

**BOOK REVIEW: A SEASON AT
THE POINT: THE BIRDS AND BIRDERS OF CAPE MAY**

by John C. Kricher

Season at the Point: The Birds and Birders of Cape May by Jack Connor, illustrations by Don Almquist. 1991. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press. 290 pages; numerous black-and-white illustrations. \$21.95 clothbound.

The season is fall, and the place is Cape May Point, the southernmost tip of New Jersey. Most birders know that this combination of time and place means hawks, frequently by the thousands. Ever since 1937, when Witmer Stone published his eloquent two volume *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*, the birding world has been informed that the narrow peninsula of Cape May acts as a funnel, concentrating masses of raptors on days following the passage of an autumn cold front. In Stone's time, birders were not numerous at Cape May. It was not binoculars but guns that took aim at the Broadwings, Sharpshins, and Peregrines. Fortunately, that era is past. Today not only thousands of hawks but thousands of birders come every fall to Cape May, the latter to bear witness to the migrational peregrinations of the former. We all know that birding has gone big time, and Cape May Point is to birding what Las Vegas is to gambling: you just have to go there, or you have not been.

Jack Connor, a New Jersey-based author (*The Complete Birder*, 1988, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) and Cape May groupie since he first met Pete Dunne in 1978, has taken on the task of chronicling one full season's passage at Cape May Point. Connor arrives in August, while Victorian Cape May is still crowded with summer vacationers. In September and October the birders come; and he, along with myriads of other birders, scans the sky from the hawk counting platform at the lighthouse, walks the railroad track at the Beanery, and birds the dense patches of shrubs, fields, and hedgerows of Higbee's Beach. Even through November, when most of the birds and virtually all of the birders have left, Connor remains, hoping to see the last hawk of the season.

As the book's subtitle suggests, Connor has really written two books, skillfully and delightfully blended together. He tells the story of Cape May's migrant birds, especially the hawks, but also the owls and passerines. By extensively interviewing the personalities to whom Cape May is "home turf," Connor shares with his readers a solid treatment of Cape May's ornithology. We learn, for instance, that the vast majority of accipiters in the skies above Cape May Point are juveniles. Apparently they come to Cape May but once in their lives, during their first migration. We learn that in spite of the small area of Cape May Point, the actual pattern of hawk migration remains largely a

mystery. Do the hawk counters count the same birds over and over, birds that have flown off the coast, only to have circled back overhead? Connor succinctly summarizes much information from recent research on migration patterns, banding studies, and other aspects of basic ornithology, with particular attention given to raptors.

But Connor is most enthralled by the human sources of his information. The real strength of this book is its emphasis on people even more than on birds. Connor introduces us to Frank Nicoletti, the "Iron Man" of hawk counters, who never missed a day on the hawk counting platform, who put in more than a thousand hours in each of his three seasons as hawk counter, who could confidently separate a Cooper's from a Sharpie even if the bird was so high as to be but a pinprick, but who lost his job because he was too noncommunicative with visiting birders.

We meet Clay Sutton and his wife Pat, two of the finest field biologists in New Jersey. Clay was rather insulted not to be offered the job as first hawk counter when the count was initiated. Instead, the job went to a "kid" by the name of Peter Dunne. On the first day of the hawk count, Clay saw a Peregrine come in low over the ocean. He laughed, knowing the new kid on the hawk watch would miss it. But Pete did not. Sutton and Dunne have been close friends ever since, and, along with David Sibley, published *Hawks in Flight* (1988, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), a book largely researched at Cape May Point. Connor amusingly takes us to a lecture on hawk identification given by Pete and Clay. They argue over how many trays of slides are appropriate. Sutton prefers four trays, about four hundred slides! Dunne likes the idea of about eight slides total. Sutton prevails, and as the talk goes on well past its allotted hour, more and more members of the audience drift off to a world populated more by dreams than by hawks.

We meet Al Nicholson, the curmudgeon of Cape May, a naturalist, artist, and environmental activist who regularly engages in battle with the County Mosquito Commission (about spraying and ditching salt marshes), and who hates what Cape May has become. He believes that birders get the wrong message about conservation from visiting Cape May. He thinks the hawk count and banding operations ought to stop. Nicholson is not much for compromise. Once he was Clay Sutton's mentor, but the two had a falling out and are barely cordial today.

We meet Paul Kerlinger, the outspoken director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, who is usually too busy addressing envelopes, answering the phone, or selling T-shirts to do the one thing he does extremely well—ornithological research (Kerlinger authored *Flight Strategies of Migrating Hawks*, 1989, Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Kerlinger's passion for research, his knowledge of raptors, and his frustrations at the multiple demands

on his time, are conveyed in Kerlinger's own words, as Connor made a point of being Paul's "shadow" for most of the season. Kerlinger muses that the good hawk flights may be nothing more than a consequence of the birds' hesitation to cross water when there are strong tail winds. Kerlinger argues that the birds do not have the option of turning back if they become exhausted. Therefore, on days of strong northwest winds, they bottle up in the skies over Cape May Point. Kerlinger thinks that on days of easy, warm, south winds the hawks may cross quickly at elevations as high as three thousand feet. The point here, of course, is that if Kerlinger is right, the really good flights would appear to be essentially nondetectable from the hawk counting platform. That would put quite a wrinkle in the justification for conducting a daily hawk count, a program that Kerlinger directs! One high point of the season for Kerlinger came when a Golden Eagle was lured to one of the banding stations and subsequently captured. It is a very rare event at Cape May to capture an eagle. Kerlinger picked up his radio and nonchalantly called the hawk counting platform, dryly reporting, "Houston, this is Tranquillity Base. The Eagle has landed."

We meet many others as well. There is Jeff Bouton, the official hawk counter, who seems to take personal guilt in the fact that the year's hawk count, 43,534, is among the lowest ever. There were 20,000 fewer Sharpshins than average and 7000 fewer American Kestrels. Whatever the cause for these declines, they are probably not related to Bouton. But try to tell him that.

There is Richard Crossley, the British birder who disdains hawks and watches warblers, confidently identifying them as mere silhouettes on the wing. According to the "Brit," Americans put far too much faith in field guides and not nearly enough in eyes and brains. He claims the British are far advanced over Americans as field birders, and only David Sibley really measures up to British standards.

There is Katy Duffy, who bands owls and has documented the migration of Barn, Long-eared, and Saw-whet owls at Cape May. Connor joins Duffy for a celebration of champagne and cake in honor of having banded her thousandth owl in her eight years at the Point. The celebration was necessarily brief, as Duffy had to go out and check her nets.

And then there is Pete Dunne, the golden boy of Cape May, initiator of the World Series of Birding, who, Connor claims, is arguably the second most familiar name in birding (RTP is still numero uno). Dunne, a former carpet installer (who once listed his occupation on a tax return as "professional ne'er-do-well") came to southern New Jersey in 1976, to eventually become Dunne the ubiquitous wordsmith of birding (*Tales of a Low Rent Birder*, 1986, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, plus innumerable articles in virtually every birding periodical in the United States, including *Bird Observer*, Vol. 9, No. 4, August 1981). The "Dunne Era" so much correlates with the emergence

of Cape May as a modern birding mecca that the Point's recent history is divided into two periods, "BP" and "AP" (Before Pete and After Pete). Though Connor obviously has great respect and admiration for Dunne, he is in no way deferential toward him. Dunne is but one of several people who are the central characters in this book. He is not the star. Connor points out that Dunne, though indisputably a fine writer, lecturer, and photographer (and birder), has an ego that occasionally flies as high as some of the Peregrines that cross over Cape May. The first meeting between Dunne and Maurice Broun (of Hawk Mountain) is an example of Pete's occasional tendency toward arrogance in handling people. Maurice Broun had come to Cape May at the invitation of Bill Clark, who then directed the hawk-banding program, to see for himself that both the banding and counting operations were being well run. Maurice tried to come incognito. When Dunne saw Broun and introduced himself, Broun did not give his right name. Dunne then pretended not to recognize Broun, and asked if Broun had ever been to Hawk Mountain. He then told the unsuspecting Broun, in very purple prose, about how he admired a man named Maurice Broun, "the best hawkwatcher in the world, the Keeper of the Flame at Hawk Mountain, the man he'd most like to meet." Later, when Broun tried to introduce himself to Dunne, Pete brushed him aside with a dismissive wave, saying, "Oh, sit down, Maurice. I knew who you were." Dunne's current concern is over the precipitous decline in numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks at Cape May. He speculates that passerine declines caused by forest fragmentation and outright habitat loss could be responsible.

If you cannot go to Cape May, read *Season At The Point*. Even if you can go, get it and take it with you. Connor has crafted a brilliant book. The birders he profiles are not just any birders. They are not taken from the masses who come for New Jersey Audubon's annual autumn weekend. They are the few, the dedicated, who freely devote one fourth or more of their year, usually at next to no pay, to learning about the birds of autumn. They do not always agree with one another. Clay Sutton still has an extreme aversion to watching hawks captured, handled, and banded. Al Nicholson thinks Pete Dunne has ruined Cape May. But their passion and, underlying it all, their friendships and mutual respect, come through clearly. They share a very special experience, which Connor manages to capture in prose.

The book is free of typos, illustrated with attractive black-and-white sketches, and has a map on the endpapers. There is a brief guide to hawk identification at the end of the book. Unfortunately, there is no index, and a book with so much good discussion of science ought to have one.

As a postscript to the Cape May story, the New Jersey Audubon Society had hoped to construct a new building on Bayshore Road near Higbee's Beach to house the Cape May Bird Observatory, which currently is much too confined,

with severely limited space. To that end there was a proposal to purchase an old twenty-acre farm, to be the new site of the observatory. On July 30, 1991, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that the local planning board had rejected the proposed building, claiming that the influx of birders would present too much of a nuisance to local residents.

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