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Where Raptors Soar

For centuries, birds of prey have been winging their way past Hawk Ridge during fall migration. For decades, humans have been watching them with wonder and awe.

By Mary Hoff

No sooner do I step out of my car onto the gravel of Skyline Parkway in Duluth than the action begins.

"Look at that kettle!" a man striding past me exclaims, gesturing skyward. Above the bluffs a mile inland from Lake Superior, a dozen broad-winged hawks swirl heavenward on rising air. Soaring among them is a single bald eagle, head and tail aglow in the mid-September sun.

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 Where Raptors Soar

A world pregnant with autumn surrounds us: Sumac bursting red among the bushes. Maples just starting to glow orange and red against stark white birch. Rosehips blushing at their own profusion. Green darner dragonflies dancing on the breeze. And raptors -- everywhere. It's a perfect day.

I've just arrived at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve, one of the best places in North America to watch birds migrate. Each autumn some 94,000 hawks, eagles, and falcons fly by this promontory on their southward journey. And each autumn thousands of human visitors -- 85 percent of them from out of town, over the years hailing from more than 40 countries -- come to watch the action. This year I am one of them.

Hawk Gawkers.

I hike past a hundred or so parked cars, a hamburger stand, a T-shirt booth, and an information table to the main overlook, a widening in the dusty drive. To my left, inland, white-throated sparrows and chickadees dart among the bushes. To my right a brushy hill tumbles down to the big lake 600 feet below. All around me, dozens of hawk gawkers peer through binoculars and spotting scopes. Overhead, birds of prey pepper the sky. An immature bald eagle soars. Tiny kestrels flit. Thin-tailed sharpshins and stubby broad-winged hawks, the Laurel and Hardy of the raptor world, entertain an appreciative audience.

Out on the bluff, a gentleman who looks like a retired sea captain scans the sky. Couples sit in lawn chairs. Kids scramble up and down big boulders. Camera jockeys lug Nikons with lenses the size of coffee cans.

I quickly discover that you don't need to know your birds to have a good time up here. Those who do are happy to share.

"Immature goshawk along the tree line!" one watcher calls out, like a sports announcer giving the play-by-play. "Sharpie overhead," another adds. "Merlin out on lakeside." A 5-year-old nearby catches on to the routine -- he thinks. "Ship!" he calls proudly, catching my eye and pointing out into the harbor far below.

Strings of broad-winged hawks stream southward, forming a dotted line across the deep blue sky. "Red-tail off the back," an observer offers. "There's a 'shin in there with it," says another. "You can see it flap, flap."

All morning long, fingers point and binoculars swing into position. Necks twist in all directions. I wonder why some enterprising chiropractor hasn't set up a stand next to the ones selling souvenirs and sandwiches.

Ethereal Elevators.

The story of this place, which I gather over the course of the day, is a fascinating one. In spring, birds of prey flying north fan out across Canada and Alaska to nest and raise their young. Toward summer's end, as days shorten, the urge to migrate ripens into action. Using navigational cues from the sun, the terrain, and perhaps even Earth's magnetic field, they wing their way to their wintering grounds in the southern United States and beyond.

If you squint at a map of Lake Superior, you can see the head of a wolf, with its muzzle carving a long swath southwest from Nipigon, Ontario, to Duluth. Raptors avoid flying over large bodies of water, and as the south-migrating birds approach this big lake they swing westward and funnel down the wolf's nose to where I now stand -- about where the nostrils would be -- before scattering out over land again.

Avoiding big water is one reason hawks and their kin converge here, but it's not the only one. Migration is an energy-intensive activity, and every wingbeat saved enhances the odds of success. When the sun shines on the ridge and the air near the ground warms, thermals -- up-flowing currents of air -- form. Soaring skyward in cylindrical groups called *kettles*, raptors ride these ethereal elevators, gaining free altitude to propel themselves south. For every vertical mile they climb, the birds can glide seven with barely a flap.

Combined, these factors make Hawk Ridge a perfect flyby for migrating birds of prey. The parade usually starts a couple of weeks before Labor Day with a trickle of broad-winged hawks, sharp-shinned hawks, and kestrels. It crescendos to a peak of 10,000 or more per day in September. By Thanksgiving the action will substantially slow, though a few eagles, rough-legged hawks, northern goshawks, and redtails will still be coming through.

Band and Count.



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Migrating hawks have long attracted humans to this ridge, though not always for birding. In the early 20th century, the overlook was used for target practice, the raptors as targets. In the late 1940s, the Duluth Bird Club campaigned to end the shooting, and the ridge became a gathering ground for bird devotees instead. In 1951 an official hawk count by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confirmed what birders had suspected: This is a remarkable place. For the next two decades raptor lovers hovered about in fall, watching and counting when they could.

In 1972, with the help of The Nature Conservancy and the bird club (now renamed the Duluth Audubon Society), the city of Duluth bought 115 acres of land -- including the land on both sides of this stretch of Skyline Parkway -- and gave the Duluth Audubon Society responsibility for managing it.

That same year Dave Evans, a young hawk aficionado just out of college, started capturing and banding birds at the site each fall. Thirty-five years and nearly 100,000 birds later, he's still at it. The data he gathers are used by wildlife biologists and other scientists to improve understanding of hawk behavior and migration and inform conservation efforts. Birds he's banded here have ended up in New Jersey, British Columbia, Mexico City, and Brazil.

"In the fall, for three and a half months, it's pretty much 24/7," he says. "I get home a couple hours a day to do the dishes, a couple of things around the house, and then I'm back."

Also in 1972, Duluth Audubon established a formal raptor count that continues to this day. From mid-August through sometime in November, trained observers use what birders call "GISS" -- general impression of size and shape -- to identify and tally birds that to most of us just look like spots in the sky.

It's a wonder to behold. Binoculars fixed upward, clickers in hand, this season's official counter, Eileen Muller, and her assistant, Karl Bardon, click and jot, click and jot the day away. They started at 6 a.m. They'll keep at it for upward of 10 hours.

"Basically, when you're a hawk counter you're orchestrating the flight," says Frank Nicoletti, who served as counter on this ridge from 1991 to 2005. "You count and identify everything, some by age and sex."

Nicoletti has watched hawks all over the country. Hawk Ridge, he says, is "one of the most magical places I've ever been to." He met the woman who became his wife here, and he'll never forget the day he first asked her out: Sept. 29, 1996, the same day he recorded the highest total ever for turkey vultures.

"I live for the migration," Nicoletti says. "I always have, and I always will."

Promoting Conservation.

Education has always been an important function of this place. As word of the phenomenal migration got around, more and more people started flocking to the ridge. Local raptor lovers began offering naturalist programs in the mid-1970s, not long after the daily counts began.

Today a Duluth-based organization called the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory keeps folks in the know. Observatory staff and volunteers roam the ridge daily, helping visitors learn to identify birds both by physical features (the northern harrier has a white rump patch, the osprey in flight looks like the m-shaped birds kindergartners draw in their blue-crayoned skies) and by behavior (accipiters fly with a flap-flap-flap-glide). They give talks exploring the natural history and biology of the various species flying through. A binoculars-lending station ensures that everyone who wants to get a better look has a chance to do so.

"It's all about promoting conservation," says Debbie Waters, education director for the observatory. "We want to give people positive experiences with birds so they learn to love birds."

Visitors get to see raptors up close after they've been banded, before they are let go. For a tax-deductible contribution (ranging from \$20 for a sharp-shinned hawk to \$200 for an eagle or gyrfalcon), visitors can even adopt a bird that's been captured at the banding station. The honor includes the privilege of holding and releasing the bird, then receiving reports if someone recaptures it or finds its band in the future.

A Place Set Apart

Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve was named Minnesota's first Important Bird Area in 2004. By naming IBAs, the National Audubon Society seeks to call attention to and protect areas that are pivotal for the survival of native birds and other living things. Minnesota currently has 34 IBAs. [Learn more about IBAs.](#)

New Eyes.

This particular day turns out to be as attractive to the birds as it is to the birders. A weather front went through recently, and west-southwest winds favor flight. The report Muller and Bardon will file online at www.hawkcount.org after the sun sets will list 5,428 raptors, the second-highest daily tally of the season so far.

At a newly constructed outdoor amphitheater, I catch naturalist Laura Albert giving a presentation about owls in legend and fact. Brave woman: Talking to this crowd is like trying to teach long division to a classroom full of third graders while a clown parade marches by. As Albert starts her talk, members of the audience turn backward in their seats in search of interesting birds. A trio of gangly sandhill cranes appears in the northwestern sky, riding a thermal upward in an astoundingly synchronized soar. Sportingly, Albert puts the owls on hold and starts talking instead about what's happening above our heads.

At the end of Albert's talk, I meet Paul and Joyce Petiprin, a retired couple who drove their blue Prius 600 miles from their home in Michigan to watch the hawks here. They read about the migration in a magazine and wanted to check it out.

"We know a lot about birds, but not about raptors," Joyce says. Now that she's had her consciousness raised, she can't wait to get back to Bay City to find out if the peregrine falcon she heard was nesting downtown is still around. She also wants to return to the school where she used to teach. A couple of years ago, her students asked her why hawks fly in circles, and she didn't know. Today she learned about kettling, and she wants to finally give those kids an answer.

"We're going to see our Michigan birds with new eyes," says Paul.

Later, sitting in the short grass on the side of the road, I visit with Duluth native Kim Flaa, who came up here today with her 4-year-old son, Griffin. Flaa bikes Skyline Drive often, but this is the first time she visited specifically to watch the raptor migration. Her sister is an observatory volunteer, and Flaa wanted to see what

was so great about this place.

"Now that I'm here, it's really cool," she says. "I'll have to invest in a good pair of binoculars."

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