



Bobby Kurtz on the platform at Fire Island Hawkwatch. Photo by Trudy Battaly

## Robert J. Kurtz, Hawk Watcher Extraordinaire

### Fire Island Raptor Enumerators, 1982-2017

by Trudy Battaly

Bobby Kurtz, a very good friend to hawk watchers and birders on Long Island and throughout the East, died of lung cancer on September 26, 2017. Bobby, with his telescope, was an icon at the Fire Island Raptor Enumerators (FIRE).

In the middle of July, Drew Panko and I would hear from Bobby. “Only 5 more weeks to the hawk watch.” A week later, there was another message: “28 days and I’ll be there!” That was how the countdown happened every year. Bobby Kurtz just couldn’t wait for the new FIRE season to begin. He birded Jamaica Bay and other locales for shorebirds and passerines, but he just loved hawks! He loved hawks so much he started watching on every good weather day beginning August 20, even though the official start date at FIRE wasn’t until September 10.

FIRE counts mostly falcons, and the falcon flight along the barrier beach does not begin in earnest until the second week in September. So, along with some hummingbird fun, the pre-season days did not have many hawks. But, for Bobby, those hawks—Osprey, Harriers, Kestrels, Merlins and Peregrine Falcons—were the harbingers of hope for a uniquely good season. Filled with excitement, Bobby was there to be sure that every hawk was counted; and each hawk that he saw became his, as he recorded it in his personal notebook.

Bobby was there in 1982, along with Drew Panko, Ted LeViness and Tony Tierno, when Drew and Ted organized their general hawkwatching days into the official FIRE watch

at Robert Moses State Park. Everyone who came to the watch knew Bobby. His excitement was contagious. He would jump up and down or shout whenever something special happened. It could be an eagle flying overhead, a Peregrine diving on a duck in the bay, a raven harassing a Cooper’s Hawk, or a Merlin diverting its path to chase a Kestrel off its perch. All species and all behaviors caught Bobby’s attention. He even named a resident wolf spider Herb. Herb had a burrow at the base of the platform, and Bobby would check him out daily as he arrived.

Each year, near the end of the Bluejack (an adult male Merlin of the Eastern Taiga form that has a blue back) season when the falcon flight waned, and the adult Sharpies were slowing down, Bobby would head inland to catch the buteos, Northern Goshawks and eagles. Golden Eagles were his favorite. With only two counted at FIRE since 1982, Bobby would head to the ridges to tally his Golden Eagles for the year. One of his favorite places was Hawk Mountain, where he could see two or three Golden Eagles in a day, along with Bald Eagles and more.

By the time Bobby finished the migration season each year, his notebook had become a treasure book of raptor experiences. He made every day at the hawkwatch special, and he infected all of us with his legacy—an enthusiastic love of hawks, their behaviors and their numbers. We miss him, even as his animated spirit lives among us.

For more information about Bobby and some photos of him at FIRE, see <http://www.battaly.com/fire/Bobby/>

(Trudy Battaly is a hawk counter at FIRE since 1982 when the watch began. She is also on the board of directors of the NorthEast Hawk Watch, an editor of the NorthEast Hawk Watch Report, and coordinates the Hook Mountain Hawk Watch in Rockland Lake, NY.) 