

BOOK REVIEW

by Katherine Durham

Hawks in Flight: The Flight Identification of North American Migrant Raptors by Pete Dunne, David Sibley, Clay Sutton, foreword by Roger Tory Peterson, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1988. 254 pages, 92 illustrations (Sibley), 173 photographs (most by Sutton); hardcover \$17.95, softcover \$8.95.

Hawks in Flight is one of several books about hawk identification to appear in recent years. Why was this one so eagerly anticipated? What might we expect from a book senior-authored by Pete Dunne? This is the guy who, at the 1981 New England Hawk Watch conference, opened his talk on differences between Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks thus: that he was qualified to lecture on this because, after all, credibility is much like virginity—you can only lose it once, and he had lost his so many years ago, that it no longer mattered what he said. This is also the person who describes the flight behavior of the Merlin as a low-flying cruise missile following vegetative contours. In other words, he creates a picture and says things you can remember. Pete's imagination is stuck in overdrive, and he is constantly looking for more provocative and meaningful ways of describing what he sees. For those who may have feared that this book would be a washed-down version reflecting conservative editorial constraints, rest assured that Houghton Mifflin has indeed let Pete be Pete.

The authors promote this book as the first holistic guide to hawk identification, combining field marks with the overall impression. This is not a book about perched birds. Flight broadly applies to any reason why a bird is in the air, only one of which might be migration. Thus, it is also valuable for the backyard birdwatcher. Nor is this a pocket field guide. Rather, it is a chatty, irreverent textbook about identification, migration, and behavior that can be enjoyed from many approaches. It assumes you have done your homework before reaching the hawkwatch site. It attempts to teach a skill, a way of thinking, an understanding of the various species in question. This skill is the ability to identify hawks at "very unreasonable distances." Hard and fast rules appropriate to a bird in hand do not apply; absolute certainty of identification is discarded. Several characteristics must be applied to arrive at a responsible conclusion.

The body of the book is broken down into a discussion by genus. But the intention is to group birds with similar physiques or flight patterns or behaviors; so one chapter is titled "Big Black Birds" and is devoted to four unrelated species of eagles and vultures. The inside covers provide a uniquely helpful and convenient reference to ventral and head-on views. The photographs (from a variety of lookouts) and illustrations (expertly crafted by David Sibley) are

purposely all black-and-white, to more accurately depict conditions in the field and the way markings tend to merge together at a distance. Overall, the book appears to be very high quality, although there are several typographical and editorial errors that will have to wait for the next edition.

A major focus of the book is on behavior, which is covered from a variety of angles—temperament, hunting techniques, timing of migration, willingness to cross water, reliance on thermals—all of which add up to clues far more important than details of plumage when a hawk is at the limits of vision. It also makes for an unusually interesting book on identification. Alongside considerations of behavior is a detailed analysis on flight patterns and silhouettes of hawks in the air and how these may differ under various conditions of flight.

There are a few distinct biases that should be kept in mind. First, although the authors have wide experience internationally, their Cape May heritage comes through in a definite emphasis on coastal and peninsular conditions and flights. It often does not translate to what we see at Wachusett Mountain, for instance. A second bias is that this first edition covers twenty-three primarily eastern and migratory species of hawks, i.e., all of our regulars here in New England plus a few possible vagrants. It will not be as useful for travelers to the southwest. Third, the book assumes previous familiarity; it is not really designed for the beginning hawkwatcher seeking a Chester Reed introduction to what hawks look like.

Inherent in Pete's style is the use of analogies. Shapes and silhouettes conjure up comparisons to household articles. Sometimes these are frustrating, such as the suggestion that the tip of a Sharpshin's tail is never "spatula-shaped." The three spatulas in my kitchen all have slightly different shapes, but the common pattern among them suggests to me that "spatula-shaped" is perhaps a *good* way to describe Sharpies' tails. Or perhaps they make spatulas differently in New Jersey. David Sibley could come to the rescue in future editions by providing side-by-side drawings of how these household items are supposed to describe the hawk in question. Although many of the analogies are very helpful, much is left to the vagaries of our imaginations.

Other analogies are at times too subjective or relative—for instance, Pete's inclination to compare the falcons to different models of high-performance sports cars. I do not think it is simply a limitation of my gender that prevents me from understanding just how the Merlin becomes the Porsche Carrera of the falcon world. As fun as it may be to try to apply some of these references, it may not add much to the accuracy of the HMANA green forms [Hawk Migration Association of North America].

In addition to analogies, there are also rules of thumb. The Red-shouldered Hawk is "the *buteo* that thinks it is an *accipiter*." Although sometimes more

toned down than in his previous HMANA articles, Pete doggedly emphasizes the behavioral clues. In reference to the aggressive nature of Merlins: "If a bird passes a perched raptor and doesn't take a shot at it, then it isn't a Merlin." If your reaction to Pete's analogies or rules of thumb is, "I've never seen that," or "My birds don't do that," it is still an approach that lends itself to encouraging an open mind. Pete is providing us with food for thought, and I have faith that his runaway imagination will continue to yield more appropriate images.

I would caution hawkwatchers in eastern Massachusetts that our open fields and monadnocks produce flight patterns and silhouettes at times substantially different from what is described in the book. The flat wings and quick wing dipping we use to identify gliding Broad-winged Hawks a couple of miles out is never mentioned; and in fact, one would come away from the book with quite a different idea of how they fly. There is not really enough emphasis on the uniqueness of different sites and weather conditions; you will have to decide what really goes on at your favorite raptor haunt.

Despite certain limitations on the universal application of this book, it provides something of value for everyone. It is a must for the library of any serious hawkwatcher. The budding enthusiast will enjoy the behavioral sections but should not get too bogged down by the physical descriptions. It is a good crash course in putting names to specks in the sky but better if used under the nurturing of a more experienced hawkwatcher. This behavioral approach to identification qualifies the book as a milestone in the art of hawkwatching and as a way of sharing that skill with the public. And Pete Dunne imparts an excitement about hawks and hawkwatching. There will be no lack of things to debate on the hillsides during those moments between flights.

KATHERINE DURHAM, a vice-president of Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch, recently joined the law firm of Mintz, Levin as an environmental paralegal. She caught the hawkwatching bug on Wachusett in 1981 and has since been looking for specks in the skies over Cape May, Hawk Mountain, and Whitefish Point. She keeps in shape off-season by counting Mourning Doves in Hingham Bay.

SPRING 1989 EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH (EMHW)

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW) needs volunteer observers for coordinated hawkwatching on the weekends of April 22-23, April 29-30, and May 6-7 and on weekdays during the peak migration period from April 15-May 7. The May 6-7 watches will be dedicated to a special hawkwatching project on Cape Cod. For more information, including a flyer describing the special Cape Cod weekend project, write Paul M. Roberts, EMHW, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155, or call 617-483-4263 after 8:00 P.M.