

A BIRD WATCHER IS BORN

By Bill Hilton Jr.

There was a time when I thought watching birds was a dumb thing to do.

Although I grew up with a deep interest in nature, my early explorations mainly dealt with catching snakes and salamanders and digging for fossils in Appalachian shalebeds. Later on, as a young adult and novice biology teacher in South Carolina, I delighted in photographing wildflowers and slogging through salt marshes with my high school students, but even then I saw little reward in studying birds. Twenty years ago, my whole life changed—almost abruptly—because of two things: Shu, and the flu.

In March 1976, a bad case of influenza kept me at home and away from my teaching duties. I was too sick to read or even watch TV. After nearly a week of misery, my fever finally broke at sunrise, just as a Carolina wren hopped to my windowsill

with an exuberant chorus of *teakettle, teakettle, teakettle*.

Suddenly, this chipper little songster made me realize birds might be interesting after all, and I spent several recuperative days perusing an old bird guide from the bottom of my closet. It was then that *Thryothorus ludovicianus*—the Carolina wren—became the first entry on my growing life list of North American birds.

Later that spring, a longtime friend named Jim Shuman—"Shu" for short—drove from West Virginia for a weekend at my home in the Carolina woods. Shu had gotten interested in birds through his father, who spent each May watching northbound warblers along the south shore of Lake Michigan.

I listened to Shu's tales of sapsuckers drilling horizontal feeding holes and cuckoos "slurking" through the treetops in pursuit of tent caterpillars, and paid special attention when he

mentioned Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, a place in eastern Pennsylvania that offered close views of migrating birds of prey. Before he left, I suggested Shu and his father meet me and my wife Susan at the Sanctuary sometime that autumn.

In mid-October, Susan and I and three of my students drove 610

The Carolina wren sings its cheery song in suburban areas.



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miles from York, South Carolina, to Kempton for FAHGEHM—our “First Annual Hawk Gawk Expedition to Hawk Mountain.” Shortly after sunrise on the 16th, we arrived at the Sanctuary parking lot, gathered optics, pillows and picnic basket, and rendezvoused with the two Shumans.

Although five months pregnant, Susan determinedly climbed the rocky path to North Lookout. A cold front was moving through, but we were all newcomers to the Mountain and no one knew quite what to expect. As we topped the trail, the view—and the activity—literally took our breath away. There were thousands of acres of autumn foliage, sharp-shinned hawks swooping at an owl decoy, red-tailed hawks gliding through in steady streams, and even a merlin slicing past at head-jerking speed.

For ten unforgettable hours we perched on the rocks, spotting raptors over Donat or Hunter’s Field and learning from Curator Jim Brett and the official counter how to tell one hawk from another. That amazing Saturday brought 674 sharpshins, 15 kestrels and 63 redtails—nine species and 786 individual raptors in all.

The next day’s hawk gawking seemed anticlimactic by comparison, and we almost started to get a bit blasé—until a “big bird” was spotted over Number One. For what seemed like an eternity we watched the slow approach of a large raptor as it came straight toward the Lookout, and we joined the exuberant cheer that rang out when—only a few dozen yards from where we sat—my first-ever immature golden eagle glided over the Little Schuylkill River. The peregrine falcon that barreled through an hour later was an unexpected bonus.

On that October weekend 20 years ago, I became hopelessly addicted to birds and to Hawk Mountain. I was so intrigued that the next summer I took an ornithology course at Mountain Lake Biological Station in Virginia. In the fall of 1977, it was back to Hawk Mountain for the sec-

ond time with students, Shu, Susan and Billy—the latter now eight months old and arguably a two-year hawk-gawk veteran.

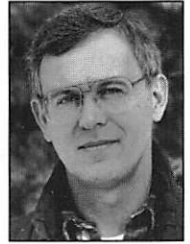
There was no quenching my thirst for bird study, so in 1978 I moved the family to Minneapolis to begin graduate work and a three-year field study of the behavioral ecology of blue jays.

When we moved back to South Carolina in 1982, I resumed teaching and added natural history writing and bird banding to my list of activities. I also revived our annual expeditions to Hawk Mountain. Typically, the whole family traveled north—newborn Garry joined us in 1985—and I brought increasing numbers of students—40 of them in 1988. It was always rewarding to share the Hawk Mountain experience with young people, and I’m pleased that many of my hawk-gawking students have chosen careers in ecology, ornithology, science education or related fields.

This year, two decades after our first trek to North Lookout, I’m privileged to join the staff as Director of Education. Although coming here was not a conscious career goal, I’ve spent my entire life training for my new position, and I look forward to helping many more people learn from the multitude of lessons Hawk Mountain offers.

My target audience is students—ages one year through 99—and the entire education staff is at work improving existing programs and designing new ones to meet the needs of school kids, teachers, general visitors and Sanctuary members. We’re also making an effort to extend our outreach to new audiences and to offer programs throughout the year.

I urge you to share your affection for birds and for Hawk Mountain with friends, family and students. You never know when a chance happening—perhaps the song of a Carolina wren near a sickbed or a long look at a golden eagle—might help someone realize bird watching and hawk gawking aren’t so dumb after all.



Along with his hawk-gawking forays, Bill Hilton brings 25 years of experience in science and natural history education to his new job as Sanctuary director of education.