

ENVIRONMENT

ROB KANTER: ENVIRONMENTAL ALMANAC

Hawk seen locally in O'Hare relocation study



On the morning of Jan. 21, I was dutifully pecking away at my keyboard when I got a phone call from a co-worker whose office is one floor below mine. "Quick," she gasped, "look outside, there's a huge bird!" I was at the window in a flash, and there, perched atop the nearest streetlight, was a first-year red-tailed hawk.

Fortunately I keep my camera close by for just such occasions. Not only did the hawk pose long enough for pictures on the streetlight, it came in closer to a tree beside the building, where it tried to catch a squirrel.

Now, a red-tailed hawk is an everyday bird in Illinois, and I wouldn't mention this one had it not been for something I noticed as I was taking pictures: it was wearing on its wings great big tags, marked "080."

Thinking Red-tail 080 must be involved in a local study, I contacted University of Illinois avian ecologist Mike Ward to get the story, but neither he nor any of his colleagues knew anything about it. A query to birdnotes, the Champaign-Urbana birders listserve, brought a more unex-

pected answer. Red-tail 080 was tagged by researchers at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

Schedules being what they are, it took some time for me to connect with investigators, but last week I spoke by phone with one of them, Craig Pullins. He is part of a team of biologists and technicians employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services division and based at O'Hare. In general, the mission of Wildlife Services is to resolve conflicts between people and wildlife. At airports, this means deterring animals from taking up residence or hanging around because of the dangers they pose to aircraft (and vice versa).

This begins with managing the landscape to make it inhospitable to wildlife. So the Wildlife Services team makes sure the grass is kept short, that water moves off the land quickly, and that cover, such as brush growing along creeks, is minimized.

These measures greatly reduce numbers of larger animals, such as Canada geese, white-tailed deer and coyotes. But what's poor habitat for one animal is often good for another, and the airport's expanses of short, well-drained grass support healthy populations of small mammals, such as voles. These,

in turn, attract birds of prey, everything from the occasional snowy owl or peregrine falcon, to the more common American kestrel and red-tailed hawks, which are the birds most often struck by aircraft.

Since 1992, Wildlife Services has worked to keep down the number of raptors at O'Hare by trapping and relocating them, a strategy that has been pretty effective. According to Pullins, only 7 to 12 percent of the relocated birds return. The catch is, it requires considerable effort to trap birds of prey, load them into pet taxis and then drive them off toward the state line for release.

Which brings us back to Red-tail 080. It is part of a study begun by Pullins and company last year to determine how the rate of birds returning to the airport is affected by the distance they are moved from it.

Red-tail 080 was trapped at O'Hare on Sept. 21, 2010, and was one of the study birds released 120 miles to the west, just 5 miles short of the Mississippi River. Other hawks in the study are being moved distances of 50, 75 and 100 miles.

Why 080 showed up in Urbana nobody can say for sure, although it is common for red-tails to shift some ways

south during winter. Some red-tails tagged for the study have been reported around the state, from downtown Chicago to Springfield, Rockford, Decatur and Albany. Others have shown up further away, from Madison, Wis., to Iowa, Alabama and even Florida.

Of course the real question with regard to these birds is not how far away from the airport they go but whether or not they return. And it will be some time before Pullins and his colleagues learn much about how relocation distance affects rates of return.

Of course, I and others who have enjoyed occasional sightings of 080 since January would be happy to have it stick around here.

Know any young birders?

The Illinois Ornithological Society has recently launched "Illinois Young Birders," a group intended to foster interest in birding among youth ages 9-18. Check out their cool, member-produced newsletter and see further details at www.illinoisyoungbirders.org.

Rob Kanter is a senior writer with the Environmental Change Institute. Environmental Almanac is supported in part by the UI Office of the Provost and can be heard on WILL-AM 580 at 4:45 and 6:45 p.m. Thursdays.



Red-tail 080 as seen from Rob Kanter's window in January.

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