



## My Blind Date with a Red-tailed Hawk

The Raptor Watch researchers knew this hawk was young because of his yellow eyes, which will darken with age. Notice the hole in his tongue. This type of tongue allows him to eat and breathe at the same time. We don't have that adaptation and can only do one or the other.



# Mackinaw News

by Sandy Planisek

The first warm sunny day and I was lucky enough to go on a “blind date.” I was privileged to spend the morning in a well-camouflaged bird blind with two local bird researchers: Nick Alioto and Ed Pike, and Raptor Watch Director Scott Davis banding Red-tailed Hawks. Unlike owls, which are active at night and thus banded at night, Red-tailed Hawks soar over fields during the day catching almost anything, but particularly rodents.

To lure the hawks into either the mist nets or the ground net, tethered invasive species birds are placed in the open and supplemented with a bird call. The tethered birds are encouraged to flutter to attract a soaring hawk. Unfortunately, what to me was a perfect weather day, to a hawk it was a day for soaring along on the warm thermals racking up the miles on their migration north, not a day looking for lunch.

Luring a hawk in to be captured and banded was unlikely.

So I used the time to talk to researcher Nick Alioto, a Master of Science student at Michigan State doing his thesis on “The Movement Ecology of Spring Migration of Red-tailed Hawks.” Why? I asked. He explained, probably for the fiftieth time, that Red-tails are a common bird about which almost nothing is known. Researchers are able to

attract funding to study endangered species, but not common ones. Second, being common is an advantage because lessons learned from this bird will probably be applicable to other species. Thirdly, Mackinaw City’s extraordinary number of Red-tails makes banding and even adding a tracking backpack a much more productive use of time than trying for a rare species. And, lastly, their migration route raises many interesting questions. For example, while in the spring 10,000 of



*The blind is nestled under a tree far from people.*



*The ground trap*



*The transmitter is solar powered, weighs 16 grams and will last at least three years. It is mounted on a foam pad and strapped to the bird's back with teflon straps to avoid irritating the bird. The transmitter itself costs \$1,500 and requires cell service that is used to send data to an app on Nick's phone.*



*Nick Alioto spends 6-1/2 hours a day watching for hawks*





these birds might cross over Mackinaw City, only a tenth as many arrive at Whitefish Point. Why? In the fall, less than half as many flow south over Mackinaw City. Why?

Nick will soon have 25 birds carrying solar-powered, tracking backpacks. These are providing data on the bird's path, weather, altitude, and speed. When the tracking units are at full power they record one data point every minute. So Nick has a massive database of information after two seasons. Once data collection is complete next year, he will test the hypotheses that he has been formulating from casual observations by running correlations with his data and with NOAA's.

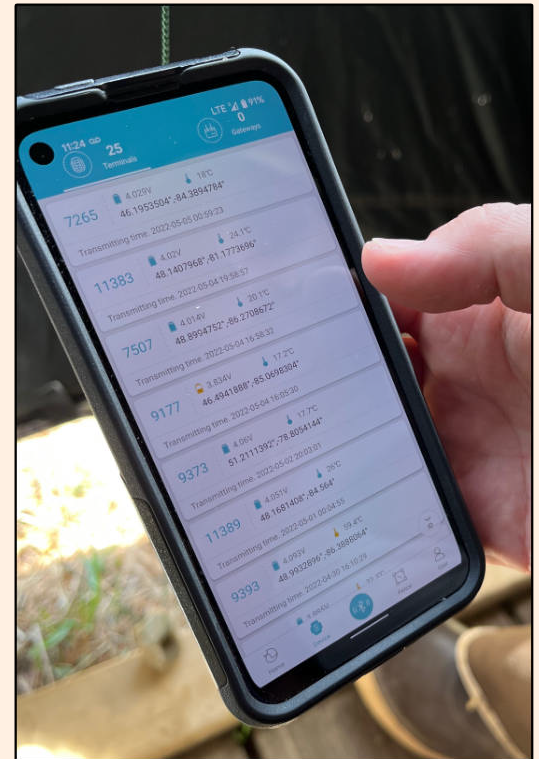
Having learned this and a lot more, I was about to leave when Ed jumped up and was running out of the tent. The mist net had caught a Red-tailed. After untangling it from the net, the bird was measured, weighed, given a health check, recorded and then banded. Although healthy, the bird was too small to carry the last remaining backpack. So it was released. Nick will be at this work until the end of May, but already his tracking app was showing that the birds that had passed through earlier were now nesting in northern Canada. Migration season for this species is nearly over.

He wants to thank everyone who has donated to pay for the expensive backpacks. Without their donations this ground-breaking work would not be possible. If you would like to support this program and students like Nick, contact Scott Davis at [scott@mackinacaptorwatch.org](mailto:scott@mackinacaptorwatch.org)

## The Banding Process

Many measurements are taken during banding. Banding is a two-person operation.

1. Bands come in different sizes so step one is to decide the size needed. This bird is a 7A. The number on the band is recorded.
2. If the bird is agitated a hood is placed over its eyes, calming it.
3. It is weighed by putting it into a coffee can arrangement.
4. Then other parts of the bird are measured and recorded.



*With this app Nick can click on any of his 25 birds and see what they are doing right now, if they are in range of a cell tower.*



*Ed was sure to hold tight to the legs of the bird. Its talons can cause great harm. It is suspected that these birds live about 10 years, if they survive their first year. Nick and Ed did catch a bird that was banded 22 years ago, so a longer life is possible.*





Because of better cameras, the raptor team sometimes uses colored bands. A good photo can be enough to identify such a bird. Since the recapture rate on banded birds is only 1%, colored bands have the potential to provide data on a lot more birds. Banding does provide useful data but not nearly as useful as the tracking backpacks.



*The black and white colored bands used to indicate Mackinaw City*



*The ban used*

## Raptors galore

Mackinaw City's unique geography, at a narrowing between Lakes Huron and Michigan, makes it an attractive crossing point for migrating birds who prefer not to fly across large bodies of water. Last spring, 68,000 birds representing over 20 species migrated over Mackinaw City.

To see some of these birds yourself stop out at the Raptor Watch site on Central Ave. before they wrap up at the end of May. The counting team will be either behind the Rec Center or at Darrow's gravel pit depending on the winds. They will have their small sandwich board posted near the street. Weekends are best when often an interpreter is on-site.

The counting will resume in the fall, September thru November, with counters stationed at Pt. LaBarbe, on the north side of the Straits.



*The length of tail feathers is one of many measurements made on the bird.*

