



Vicki Penziner-Matson Natural History Field Trip: Report
30 September to 2 October 2011
Point Pelee National Park and Holiday Beach Conservation Area, Ontario, Canada

The short report is: “We had a great experience, we wish YOU had been there!” The longer version is:

The first Vicki Penziner-Matson Field Trip of the 2011-12 school year took place last weekend, 30 Sept- 2 October 2011. For the first time in many years, we returned to Ontario to observe the fall migration of birds, especially raptors (hawks, eagles and falcons) on the north shore of Lake Erie. Twenty folks participated -- four faculty and 16 students. The following is a synopsis of the trip.

The Vicki Penziner-Matson trips are supported by an endowed fund set up about 40 years ago in Vicki’s memory by her parents and friends. Vicki had deep interests in natural history and photography (her Earlham faculty mentors were Carrolle Markle, Gertrude (“Lucky”) Lockhart Ward and Jim Cope). The fund pays for transportation, food and gear and is open to all members of the Earlham community -- staff, students and faculty and their families.

This trip was organized and led by Joel Hogle (EC ’12), Kevin Schmidt (EC’12), Wendy Tori and Bill Buskirk. Everyone who participated facilitated its success. We departed from Earlham on Friday afternoon at about 3pm. A sort of picnic dinner in NW Ohio was cut short by a rainsquall and we continued on to the Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Canada. After a conversation with Canadian immigration/customs, we were on our way to Point Pelee National Park where we had campground reservations.

We arrived in darkness and drizzle to find a well-appointed group campground with shelters, lights and clean facilities. At this point the wind was howling out of the north and rainsqualls were on us soon after the tents were up. Wind and rain dominated the night, some found it lulling, some exhilarating (you could also hear the waves crashing on the nearby Lake Erie beach), others found it soaking -- as one or two tent set-ups weren’t up to the challenge. [Note: next time: better instructions about not having the ground cloth extending beyond the “footprint” of the tent, and we are due for a set of tent replacements.] [Note: thanks to Wendy and Jose Ignacio’s selection of their tent, brought by Wendy and shared with the other faculty. We had a dry, if not calm night.]

As we drifted off to sleep, three of the faculty listened to a lively card game, involving Wendy and a bunch of the other participants. As we climbed into our sleeping bags, Raja mentioned that he hadn’t camped since he was at a youth camp 35 years before -- where he first met Subha!

The early dawn brought the end of the heavy rainsqualls, but not the winds. In the early dawn light we marched the 1.5 miles to the “Tip”. Along the way we found an unusually confiding Solitary Sandpiper feeding on the roadway -- allowing us to get within a few feet of us as it fed -- a snazzy beginning for the day. As we approached the Tip we began seeing American Kestrels overhead and a large number of thrushes and warblers flitting through the forest. At least two Belted Kingfishers were actively calling and flying back and forth. The Tip of the point provided a highly dramatic scene with waves crashing in, gulls, cormorants and ducks flying in all directions, A beautiful Ruddy Turnstone was on the beach, later joined by a Semipalmated Sandpiper -- both, like the Solitary Sandpiper, allowed close up views as they fed around us.

American Kestrels, Northern Harriers, three Bald Eagles were overhead. Small birds that had been caught at first light over the lake were struggling back against the wind and arriving, sometimes below knee level, to seek shelter in the vegetation near the point. A Merlin (a small falcon with attitude) struggled mightily against the wind as well -- carrying a small bird that it had captured out over the lake. When we checked the woods we found it full of Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, White-crowned Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers and a smattering of other small birds. Favorites of ours included Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Scarlet Tanager, Black-throated Green Warbler and Black-throated Blue Warbler.

After a late morning brunch we drove north of the park, making use of a nearby laundromat to dry sleeping bags and to visit a variety of habitats near the base of the Pelee peninsula. Everywhere the air was full of loose flocks of Turkey Vultures and scattered Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers and American Kestrels. On our way back to the campsite we visited the marsh boardwalk for an exhilarating walk in the strong winds and under partly sunny skies. After a robust meal of hot soup and taco salad many of us turned in early. Welling, Raja and I fell asleep talking and solving the problems of the world; Wendy was helping students study for an upcoming exam in their insect course.

At dawn, the winds had subsided some and on our trip to the Tip we found the sky full of Sharp-shinned Hawks and other raptors. An Osprey was flushed from the trees. Though windy, the point didn't offer as many raptors and water birds as the day before -- we did have Bald Eagles fly by, heading across the lake toward Ohio. The songbirds on the point, however, were a very different mix than the day before with new species like Dark-eyed Junco, Red-breasted Nuthatch, lots of Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Eastern Phoebe. A Merlin, perched on a dead snag, allowed excellent spotting scope looks. A Sharp-shinned Hawk dived on it at one point.

As some of us returned to camp, we talked about the plant composition on the point -- it is primarily made up of trees and shrubs with bird-dispersed seeds (Hackberry, Mulberry, Black Cherry, Choke Cherry, Wild Grape, Black Raspberry, Black Berry, dogwoods, Red and Chinquapin Oaks, etc. With so many birds stopping here on the point the predominance of those species makes sense. Historically the Point had open sandy habitats and remnants of the vegetation of those days still persists in some locales -- prickly pear cactus being one obvious remnant species!

After brunch we broke camp and departed to the west, along the Lake Erie shore, to the hawk watch site in the Holiday Beach Conservation Area. Here observers keep a daily tally of the hawks migrating along the coast from August to November. A four-story observation tower is the watch site and from the top you get a broad view of the trees along the shore, a marsh to the north and west and are on the flight line for many of the hawks that come by just overhead or even below you! We had an exhilarating time as many American Kestrels, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks passed -- some zipping by with strong tail winds out of the northwest. A Bald Eagle adult was seen and long lines of Turkey Vultures seemingly lazily drifted to the west. A variety of ducks and other water birds were discovered in the marsh. While we were there for only an hour or so, the day's total counts of species reported by the official observers were impressive: 3356 Turkey Vultures; 1823 Sharp-shinned Hawks and 506 American Kestrels (the previous day they reported 2472 kestrels -- an all-time single day record for the site!!).

We returned home just after dark on Sunday evening ... what a wonderful weekend trip!

Thanks to all who participated and special thanks to Joel and Kevin who carried most of the responsibility of getting us organized and off on the trip!

Bill and Wendy



A great group of people!



A few of the things we saw



Note: pictures by Andrew Hood and Wendy Tori

A few activities we did

