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Hawks by the thousands attract birders to Hawk Ridge

Lots of sharp-shinned hawks are expected to pass over Duluth's Hawk Ridge in the next week or so, and a lot more eyes will be there to see them when the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory holds its annual Hawk Weekend Friday through Sunday.

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune

The sharp-shinned hawk skims the tree-tops on Hawk Ridge, boring straight for the official counters' knoll.

"Sharpie over the ridge," someone shouts.

All eyes, most of them assisted by 8-power Swarovskis, lock onto the incoming raptor.

Lots of sharpshins are expected to pass over Duluth's Hawk Ridge in the next week or so, and a lot more eyes will be there to see them when the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory holds its annual Hawk Weekend Friday through Sunday. Each fall, about 18,000 people come to Hawk Ridge, many of them on Hawk Weekend, to witness one of the largest concentrations of raptors in the country.

A sharp-shinned hawk is not an imposing creature. Eleven inches long from beak to tail, a sharpie is one of the smallest raptors among the 94,000 that typically migrate over Hawk Ridge each fall.

But you would not want to be a warbler lolling through the thin September light with a sharpie on your tail. A yellow-rumped warbler might look like a splash of sunlight to a birdwatcher, but it looks like lunch to a sharpshin.

And, like all raptors, a sharpshin is terrifically well-adapted to acquiring lunch. Imagine a 5-ounce F-16.

The "Sibley Field Guide to Birds" says the sharpshin "captures small birds by surprise in lightning-quick strikes." You can almost feel the talons sinking into your back, can't you?

The sharpie hurtles closer to the counting station now, taking aim at an owl decoy placed by the counters to draw raptors for closer inspection. All raptors dislike owls, even if they're made of plastic.

At the last possible moment, the sharpshin twists in mid-flight, flipping its wings from horizontal to nearly vertical as it buzzes the inanimate owl. The sharpie peels instantly south in a move that surely exerts a couple of extra G-forces on the bird.

Then it calmly levels its wings and resumes its casual flight as if nothing had happened. Watching this, your feet planted heavily on the ridge, you can only marvel at the spectacle of aerobatics you have just witnessed.

How cool would it be to fly that way? Wouldn't it be satisfying to spend your days hassling owls, real or otherwise? Tell me you wouldn't get an adrenaline rush banking into a tight dive and puffing an unsuspecting kinglet right out of the air.

The sharpshin flaps southward now, bound for Oklahoma or Texas or Mexico. He grows smaller and smaller against the sky.

Head counter Karl Bardon adds one sharpshin to the day's tally.

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A Hawk Ridge how-to

Here are some tips for getting the most out of a visit to Hawk Ridge.

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune

Here are some tips for getting the most out of a visit to Hawk Ridge.

- › When to go — Best days are those with a westerly component to the wind, especially northwest or west. A day like that after a front has cleared out can be even better. West winds push the hawks toward Lake Superior. Because they don't like to fly over the lake, they funnel past Hawk Ridge as they round the tip of the lake at Duluth.
- › Best times of day — Hawk-watching is a relaxed affair. Best action is usually from about 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., when warm days create thermals of rising air on the hillside.
- › Peak of migration — Most of the hawks that pass over Hawk Ridge will do so from Sept. 10 to 25. Sharpshins move early. Then the broadwings make their push. Bigger raptors such as eagles and goshawks and red-tails tend to move later.
- › What to bring — Bring binoculars, if you have them, and a birding field guide. Bring a lawn chair if you wish. Bring some lunch or a snack.
- › Hawks by the thousands — Each fall, about 94,000 hawks pass over Hawk Ridge.
- › Single-day record — On Sept. 15, 2001, an amazing 102,321 raptors passed over Hawk Ridge.

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Record August raptor count

Already, it has been a good year on Hawk Ridge. Official counter Karl Bardon says Hawk Ridge broke a record for the largest number of raptors observed in August.

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune

Already, it has been a good year on Hawk Ridge. Official counter Karl Bardon says Hawk Ridge broke a record for the largest number of raptors observed in August.

The official count at Hawk Ridge began Aug. 15 and will continue through Nov. 15. In the count's first two weeks, 2,463 raptors passed over Hawk Ridge, led by 989 sharp-shinned hawks.

Bardon, in his third year as head counter at Hawk Ridge, isn't sure why the August numbers were up.

"It's been a really cool summer, and the weather has been favorable for migration," Bardon said.

Many of the northern harriers that passed over the ridge were adults, which is unusual, Bardon said. Usually the young birds move first.

"They may have had a poor reproduction year and decided to go," he said.

On the other hand, most of the sharpshins and broad-winged hawks have been juveniles, as expected. That indicates those species have had a good reproduction year, Bardon said.

"It could be a combination of those things [mature harriers and young broadwings and sharpshins]," Bardon said. "It's a tough thing to speculate on. Every species reacts differently."

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Get good binoculars for birding

The most important tool a birder can own is arguably a good pair of binoculars. But how good is good enough?

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune

The most important tool a birder can own is arguably a good pair of binoculars. But how good is good enough?

Hawk Ridge education director Debbie Waters offers this tutorial on buying binoculars:

- On compact binoculars versus full-sized binoculars — "I don't recommend the compact or pocket binoculars," Waters said. "The field of view is too small." It's hard to find a bird in the sky with such a narrow field of view.
 - Styles — Binoculars come in two basic forms: Those with roof prisms, which are straight-barrelled, and those with Porro prisms, which have offset barrels. The roof-prism binoculars are gaining favor over the Porro-prism style, Waters said.
 - Entry-level to mid-level binoculars — "For entry level to mid-level, we love Eagle Optics binoculars," Waters said. "For entry level, we recommend the Eagle Optics Denali. We like the 8-power. [Suggested retail \$170.] In the mid-range, we like the Eagle Optics Ranger SRT [8-power, suggested retail \$370]."
- What you gain as you go up in price with binoculars is better glass and better coatings on the glass, Waters said. You don't notice it so much in the center of the field of view, but at the edges.
- High-end binoculars — If you get serious about birding, you may eventually want to go to finer binoculars such as those made by Swarovski, Zeiss or Leica, Waters said. Again, stick with the 8-power to keep the field of view wide enough. These binoculars have excellent glass and coatings, allowing the user to see birds more clearly in low-light situations, Waters said. Expect to pay \$1,500 to \$2,500.

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Pick a good field guide

If you want to improve your birding, or just occasionally look up a bird you've seen, you'll need a good field guide.

By: [Sam Cook](#), Duluth News Tribune

If you want to improve your birding, or just occasionally look up a bird you've seen, you'll need a good field guide.

Debbie Waters, education director for Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, recommends two field guides. One is the "National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America." The other is the "Sibley Field Guide to Birds: Eastern North America."

Both guides feature paintings of birds rather than photographs, and Waters thinks that helps in identifying birds. Both also include range maps on the same page as bird descriptions, allowing a reader to see at a glance where the bird spends summers and winters. (Some guides have maps at the back of the guide rather than with the bird descriptions.)

Waters' advice about a field guide?

"Read it," she said. "People who are good at identifying birds study them. Look at the range maps. Become familiar with the birds in your area."

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