

Hawk Migration Studies

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Broad-winged Hawk by Vic Berardi

Stiles Thomas (1923-2023)

By Jim Wright

Life-long raptor advocate Stiles Thomas died earlier this year at age 99 in Massachusetts after a short illness.

"Stiles was such a pioneer of hawk migration," the late HMANA founder Eric Single recalled a few years ago. "Stiles and I attended the planning meeting for the first HMANA conference, organized by Mike Harwood and his Hawk Mountain colleagues. Like he was for so many, Stiles was my mentor regarding hawks."

Stiles founded the Mount Peter Hawk Watch in Warwick, New York—the first all-volunteer hawkwatch in the nation and the longest-running—back in the 1950s and ran the hawk watch for 12 years.

What was the secret to his success? "Stiles recruited friends and acquaintances and seven bird groups from New York and New Jersey to take a day or two," said Judy Cinquina, who has run Mount Peter for the past 44 years. "He relished the company and always made it fun."

An insurance man in his hometown of Allendale, New Jersey, Stiles still found time to serve as treasurer of the New Jersey Audubon Society and as an eastern director of the Society for the Preservation of Birds of Prey, a national organization founded in 1965 to increase interest in hawks.

In 1971, Stiles launched the Hook Mountain Hawk Watch in Rockland County, New York. A year later, Stiles and his fellow observers counted 115 Northern Goshawks at Hook, and another 85 in 1973—the last invasion of that magnitude in the East.

In 2010, at age 86, Stiles helped restart the State Line Hawk Watch in Alpine, New Jersey.

Dave Schwenker, who ran the Skyline Ridge Hawk Watch in Oakland, New Jersey, watch for its six autumns of existence (1976-1981) said: "Stiles was very modest about his amazing abilities when it came to identifying migratory raptors. His reports to HMANA also had a larger percentage of unidentified hawks because he was so honest and would not count any specific raptor unless he was sure. And he was always interested in encouraging people who might only be casual observers at the hawk watch."

Deedee Burnside visited State Line and many other hawk watches with Thomas over the years. "Stiles was always looking for new hawk watch sites, and I'd go with him some of those times," she said. "It was always exciting—partially because Stiles was so enthusiastic. Stiles was a great teacher to so many people."

Thomas was also a pioneer in erecting nesting boxes for Barn Owls and Eastern Bluebirds all over northern New Jersey—efforts that received national coverage, including in Reader's Digest and Audubon Magazine.

Stiles was proudest of his work with the late Mayor Edward FitzPatrick of Allendale in preserving the 107-acre Celery Farm Natural Area, a top birding spot in the New York metropolitan area. The effort took 25 years, but Thomas

persisted. New Jersey Audubon named Stiles and FitzPatrick as "Conservationists of the Year" for their efforts.

The Celery Farm is said to be the first municipally owned wetlands in the nation. It draws birders from across the New York metropolitan region. More than 250 species of birds have been seen there. Thomas served as the volunteer marsh warden for almost four decades.

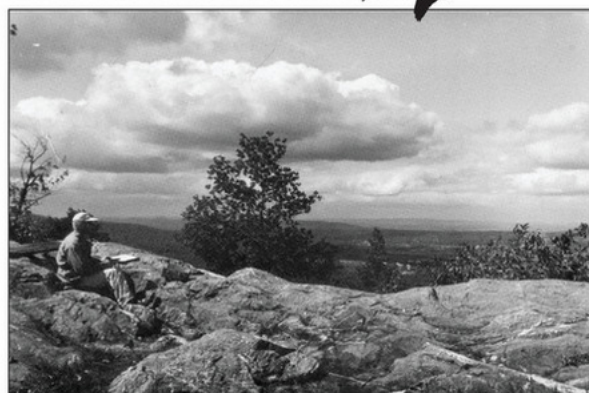
A lightweight Golden Gloves boxer in his youth, Stiles also sang, yodeled, carved birds and snakes, and played practical jokes on his many friends.

Stiles' most enduring contribution might have been his ability to share his love of raptors and nature with people. Whether organizing Christmas Bird Counts or leading trips to Belize for two decades to introduce hundreds of people to tropical birds and that wonderful nation, Stiles always led the way.

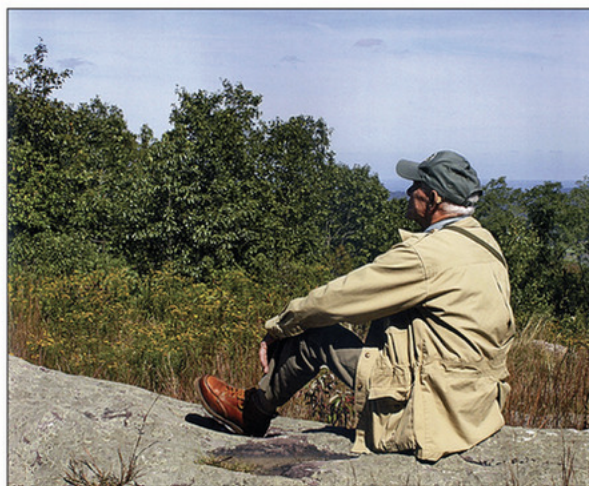
A plaque on a large stone in the Celery Farm says it all: "In memory of Stiles Thomas, the one and only."

Special thanks to Betsy Thomas for information on Stiles.

Ed. Note: Jim Wright is a writer and a raptor counter at State Line Hawk Watch. His latest book is *The Screech Owl Companion* (Timber Press, 2023). Stiles Thomas was his dear friend and mentor for more than 20 years.



Stiles Thomas at Mount Peter hawkwatch, New York. Photo by Harry Kemp.



Stiles Thomas at Mount Peter hawkwatch, New York. Photo by Jim Wright.