

Taking Flight: *News From The Ridge*

Spring/Summer Issue | 2009



A Closer Look: The Merlin

by Frank Nicoletti
and Janelle Long

Merlin Photo by Mike Furtman

Coming Events

Hawk Weekend!

September 11-13

Come and celebrate the migration at our annual Hawk Weekend!

Friday and Saturday evening activities will be held at the "Coppertop" First United Methodist Church at 230 East Skyline Parkway in Duluth, MN.

All activities at the Hawk Ridge Main Overlook are open to the public; everything else requires registration.

Continued On Page 7

The Merlin, formally called Pigeon Hawk, is circumboreal and can be found in North America's habitat that ranges from boreal and northern coastal forest and prairies. They are a small falcon with a robust and stocky build, often looking like a pigeon in flight.

Adult males have a blue back, while adult females and immature are more uniform brown on the back. They are streaked below, have faint facial markings, and have a prominent banded tail that separates them from their closely-related cousin, the American Kestrel. Plumage varies somewhat geographically with dark birds from the Pacific Northwest to pale birds from the northern prairie region of North America. In eastern North America including Duluth, birds are in between in plumage and are often called Taiga Merlin, referring to breeding range. Females average larger than males in size.

Since the first systematic count started at Hawk Ridge in 1972, the average number of Merlins migrating is 121.

From the data collected in the spring at the West Skyline Hawk Watch, the average is 20. This species bulk of passage in fall occurs in September through mid-October and in spring from early April through early May. They are seen rarely in winter in Duluth with 1-3 birds seen most years. In the recent book, State of North

America's Birds of Prey, Farmer et al. (2008) reported long-term increases by this species in northeastern North America are changing to recent stable or declining trends.

In our region, Merlins nest in tall conifers often in old crow nests and generally around lakes. During the breeding season, April through July, Merlins can be heard often calling with their high-pitched Ki-Ki-Ki-Kee uttered rapidly. Adults can be seen chasing each other during courtship flight especially in April and early May. Merlins are the most common nesting raptor within the city of Duluth.

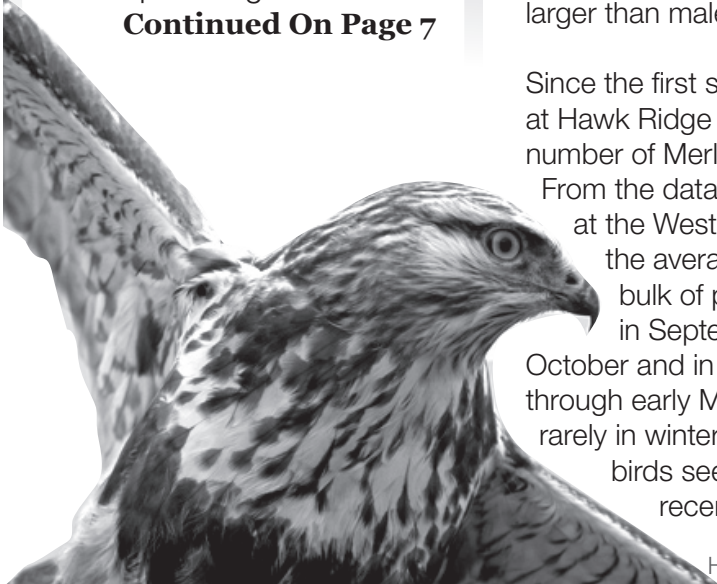
Continued On Page 6

INSIDE

Nighthawk Migration	Page 2
Spring Migration Count	Page 3
Peregrine Watch	Page 4
Raptors in the Classroom	Page 5
Spring Migration Celebration	Page 5
Spring Owl Monitoring	Page 6
Comments from the Board	Page 6
Notes from the Director	Page 8

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory
P.O. Box 3006
Duluth, MN 55803-3006

Call: 218.428.6209
Contact: mail@hawkridge.org
Visit: www.hawkridge.org



Hawk Photo by Mike Furtman

Board of Directors

Chairperson:
Tim Bates

Treasurer:
Erica Sivertson

Secretary:
Janet Green

Member:
Doug Lewis

Member:
Ray Gamache

Member:
Mark Martell

Member:
Gerald Niemi

Member:
Robert Owens

Member:
Molly Thompson

Executive Director:
Janelle Long

Newsletter

Editing:
Ray Gamache

Design:
Sarah Lonetti

Office Location Notice

Please note we have moved from our rented office space at the previous St. Edward's Episcopal Church location at 4401 Glenwood St. The new owner of the location is the Hawk Ridge Church of Christ, which we are NOT affiliated with. Our new office location is at 1330 E. Superior St., Duluth, Minn., above Alakef Coffee Roasters. Staff and volunteers will continue be at the main overlook at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve daily in September and October.

Fall Migration: Common Nighthawk

by Janet Green & Carly Lapin

The North Shore of Lake Superior has been well known as a corridor for the migration of Common Nighthawks. The migration is concentrated in a time window from mid to late August with a peak usually around August 20-27. Sporadically from 1983 to 1996 Duluth Audubon's Hawk Ridge Committee sponsored Nighthawk counts at both Hawk Ridge and the Lakewood Pumping Station (Congdon Blvd.). Other incidental counts in the Duluth area from 1983 to 2003 turned up some impressive numbers of



Photo by Debbie Waters

migrating Nighthawks. Peaks include: 43,690 (2.75 hours) on 8/26/90; 16,495 (2+ hours) on 8/16/86 and 15,173 (no hours given) on 8/23/00. In recent years the migration has not been as heavy and peak days reported range from 1,200 to 3,000 Nighthawks.

This lower migration is in keeping with concern about the decline of Nighthawks and other aerial feeding birds. For example, in Ontario the second atlas of breeding birds (2008) showed that the populations of the aerial foraging guild, including the Common Nighthawk, Whip-poor-will, Chimney Swift and six types of swallows, dropped 30 to 50 percent in the past two decades.

Because of that concern, HRBO initiated a count of migrating

Common Nighthawks in Duluth in August 2008.

Counts were completed daily from the rooftop garden of an apartment building located at 6030 E. Superior St., Duluth, Minn., from August 11- 31, 2008. Daily observation began at 4:30 p.m. and concluded at sundown. Common Nighthawks were observed on 8 of the 20 days of the count and a total of 2,514 Nighthawks were counted. The highest number was observed on August 24, 2008, when 1,470 Nighthawks were observed, and the second highest number was observed on August 16, 2008, when 668 Nighthawks were observed. Nighthawks were more consistently observed on days with high temperatures. Nighthawks also

seemed to migrate irrespective of wind conditions, with observations being recorded on days with westerly, southwesterly, southerly, and northerly winds. This count will be continued in August 2009.

Other programs for monitoring Nighthawks have been started elsewhere in the U. S. The Northeast Partners in Flight created a Nightjar Working Group in 2004 and produced this report: "Northeast Nightjar Survey – 2006 Summary." Also the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William & Mary has inaugurated a program called the Nightjar Survey Network; volunteer participants are welcome. This network essentially uses the USGS Breeding Bird Survey routes; it can be accessed at: <http://www.ccb-wm.org/nightjars.htm>.

Spring Migration Count Raptors and Non-raptors West Skyline Parkway, Duluth

by Karl Bardon

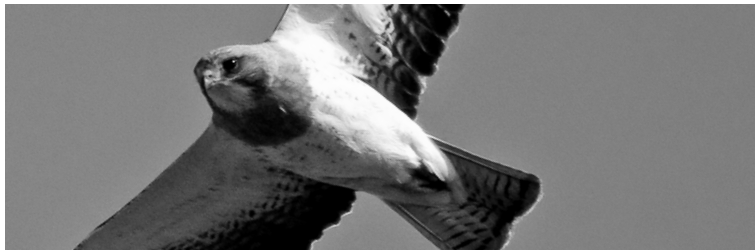
For the first time since 2005, Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory conducted a complete spring hawk count. This count had been previously done from 2000-2005 by Frank Nicoletti, and has been officially called the West Skyline Hawk Count due to usage of several sites along West Skyline Drive, including the Thompson Hill rest area and the Rice Point overlook near Enger Tower.

During the spring 2009 count, a total of 19,269 raptors were counted during 570 hours of observation. Compared to the six previous seasons (2000-2005) of data from West Skyline Hawk Count, this represents the lowest total number of hawks, but the highest total number of hours. Spring 2009 seemed overall very cold and very windy. Persistent and strong easterly winds throughout the season, especially during mid-April during the peak migration for many species, especially Red-tailed hawks, disperses the flight away from Duluth and may account for lower than normal numbers. Also, when the wind wasn't blowing from the east, there were often very strong cold fronts that brought westerly gales, which has the opposite effect as easterly winds, dispersing the flight out over Lake Superior where many birds may be difficult or impossible to detect.

Raptor highlights are included here but the complete count can be accessed on the HRBO web site. Bald Eagles (4142) passed by West Skyline in higher numbers than previous seasons, including a peak of 419 on March 17, and a substantial number were seen moving at the end of the season during May (413), these latter birds apparently individuals of the southern race involved in northward post-breeding dispersal. The 2009 season total for Northern Harriers (75) was the second highest count among the seven years of data.

The total number of all accipiters was low. The quota of four Red-shouldered Hawks was seen this season, all adults during a narrow window from April 9-14, including two on April 11; this number is both the maximum of any spring season, and the seasonal average. Other than Red-shouldered Hawks, the number of all other buteos was disappointing. A single immature light morph Swainson's Hawk was seen on May 20. Although the count of 61 Golden Eagles was lower than average, the peak of 14 on March 13 was the second highest spring on record.

In addition to doing the official hawk count, I also kept track of all non-raptors I felt were actively migrating during the



Swainson's Hawk Photo by Mike Furtman

same hours as the hawk count, similar to what has been done the last two falls at Hawk Ridge. However, the flight of non-raptors through the Duluth area is not as consistent or well organized as it is in the fall, and I often spent time in the early morning hours before the official hawk count began trying to find migrant birds. I spent an additional 70 hours during the early morning counting at sites away from West Skyline. For the analysis of the non-raptor data, I combined all hours of observation. A total of 34,542 non-raptors were counted during 640 hours of observation. Non-raptor highlights included a much larger than expected loon migration, including season totals of 218 Red-throated Loons and 1179 Common Loons. Most noteworthy were peak counts of 117 Red-throated Loons on May 3 and 42 on May 4, since the previous high count for the state was 39 birds on May 9, 2001. The peak Common Loon count was 181 on April 24. Also noteworthy were 1066 American White Pelicans, a species once considered rare in Duluth! This species was seen almost daily from April 11 - May 16, including a peak of 166 on April 25.

Other highlights include a one day count of 63 Solitary Sandpipers on May 14, representing the highest count for the state, and a total of 53 Willets for the season, including 29 on May 5, apparently the highest number reported in Duluth. The season total for Blue Jays was 3048, including peaks of 1473 on May 6 and 1200 on May 7. Although most birders are aware of the large number of Blue Jays which migrate through Duluth in spring, no prior accurate counts are available. The season total for American Robins was 9803, including a peak of 4666 on April 8, the second highest spring count for the state. Lastly, considering the enormous number of Redpolls which moved south last fall passed Hawk Ridge, it was not too surprising to see a substantial return flight of 5379 this spring, including 2415 on April 9, which is also the second highest spring count for the state.

I am very grateful to Janelle Long and Frank Nicoletti for organizing the spring count, and especially to all the private donors who felt resurrecting the spring count was worthwhile enough to answer their appeal for funds. I am officially dedicating this spring to Howard Weinberg, who's almost constant and cheerful presence was one of the highlights of the season. I would also like to thank all the visitors to the count sites, all of whom provided company or treats or both! Thank you everyone and see you all this fall!

Volunteer! With Hawk Ridge

Each year, dozens of volunteers ‘make it happen’ at Hawk Ridge! If you’re interested in Hawk Ridge, you’re qualified to be a volunteer, too! We’ll have training sessions in late August/early September that will teach you everything you need to know to be a GREAT volunteer at the Main Overlook. We ask for

24 of your hours between September 1 and October 31; we need people 7 days a week for short shifts between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. We’re flexible and easy-going, so your schedule WILL blend with ours. Details will be posted on our volunteer website (<http://www.hawkridge.org/education/volunteer.html>) as soon as they’re available.

Contact Julie O’Connor, Volunteer Coordinator
Call: 218.348.2291
E-mail: joconnor@hawkridge.org



Zinger Fledging Photo by Mike Furtman

Peregrine Watch is an educational program centering on a family of Peregrine Falcons that nest in a man-made box at the top of the Greysolon Plaza Building in downtown Duluth. The Watch started in 2006, and has grown in popularity every year since. One of the goals of Peregrine Watch is to educate people about peregrines in general, this family in particular, and we see our visitors increasing their knowledge and attachment to this family of birds through our program.

Peregrine Watch 2009 has been a GREAT season! We had a new Peregrine Watch Intern Naturalist, Jess Johnson, a recent graduate from Bemidji State University. Jess was a great asset to Peregrine Watch, and we hope to see more of her in the fall. Funding issues have plagued us this year, and our staffing, programming and hours were cut drastically. Jess and I were able to provide adequate coverage in the park, but we sure miss having the staff to man the site seven days a week!

You may recall that in 2008, three of the four chicks at the nest died from an illness at two weeks of age, but our 2009 family is big, healthy and strong. The adult falcons are the same birds that have nested here for the past several years—almost like having old friends return for the summer!

Also due to the lack of funding, we ran Peregrine Watch without our monitoring equipment that allows us to look inside the nest box via a camera/monitor. This lack of equipment actually increased the mystery of watching the birds, because from day one, we didn’t know if there were three or four chicks in the box.

On banding day, we watched with eager anticipation as the bander, Amy Reis of the Raptor Resource Project, scaled the wall and reached into the nest box FOUR times to bring out chicks to get their bands! The family consists of two males, Zinger and Alex, and two females, Brittnie and Mariah, (named for our two interns from last year, not the celebrities).

We have celebrated the growth and development of the chicks, sharing them with over 1700 people in the past four weeks—averaging 83 visitors per day. We’re noticing a decline in visitor numbers, but our weather has been prohibitive this summer, and the Lake Walk has been a LONELY place to be on those 50 degree, windy days!

All four chicks fledged between June 28 and July 5. The males flew first, on June 28 and 29. This is typical... females are larger and take a bit longer to reach the physical maturity to sustain flight. The first female chick

fledged successfully on July 2, but her sister fledged prematurely and we picked her up off of Superior Street and returned her to the rooftop of the Greysolon Building. There, she was enclosed by an 8-foot high wall that kept her safe until she was able to get herself off the top of the building a day later.

The birds have been hanging around downtown, dividing their time between the Greysolon Building, the Central High School Clock Tower (on Lake Ave.) and the Temple Opera/NorShor Theater Building (1st Avenue East and Superior Street). They’re still dependant on their parents for food until mid-August, so keep your eyes and ears open when in downtown Duluth!

We want to thank all Hawk Ridge members who have sent in contributions in support of Peregrine Watch. We are happy to have your support, and are doing our very best to provide the highest quality program we can during these difficult times.

Peregrine Watch updates can be found on the Hawk Ridge website (www.hawkridge.org), or on our Peregrine Watch YahooGroup at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/peregrinewatch/>



Zinger Banding Photo by Mike Furtman

Education Stories: Raptors in the Classroom

by Debbie Waters

Each time I depart a classroom’s first visit, I talk about what’s going to happen when I visit for the second and final time. I tell them that they’ll need to remember the word, “Calm.” Why? As I watch the expressions of the pondering students, I see their eyes widen and their posture straighten. After what they’ve learned about raptors, they suddenly realize they’re going to get to see a live one, right in their very own classroom. Birds for dessert!



Athena the American Kestrel
Photo by Debbie Waters

Not that the meal part of Raptors in the Classroom is yucky! It’s more like pizza rather than brussel sprouts. But what makes the program shine in the end, what pulls all they know about raptors together and puts the cherry on top of their understanding? The education birds.

So I want to tell you about “our” birds. We started out the program in 2005 working with the Lake Superior Zoo. Since then their education birds have visited exactly 404 classrooms! Raptors in the Classroom 2009 was the last for the Lake Superior Zoo’s two primary education birds, Bosley and Athena, and I would like to tell you about them.

Bosley, a male Eastern Screech-Owl, was a great favorite of students and teachers alike. Students would wait with bated breath for him to be removed from his crate. “Step up,” Heidi would say quietly as she’d slowly reveal him to the class. Inevitably there’d be a collective “oooooh!” from the students--for Bosley’s cuteness factor is off the charts. He’d continue to hold them captivated as he stared back at them, turning his head up to 270 degrees, demonstrated his zygodactyl toes, and the art of camouflage.



Bosley the Eastern Screech-Owl
Photo by Debbie Waters

Athena, a female American Kestrel (a small falcon), had a very vibrant personality. She would often vocalize even before being brought out of the crate and captivated the students with her antics throughout her visit. Athena demonstrated well the shape of her falcon wings, her tomial tooth, vocalizations, and female camouflage. Each turned a whopping 14 years old this past spring, which for little raptors is a grand old age. The decision was made to retire Bosley this past May. Athena passed away after a sudden illness in May. They are both sorely missed.

Bosley and Athena had a great impact on our students and the success of the Raptors in the Classroom program. They deserve a HUGE round of applause!

Spring Migration Celebration: Hawk Ridge Birdathon

by Janelle Long

This spring we partnered with Duluth Audubon Society, Hartley Nature Center, and Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center to hold the first annual “Spring Migration Celebration”. Events were held throughout the week of May 12-17 to celebrate the spring migration of birds. A highlight of the event was the Friday night kick-off, in which Dave Benson and Mike Hendrickson shared entertaining stories and tips about the Birdathon and birding hotspots in St. Louis County. Peter Hawkins also joined us to sign posters for “Loon Appreciation Week,” which displayed his winning photograph.

On Sat., May 16, there were 8 teams that braved the weather to participate in the 24-hour Hawk Ridge Birdathon in St. Louis County. Team “Little or No Accumulation” continued to defend their first place title for the third year in a row! Dave Benson, Lars Benson, John Ellis and Jesse Ellis counted 150 species and received the new traveling trophy (thanks to creative efforts of Dave & Sarah Grosshuesch). In all, a grand total of 179 species were tallied. This beat the 2008 total by 1 species, but is still below the 23-year average of 192 species. Close to \$1,000 was raised to help benefit the research and education programs of Hawk Ridge. Congratulations and thanks again to all who participated!

Western Great Lakes Spring Owl Monitoring

by Julie O'Connor & Dave Grosshuesch



Hawk Owl Photo by Mike Furtman

This April, owl monitoring volunteers took to the woods and roads around Minnesota to listen for breeding owls calling in the night. As top predators of the food chain, owls are considered good indicators of environmental health, making them important to monitor; however, there is a paucity of data about the abundance and population status for most owl species in the western Great Lakes Region.

There are currently few species of owls that are adequately monitored using traditional survey methods such as the Breeding Bird Survey and the Christmas Bird Count. For these reasons, the Western Great Lakes Region Owl Monitoring survey was initiated in 2005. The survey objectives are to: 1. Understand the distribution and abundance of owl species in the region; 2. Determine

trends in the relative abundance of owls in the region; 3. Determine if trends are comparable in surrounding areas and analyze whether these trends could be scaled up or down on the landscape; and 4. Determine if there are habitat associations of owl species in the region.

This was the fifth year of collaborative effort between HRBO, Natural Resources Research Institute, Minnesota DNR and Wisconsin DNR to monitor owl populations. Existing and randomly selected survey routes were used to conduct roadside surveys (once per route in early April) in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

All survey routes consist of 10 survey points spaced one mile (~1.6 km) apart. Volunteers listen passively for five minutes at each survey station,

taking down weather and habitat information at each station where owls are heard and identified.

There were routes assigned in Minnesota this year to approximately 110 volunteers. In Wisconsin, 90 routes were assigned and 88 were completed. We're still looking for about 30 volunteers to fill in routes in MN for April 2010. Contact Julie O'Connor (joconnor@hawkridge.org or 218-348-2291) if you'd like to run a survey route in Western or Southwestern Minnesota in 2010.

Data analysis is underway, and the results will be available on the Hawk Ridge website this fall. Thank you to all monitoring volunteers—we couldn't possibly gather all this data without you!

A Closer Look: The Merlin continued

In 2010, Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory plans to conduct a citizen-science based Raptor Nesting Survey within the city of Duluth, MN. If you live in Duluth, please keep your eyes and ears alert for nesting raptors in your neighborhood. More information will become available on this project, before spring of 2010. If you have any information on current raptor nests within Duluth, please contact Frank Nicoletti at:

Call: 218.591.0174
E-mail: fnicoletti@hawkridge.org

HAWK WEEKEND

September 11, 12 and 13, 2009

Friday evening is "An Evening for Everyone," including a social and refreshments, live birds, a twist on the "Guess-the-Number-of-Hawks Contest," and a presentation by Carrol Henderson, Minnesota DNR Non-game Supervisor and author. He will give an illustrated talk about his new book, "Birds in Flight: the Art and Science of How Birds Fly". This book combines the joy and wonder of witnessing birds flying and the science of how they accomplish it. Carrol will have his books available for purchase.

Saturday will offer a variety of field trips and seminars away from the Ridge, and hawkwatching, interpretive programs, banded hawk and passerine demonstrations, optics displays, merchandise, and refreshments at the Hawk Ridge Main Overlook. Saturday evening offers a social and refreshments, our annual member meeting, a fabulous "sustainable" dinner, awards, a silent auction, and a keynote address by Dr. Patrick Redig, Professor of Avian Medicine and Surgery, University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. His presentation is titled, "Forty-five Years of Meandering the World of Raptors: A Personal Odyssey." Pat was also the co-founder and previous director of The Raptor Center. Sunday will offer a variety of field trips and many activities at the Hawk Ridge Main Overlook.

For more details about Hawk Weekend, go to www.hawkridge.org or contact us at 218.428.6209 or mail@hawkridge.org.

Help Us Meet Our Financial Obligations!

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory depends on the generous contributions made by its members and friends. You'll receive special member discounts and behind-the-scenes with tours as well as knowing these funds go to support education and research. Your membership contribution is tax deductible! Please make checks payable to *Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory*.

SEND FORM & PAYMENT TO:
Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory
P.O. Box 3006
Duluth, MN 55803-3006

Membership Contribution



Please ☐ Begin ☐ Renew

My Hawk Ridge Membership

- ☐ Student Membership (\$15)
- ☐ Individual Membership (\$30)
- ☐ Family Membership (\$50)
- ☐ Sustaining Membership (\$100)
- ☐ Supporting Membership (\$500)
- ☐ Steward Membership (\$1000)
- ☐ Additional Donation: _____

Help Fund Education Programs

- ☐ \$125 for a 4th Grade Outreach lesson: "Raptors in the Classroom"
- ☐ \$175 for a 5th Grade Lesson: "Experience Hawk Ridge"
- ☐ \$150 for the Yellow Bus Fund

Help Fund Research (per day)

- ☐ \$125 Raptor Banding
- ☐ \$80 Raptor Count
- ☐ \$40 Owl Research
- ☐ \$75 Songbird Banding

Comments From The Board

Tim Bates, Chair

I am very excited about the future of Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory. We are becoming more and more stable with our financial situation, thanks to the many members and donors who believe in the education, research, and stewardship activities of this organization. Working together, we all can make a positive impact.

Our board is a very diverse and hard working group and we would like to welcome our newest member, Ray Gamache, who is a professor in communications and journalism at the College of St. Scholastica. Ray will help us improve our visibility through various techniques of marketing and communication.

Come up to the Ridge this fall and enjoy the migration, learn more from our on-site education staff, and support the quality and service to the region that Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory provides.



Hawk Ridge Hosting HMANA Conference!

April 15-18, 2010 will bring the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA) to the Radisson Hotel in Duluth, Minn., for their annual conference, hosted by Hawk Ridge. Attendees will fill their weekend with fascinating speakers,

can't-miss field trips, must-see posters/presentations and the fun of spending four days in the company of other hawk watchers from around the country.

Registration will open in the fall of 2009; the Hawk Ridge website will be updated as soon as details are secured. Please contact Julie O'Connor at 218-348-2291 or at hmana2010@aol.com with questions.

Notes From The Director

By Janelle Long

This spring was filled with excitement, as we were able to re-establish the West Skyline Hawk Count, continue the Western Great Lakes Owl Monitoring program with over 100 volunteers, teach many more students through Raptors in the Classroom outreach education, share with visitors in the success of all four chicks fledging during Peregrine Watch, and partner with several organizations to hold the first annual Spring Migration Celebration in conjunction with the Hawk Ridge Birdathon.

Thanks to generous members, donors, and grant funders: Minn., DNR, Lloyd K. Johnson Foundation, and Minn., Lake Superior Coastal Program with NOAA. We were able to reach out and connect with more people through these programs. We appreciate your helping us

contribute to bird conservation research and education efforts. This fall season, we continue to ask for your help, as our organization and program needs continue to grow. The majority of the previous education and research staff are returning for another intense fall season up at Hawk Ridge. We are grateful for the dedication, knowledge, and passion they have in sharing their love for birds with the thousands of people that come to visit.

We hope to see you this fall season at our Hawk Weekend special event or at another time during the great migration. Both Audubon and WildBird magazines recently had articles highlighting the spectacular migration as one of the best hawkwatching sites to be in the fall. We couldn't agree more.



Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory
P.O. Box 3006
Duluth, MN 55803-3006

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage

PAID

Permit No. 1009
Duluth, MN