



MOUNT TOM STATE RESERVATION

by David L. Fischer, Macomb, Illinois

Mount Tom State Reservation, located about 95 miles west of Boston, is among the state's premier birding areas. Although known to birders primarily for its hawk migrations, the reservation is situated in the heart of the Connecticut River Valley, New England's major inland avian migration route, and consequently attracts a wide variety of birds. The reservation encompasses nearly the entire Mt. Tom Range, a five-mile string of peaks which begins at the northeast end with the relatively low (750'-850') Mt. Nonotuck, Dry Knoll and Goat Peak, then drops through a low area known as Free Orchard Notch and finally rises up to the higher (1100'-1200') Whiting Peak and Mt. Tom (a two-mile distance with spectacular west-facing cliffs). South of the reservation, the same ridge-line continues at a lower elevation into central Connecticut. Nearly the whole reservation is forested; the south-facing slopes are primarily oak, the northern and eastern slopes a mixture of hemlock, white pine, and a variety of hardwoods. Open water and marshland areas are lacking with the exception of Bray Lake, which may attract a few grebes or diving ducks during the fall migration.

Mt. Tom Reservation can be reached from Interstate 91 in Holyoke by taking Rte. 141 1.6 miles west to the reservation entrance (Christopher Clark Rd.) near the Holyoke-Easthampton line. From US Rte. 5 north from Holyoke Center or south from Northampton, take Reservation Rd. (well marked). A third entrance connects to East St., Easthampton, about a mile west of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Arcadia Sanctuary turnoff. The reservation is administered by officials of Hampden County and is generally open from 8 A.M. to sunset throughout the year. Numerous picnic facilities, hiking trails and scenic views are the focus of public usage. Camping is not permitted.

Ornithological interest in Mt. Tom is not new. Peregrine Falcons were reported nesting here as early as 1869. The first hawk migration studies were conducted by state ornithologist Joseph A. Hagar in 1936. In the years since, a multitude of birders and hawkwatchers have visited the area and much has been learned about hawk migration here. In this regard, a quantum leap in knowledge has occurred within the last decade as a result of the New England Hawk Watch project. Coincidental with hawk migrations, observers have also noted many other species migrating past Mt. Tom, especially waterbirds. Snow Geese by the thousands are expected in early April and late October. In addition, loons, Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Herons in numbers, Canada Geese, scoters, swallows, winter finches and many others are regularly seen moving past Mt. Tom. Anything might turn up on this avian highway, as was proved when three Canary-winged Parakeets winged by a group of puzzled hawkers in 1973.

The extensive forests of Mt. Tom may also play host to concentrations of passerines, which seem to filter through the trees along the ridges during good May and September days, though there is never the tremendous concentration of birds as at a coastal landbird trap. Still, this observer has several times listed 15 to 20 species of warblers from Goat Peak Tower during lulls in the day's hawk flight in September. State listers may find the area worth visiting for its regular Worm-eating

Warbler and resident Pileated Woodpeckers, Ruffed Grouse and Great Horned Owls, all of which frequent and sometimes nest in the main picnic area.

BIRDING HOT SPOTS

Though the focus of birding at Mt. Tom is generally the two hawkwatching towers, there are a couple of other spots worth checking at certain times of the year.

Bray Lake Area: This area has nesting Pileated Woodpecker, Ruffed Grouse, Wood Duck, and Louisiana Waterthrush. In mid-April it is good for Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Winter Wren and early warblers. The best trail leaves the road 0.1 mile west of the lake (up the hill) and descends northward into swampy woods before dead-ending near a golf course. Park at the bottom of the hill in the space available along the road or in the Bray Lake parking lot. Explore other trails if time allows.

Christopher Clark Rd.: The reservation is so vast that often the best approach to birding the area is to systematically drive through it with your car windows open, stopping whenever you hear or see something of interest. Christopher Clark Rd. is best for this method since it has numerous pull-offs in which to park. Listen for the resident Worm-eating Warbler along the southern 0.3 miles of the road in May/June.

Metacomet-Monadnock Trail: This trail runs from Connecticut to New Hampshire and bisects the reservation, more or less following the ridgeline. The portion of the trail most often birded is the southern ascent from Rte. 141 to the Mt. Tom summit. This can be excellent early in the morning in May; nocturnal migrants seem to land and concentrate here before filtering through the trees northward. Many rarities have been found here in recent years (Hooded, Cerulian, Kentucky, and Mourning Warblers; Summer Tanager; Acadian Flycatcher; etc.) though the area is not well covered. This is another good place to look for the Worm-eating Warbler (just at base of the very steep part of the trail). Enthusiastic hikers are encouraged to complete the hike to the Mt. Tom summit for a spectacular view. The trail leaves Rte. 141 where the power lines cross the road 0.2 miles east of the Christopher Clark Rd. entrance; parking is available along the highway. Summer hikers reaching the upper slopes should beware of rattlesnakes and copperheads (the author has yet to find one in over twenty climbs).

HAWKWATCHING HOT SPOTS

Hawkwatching is generally done from two locations: Bray Tower and Goat Peak Tower. Bray Tower is used in the spring, Goat Peak in the fall. Though Goat Peak is probably the superior site at both seasons, road access is often not available in the spring. Bray Tower is sometimes used in late fall when wind chill renders Goat Peak Tower uninhabitable for any length of time.

Bray Tower: This tower is located near the reservation headquarters building (intersection of Christopher Clark Rd. and Reservation Rd.). Take your first left if coming in the Christopher Clark Rd. entrance. An excellent view of the Whiting Peak cliffs and the western horizon is obtained from the tower. Many birds pass directly over the tower so that

the limited visibility to the east is not usually detrimental. Comparatively little can be seen from the ground.

Spring migration begins in early March with the passage of the larger buteos and an occasional harrier, Goshawk, other accipiter or falcon. There is an early peak for these species around March 20 to April 5, and then a second peak about April 17 to the 27th in which Broad-wings, Ospreys, Sharp-shins and kestrels are the principal species. Best days seem to be on southwest winds; east winds are the poorest. Warm, gentle breezes are preferred by most species to cold, blustery conditions.

Goat Peak Tower: To reach this tower, proceed north from the intersection near the headquarters building and park in the large gravel parking area on the right (about 0.5 miles). From here, a 10-minute walk up a paved (restricted vehicle access) roadway will bring you to the tower. A cleared bluff just east of the tower offers excellent ground viewing when the area becomes crowded on September weekends. The view from the tower itself offers a complete 360° view of the horizon.

Fall hawk migration in New England begins with a trickling of birds in August, peaks in mid-September for numbers and in late September-early October for species, before ending with another trickling of the larger species in November. At Mt. Tom there is typically an early kestrel peak around September 10, a Broad-wing-Osprey peak within five days of the 17th, a long accipiter-falcon peak from about September 22 to October 10, and finally a Red-tailed-Red-shouldered Hawk peak during the last two weeks in October. In the fall any wind direction may produce a hawk flight at Mt. Tom as long as visibility is good and there is no precipitation. It has been shown that clearing weather after a period of rain (a high pressure system moving in behind a low) during the peak Broad-wing period will consistently produce massive movements of Broad-winged Hawks in New England. These conditions usually produce northwest winds and a large flight may result at Mt. Tom or, as in 1975 and 1978, the majority of the birds may pass to the east. A dry northeast wind, however, has seldom produced anything less than spectacular results. The 6,000 Broad-wings that passed Goat Peak Tower in about an hour's time on 9/18/69 was on such a wind. Accipiter flights also tend to occur on northeast or east winds. Curiously, best kestrel days seem to occur on westerly winds.

How many hawks can you see at Mt. Tom and when should you come? The time to come depends on what you want to see. What you actually see is largely a function of weather conditions, luck and patience. On any decent day in mid-September (as long as it's not raining, foggy, or threatening to rain) you should expect to see over a hundred hawks, mostly Broad-wings. In October, you may only average 2-3 hawks per hour on a poor day. Arrive by 9 or 9:30 A.M., if possible, to catch the lower, more exciting, early accipiter flight.

The table below lists seasonal totals from counts prior to 1978 at Mt. Tom. It is included to give the reader some idea as to the numbers of hawks observed here and relative abundance of each species. This data was collected and compiled by Mary and Sebastian Yenlin, Diane Hathaway, George and Helen Champoux, Tom Gagnon and the author.

Species	Fall Flights (1973-77)					Spring Flights	
	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1975	1976
Turkey Vulture	4	NC	17	31	19	48	15
Goshawk	11	13	10	12	20	12	10
Sharp-shinned Hawk	138	226	589	657	897	186	223
Cooper's Hawk	24	25	49	23	38	13	24
Red-tailed Hawk	28	14	89	37	102	94	14
Red-shouldered Hawk	7	4	16	15	5	94	53
Broad-winged Hawk	4136	5639	5036	2344	11778	277	440
Bald Eagle	2	0	2	3	1	0	1
Marsh Hawk	16	37	47	31	44	22	13
Osprey	112	83	182	112	199	95	56
Peregrine Falcon	2	2	4	1	2	0	0
Merlin	3	4	2	5	5	5	0
American Kestrel	115	189	332	252	203	113	47
Unident. & Other	7	28	87	31	19	12*	8
Total	4605	6264	6462	3554	13332	971	904

NC = not counted

* - includes one Swainson's Hawk

COLOR-DYED SHOREBIRD PROGRAM

In 1979, the Canadian Wildlife Service will be continuing an extensive program of banding and color-marking shorebirds in James Bay, with the objective of defining migration routes used by shorebirds on their journeys between the Arctic breeding grounds and wintering areas. Since 1974, over 38,500 shorebirds have been captured in southern James Bay. Much new information is being obtained on migration routes and strategies, and your assistance in looking out for and reporting color-marked birds would be very much appreciated and would contribute very substantially to the success of the program.

Feather dyes (yellow/orange) and colored leg bands (yellow or light blue) will be used to mark the birds according to age and date and place of capture. If you see a marked shorebird, please record details of: species, place, date, color-marks and, if possible, numbers of other shorebirds present. For color-dyed birds, please record the color and area of the bird that was dyed (e.g. entire breast, upper breast only, belly from legs to tail only, etc.). For color bands and standard metal leg bands please record which leg the bands were on, the colors involved, and the relative position of the bands if more than one was on a leg (e.g. right leg, blue over metal, etc.). A note should also be made whether the bands were below or above the "knee" of the bird.

Reports can be sent to Massachusetts Audubon Society, Natural History Services, Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773 or by phone (617) 259-9500.