

Fifty Years at Kiptopeke

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Next month, birders will be flocking to Virginia's Eastern Shore for the ABA's 2012 Birding Rally. The rally will be based out of Kiptopeke State Park, the site of several long-term bird-monitoring projects. This article introduces folks to Kiptopeke's rich birdlife, as well as to the human personalities who have been instrumental to understanding and protecting the birds that pass through Kiptopeke each year on fall migration.

The Delmarva Peninsula, with barrier islands and the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the broad Chesapeake Bay to the west, narrows dramatically as you approach its southern tip. Kiptopeke Beach lies three miles north of this southern tip, and at that point the peninsula is just two and a half miles wide, with the bay stretching 23 miles to the west. Below the peninsula's southern tip and adjacent Fisherman Island, the mouth of the bay presents 11 miles of open water before reaching the mainland. The Delmarva becomes a focal point for great numbers of migrating birds, exhausted and seeking landfall at the close of a night's migration. Many choose to stop, rest, and feed before venturing again over open water, and, as dawn arrives, many of these migrants form loose flocks and work back north from the tip in search of food. Kiptopeke lies directly in the path of many of these foraging songbirds.

Kiptopeke is where, on a September day in 1962, a birder returning from the offshore barrier islands was awaiting the ferry to Norfolk. In a gap in the trees lining a bluff above the beach, he saw a continuous stream of birds, many of them moving north. While the direction was interesting, the volume of birds was why he brought out his binoculars to confirm the first impression.

Kiptopeke State Park, near the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, is one of the finest spots from which to observe the fall land bird flight across eastern North America. And Kiptopeke will be the hub for the ABA's first-ever Birding Rally! You never know when a rarity (above) will show up, and you're guaranteed encounters with the common regional species (right), often in excellent numbers.

Above: Part of the Kiptopeke experience is the rich lore of the site. Birders swap tales about the old days—as when, back in October of 1981, this **Bewick's Wren** wandered into a net—and are forever on the lookout for the next “mega.” *Photo by © Walter Smith.*

Right: The long list of rarities is impressive, but the most captivating thing about Kiptopeke is the huge number of common songbirds that migrate through each fall. On “flight days,” practically every patch of vegetation shelters one or more migrants, like this **Field Sparrow**. *Photo by © George Armistead.*



The Kiptopeke story is one of birders as well as of birds. This image depicts a presentation to volunteer bird banders of awards by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Award recipients, all in the front row, are, left to right: Paul Baker, Reese Lukei, John Dillard, Walter Smith, Fred Scott, Dorothy Mitchell, Dot Silsby, Charlie Hacker, and Mitchell Byrd. *Kiptopeke State Park; October 1992. Photographer unknown.*

Fred Scott was a bird bander who had evaluated Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in 1957 as a possible site for participation in "Operation Recovery," a series of banding stations along the Atlantic Coast. This was a program initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to understand bird movements during fall migration. Chincoteague is on the coast and where the peninsula is at its widest point. The results there did not justify further effort.

After receiving permission from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel Authority to use the property, Fred went back to Kiptopeke in 1963 to sample the site. Walter and Doris Smith, Mike and Dorothy Mitchell, and Charles Hacker came across the bay from Hampton and Newport News that first year to assist with banding. They and others installed 28 mist nets dispersed through the woods, which consisted of heavy undergrowth beneath pines and broadleaf trees 15–25 feet high. They operated for seven days in September and banded 216 birds of 41 species. A bird of interest that year was a Chestnut-sided Warbler, for which there were no records on the Eastern Shore. Bay-breasted and Connecticut warblers, which had been considered rare on the Virginia coast, were also banded.

The group had found its second home in the fall. They returned in 1964 and operated the station 16 days from September 26 through October 11. This extended operating time, plus a major cold front, enabled them to band 1,660 birds of 61 species. The Swainson's Thrush was the most numerous with 254 individuals banded, followed by Blackpoll Warbler (220), Gray Catbird (200), Gray-cheeked Thrush (174), and American Redstart (106).

Cold fronts, typically accompanied by winds from the northwest, provide a tailwind for migrating birds and are a good predictor of which nights will see a relatively strong passage





Songbirds are a major draw at Kiptopeke, but the fall raptor flight is, if anything, even more evocative. The falcon flight is spectacular, with Merlins and Peregrine Falcons guaranteed if the winds are right.

Merlin. Kiptopeke State Park; October 2010. Photo by © Steve Thornhill.

of migrants. These same northwest winds drive many birds toward the coast, especially young birds whose orientation is less precise than that of adult birds. For this reason, the percentage of young captured at coastal banding stations is much higher than at inland stations. At Kiptopeke in 1964, more than 30% of all the birds captured were caught during the course of just two days following a cold front.

The banders soon established a pattern of operation that would continue for 20 years. They furnished the nets, as many as 50 in the 1980s, and each served as bander-in-charge for a week or more. Station Director Fred Scott was responsible for recruiting banders as well as preparing their schedule. He and his colleagues also have prepared annual reports for *The Raven*, the journal of the Virginia Society of Ornithology. Meanwhile, Walter P. Smith, in his *Kiptopeke Chronicles* (Aventine Press, 2009), has summarized banding results by day and by species, a significant task in light of the 10,000–15,000 birds processed per year.

Help from additional banders, such as Mitchell Byrd from the College of William and Mary, enabled operation of the station for two months by the late 1960s. By 1967, 100 volunteers were helping with the operation. These assistants were needed because big flight days involved 500–1,000 birds. The number of nets was increased to 42. Yearly captures increased to 12,202 by 1968 and reached a peak of 15,600 in 1974.

Other information was obtained. Blood samples were taken to determine whether parasites were being picked up by birds on the breeding grounds, and ticks were removed to aid in detection of bird-borne diseases. Wing chord and fat were measured on selected species at the request of the U.S. Bird Banding Laboratory, data not normally required at the time.

Although Kiptopeke was established as a songbird station, it soon became evident that it is also a primary hawk migration site. Nets were sized for small birds, and 16 Sharp-shinned Hawks were captured the first year. In 1965, Walter and Doris Smith, when not banding, counted 854 American Kestrels and 1,514 Broad-winged Hawks in one week. By 1977, seven larger-meshed hawk nets were substituted for songbird nets to increase the number of hawks captured. In addition, Charles Hacker established a hawk banding station below a bluff adjacent to the songbird station. This required a different method of trapping, so records were kept separately for this operation. This was the genesis of the current hawk station.

Birders interested in hawk counting discovered that the same bluff which faces north also provides a magnificent view of hawks streaming past on their way south. By 1977, they had started keeping records of their counts. That is the year in which Kiptopeke can be said to have reached its full potential. If you visited, you would see a group of enthusiastic birders in the woods taking songbirds out of nets, hawk watchers sitting on the bluff facing north, and a bander below the bluff trapping hawks. All three activities are still in operation.

There was a time in the late 1980s when the station was threatened with conversion into a campground. The owner, John Maddox, who had graciously permitted us to use the property for more than 20 years, was going to build a trailer park on the banding site. Several organizations mobilized support for saving the habitat by buying it for a state park.

In 1994, the Kiptopeke Environmental Station, Research, and Education Laboratory (KESTREL) was founded, and Bill Williams served as its first president. Brian Taber, now president, served as its first vice president. The name was later changed to Coastal Virginia

Wildlife Observatory (CVWO) to reflect interest in all coastal Virginia areas, not just the Kiptopeke location. CVWO started funding and staffing the fall migration operations with full-time professional banders in 1997. That was one year before the practice of songbird banding in North America shifted dramatically, with the U.S. Bird Banding Laboratory's adoption of Peter Pyle's *Identification Guide to North American Birds: Part I* as the official standard by which all aging and sexing determinations were to be made in the U.S. With its strong emphasis on close examination of species-specific molt patterns, the learning curve for songbird banders became much steeper. The new professional songbird bander hired by CVWO, along with the volunteer banders who continued to assist him, met the challenge, as have the staff and volunteer banders every year since, setting a high standard of accuracy and thoroughness in their monitoring efforts.

Despite the higher demands placed on the banders, Kiptopeke staff and volunteers have continued to make education a major focus of the station. Kiptopeke volunteers selflessly donate their time, week in and week out. They extract birds from mist nets, perform station maintenance, make presentations to the public, and answer innumerable questions from visitors of all ages. Teachers from kindergarten to high school, as well as college professors, bring classes to the station to broaden their experience and to make real and personal the otherwise abstract concept of conservation. Bird clubs, elder hostels, Boy Scout troops, Girl Scout troops, master naturalist classes, families, and individuals are among our visitors.

Few places in North America see the diversity and migratory bird concentration witnessed at Kiptopeke in the fall, and the songbird station, operating seven days a week from mid-August to late November, is one of the best places to experience it up close. For this reason, it is a magnet for novice and veteran birders alike. Each September, the observatory hosts the Kiptopeke Challenge, an annual birding competition on the Eastern Shore to assist in raising operating funds. The winning team regularly records 125–150 species in a 24-hour period. Banders at the songbird station band between 90 and 105 species each fall, and, with the recent expansion of net lanes into the successional shrub-scrub habitat developing on the

Harry Armistead at the hawk watch platform at sunrise. Kiptopeke State Park; October 2011. Photo by © Brian Taber.



station's eastern side, the number of birds banded in a single season exceeded 10,000 in the fall of 2011 for the first time since 1982.

The Kiptopeke fall migration dataset has been maintained continuously since 1963, and is the second-longest record of migration banding in the U.S. Data gathered at Kiptopeke helped to establish Kiptopeke State Park, the Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival, and, of course, the observatory. The data were important in helping the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge and Kiptopeke State Park acquire nearby lands, and the data played a key role in designation of the Lower Delmarva Important Bird Area (National Audubon Society).

The observatory works regularly with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and with Kiptopeke State Park to maintain and improve stopover habitat for migrating songbirds. In the past few years, we have bought and assisted with planting many fruit-bearing shrubs and native deciduous trees that improve the diversity and abundance of insects available to migrants. We have successfully argued that protection of migrating songbirds is enhanced by the maintenance of a scrub habitat adjacent to the largely deciduous tract where the station is located. We have also removed young pines from this area; they threaten the stopover quality of the habitat. Public presentations at the songbird station emphasize the importance of habitat conservation and enhancement, and visitors are encouraged to put these practices in place on their own property and to advocate for them whenever the opportunity arises.

As summer comes to an end and fall migration begins, we invite you to journey to Virginia's Eastern Shore and to experience the phenomenon that is Kiptopeke. Let your cares slip away and immerse yourself in a community of friendly people who come each year to share, enjoy, and help preserve one of the great pageants of nature. Bring your camera, as the photo opportunities are legion. Warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, kinglets, and tanagers are there for you to experience up close and photograph. Black-throated Blue Warblers, Connecticut Warblers, Mourning Warblers, Philadelphia Vireos, Worm-eating Warblers, Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's thrushes, Scarlet Tanagers, and the list goes on and on. The presence of several rarities each season is a given at Kiptopeke: In 2011, we banded a Lawrence's Warbler and a Western Wood-Pewee. Join us in celebrating the station's 50th anniversary. Come and take part in the Kiptopeke experience.

750,000 Birds at Kiptopeke Hawk Watch

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In September 2010, I told Kiptopeke hawk watcher Zak Poulton that he was lucky. The 750,000th bird counted there would probably come by in November on his watch. We would need only a few more birds than were recorded in the fall 2009 season. But, after a robust October flight, November proved slower than normal. So, at the end of the 2010 season, we assumed we'd have to wait until September 2011—specifically, for the 3,962nd bird of the season.

We made a mistake.

We actually missed the milestone. As it turns out, we got our 750,000th bird in November 2009, but, due to a spreadsheet error that was not discovered until the following

spring, we were unaware of it at the time. We had volunteers working to get hourly observations from all 34 Kiptopeke seasons into the Hawk Migration Association of North America's (HMANA) hawkcount.org database. Special thanks are due the volunteer data-input team, led by Laurie Goodrich and Ernesto Ruelas Inzunza, who helped accomplish a huge task, finally completed in August 2011. Our dataset, one of the longest-running among raptor studies, will play an important role in analyses conducted by the Raptor Population Index team with HMANA.

As milestones go, ours was an excellent one for the East Coast, though modest for hawk watches in Texas and Central America. Begun in 1977 by Bill Williams, Dot Silsby, and others, the Kiptopeke Hawk Watch used volunteers until 1995; they sat on a Chesapeake Bay dune hillside, back before there was a Kiptopeke State Park or an observation platform. Then, in 1995, the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory was able to hire full-time hawk watchers. An impressive parade of hawk watchers has followed, beginning with Brian Sullivan in 1995–1997 and Marshall Iliff in 1998; Sullivan and Iliff have gone on to important and influential careers with eBird. Since then, our hawk watchers have included Sue Hopkins, Calvin Brennan, Zach Smith, Jen Ottinger, Sam Stuart, Scott McConnell, Jeff Birek, Kevin George, and Kyle Wright. The skilled volunteer corps of long-time birders includes stalwarts Harry Armistead, Bill Williams, Dot Silsby, Bob Anderson, Bob Ake, Chris Foster, Lynn Davidson, Hal Wierenga, Sue Riccardi, Bob Rineer, and many others.

The falcon migration is regularly spectacular, with Merlin and Peregrine daily highs of 462 and 364, respectively. We like to say, with apologies to the Florida Keys, Cape May, and Illinois Beach, that Kiptopeke's the best place in the world to see Merlins and Peregrines migrating. The flights are large, concentrated, low, and reliable as the birds funnel into the tip of Virginia's Eastern Shore, and visitors often get to see falcons diving into the adjacent hawk banding station, and then brought over for presentations. American Kestrel flights, however, have not recovered to levels from earlier years, a phenomenon noted at a number of eastern hawk watch sites. Highlights over the years here have included one Swallow-tailed Kite, two Mississippi Kites, two Gyrfalcons, 28 Rough-legged Hawks, and 34 Swainson's Hawks. The hawk watch platform bird list is 268 species, including many songbird rarities, among them Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Harris's Sparrow, and Pink-sided Junco. Learn more about these sightings in my 2008 article, "Birds of the Kiptopeke Platform" (*Raven*, vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 5–7).

(A side note: Hawk watch season numbers decreased in 2008 when the protocol was changed to stop counting vultures. Both Black and Turkey vultures certainly migrate through the area, but they wander around the peninsula north and south throughout the day and throughout the entire season, to the extent that determining their true migration numbers was judged to be futile.)

Next milestone: one million.

For more information about Kiptopeke, for hawkcount.org data, and to see a video with hawk watch footage, visit the observatory's website <cvwo.org>.

See you at Kiptopeke! Please join us for the ABA's first-ever **Birding Rally!**
Details and registration online: aba.org/events/rally12/
Or call **800-850-2473 and ask for **Nancy (ext. 234)**.**