

 Joe Morlan

Memories of Laurie Binford

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: *In late September 2009, we got word that Dr. Laurence Binford had recently died in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.*



*In the 1970s, Binford was the “dean” of California field ornithology and mentored many passionate birders. He also located the Hawk Hill site in the Marin Headlands in September 1972, a location he called “Point Diablo.” He compiled counts from the site in his 1979 article, “Fall Migration of Diurnal Raptors at Pt. Diablo, California,” for the journal *Western Birds*. Several years back, I found a memo that Dr. Binford wrote to the National Park Service describing the supplies needed to set up Point Diablo as a hawk-counting station. Along with proper binoculars and a scope, he included a lawn chair. Although I never met him, I spoke with*

Dr. Binford by phone in the late 1980s to get copies of his raptor data. He promptly mailed me the key to his mini-storage in Santa Rosa—an act of trust I was privileged to receive. Deep thanks to Joe Morlan for his reflections on Dr. Binford. —Allen Fish

WHEN LAURENCE BINFORD WAS CURATOR of Ornithology at California Academy of Sciences, he spent a lot of time birding out his office window, which overlooked trees on the western edge of the Rhododendron Dell in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. He occasionally saw unusual birds there. One day he identified a Least Flycatcher, but in those days sight records of that species were not considered acceptable, so he got his gun and went outside to collect it. The specimen proved to be correctly identified as a Least Flycatcher, but the *American Birds* account simply but accurately said it was “found dead.” There was considerable anti-collecting sentiment within some members of the birding community in those days. Binford collected in secret.

One September day in 1972, Binford noticed a Broad-winged Hawk fly by his office window. He looked at a Bay Area map and looked for possible raptor concentration points. He explored a number of sites in the Marin Headlands, including one that was then called Hill 129. He decided to do a migration count there in the fall. The first day, he tallied 160 raptors of 10 species in just 2.5 hours. That first fall he recorded an incredible 16 Broad-winged Hawks.

At the time California had only a few previous records of the species. I remember a California Bird Records Committee discussion about removing the Broad-winged Hawk from the California review list because the large number at the Marin Headlands was well above the cutoff—an average of 4 or fewer records per year for CBRC review. Guy McCaskie was initially opposed to removing it because he thought the 16 birds in 1972 might have just been a fluke. However, Guy was apparently out-voted and the species was removed from the review list in 1973. This saved Binford the trouble of having to document the 76 Broad-winged Hawks that he eventually

counted at the site over the next 6 years.

One bird in particular excited Binford during his early Marin Headlands censuses—a dark morph Broad-winged Hawk on October 4, 1974. Binford regarded it as one of the rarest birds he’d ever seen. Although Binford in 1962 saw one of the last confirmed Eskimo Curlews near Galveston, Texas, it was his first sighting of this Broadwing that seemed to give him the most satisfaction. In those days, the dark morph Broadwing was almost mythical. It did not appear in any field guide and was known from only a few specimens collected in Western Canada.

Binford had a different counting protocol than that used by GGRO hawk-counters today. He never counted a bird unless he was able to confirm that it flew over the Golden Gate towards San Francisco. Birds that headed back north also were not added to the totals.

As news of the hawk migration spread, more of us started to visit the Marin Headlands, many hoping to add Broad-winged Hawk to our California lists. I started teaching ornithology in San Francisco in 1976 and ran fall field trips to Rodeo Lagoon. If the weather was decent I included a visit to Hill 129, where students could observe hawk migration. Two of those students were Carter Faust and Herb Brandt. They both got hooked on hawk-watching and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

Bay Area resident Joe Morlan has taught field ornithology classes in San Francisco over four decades. His classes are known for their meticulous detail, and for Joe’s current and comprehensive knowledge of each species. Joe was the voice of the Bay Area Bird Box for many years, and he also manages the California Birding website <http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/index.htm>.