

[From Winter 1996-97]

Raptor Banding on ESNWR

Since 1982, the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary has conducted a raptor banding program at Wise Point, which is the southern tip of the refuge boundary. The program is intended to gain information on the recovery of the peregrine falcon, the movement of all raptors during migration, and correlate raptor movements with weather patterns. The bander in charge is Reese Lukei, a volunteer research associate from William & Mary's Biology department. Reese started as an assistant bander for the Wise Point station in 1985 and became the head bander in 1989. The banding season begins in late August and usually ends around mid-November. Early in the season, Reese begins his day at dawn and stays until dusk. But as the migration nears the end, the birds start flying later in the morning and usually stop by two or three in the afternoon.

During the fall migration, birds that migrate along the Atlantic Coast are affected by the narrowing of the land as they proceed south. Peninsulas, such as the Delmarva Peninsula, act as "funnels" due to the fact that most birds, including raptors, are hesitant to cross large bodies of water. When the birds reach the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, they build up and assess the situation of crossing the 15 mile mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. After traveling from as far north as Northern Canada, most birds have expended a lot of energy and choose to hang around and build up enough fat reserves to continue the trek to southern climates. The Wise Point banding station is located at the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula. This is a prime location which takes advantage of the funnel effect.

As the birds of prey come within sight of the banding station, they are lured in by the use of a pigeon and/or cowbird. The lure birds are placed in a harness that is connected to a string, which is in turn connected to a pole by a system of pulleys. Surrounding each pole is a series of nets that are approximately six feet tall. When a raptor is within range, Reese gives the string a tug. The lure bird is hoisted in the air, simulating an injured bird which the passing raptor sees as an easy target. The raptor then makes a dive for the lure bird, concentrating so intently on its prey that it doesn't notice the nets. It becomes trapped, and Reese quickly retrieves the bird to band it, sex/age it, measure its wing length, and release it. Occasionally, a sly merlin or a wise peregrine will notice the nets and quickly adjust its flight path to avoid capture. For the most part, the incoming birds don't notice the "trap."

Since the banding station has been in operation at the Wise Point site, they have banded nearly 12,000 raptors. According to Reese, this year has been slow, in general, for migrating raptor flights. As of November 15th, 670 birds had been banded and about 20 birds had been recaptured at Wise Point. Recaptures (birds banded elsewhere) only account for about 3% of the total number of birds caught at the station.

A good day for raptor banding usually occurs after the passing of a cold front and moderate northeast winds, which provide a good tail wind for the birds as they fly south. Reese has also seen good days when the winds change to southwest after a few days of a northwesterly direction.

Although this season has been slow, there have been a few highlights. On October 26th, Reese recaptured a peregrine falcon that was previously banded in Holsteinborg, Greenland. He also banded his first adult male northern harrier, a partial albino adult male merlin, and recaptured an immature northern goshawk. Nearly half of the birds banded this year (357) have been sharp-shinned hawks. This isn't too surprising because these birds, along with the Cooper's hawks, make up the bulk of the raptors in flight during the season. Hopefully, next fall the winds and the weather will cooperate to produce a successful banding season.

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