

Interview with Molly Evans

Q. Could you talk about how you became involved in...I believe it was called...

A. At first it was called Duluth Audubon Society, which I was very casual about. Koni Sundquist was the one who got me to go up with her. I can remember going up on the weekend, and Jack [Hofslund] would be listening to the football game, and there'd be maybe five or ten other people on a weekend. It was wonderful. And Jack was writing down on the backs of envelopes one thing or another what we saw. And I think Jan [Green] wanted to get a little more organized and casually dropped that that would be a good idea. So when Jack would get involved in listening to the football game, I would keep track, and that got to be a mess.

Q. By keeping track you mean counting?

A. Very casually, no great scientific endeavor, curiosity. And then it got to be, 'gee, it would be nice if we could use this.' So then Jan put together Jack's bits and pieces.

Q. A fall count?

A. No, not even. There was no organization. Just a bunch of us having a good time, piqued by a curiosity. Five or ten people but not all at the same time. It was loads of fun.

Q. What was it like up there?

A. There was the road, and the great big rock that stands at the end which people use to lean on, and then there was another rock we used to sit on. And so people used to pull up to see what was going on. Like I said sometimes there were two, sometimes more. There were a lot of people when MOU [Minnesota Ornithologists Union] would have its annual Hawk Weekend, which was about the same time the big day is now. And it's the only time there was ever much of a crowd. Finally, I decided the count should be more organized, so I made up a sheet on which to keep track of the count. It's what I used and Frank [Nicoletti] used—a sheet to do the daily totals and a sheet to do the yearly totals between the overlook and the banding station...what got to be called the composite count, all of which I kept track of for a long, long time...

Q. Starting in the 1980s as the official counter?

A. It was the seventies and there was no such thing as an official counter. I don't know when that happened. I remember being at a big event—either Raptor Research or the Wisconsin Ornithological Society, and there was a man, I can't remember his name—Ross or Russ—he was with the Interior Department, and he said, "Gee, I think Fish & Wildlife could get you some money." So I said, "Swell!" Because up until then I had been doing it because I liked doing it. So then we began to get contracts with Fish & Wildlife and that lasted until they cut back when the country got poor, I guess. They cut back anyway.

Q. What came next?

A. Things went on like that until we went through the deal with the city to get Hawk Ridge recognized as Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve and get some legal protection. That was thanks to Jan Green, who went to the Nature Conservancy. And then we began to get a little fancier. For a while, not only did I count—I don't know how I did it--and I was the naturalist.

Q. So you were both counter and naturalist?

A. Yes, which doesn't work, in case anyone thought they wanted to try it.

Q. Why do you say that?

A. Well, you can't watch the sky and talk to kids very well, although because there weren't so many people it was wonderful. I can't even begin to tell you how much fun it was compared to, for me, the way it is now...

Q. Overly scientific?

A. No, that part's fine. I can remember a weekend, when—maybe it was a Hawk Migration Association meeting that was here, and the guy who was the head of Hawk Mountain said, 'Don't ever let this get like we are.' And of course that's what has happened. Of course, you can't deny other people their pleasure of being up there, but it's not like it used to be—sit on a rock, four or five of us, watch the clouds if there weren't many hawks flying over, babble about what else was going on in the world...Anyway, that group evolved into The Hawk Ridge Committee.

Q. Who was on that committee?

A. Mostly, that first year we picked up the dump areas along Skyline, and they were really bad. And Koni's husband, Norm, made the first great big Hawk Ridge sign. And Koni did the first newsletter. It was all just one of us saying, 'We should do this.' There wasn't any formal anything.

Q. And what was the purpose of the newsletter, would you say?

A. To send out to MOU people, to try to raise a little bit of money...I can't remember how David got paid back then...and I don't remember when I started getting some money, It all just sort of evolved over the years, very pleasantly. Gee, I just had so much fun, and everybody else did too.

Q. And so the fun part was the camaraderie, the closeness of that core group?

A. A whole different approach amongst most of us...to just see an eagle was a big deal and a peregrine was a big deal.

Q. How did the area evolve?

A. Because the road was just this little gravel road...one day a dump truck came by with a big load of dirt. And I thought, and I said, "Would there be any objection to you dumping this right here?", that's how the first place we counted from got started. I think he dumped a couple more loads and then somebody said, 'Let's get some railroad ties.' And then somebody said, "We need some rock." And that was just great because then I could pull my car into that spot and keep people from at least that side of my car. And I sat on this little step stool so I could see over the top of my car and down below and still not have everybody have access to me except across the hood of my car. Anyway, nice Kim [Richard Eckert], who was wonderful to work with, put up a little rope. I always thought it would be good to build that dirt part out a little and put a storage space under it--with little barn doors or something--so you could leave your rake and all the stuff you needed during the day underneath there. And keep counting from that spot.

Q. Really?

A. Otherwise, when it got to be with more and more people it got more and more difficult to do what you needed to do and be pleasant. One of the nice things about Kim, he would know when I'd had it with people...up to here, and he'd come and he'd say, 'why don't you go for a walk, I'll count.' He was wonderful to work with.

Q. What was his name?

A. Kim Eckert. He was the naturalist for quite a long time and a blessing to me. Well-organized. I never knew anyone as well-organized as he is. One of the last years after he left and somehow my daughter and I got left with the t-shirt job he had records of four different colors, five different sizes, long sleeve, short sleeve, he had things just perfect. He's an amazing person. He does the same thing with his MOU field trips. Plus, he's fun to work with. He would have these wry little comments just when they were appropriate and you needed a little lift.

Q. What things did you find most enjoyable?

A. One of the things that was fun for me was on a really busy day, particularly a guy named Jim Goin, would come by on the weekend and he would stand behind me on a busy day and he would count the shins as they were going by down here. And I knew he knew what he was doing. There was never any formal second counter. That was the other thing. When we hooked up with Fish & Wildlife, it was required that there be a protocol. And so I wrote up a protocol, which as far as I know, was followed. Frank [Nicoletti] wanted to do it, using a spotting scope, which I had disallowed. I just didn't think that was the way to do it, but Frankie was determined. And that's the way that gets done now.

Q. So you would not use a scope...would you not use binoculars either?

A. I used binoculars. But I had a whole thing about how to record. Some forester had come up one day when I was making hash marks and showed me how foresters do it, which is four dots

making a box and then connecting each side and making an X in the middle, which is ten. So if you do that you don't have this great long thing of scratches going on forever and forever. It worked a lot better. So there were directions about how to do that and whether to write down unidentified and to not be afraid to mark down unidentified and to not take the word of someone who comes running over these trail, saying, Well, I just saw a Gyrfalcon. Well, if you or somebody you knew really well and knew what they were seeing saw them at the overlook, Gee that's really nice you saw a Gyrfalcon. I mean there was a lot of diplomacy involved.

Q. You're saying you wouldn't include that in the official count?

A. No, you wouldn't. Or something five groups of people back up on the road yelled about. And you wouldn't if you hadn't seen it and you were pretty sure you were looking around pretty well. So, I don't know, you'd get to know a group of people who could help you on those horrendous broad-wing days, so that when you would say you take over here and I'll take over here...so you wouldn't get more than there really were. And I don't know how they're working that now, but that was sort of tricky because you had to know who else was doing it and I dreaded counting alone.

Q. Could you talk a little about your relationships with some of the other early members?

A. Jack was darling. He was so wonderful with the kids. And he never seemed to mind that I took over what he'd been doing. That was just ducky. And it was just great. And Jan was just great, which was all before calculators. And I never used a clicker. Just drew the boxes. On big broad-winged days--and that was one of the ways I could tell it was a big Broad-winged day, I would write my number down, 375 or 1,572 or whatever—and then you look at the count sheet five years later, and you knew that was the big Broad-winged day. Because you couldn't sit there doing this [as if using a clicker]. And even to do this [again clicking] was...I just never liked clickers for some reason.

Q. So you literally trained yourself to become a counter?

A. Well yea, I suppose. I couldn't see adding. Like within an hour if you're counting sharp-shins, okay you saw five. That's out of the way, so you can look for something else. But if you click...I don't know. I would lose track of where I was.. I would need to use my polka dots, so that that's out of here, done, counted, not half on the clicker, wondering did I click those or whatever. And then what do you do if you have somebody helping you? I just didn't like it, so I did it my way, as [Frank] Sinatra use to say. It seemed to work. The only thing...and I used to ask Kim, if it was a big day, I would say, 'Kim [Eckert], cause he was a really good birder, would you just kind of scan things and see if there's a Red-shouldered or Swainson's up there that I'm missing. And not try and count how many red-tails there are.'" But there just aren't many people that good. So I was lucky to have him. He's one of the smartest people I know.

Q. Kim Eckert?

A. Kim Richard Eckert, I notice he's been using his whole name. Some people thought Kim Eckert was a woman. But he's definitely a man.

Q. And were you involved in blazing the trails?

A. No, that was Jan and John Green. And they laid them out so...that a part of every trail it was impossible to get through on any motorized thing. They did a really nice job. And some of them are a little tough.

Q. Which is a good thing for the very reason you said?

A. Jan was way on top of a lot of things. I guess I haven't said a lot about Jan. It was her idea to save this area because her forte is the legal stuff. And she named Hawk Ridge, which was swell that Hawk Hill, because it is a ridge, not a hill. A cool ridge. And John helped with the trails, but it was Jan's idea to keep the motorized vehicles off them. And she lent me her calculator when I was trying to add up all the counts, so that was wonderful. And she got me access to UMD copy machines because I had to make copies of all the stuff that had to go to Fish & Wildlife because that was my job too. And John was just darling. And Jack was a whole other kind of a thing. He was so cute with the kids. He always had a little nursery rhyme or some kind of kid's song. And nice to me too. All of them were so smart and so kind. Just a great group of people to be around. And then silly Koni. She knew David Evans long before I did because she was a passerine bander. So she was very interested in what David was doing. It was a huge part of my life. And not mine personally now, although since Dave is the raptor bander I seem to...suffer from that too. [laughter].

Q A raptor widow left for the season?

A. And a lot more. Yesterday he was up the shore doing peregrine stuff. In the winter he does snowy owl stuff, and pretty soon he'll be doing osprey stuff...

Q. So he's never lost the passion for birds?

A. No. He's so good.

Q. And published so much...

A. Well, physically with a bird, he's kind of magic, a hawk whisperer if you will. I've watched a lot of people over the years handle raptors and I've never seen anybody quite like him. And I've seen a lot of people do it really badly. He's just really good and really interested and just loves it to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Q. Say no more...

A. He's a nice kind of person.

As we were finishing up the interview, Molly noticed something outside.

A. The crows are after something. That's the other neat thing I saw up there. I was with Burnette Hohnacki, and she must have been the only other one there. And this flock of ravens flew by.

Flock...like maybe ten or twelve ravens flew by. They got down not as far as that first overlook, and one came back. And it went over to a tree the other side of the steps that go down to that flat place. And then I could hear this [scratching sound]. He'd seen a wasp nest, and I assume he was not going to share it. I don't know why he'd come back all by himself. And then we went down afterward to look, and there was the shredded wasp nest. I don't know. I just felt sure he didn't want to share.

Q. What would they be in terms of a wasp nest?

A. Grubs or whatever happened to be there. I can't believe that if he wanted it right at first and he wasn't thinking, he would have just gone to it. So he must have been thinking. After reading Ravens in Winter, that book by Heinrich, I think he knew and he was must going to hang back and have it all to himself. So there have been all kinds of little things like that made it so fascinating. Just fascinating. And that's the kind of thing you don't see when the place is crowded with people because the ravens would never get that close. And the hawks don't get that close either with that many people there. And they used to. They used to come right down the road.

Q. Really?

A. The shins would. And then it was fun to watch because we used to throw seed under the honeysuckle for the sparrows. And most of the time with shins flying all over the sparrows would be eating the seed and then they'd freeze. There was some kind of thing in the posture of the shins that told the sparrows that this was going to be serious and they had better get out of the way. You could see it happening. A shin could fly right down the road and the sparrows keep eating like nothing was going on and then all of a sudden they'd skidder. That was interesting. And of course that doesn't happen with all the people up there. It's kind of a different place...it is a different place. Things get different.