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HAWK WEEKEND: Birders will flock together this coming weekend at Hawk Ridge, hoping for westerly winds that nudge raptors toward Lake Superior.

BY SAM COOK NEWS TRIBUNE OUTDOORS WRITER

The broad-winged hawk had had a tough week. Likely migrating south with thousands of other broadwings, this one had been hit by a car on U.S. Highway 2 north of Duluth.

“It had some head trauma and bruises down one side,” said licensed rehabilitator Emily Buchanan of Duluth.

She had nursed it back to health for two days, and now it was in the hands of fifth-grader Brandy Miller of Churchill Elementary School in Cloquet atop a knoll at Hawk Ridge.

Brandy's class had made a field trip Tuesday to Hawk Ridge, over which thousands of hawks pass each fall on their journeys south. Debbie Waters, education director for the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, had used the broadwing to help teach the kids about raptors.

Now the class was in rapt attention, their eyes glued to Brandy and the hawk squeezed in her hands.

Waters counted to three, and Brandy released the broadwing with a quick toss. Her classmates oohed as the bird flapped northeast and disappeared over some yellow-gold aspens.

Hawk Ridge naturalists probably will release several more broadwings this coming weekend when the bird observatory holds its annual Hawk Weekend celebration. About 2,000 people attend the annual event, which features speakers, field trips and hawk watching at Hawk Ridge.

But so far this fall, broadwings and other raptors have been scarce at Hawk Ridge. Hawk-watching and hawk-counting are best when winds are from the west, and winds have been easterly most days.

“As I've always said, ‘The lake giveth, and the lake taketh away,’” said Dave Carman, executive director of the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory. “We wouldn't have the concentration of hawks along the shore without the lake.”

On Tuesday, Carman was leaning on a car, binoculars trained on the sky, assisting first-year counters Corrie Borgman and Sue Balint.

“Our birds that typically concentrate along the shore are dispersing inland to the west,” Carman said.

They're still migrating. They're just not getting pushed toward Lake Superior, where they typically avoid the open water and ride thermals that rise over Hawk Ridge.

“If we get a westerly component (to the wind) in the next few days, we should have a flight,” Carman said.

In predominantly east-wind years, the broadwing count might be 5,000 to 10,000, whereas it could be 40,000 to 50,000 in good years, Carman said.

A tally board documented Tuesday's meager flight by noon: “2 bald eagles, 47 sharp-shinned hawks, 1 Cooper's hawk, 8 broadwings, 3 American kestrels.”

Hawks trickled over the ridge, some high, some low.

“Adult broadwing low over the spruce,” shouted Balint to the loose flock of birders gathered.

Binoculars swung into position. Birders locked on to the bird and tracked its flight. It rode strong wings over Hawk Ridge, over the spruce, over the fifth-grade class Waters was speaking to, over the banding station, until it was swallowed by the sky.

A simple fly-over on an avian odyssey from the north woods to South America.