was time to pack up his gear and head home. Almost time.

The gos continued to turn lazy circles in the sky, but it was drifting farther away, so Sean dropped it. He walked over to the bench, noted the goshawk on the field form, then stood on the bench and did a quick scan of the bay. There were a few loons, a gannet or two, and a tidy swarm of Bonaparte's Gulls.

He walked back up to the rail. Executed a careful scan of the sky. Then

Suddenly Sean was quite certain that there would be no Cape May, next year. He had had his fall, his season at the point. He had learned, and he had gained. But now, it was time to move on.

he let his binoculars fall and his mind turn in, once again, upon memories. The alternative was thinking about the future—not something he particularly cared to contemplate.

There'd been disappointments during the fall, of course. He'd missed Golden-winged Warbler, a bird he'd very much wanted to see. And the hawk migration itself had been underwhelming—and that's being generous. Sharp-shinned remained low. The Broad-winged flight had bombed. Harrier numbers could best be described as desperate and the late season buteo flights, the very thing that hawkwatchers who go the distance live for, had fizzled. Sean's total was just shy of 30,000 birds for the fall. Not bad for most places...but a far cry from the heydays of a decade earlier when an autumn at Cape May would garner 60 or 70 or 80,000 birds.

There hadn't been any real rarities, either. No Long-billed Curlew. No wheatear. No Sandhill Crane. "No raven," he said aloud, apologizing to the marsh. Right through the fall he'd promised to pull a raven out of the skies over Cape May. But it hadn't happened.

"Maybe next year," he offered, but his oldest and most reliable friend, the marsh, remained noncommittal.

Next year?

Sean sighed, shuffled his feet, patted the rail with a pair of mittened hands, then executed another scan of the horizon.

Nothing.

He stalked to the south end of the platform. Did a quick scan of Bunker Pond and found it empty—as empty as the platform and the sky now that the gos was gone. He returned to his position at mid-platform and found the question still waiting.

Yes, he'd love to return for another year. Love to put into practice all the tricks he'd picked up from his season at the point. Love to come back and get that Golden-winged Warbler and set a new record for Peregrines or Merlins and maybe snag a new bird for the count—a Black-shouldered Kite or a Ferruginous Hawk.

He knew he'd miss the action, and the bunker, and the people. Halifax has great birds and great birders, but it simply wasn't the hub Cape May was. He knew that come next July his thoughts would certainly be turning south. Sean sighed again, looked off across his marsh, and looked down at his watch.

Most times, when it's late in the season, when hawks are not flying, an hour can take forever. But this one, this last hour, was going quickly. Too quickly. Letting his eyes play over the horizon, Sean let his arms fall to his sides. He started swinging his body from side to side, swiveling from the hips, savoring the tactile tug of his jacket and warm air trapped beneath. It was a cold day. But it would be much colder in Nova Scotia when he got home.

"Home for the holidays ..." he said to his friend the marsh. Home for the winter and maybe (hopefully) a Canadian Park Service job in the spring...

"...and Nancy," he told the marsh. Oddly, it was time he'd mentioned his intended to the marsh. And it was as much an apology as an affirmation because, quite suddenly Sean was quite certain that there would be no

Cape May, next year. He had had his fall, his season at the point. He had learned, and he had gained. But now, it was time to move on.

There was no place on the data sheet to record this final observation, so he kept it in his head as he gathered his gear and started for the car—for the short ride back to the Observatory and then the longer ride home.

The light grew frailer, went as light does, to shine on some other part of the world. The reedy protest noises went on for a time, then stopped, when the wind stopped. The beam from the Cape May Point lighthouse came on and arched outward across the empty parking lot, an empty platform, and an empty marsh.

Somewhere there were American Kestrels whose autumn wanderings were over and whose wings were yet unstirred by spring.

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.

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