

Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch records first Swainson's Hawks

By Vic Berardi



The first Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) at the Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch, was recorded 24 September 2006; with a second less than a month later.

Volunteers and I have been conducting this hawk watch for seven years, at the state park, situated along Lake Michigan in northern Lake County, Illinois. Steve Huggins, Paul Sweet, Matthew Fletcher and I remember that first sighting of Swainson's Hawk during the count in 2006 very well.

That particular Sunday in late September began with overcast skies and a light northerly wind. Weather conditions improved by late morning and a fair number of raptors began to move through. We recorded 10 species with more than 100 raptors that day, including Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. Shortly after 5 p.m. we saw a Peregrine Falcon carrying what appeared to be a gull. While we were discussing the identification of the gull (hawk watchers get bored sometimes), I noticed a hawk that looked quite different rise over the hazy horizon to the north.

"Take a look at this bird," I said to Paul.

"Very interesting," he replied. "What do you think it is?"

"I want to say it's a Rough-legged Hawk but it appears to be brown," I said. "Could it be a harrier?"

Steve and Matthew asked us what we were looking at. I pointed to the direction of the bird (remember, hawk watchers look for specks, this bird was slightly larger than a speck.)

They immediately got on the bird and Steve found it in his scope. We were all a bit confused as we looked at an apparent *buteo*, brownish in color, with an upward curve to its wings.

Juvenile Swainson's Hawk trapped and banded by Mike Jones at Chiwaukee Prairie, Wisconsin, just north of Lake County, Illinois on the morning of 25 September 2006. Photo by Mike Jones.

It is highly probable that this is the same juvenile seen at the Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch on the late afternoon of 24 September 2006.

Then Paul said the magic words, "Guys, is this a Swainson's Hawk?" I say magic because immediately everything registered in our heads. Yes, that's exactly what we were looking at.

As Steve recalls, "We waited for the hawk to pass over to confirm the identification but as is typical for hawk watching, the bird went back north."

We compared notes and came to the conclusion it was a juvenile because it was very clean underneath and we never saw a strong two tone contrast in the underwing typical of adult Swainson's Hawks.

Paul drove up to the Illinois border a mile or so north of us to try and locate the bird but wasn't successful. However, the following day I received a call on my cell phone from Rob Sulski that a juvenile Swainson's Hawk was trapped and banded Monday, 25 September by Mike Jones at Chiwaukee Prairie, Wisconsin, which is a quarter mile from the Illinois border directly north of the hawk watch.

One month later a second Swainson's Hawk, an adult that passed directly overhead was seen on 22 October at the Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch. Observers recorded more than 800 raptors that day. This was, then, the second Swainson's Hawk seen at the hawk watch in seven years, and within less than a month's time.

The 2006 hawk count at Illinois Beach State Park was the second best year in the site's seven-year history. Observers recorded 7,362 raptors from 26 August to 26 November. To see all of our data, visit www.hawkcount.org.

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Editor's Note: As this issue went to press, the indefatigable Illinois Beach State Park hawk watchers added a third Swainson's Hawk to their list 14 September 2007.