

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory 2016 Raptor Summary

By Karl Bardon, Count Director

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Peregrine Falcon by Alex Lamoreaux

In 2016 Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory conducted its 44th annual hawk count from August 15 to November 30 at the Main Overlook. The HRBO count team recorded a total of 66,369 raptors. Although this total is slightly below the long-term average, it was an amazing season, with four all-time season totals set. The totals for Sharp-shinned Hawks, Bald Eagles, Merlins, and Peregrine Falcons were all greater than any other season since official counting began in

1972! The numbers of Turkey Vultures, Ospreys, Northern Harriers, Cooper’s Hawks, Swainson’s Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, and Golden Eagles were also above average, while the counts of Northern Goshawks, Broad-winged Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks, and American Kestrels were all below average.

The record seasons for Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons were not unexpected, since these two species are making dramatic recoveries after historic lows. It seems fairly easy to predict that both species will continue to increase and new season records will be set at Hawk Ridge in the future. Indeed, in both cases, I believe the 2016 season totals could have been even higher, since we had poor weather with east winds during the peak Peregrine window in late September, and the mild weather in November probably kept many eagles to the north beyond the count period.

Merlins are also on the increase as they are adapting to nesting in more urban areas; this is the second year this species has broken the seasonal record. We are particularly proud of our Sharp-shinned Hawk total count of 22,062, since this species has been in long-term decline and is the “bread-and-butter” bird of Hawk Ridge. Although we typically only have one day over 1,000 Sharpies each season, this



Merlin by Karl Bardon

fall there were six such days, including a stretch of four days in a row (September 17 to 20) of over 1,000, culminating in 1,454 on September 20, the peak day of the season.



Red-tailed Hawk dark morph by Karl Bardon

Finally, a respectable Red-tail total! The season total of 8,867 Red-tailed Hawks is the best season since 2006, so perhaps the long period of low Red-tail numbers is over. While scanning through the Red-tails, we were able to find 62 dark/rufous morph birds, none of which were Harlan's, but we did see 2 light morph adult and 1 light juvenile Harlan's plus several light morph Harlan's intergrades. A total of 10 Krider's Hawks (some of which may

have been intergrades) was much higher than usual, while four leucistic Red-tails was more average. Swainson's Hawks also had an excellent fall; the total of 23 is the second-best season, falling short of the record 33 birds seen in 1988.

A few species continue to be seen in lower-than-average numbers, especially Northern Goshawks, Broad-winged Hawks, and American Kestrels, although the reasons for these declines are unclear or unknown. In the case of Northern Goshawks, it is now well established that invasions no longer happen, while in the case of Broad-winged Hawks, it may be nothing more than weather variables during their peak migration season. As for American Kestrels, I believe the lower numbers represent a real decline in population. I certainly don't want to end on a low note—2016 was a fantastic season at one of the best hawk counts in the country with a team of great people!

This record-breaking season is due to the skill of many people, including HRBO Counter Alex Lamoreau, Count Trainee Amy West, Count Interpreter John Richardson, and a host of volunteers, including Steve Kolbe, Jan and Larry Kraemer, Kathleen MacAulay, Dave Carman, Stephen Nelson, Russ Edmonds, Allie Pesano, Ian Gardner, Andrew Longtin, Josh Lefever, Joe Beck, Tom Reed, Brian Sullivan, and Jerry Liguori. My thanks to all.



Count trainee Amy West (left), volunteer Russ Edmonds (center), Counter Alex Lamoreaux (right) photo by Karen Stubenvoll