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Summary of Raptor Banding Efforts
at Hitchcock Nature Center Fall 2014

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The 2014 season was by far the most unusual and frustrating season since the inception of raptor banding and hawk watch at the Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, just north of Crescent. Banding diurnal raptors commenced on September 7th on schedule. The month of September was typical as far as capture rates and weather systems, although we were stymied somewhat by the lack of availability of European Starlings for lure birds. House Sparrows proved a nearly adequate substitute.

During the peak period of October, weather systems that drive diurnal raptor migration worked against monitoring efforts by forcing migration on a broad front rather than concentrating migrants along the Loess Hills ridges where we monitor. As a result, diurnal raptor numbers were reduced by about 25% compared to average banding seasons. Species diversity of banded birds was perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the diurnal season. Only one American Kestrel was banded besides the typical three species that make up the bulk of our captures: Red-tailed Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Cooper's Hawk. The one bright spot was the ratio of juvenile to adult Redtails banded. After a nearly 50-50 ratio of juveniles to adults in 2013, in 2014 the ratio was more typical of a successful breeding season (Beckett and Proudfoot 2011; Whalen and Watts 2002). It approached an 80-20 ratio of juveniles to adults.

Northern Saw-whet Owl banding commenced October 10th and was strong from the onset, considering that the 2013 season was at the bottom of their population cycle. The weather systems that disrupted the diurnal banding operations were advantageous for nocturnal Saw-whet banding (<http://www.hawkcount.org/>). By the end of October, 23 previously unbanded Saw-whet owls were banded at Hitchcock, and three that had previously been banded were also captured. One came from Hawkrigde at Duluth and had been banded only eight days before. If the owl had traveled in a straight line, it would have averaged 51.2 miles per night, a new record flight for our Saw-whet recaptures. The second recapture came from Roosevelt National Forest in western North Dakota, our first recapture from a site west of our station. The third recapture was banded last year by our friends at the Missouri River Bird Observatory (MRBO), at Marshall, Missouri, and was only one of thirteen banded there that season (Personal communication, Dana Ripper, director of MRBO).

November began with warm and mild weather much like October and we had just a trickle of diurnal raptor movement. By the 10th it had changed rapidly to winter weather more typical of January. Despite five attempts during the rest of November, no further diurnal banding occurred. The wintery weather had a similar effect on Saw-whet banding. The Saw-whet banding season peaks during the first week of November, and by the end of the third week, their migration is over (<http://www.hawkcount.org/>). During the period November 1-9, thirteen more Saw-whets were banded at Hitchcock Nature Center. We had planned to open another Saw-whet banding station on November 9th. Sandy Reinken was to continue banding owls at Hitchcock, while I intended to spend three nights banding Saw-whets at Waubonsie State Park, 50 miles south of Hitchcock in the Loess Hills. Our objective was to recapture Saw-whets banded at Hitchcock this season to demonstrate that the Loess Hills are used by the owls as a migration corridor. We were unable to carry out the plan due to the persistent unseasonably cold weather.

Table 1. Raptors Banded at Hitchcock Nature Center 2008-2014

Species	2014	2008-2014	Average
Diurnal Raptors			
Northern Harrier	0	1	0.1
Sharp-shinned Hawk	25	207	29.6
Cooper's Hawk	9	122	17.4
Northern Goshawk	0	2	0.3
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	2	0.3
Broad-winged Hawk	0	3	0.4
Swainson's Hawk	0	1	0.1
Red-tailed Hawk	82	643	91.9
American Kestrel	1	4	0.6
Merlin	0	8	1.1
Peregrine Falcon	0	7	1
Prairie Falcon	0	2	0.3
Nocturnal Raptors			
Eastern Screech-Owl	0	1	0.1
Northern Saw-whet Owl	38	306	51
TOTAL	155	1309	194.3

When the winter weather hit on the 10th, conditions were considered unsafe or unproductive for banding and no further banding occurred. November 20th when the last Saw-whet of the season was banded. All told, 35 new owls were captured and banded, and 3 birds banded at other sites were also captured, totaling 38. (Table 1.) This tally is consistent with what might be expected the first year after the low year in the population recovery cycle (Rasmussen et al. 2008), especially considering losing two weeks of prime banding time to weather conditions.

In other nearby Saw-whet banding efforts, Veronica Mecko continued her efforts at Mount Ayr Wildlife Management Area in Ringgold County, Iowa, on four nights, which resulted in four Saw-whet captures. She also banded six Saw-whets in six nights at a second site, south of Lamoni, Iowa, on private property in Harrison County, just over border in Missouri. Her efforts were hampered by scheduling problems and by larger owls in close proximity to her mist nets, which forced her to close her nets prematurely or not open them at all on some nights due to fear of predation.

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