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LIVING

Fall skies fill with raptor fest

Hawks, eagles and merlins swoop in, Whitby marsh a premier viewing area

“ You are guaranteed to see a lot more birds than just hawks at hawkwatching stations. On a good day in September, thousands of blue jays are likely to be seen moving through in loose flocks. “



most hawks come in both juvenile (immature) and adult plumages. There is quite a difference in the field marks between these age classes, especially in the case of bald eagles.

Turkey vulture: Also known as a “TV,” turkey vultures are very common migrants. They have an unstable, rocking flight, hold their wings in a slight V-shape (dihedral) and often form large kettles.

• **Eagles:** Bald eagles soar and glide on horizontal, “wooden plank-like” wings and go for long periods without flapping. When they do flap it is slow and heavy. A bald eagle’s head projects out more than half the tail length. Golden eagles, on the other hand, have a smaller head and usually soar and glide with a slight dihedral. Care must be taken not to confuse dark, first-year bald eagles with adult goldens.

• **Broad-winged hawk:** This is a common to abundant migrant which usually migrates in large kettles that can range from a couple of birds to thousands. The wings of this crow-sized hawk are pale with a dark trailing edge. The tail is banded.

• **Red-tailed hawk:** Larger than a broad-winged hawk, the red-tailed has very broad, rounded wings and a short, wide tail. Only in adult birds is the tail red. There is also a dark bar on the leading edge of the underside of the wing, close to the bird’s head.

COMMON MIGRANT

• **Sharp-shinned hawk:** This common migrant is only about the size of a blue jay. Like the closely-related Cooper’s hawk, it usually flies with a distinctive “flap, flap, flap, glide” style. However, the sharp-shinned has a smaller head that barely projects beyond the leading edge of the wings.

• **Cooper’s hawk:** When seen well, the Cooper’s head is bigger and projects farther ahead of the wings. Its tail is distinctly rounded – not square-shaped like the sharp-shinned hawk – and it has a wider white tip.

• **Peregrine falcon:** Although still fairly uncommon, peregrines are seen regularly. This crown-sized falcon has long, pointed wings and a long tail. Adults are blue-gray above with barred underparts and a dark head with thick sideburns.

You are guaranteed to see a lot more birds than just hawks at hawkwatching stations. On a good day in September, thousands of blue jays are likely to be seen moving through in loose flocks. American pipits can be very common, too. Cranberry Marsh is a wonderful place to see great egrets, double-crested cormorants, green-winged and blue-winged teal and both trumpeter and mute swans. In early September, thousands of monarch butterflies will often pass through in a day, as well, along with good numbers of green darner dragonflies. The latter are a favourite food of kestrels and young merlins.

Ron Pittaway’s excellent *Fall Hawkwatching Guide* can be downloaded at the Ontario Field Ornithologists website. It includes directions to all the hawkwatching sites in the province. Click on “Articles.” I also highly recommend looking at the many superb videos of hawks available at macaulaylibrary.org as preparation for a hawkwatching trip!

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As autumn’s blaze of colour lights up fields and woodlands, it’s easy to forget that we should also be casting our gaze skywards. On many late summer and fall days, the seemingly empty blue sky is actually dotted with migrating raptors – hawks, falcons, eagles, ospreys and turkey vultures – making their southward to destinations as far away as Peru. On a good day, hawk migration can be one of the most spectacular and memorable of nature’s annual events, instilling in the observer a wonderful sense of the changing seasons.



Part of the reason for this spectacle is that hawk numbers are the healthiest they’ve been in decades. This is probably due to the reduction in DDT in the environment but also to the expansion of forest cover in much of eastern North America. Merlins, peregrine falcons and bald eagles have shown a particularly strong comeback. Several species such as Cooper’s hawks and merlins are also appearing much more frequently in urban environments. This is definitely the case in Peterborough. The only species whose numbers are significantly down is the American kestrel.

MIGRATORY HAWKS

All of our hawk species are at least partially migratory, and southern Ontario provides some of the best opportunities to see migrating hawks in all of North America. From late August through November, observers at locations all along the north shore of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie witness a veritable river of hawks streaming in a southwest direction overhead. The reason for the large numbers here is simple. When hawks migrate south from northern Ontario and parts of Quebec, they eventually encounter the north shores of the Great Lakes. The birds hesitate flying over the lakes themselves – there are no thermals on which to soar – but instead turn westward. They therefore end up flying along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, their numbers increasing all the while. They eventually turn south again at the Detroit River south of Windsor. Although many of these birds pass right over the Kawartha, they tend to go unnoticed. By simply getting into the habit of “looking up,” you can sometimes see dozens of broad-winged hawks, turkey vultures and other species soaring southward.

BEST WATCHING SITES

The best show, however, is happening to the south of us at places like Cranberry Marsh in Whitby and High Park in the west end of Toronto. Expert hawkwatchers are almost always on hand to point out the birds and answer your questions. Even greater hawk numbers are seen from sites on Lake Erie. Hawkwatching stations can be found at Hawk Cliff, located just east of Port Stanley, Point Pelee National Park at Leamington and Holiday Beach Conservation Area between Pelee and Windsor. The highest hawk numbers in Canada are seen at Holiday Beach. Volunteers at all of the hawkwatching stations record the



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner

The raptorwatch station at Cranberry Marsh in Whitby is one of the best places in the province to see hawks in migration, including the red-tailed hawk (top) and sharp-shinned hawk (left).



raptor migration.

The calendar is a great help in knowing what birds to expect. Starting in late August, ospreys, northern harriers, sharp-shinned hawks, broad-winged hawks, merlins and American kestrels begin migration. The numbers build throughout September, especially for broad-winged hawks. The vast majority of these South America-bound raptors pour out of the province in spectacular numbers within the space of a week in mid-September. Other species, such as the bald eagle, are fairly regular throughout the migration period. After mid-September increasing numbers of turkey vultures, Cooper’s hawks and red-tailed hawks join the flow. Peak numbers for peregrine falcons usually occur in late September and early October; Cooper’s hawks peak in the first half of October; most red-shouldered hawks pass over from mid- to late October; red-tailed hawks reach their biggest numbers in late October and early November; while rough-legged hawks, northern goshawks and golden eagles are regularly recorded – albeit in small numbers – from mid-October to early November. As for numbers, last year’s best days at Cranberry Marsh produced species totals such as 4,000 broad-wings, 118 sharp-shins, 372 red-tails, 11 bald eagles and 635 turkey vultures.

SEEK OUT COLD FRONTS

Since cold fronts trigger migration, the best viewing conditions for fall flights occur during cold fronts with northwesterly and north winds. Another indicator of a good flight is decreasing temperature and humidity. You don’t have to wait for so-called perfect condi-

Want to watch raptors? Follow the directions

To get to **Cranberry Marsh** from Peterborough, take the 401 west to Brock Street in Whitby. Go south (left) 0.5 km to Victoria, and then go west (right) 3.3 km to Halls Road on the left. Go 1.6 km and park on the roadside. Walk east about 100 metres to the viewing platform.

tions to see migrating hawks, however. Some birds will migrate during most weather conditions except heavy rain. For continual updates on wind speed and direction, enter Environment Canada / marine forecast / great lakes into Google. Migrating hawks also take advantage of thermals. These are columns of warm, buoyant air that rise quickly as the sun heats the ground and the air above it. Hawks spiral several thousand feet upward in a thermal until it dissipates. They will then often glide several kilometres on locked wings and at high speed until they reach another thermal. In this way, they can cover 100 kilometres or more in a day without even beating a wing. A group of hawks circling in a thermal is called a kettle.

KNOW THE SHAPES

Knowing how to watch hawks is also important. Experienced birders base their identification on a general impression of flight pattern, field marks, size and shape. They also keep in mind that hawks often change their shapes depending on whether they are soaring, gliding, flapping, etc. Until you get a fairly good view, most hawk species can be confused. Keep in mind, too, that