



Birds Across the Shore

An essay on fall migration along Lake Michigan

by Steve Barg

Steve Barg enjoys the magic of fall migration along Lake Michigan (Paul Dawson photo).

Sunday, the first of November, winter was making an early appearance in Highland Park. Strong northwest winds first brought grey skies and snow squalls, often followed by quick gusts and patches of clear blue sky. Gone were the splendid colors of the basswood and maples. I felt a bit melancholy as autumn neared its end.

With rake in hand, I went about my own seasonal ritual, thinking about how for the past six months I had explored with childlike enthusiasm the wooded ravines and Lake Michigan shoreline that lay outside my back door.

Just then, my eye caught a familiar silhouette. A Red-tailed Hawk. Immediately following was a second redbill. And then, a third raptor appeared - a large falcon.

That sent me inside after my binoculars. But before I made it to the door, a faint, familiar sound stopped me. As I looked to the sky a flock of Sandhill Cranes struggled against the wind often breaking formation. As they grew closer, their trumpeting filled the air.

I rushed inside to get my binoculars, then experimented outdoors with various observation points before settling on

the roof of a beach house at the base of a bluff. Here, I could see straight up the shoreline from Highland Park north to Waukegan.

Then began a steady, unending stream of bird life that kept me motionless on the roof for nearly three hours. The raptors flew solo. First came a Rough-legged Hawk, then a Red-tailed Hawk, a sharpshin and a Cooper's. Next, came a Merlin. Peregrine Falcon. Northern Harrier. Osprey. Turkey Vulture. They rode the wind as true masters of the air, rarely flapping a wing. As though on a compass heading due south, they pitched their wings into the wind and sailed to warmer climes.

Joining them were flocks of mergansers, Ring-necked Ducks and Coots that formed rafts on the water. Buffleheads, scaup, pintails and Mallards flew overhead. An occasional Blue-winged Teal or American Black Duck changed the avian scenery. A few isolated Common Loons rounded out the water birds which together numbered close to one-thousand.

Most unforgettable were the gulls. Loosely gathered flocks stretched from the beach well out over the lake. Hour after hour, wave after wave, they

continued. Even after the other birds began to diminish in numbers, the gulls continued to come. Their hypnotic bouncing flight created a striking background to the raptors and ducks.

To rest my eyes, I glanced at the wooded bluff. Even here, cold winds puffed up small land birds. Sparrows and kinglets flitted in the trees on the hillside. A male and female bluebird illuminated the grayish landscape, carrying with them the last of the autumn color.

In my twenty years of birding, I've observed migration in many places - Point Pelee in May, Cape May in fall, Florida in winter. I've even seen the last wild California Condor.

But as I watched this spectacular bird migration in my own backyard, I remembered what John Muir once wrote: "I sought and found beauty in places close to home. I looked for things other people missed and I found them. All the wild world is beautiful, and it matters but little where we go. The spot we chance to be always seems the best." ■

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