

Northern Wilds, Fall 2007

Migrate to Hawk Ridge

Story and photos by Eric Chandler

I was alone under an overcast sky when I climbed off my rusty old road bike. The bluish-gray Lake Superior horizon on the left narrowed down to the “fond du lac” on the right. I could just make out the grain elevators of the Twin Ports and long sand-spit of Park Point. This view is about four miles from home on a quiet weekday afternoon. I don't mean to rub it in, but somebody's got to live near Hawk Ridge.

Hawk Ridge is a spine of rock parallel to the North Shore that stands guard above the northeast end of Duluth. Scenic Skyline Parkway passes through this nature reserve. Many people enjoy the views from their cars, bikes, and on foot along the road. It took me a while to realize there's a whole trail network with more ledges and views. Runners can enjoy a trail race put on by the Northern Minnesota Track Club in the fall. Skyline Drive isn't maintained through the park in the winter. The road turns into a multi-use trail open to snowshoeing, walking, and cross-country skiing. Awesome views, great foot trails, and a scenic road right in the middle of a big town ought to be enough for anybody.

Throw in the fact this is also an internationally recognized Important Bird Area (IBA). In 2004, it was the first site in Minnesota to get this IBA designation. Now you have a rare convergence of natural and recreational activities. During the fall, there is a migration of raptors which gives the ridge its name. Hawks of all kinds are heading south and say, “Whoa, that water looks awful cold. Let's take a right.” They end up soaring smack dab over the thermals and updrafts generated by Hawk Ridge. In 2003, over 100,000 hawks flew over the ridge...in one day. That isn't a typo.

Visionaries early on realized the value of this site and created the Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in the 1970's. The Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory administers the 315-acre area which is owned by the City of Duluth and encompasses the hiking trails and Main Overlook. In September and October, there are several activities at the Main Overlook to help you experience this birding event. A few years back, I visited Hawk Ridge with my family and listened to a naturalist describe this migratory phenomenon. She held a sharp-shinned hawk in her hands while she spoke and I faced a dilemma. I didn't know whether to look at the raptor's laser-like yellow eyes or at the amazed face of my son. One bird or thousands. A hike or a hawk. Hawk Ridge has it all.

Web Resources: Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory website (www.hawkridge.org)

Take London Road (aka Highway 61) exit at end of I-35. Take a left at 43rd Ave. Take another left at Glenwood Ave. Take a sharp right onto Skyline Parkway at the top of the hill at the Hawk Ridge signs. Drive one mile east to the Main Overlook.