

186-01-2004

Pennsylvania Rare Bird Report

SPECIES: Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)

AGE AND PLUMAGE: probable juvenile of the intermediate or dark form

DATE OF OBSERVATION: September 7, 2004 TIME: 12:00 EST

LOCATION: North Lookout, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Berks County, Kempton, PA

OBSERVER: Arlene Koch, 1375 Raubsville Road, Easton, PA 18042 610-253-6377

OTHER OBSERVERS: Sue Schmoyer, Kutztown, PA, Bob ? and David ?

HABITAT: rocky outcropping, 1500 feet

DISTANCE TO BIRD: varied from about a mile away to directly overhead where it was easily seen with binoculars

VIEWING CONDITIONS: Although the sky showed patches of blue and white puffy clouds, it was very hot, humid, and hazy at the same time. The wind, when we felt any at all, was from the SSE, but it was almost nonexistent. This bird was spotted on the south side of the ridge, at horizon, midway between #1 and the Donat, which was half shrouded in haze. The sun was directly overhead. What birds were coming through this day mostly came from there and no color, per se, was being seen on them unless they got a lot closer.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED: Brunton Epoch's 10.5 X 43

DESCRIPTION: Although Sue first called out this bird to me as an approaching osprey, when I looked at it I knew it was a buteo. It was gliding down the valley at horizon level. At first I could see about a two-thirds sideways view of it, making its left wing (which was slightly crooked or appeared to be) partially visible. As it got closer it became a complete, dark silhouette. Occasionally it flicked its wings downward, much in the manner that black vultures do, but other than that it didn't do anything to make its identification easier. It would have been great if it had exhibited its characteristic, at times buoyant flight pattern and shown its often dihedral wingset, but it didn't. Its tail seemed long, relatively speaking, but from years of hawk watching experience I know how variable silhouette views can be. It glided toward the South Lookout and then lifted up, disappearing behind the tree canopy. Fortunately, it reappeared directly above us in the counter's pit. I had to get up and turn around completely to get a good look at it at that spot. Then I got an excellent view of this bird with wings and tail spread as it made tight circles next to and backlit by the sun. It was pretty high by then but still easily seen by all four of us looking. Its wings were long, slim, and pointed. There were no rectangular or arc-shaped light patches near the tips and no other distinguishing marks (like wrist marks or dark carpal patches) on them. Its breast and belly looked all dark, or perhaps dusky is a better word to use. There didn't seem to be any mottling of any kind

on it but there could've been. However, all four of us said that same thing afterwards -- that it just looked all dark. What stood out most to me about the wings was that, being backlit by the sun as they were, they looked to be almost two-toned, darker on top and into the body and much lighter along their edges out to their tips. One of the men described this light area as looking translucent to him. The spread tail was rounded and very light, probably finely streaked or banded. It then circled a few more times, set its wings in what appeared to be a slightly crooked position, and glided off.

SEPARATION FROM OTHER SPECIES: This buteo wasn't a Broadwinged or Red-shouldered hawk. Both of these species are smaller, stockier if you will, in all ways. Everything about it was wrong for both of these species. Its wings were longer, slimmer, and differently shaped. It wasn't a Redshoulder because of its shape, its wing size, its overall jizz, and there were no translucent crescents at the tips of its wings.

To me the only bird it could have been confused with was a dark phase Redtail. However, it wasn't "blocky" like a Redtail is, it didn't hold its wings like a Redtail does, and they were much slimmer and longer, more tapered. Overall, the bird had a more fluent look to it than a Redtail does and was, overall, slimmer in body. The bird's "jizz" just didn't say Redtail to me. I never even considered a Roughleg. It just wasn't that. Roughlegs are almost unheard of at this time of the year anyway. This buteo had no dark carpal patches, no dark band(s) on its tail, and nothing about it was right for Roughleg. As soon as I got the overhead look at it the first thing that popped into my head was that this was a buteo about the size of a Redtail but it wasn't one. After it flew off I didn't say what I thought it was. I found myself wishing that it had come closer as it glided down the valley but didn't. It was just a silhouette. I asked the two guys to show me what species it most looked to them using their own books. Neither of these guys had much raptor ID experience, neither one had ever seen any of the western hawk species, and what they thought really doesn't hold a lot of water -- one picked out a dark phase Ferruginous hawk and the other pointed to a juvenile Swainson's. They were, I believe, going by shape impression more than anything. It would have been great if this Swainson's had been a light adult. But it wasn't. With hawkwatching, you take what you get.

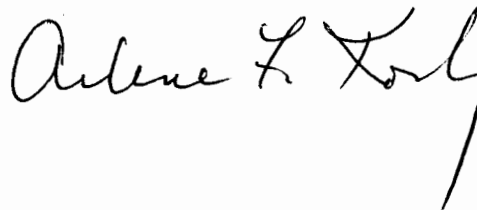
PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND/OR SIMILAR SPECIES: I've been looking at and/or counting raptors since the late 70's. I've seen Swainson's hawks in the West many times and I've seen them in Mexico. I've seen two at Bake Oven Knob hawkwatch (adult light phase and adult dark phase, ver. Fritz Brock), and I had one over my property (light phase, age questionable, ver. Bernie Morris), all on E or SE winds.

ARE YOU POSITIVE OF YOUR IDENTIFICATION: Yes.

REFERENCES CONSULTED, after observation only: "Hawks," by Clark and Wheeler; "Hawks in Flight," by Dunne, Sibley, and Sutton; "The Sibley Guide to Birds," by David Allen Sibley.

DATE OF THIS REPORT: September 8, 2004

SIGNATURE OF OBSERVER:



Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Swainson's Hawk (Buteo swainsoni)

Date of Sighting: 7 September 2004 to 7 September 2004

Location: HAWK MOUNTAIN

County : BERKS

Observer(s): Arlene Koch et al.

Date of Submission: 2004

Submitted by: Arlene Koch

Written Description: Yes

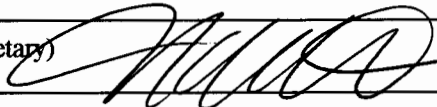
Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut				X				
D. Heathcote			X					
P. Guris				X				
J. Stanley				X				
E. Witmer				X				
R. Leberman				X				
M. Sharp								
TOTALS			1	5				
DECISION				X				

Comments: 1/5

Signature (Secretary) 

Date: 12/7/05