

Swainson's Hawk
Written the end of September, 2011
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On September 26, 2011, Rudy Keller and I were on duty at North Lookout at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary (Berks County) in Kempton, PA. It was an abnormally hot, humid day for late September and in the morning the North Lookout was fogged in. At times we couldn't even see the hemlocks at the front of the rocks. It wasn't until sometime around 11 that the fog began to dissipate and we were finally able to see across the valleys to the south and north although it was still hazy. Just about all of the birds that day were off to the south because of the south/southeast winds.

Broad-winged hawks were still moving due to rainy weather that had kept them backed up for days. So when I saw a buteo lift up on the south side in the general vicinity of the South Lookout I assumed it was going to be a broadwing. However, as it circled and moved up I saw things that bothered me. It had a very distinct dihedral and at one point I thought I noticed some white at the base of its tail. Overall it was "darkish" as opposed to light, grayish brown if you will, with no obvious distinguishing color variations.

I quickly negated it being a northern harrier because it was a buteo and if there was white on its rump I never saw it again. It didn't have the long, thin tail with white uppertail coverts that harriers have. Its wings were long in relation to its body and tail, but they were decidedly wider than those of a harrier. And although it was flying dihedrally, its flight wasn't really buoyant and its dihedral wasn't nearly as pronounced as is that of a harrier.

It was definitely a buteo but it wasn't a red-tailed hawk. It wasn't as bulky as a redtail would be nor was it as big as a redtail should be, it had no rectangular window marks on its primaries, and it had no dark patagial patches. Its belly looked to be mottled or marked with no semblance of a belly band of any kind and its tail wasn't right.

As it rose it was joined in the thermal by some broadwings, allowing a contrast to be made between it and them. From the distance I was seeing it this bird was more evenly mottled-appearing than the broadwings around it and was bigger overall. Its wings were definitely longer and more tapered and there was no light vs. dark on them as often, but not always, can be seen on a flying juvenile broadwing. Unlike the other buteos it was circling with, it stayed in a dihedral all the while I watched it. On its wings, about at the same place where a redtail would have the rectangular light areas (near the carpal area), it had small but noticeable light areas with no distinct pattern, at least to my eye. It showed no contrast between the leading and trailing edges of the underwings, no dark vs. light; they looked to be "darkish" or dusky appearing. And the same can be said for its tail, although for a second or two I thought I saw a small dark tail band. But I wasn't sure of that and basically I got no distinct markings on the tail. What I did see, however, was that there appeared to a small but distinct indentation between its rump area and the adjoining wings. In other words, the wings angled in where they joined its body above the base of the tail. They weren't straight across.

Red-shouldered hawk obviously came to mind but this bird had no translucent comma or crescent marks on its wings. When I got a top view it just appeared to be mottled or dark; there were no white mottled areas like you would see on a juvenile or

adult red-shouldered, which I realize can vary in location and appearance. The length of its wings and their pointy shape in contrast to its body made it look longer and leaner, if you will, than the overall appearance a red-shoulder would have. Also, its dusky underside was darker and more “smudged” looking than what I would have expected to see on the belly and underwings of a juvenile red-shoulder. Also, usually on a red-shoulder, depending of course on how close it is and the lighting conditions, you can usually discern some tail bands even when they’re very light. This bird didn’t show any but I can’t say anything about its tail other than what I’ve already said.

This bird was, to my eyes, **a juvenile dark morph Swainson’s hawk**. It wasn’t an adult or a light morph juvenile because there was no contrast between its head and neck area. The color of its head was basically dark as opposed to light and just seemed to blend in with its chest.

Rudy and I and another relatively knowledgeable raptor guy who didn’t feel he knew enough about a Swainson’s hawk to write it up watched this bird as it thermalled up and eventually went over the South Lookout. I haven’t consulted Rudy on this write-up because I saw what I saw and he saw what he saw. And were I to give more reasons for my ID call on this bird I’d be making them up.

I realize accepting a Swainson’s hawk based on a verbal description is difficult if not impossible but I felt it important enough to at least submit the sighting.