

2018 MIGRATION SUMMARY

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August 2018

The Season

This year temperatures in February averaged more than four degrees above normal in Grimsby. So warm that after the middle of the month the temperature was seldom below zero. The last week in particular brought double digit highs with the result that raptors were on the move. Partial counts were obtained for the last three days, 45 birds of five species, providing a head start to our season.

In March, reality returned along with more normal temperatures. There were six days in February that were warmer than any day in March and in fact, aside from April 12th, were warmer than any day until April 21st. It wasn't cold in March as the low temperatures were slightly above normal and the mean temperature was actually marginally above normal: there just weren't any warm days. The result was we had no good flights and experienced the third lowest March total (2,014) ever and lowest since 1994.

As mentioned there was only one warm day in the first three weeks of April and no days all month when the temperature reached 20°C. The result was a daily mean temperature that was 2.5 degrees below normal. Six of the days were wiped out by inclement weather and a seventh lacked a counter so we had seven shutouts for the month, about double what we normally see in April. The monthly count of 8,562 was only slightly below average but disappointing considering the low March total.

May started well with warm temperatures but after the first two days, no significant counts were made despite a normal amount of effort. Just two days lacked counters and on one of those there was some rain. The monthly count of 550 birds was typical of recent years.

In all, the seasonal total of 11,184 was well under our long-term average of more than 14,000. While coverage improved over 2017, there were still five days without a counter and the hours of effort at 449.4 was more than ten per cent below what we normally manage.

Individual Species

Certainly it was a vulture year with more Black Vulture sightings than ever before and a near record number of Turkey Vultures counted. There was considerable debate among watchers as to how many different Black Vultures were actually passing. This was partly attributed to the fact that a Black Vulture had been roosting during the late winter at a site south of Smithville, only fourteen kilometers by air from Beamer. The two locations are certainly within easy reach of a foraging raptor.

The Turkey Vulture count of 7,684, was just below the all-time high of 7,730 set in 2014. Your reporter was fortunate to be the counter on the three largest TV counts this year and on two of those days, the vultures were cruising along right at the edge of the escarpment. Many of these were not visible from the ground below the tower but of course many more were likely passing just out of sight from the tower, below the edge. So it would appear that the rise in vulture numbers has not abated as yet despite our having gone four years without a new record high count. Turkey

Vultures have become the most commonly counted raptor at Beamer since counting began in 1975, their total having finally passed that of Broad-winged Hawks.

The picture is not nearly so rosy for hawks, in fact not rosy at all. It was such a poor count this year that I almost don't know where to start to describe it. Consider Northern Harriers (NH), our only harrier species and an irregular migrant that often passes the watch going in unconventional directions, i.e. not westerly. We had set a record low count of 63 NH in 2014 but this year only counted 45, almost 30% below the former record and about a third of our long-term average.

Of the three accipiter species we see, the Northern Goshawk has become a very rare sighting. We had one this year, seen by quite a few watchers on April 2nd, which is about what we've come to expect in recent years. Other watch sites in the Great Lakes area are also finding this species in lower numbers than in the past. For example Derby Hill at the eastern end of Lake Ontario has had less than ten in three of the last four years after never before having that few since they began to count in 1979. Braddock Bay near Rochester saw only one this year as well, their previous low count for a full season being 3 in 1998.

We barely managed to exceed our record low count for Sharp-shinned Hawks, 835 in 2014, with this year's total of 845. This represents 30% of the long-term average and 67% of the recent five-year average. Long gone are the days when we could count over a thousand of these in a single day as happened on a few occasions, one as recently as April 15, 1994. Ripley, south of Lake Erie, had their lowest sharpie count ever and Braddock Bay had their record lowest count for a complete season. Declining numbers of this species in migration have been noted for over twenty years. One explanation was short-stopping in which birds didn't move so far because of the ability to overwinter where bird feeders supplied food for prey species. With continued declines, I suspect that it more likely reflects decreased populations of the passerines that sharpies use to feed their young.

Cooper's Hawks (CH) have historically always been much less common than sharpies with most watches seeing ratios of on the order of one to ten. In the past, they were generally seen only in migration in our area but CH are now found throughout the year in southern Ontario. Our counts for CH were quite stable for the first thirty years or so despite there being a great increase in breeding birds in the area. This year however, we had the lowest count of CH since we started full season coverage, just 83 birds. This is 67% of the five-year average and only 46% of the long-term average. Like sharpies, I suspect this decline in migrant numbers may be related to passerine populations declining.

A relatively brighter result was this year's Osprey flight. Osprey were seen on nineteen days

including one-day counts of nine and eight, and totaled 53 birds. This is just above the recent five-year average and the seventh highest ever at Beamer. Our numbers should be put in perspective though. At Derby Hill they counted 63 Osprey on May 1st alone, part of a total flight of 367 for the season, which is about normal for that site.

Table 6 Buteo Records

Species	High (year)	Low (year)	2018	5-year Avg.	39-year Avg.
Red-shouldered	1,419 (1994)	275 (2016)	209	479	686
Broad-winged	8,613 (2011)	1,484 (2013)	1,055	2,301	3,314
Red-tailed	3,861 (1992)	1,131 (2014)	1,016	1,595	2,503
Rough-legged	204 (2004)	22 (2002)	17	35	67

The count of 16 Merlins is slightly above the recent five-year average of 14.4 while the Peregrine Falcon count of nine ties the third highest count for that species. However we had only 37 American Kestrels (AK), which represents the second lowest count ever (30 in 2014 being the nadir). By contrast Derby Hill had a normal AK count of 342, Braddock Bay was relatively low at 200 and Ripley was above normal at 301 birds. The count at Holiday Beach heading south last fall was below average as well.

With Bald Eagles now nesting at several locations along the Lake Ontario shore, we are beginning to encounter non-migratory birds that are seen heading east and south as well as the general migration route of west. While this complicates our efforts to monitor the migration, it certainly nice to be able to show visitors an eagle whether we count it or not. This year's count of 54 migrants was about what we've been seeing in recent years.

Golden Eagles were a bit of a bust in 2018 with only four recorded. The record low count is three and while this species has never been common at Beamer, we normally average about twice this year's total. It seems that this species took a more easterly route this year as Ripley had none at all, Braddock Bay had a low count of 17 but Derby Hill at the other end of Lake Ontario had their fourth best total ever of 76.

Now for the really bad news, all four of our regular buteos had record low counts this year as shown in Table 6 above.

Three of them broke records that had been set in the last five years. At other watches the results were mixed. Derby Hill for example had an excellent flight of Broad-winged Hawks, a fairly typical flight of Red-shouldered Hawks but the second lowest ever counts of Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks. Last fall, Holiday Beach had a record low number of broad-wings, a low number of tails but typical numbers of shoulders and rough-legs. Ripley had low counts of all four buteos but no record lows.

An earlier summary (2014) had described the decline in non-vulture raptors that has occurred since we began monitoring at Beamer. Well, this year we set a new low of just 3,503, breaking the 2014 record of 4,339. It is not a pretty picture.

As always our thanks goes to the designated counters, who this year consisted of Phil Waggett, Tom Thomas, Mike Street, John Stevens, Rob Spaul, George Naylor, Brian Mishell, Matt Mills, Gord Kozak, Tim Foran, Chris Escott, Sandy Darling and John Barker.