



Banding Hawks on the North Shore: Fishing from the Sky with Frank Taylor

Text by Dr. Trudi Taylor and photos by Frank Taylor

"Coming in from the north! Looks like a Tail!"

Seven pairs of binoculars turn quickly to the north, scanning the skies.

"I see it. Yep, a red-tail! Bring 'er in, Rick!"

Rick pulls the line and the lure flutters up.

"You've got its attention—it's locked on! Everybody QUIET!!"

Seven observers slowly pull back from the blind's openings and hold their collective breaths, hoping! And then they watch the most amazing sight: The red-tail begins a long stoop in from high in the sky, a quarter mile out, and in its final push, 50 yards from the net, lowers its powerful "landing-gear" legs. It slams full speed right into the front net!

"YAHOO!! Got it! What a sight!!"

With silly grins and high fives all around, the team piles out of the blind. Rick and Chuck carefully retrieve the red-tail - feather perfect - and reset the nets. Frank measures the hawk and puts a band on its leg while the others record the data. Then comes the most magical part of the event: The Release.

"One! ... Two! ... Three!"

The group counts, and cameras click as Becky, first-time visitor to the blind, releases the Buteo back to the wild. The red-tail takes an elegant turn and is lost from sight over the trees, five minutes after its capture. Becky is left looking after it with tears in her eyes.

"AHHHHH! That was incredible! Who knew? No wonder you keep doing this! It's like fishing from the sky! And when you get to let them go... OhMyGod! That was soooo AWESOME!!!"

The team jumps back into the blind and begins scanning the skies for the next raptor.

The Beginning of a Passion

Raptors have been Frank Taylor's defining passion ever since he was in third grade. After reading author, historian, and falconer T. H. White's book *The Sword in the Stone*, Frank was hooked. He began drawing pictures of raptors and reading every related book he could find. He became an avid falconer in his late teens, and along with Dr. Pat Redig and a small group of like-minded falconers, helped to form the Minnesota Falconers Association while in his early 20s.

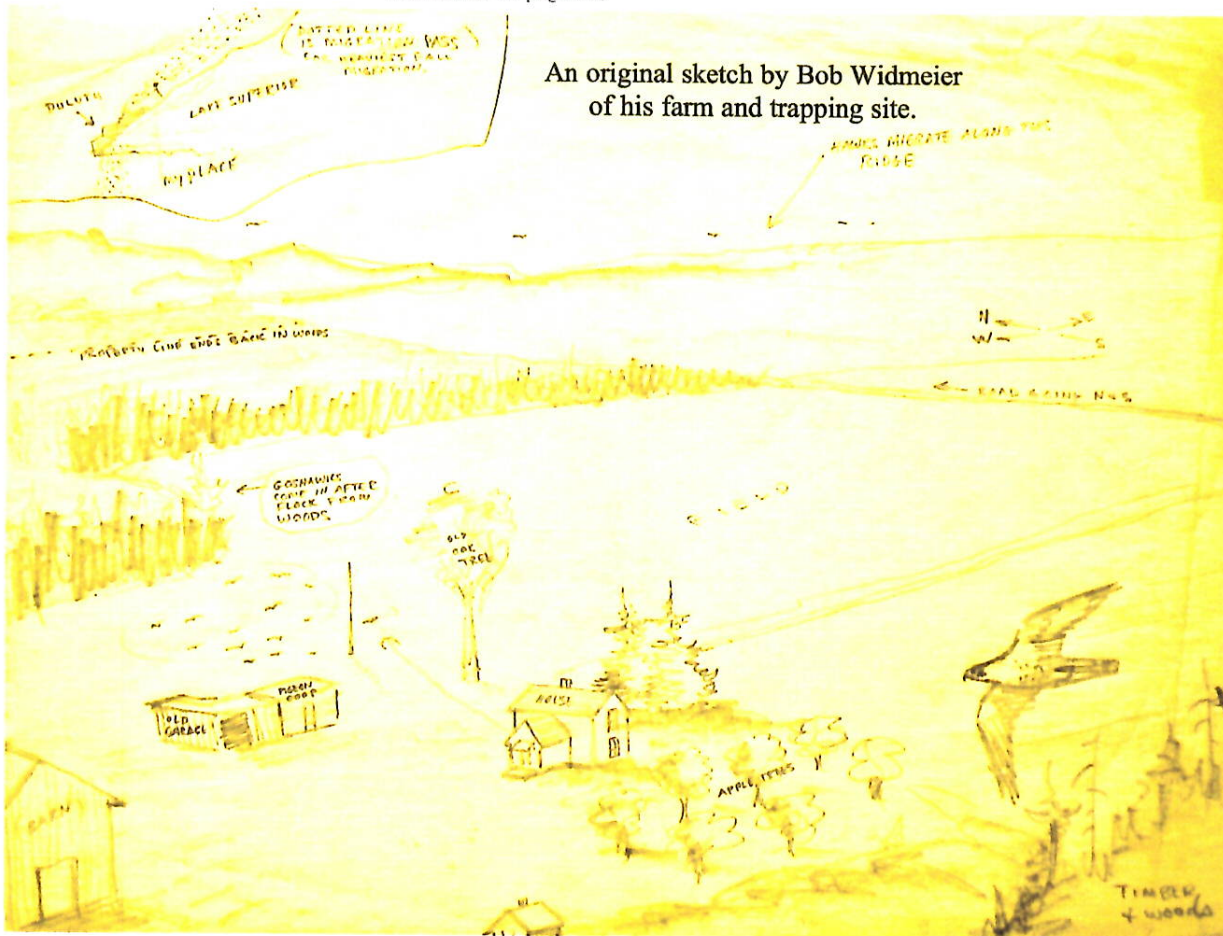
The Craigheads' book *Hawks in the Hand* and exciting NAFA articles about Bob Widmeier, the artist/falconer who was trapping hawks and sending them all over the world from his Duluth farm, drew Frank inevitably up to the North Shore of Lake Superior. Frank started out trapping hawks for falconry on Hawk Ridge in Duluth before it was declared a sanctuary, and in 1970, with the blessing of land owner Roy Mattson, moved his nets to a beautiful hayfield halfway between Duluth and Two Harbors, just over a mile southeast of his hero Widmeier's land.

Frank has now been banding in that same hayfield,

(Continued on page 22)



Frank and Trudi Taylor



An original sketch by Bob Widmeier of his farm and trapping site.

overlooking sparkling Lake Superior, nearly every weekend in September and October for 45 uninterrupted years. For almost all of those years, friend and fellow falconer Rick DuPont has been right there working with him. Some 30 years ago, falconer Dr. Chuck Schotzko became the third member of the group. The core banding team now typically includes those "Three Amigos" and wives Nancy Schotzko and Trudi Taylor.

Frank became a Sub-Bander under falconer Mike Erickson in 1982 and got his own Master-Personal Banding permit in 1990, with Rick and Chuck as Sub-Banders.



The Three Amigos; Rick, Frank and Chuck with a goshawk.

The "Mission"

When asked why he continues to do this after all these years, Frank says, "I consider banding one way I can 'give back' to raptors for the joy they have brought me! As falconers and banders we have the incredible privilege of being 'up close and personal' with these magnificent creatures; it is awesome to experience that thrill over and over again through the eyes of visitors up here. It's all about sharing the experience and the passion. Besides, it's just plain FUN!"



Our group holding 14 sharp-shins ready for release on our record 38 bird day.

In keeping with that "mission," hundreds of visitors have "sat in" at the blind over the years, many in groups that return year after year and who hold their spot by booking a year in advance. Nearly every banding day includes interested families, senior citizens, K-12 students, college classes, environmental organizations, naturalist tours, birders or photographers. It is not unusual for media personnel or wildlife officials to stop in, and "blind time" is a great time to advocate for raptors and to educate guests about the critical environmental role falconers have played.

The Setup

The banding logistics have evolved over 45 years, with tweaking every few weeks as somebody thinks up a new idea to try, but the setup remains essentially the same. Backing up to a state-owned woods and fronted by a 40-acre hayfield sits the 6x8' blind, 10-feet away is the front net, a 24-foot long dho gaza net about 8-feet high. The back net is a standard 5 pocket mist net bent around poles to enclose the lure bird. The lure, always a pigeon in a specially designed protective harness, is changed often to avoid tiring. In acknowledgement of the sensitivity of the many visitors and because a portion of the site research involves methods for trapping without harming the bait bird, no bow nets or harness traps are used. Mechanical lures are also being evaluated. All birds trapped at this site are banded and released.



The First Blind.

In 1992, the Taylors purchased a dozen acres across the road from the banding hayfield for use as a primitive campsite. Since falconers could not have access to any birds banded at the main blind, a trapping station where they could trap hawks for falconry use was established on that property. Falconer Todd Rosengren has helped to coordinate that activity for the past number of years. Falconers and banders from both sites often meet after dinner around the campfire at "Hawk Harbor," as the camping area is known, to compare (embellish?) the day's successes and frustrations.



The fourth and current blind.

The Data

Because Frank, Rick and Chuck all live over 100 miles from Duluth and have all had "real" jobs, banding has taken place on weekends during the fall and not necessarily when winds and weather were optimal for migration. (And the wives insist they don't sit on the side of a woods in camo once deer season starts, thus providing a definitive ending date to the banding year!) The number of raptors banded for each year correlates strongly, therefore, with weekend weather luck!

On any given banding day, from zero (can you feel the pain and say "Skunked"?!) to 38 (record day in 2014) raptors are processed. In any given season, between 100 (a really unlucky weekend weather year!) and 300 (thank you, Northwest winds!) raptors are banded. Typically, a high percentage are sharp-shins caught in mid-to-late September. Of 202 birds banded in 2014, for example, 162 were shins (117 immy, 45 adult). Other species included: 9 red-tails (6 immy, 3 adult); 11 merlins (all immys); 1 kestrel (immy); 4 harriers (2 immy, 2 adult); 8 goshawks (7 immy, 1 adult); 6 Cooper's hawks (3 immy, 3 adult); and 1 broadwing (immy).



(Continued on page 24)

Data collected and submitted annually to the Bird Banding Laboratory operated by the US Geological Survey for each bird include band number, location caught, date, time of day, species, sex, age, and wing and tail measures. Data are also submitted for any birds caught that were previously banded. Data recorded but not submitted include prevailing wind information, bounce-outs for trap-efficiency analysis, and anecdotal notes (direction from which the bird came, stoop, medical notations, full/empty crop?, etc.).



Raptors afflicted with oddities.



The Results

Admittedly, information collected and submitted by this relatively small banding operation is not in itself highly significant. However, in conjunction with data gathered by hundreds of similar operations around the nation over time, it helps to identify species-specific behavior patterns and produce concrete evidence from which rational, future-thinking policies can be developed. And the hundreds of visitors who've had positive personal experiences with raptors at the site (or even virtually through the blog) become raptor and falconry advocates. Besides, as Frank reports, "We are having so much fun! It's like fishing from the sky!"

Contacting Frank

Readers interested in more details: Join us for an evening campfire at Hawk Harbor, where falconers and friends often gather to tell great (tall) tales, or check out Frank's blog by googling North Shore Banding - Frank Taylor (or go to the url listed).

- North Shore Banding - Frank Taylor
<http://bandingreports.blogspot.com/?view=snapshot>
- Wild About Animals Segment
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptfN5l-K5Es>
- Old Public Access TV Program
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2y5ipNshAM>

Keep your eyes on the skies!

J

