

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory: 2018 Fall Season Full Species Review

**Compiled by John Richardson
Fall Count Director**

Mission:

The mission of the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory is to protect birds of prey and other migratory birds in the Western Lake Superior Region through research, education, and stewardship.

hawkridge.org (2018)

Overview:

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory under a trust agreement with the City of Duluth, the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization, manages the Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve and is located at 3980 East Skyline Parkway, Duluth, MN 55804.

More details and information can be found at <https://www.hawkridge.org/about>

This year welcomed back Stephen Nelson as Counter. Stephen is a native of the Duluth area.

Hannah Toutonghi who hails from the State of Washington returned as Count Intern previously spending last season on the education staff.

This year we welcomed a new Count Director for the Fall John Richardson who spent the previous two years as Count Interpreter. John a native of the U.K. has been a resident for twenty years in Minnesota, and when not counting hawks he completes his year as a professional bird-guide in MN.

We would like to send a special thank you to Karl Bardon for his ten years as Count Director and all his dedication and hard work for Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory. The Board and staff wish him the very best in all his future endeavors.

The official count begins every year August 15th and continues daily, weather permitting, until November 30th.

Although hawks, owls and their allies are the focus species we count and document, it is also the task of the counters to document and count all avian species that migrate along the ridge.

Species Summary:

In total, **175** species of birds were recorded, this does not include 'other taxa' (finch sp., Buteo sp., etc), a designation used when a bird is recorded as specific to a family of birds because no specific determination could be confirmed as a particular exact species. With those extra taxonomical records the total came to **209** for the fall season.

2018 provided us with 16 different species of Vultures, Hawks and Falcons. No owl species were recorded during the daytime hours this fall.

Highlights of the non-focus species included 23 species of waterfowl, 10 species of shorebird and 24 species of warbler.

Focal Species:

(alpha-codes are provided next to the species name as used by counters)

- **Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* (TUVU)**

Peak Migration: late Sep - early Oct
Record Daily High: 799 on 29 Sep 1996
Record Seasonal High: 1,952 in 1996
10-year average ,1316

2018 was a record setting year this fall. 2,573 were recorded which is well over the previous seasonal high set back in 1996, 22 years ago!

During August only **2** were officially counted as migrating. Late September appeared to provide the bulk of the numbers. September the 28th, 29th & 30th were the biggest days with **385**, **214** and **426** respectively. However, there were 2 more big days to come on October 4th & 6th with **282** and **287**. Those 5 days tallied **1,594**.

Three individuals passed by during the cold of November with the final bird of the season cruising by on the 12th of November.



- **Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* (OSPR)

Peak Migration: late Aug-Sept
Record Daily High: 90 on 17 Sep 1997
Record Seasonal High: 539 in 2005
10-year average 273

Osprey numbers were down on the 10-year average this year with **199** recorded. 173 of those came in September with the peak one-day total of **25** coming on the 14th. No Osprey was recorded in October with the last two birds coming through on the last day of September (30th).



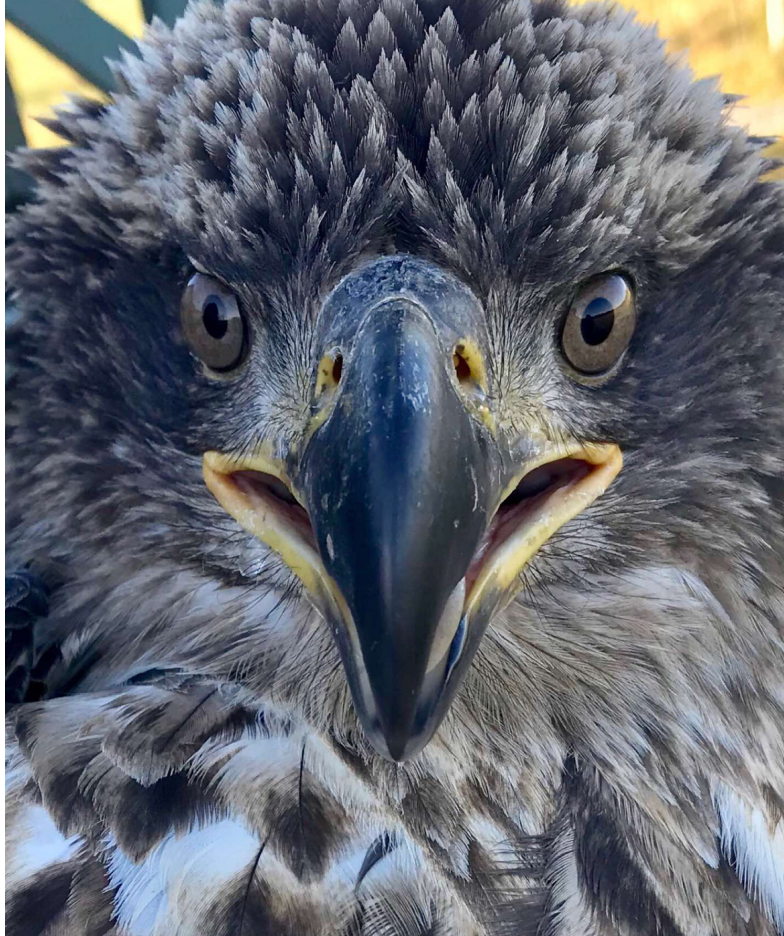
- **Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* (BAEA)

Peak Migration: 1st peak in Sept, 2nd peak in Oct
Record Daily High: 743 on 22 Nov 1994
Record Seasonal High: 6099 in 2017
10-year average 4,631

Bald Eagle numbers have continued to rise almost every year; especially, over the past ten years. Last year (2017) a new record **6,099** was documented.

During the month of August when we typically tend to get the early push of Southern-breeding Bald Eagle **489** were tallied, which was way ahead of 2017. By the middle of September it appeared the record was once again on shaky ground.

However, as we would see over the remainder of the season with numerous species, weather and unfavorable winds put a wrench in many of the final numbers. By the end of the season the final number rested at **4,620** just 21 below the 10-year average.



- **Northern Harrier** *Circus hudsonius* (NOHA)

Peak Migration: late Aug- early Oct

Record Daily High: 172 Sept 17, 1994; Sept 15, 1999
Record Seasonal High: 1,100 in 1999
10-year average 548

2018 proved particularly stingy with harriers providing us the lowest seasonal total since 2008 with a meager **406**. August started nicely with **59**, September **196**, October **147**, and November only **4**.



- **Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* (SSHA)**

Peak Migration: mid Sept - early Oct
Record Daily High: 2515 on Sept 24, 2017
Record Seasonal High: 22,602 in 2016
10-year average 16,167

Sharp-shinned Hawk (Sharpies) usually make up a large proportion of migrating hawk numbers. As the average suggests above we expect somewhere in the region of 16,000+ annually. The previous two years' total surpassed the dizzy heights of 22,000. Could it be 3rd year in a row for such high numbers?

Unfortunately, it was not to be; although, we did break a record of sorts! **11,148** rounded out the season which constitutes the lowest fall season total over the past 10 years.

As the banding/research station at Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory testify many species of birds including hawks potentially suffered greatly this year with a particularly

cold and unsettled month of April. Many birds perhaps either did not breed or were unsuccessful in doing so resulting in the low numbers of birds and notably juvenile birds.



- **Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* (COHA)**

Peak Migration: mid Sept – early Oct
Record Daily High: 43 on 15 Sep 1999
Record Seasonal High: 319 in 1993
10-year average 115

Being on the northern fringes of the breeding range for Cooper's Hawk we tend to not see too many. This year only **76** passed by, below the 10-year average. The best single-day total this year was **9** on the 15th of October.



- **Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (NOGO)**

Peak Migration: mid Oct – early Nov
Record Daily High: 1068 on Oct 15, 1982
Record Seasonal High: 4963 in 1971
10-year average 203

Northern Goshawk numbers have dropped precipitously over the last 20 years due to varying factors. We almost reached the 10-year average this year with **192**. Mid-late October proved to be the peak time this year with a few good daily totals, **15** on the 17th October, and **19** on the 20th.



- **Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platynerus* (BWHA)**

Peak Migration: 10 Sep - 25 Sep
Record Daily High: 101,698 on Sept 15, 2003
Record Seasonal High: 160,703 in 2003
10-year average 28,936

Broad-winged Hawks, or ‘Broadies’ as they are affectionately termed at the Ridge are one of the big anticipated spectacles of the season and one most people look forward too.

The big Hawk Weekend Festival is planned to coincide with peak BWHA migration and the Ridge is packed with visitors and plenty of activities put together by the wealth of great volunteers (for whom we are ever in their debt) and education staff,

and even if the weather does not come through on its part every year its always a successful weekend for everybody.

Our 'big day' for Broadies came on the 17th of September this year with **10,137**. With lack of good flight conditions during the 1st half of September numbers all round were down and hawk numbers were no exception, so most of the broad-wings we counted came in the later half of the month with several decent days numbering over a 1,000.

Many hawk-watches across the country experienced the same conditions as we did, and birds lingered well into October, but by the time September is done you cant expect to see any in great numbers. The last broad-wing of the season came through on October 28th. With a season total of **17,763** it was not the lowest season total by far, but still well over 10,000 short on the 10-year average.



- **Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* (RTHA)**

Peak Migration: Early Oct - early Nov

Record Daily High: 3,988 on Oct. 24, 1994

Record Seasonal High: 15,358 in 1994

10-year average 6,713

Red-tailed numbers start to build with the juvenile birds coming first before the adults, and October is generally the peak month.

In the middle part of October this year we saw the majority of birds come through. The season total was slightly below the 10-year average with **6,480**. It seems based on the previous 10 years numbers of Red-tails are holding steady.

We did see a good number of dark-morph type red-tails this year with **63!** Perhaps the bird of the season was also a Red-tailed Hawk. Not only did we get good looks at the bird, but it was initially caught and banded by the banding station before making its way up to the overlook where a good crowd was able to see up close a bird of a lifetime.

Red-tails are notorious for their genetic diversity and for instances for leucism (pigmentation issues causing feathers, sometimes all but a few to be completely white in appearance). On September 30th a large (1,200 grams) bird, likely an adult female with only 4 normal colored feathers, 2 in the central tail and 2 primary feathers leaving the rest of the bird completely white was captured at the banding station. It was one of the highlights not just for the season but of all seasons. Even the most seasoned veterans of the Ridge were in awe at such a stunning and amazing bird!





- **Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus* (RLHA)**

Peak Migration: Mid Oct – Early Nov
Record Daily High: 322 on Oct 25, 2017
Record Seasonal High: 1,123 in 2017
10-year average 608

Last year, 2017, saw a record number of ‘Roughies’ with **1,123** which blew the old record out of the water, and an amazing flight on the 25th of October of **322**.

2018 started September 26th for Roughies, the first of which was an adult female, the first sign it was not going to be another big year for them. When adult females show up early it is usually because of an unsuccessful breeding season across their breeding grounds, so with many other species suffering the same fate it seemed natural that this would be the case also here, and it was.

The total for the season ended at **367**, not the worst year over the past 10, but not far behind 2008’s **274**. The highest one day total this year came on the 9th of November with **57**, and the last 3 birds passed by on the 27th of November.

- **Swainson's Hawk** *Buteo swainsoni* (SWHA)

Peak migration: Sept-Oct
Record Seasonal High 23 in 2016
10-year average 9

Swainson's Hawks are often an annual occurrence at Hawk Ridge, but as a Western U.S. species they are always in small numbers, so it really depends on the winds out West and in Canada to what we will see. Nevertheless, we did see **6** individuals this year, slightly behind the 10-year average of **9**.



- **Red-shouldered Hawk** *Buteo lineatus* (RSHA)

Even less common than the Swainson's Hawk, due to its breeding range being generally south of Duluth, MN, the Red-shouldered Hawk is undeniably a rare sight here, despite its common presence in the rest of the Lower 48 States.

Therefore, having **3** this year was quite special indeed, and 2 on 1 day no less.

- **Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* (GOEA)**

Peak Migration: late Oct – Nov
Record Daily High: 57 on Nov 12, 2012
Record Seasonal High: 223 in 2009
10-year average 190

Golden Eagle is species that many wish and hope to see, and October-November is the prime-time, so one must dress appropriately in order to fulfill the goal of seeing one.

2018 established itself as a banner year for Golden Eagles. The season started in earnest with the first one seen on the 26th of September and it went on from there. October saw 136 with 27 being the daily high for 2018 on the 17th of October. Another 105 in November set the new season total with an impressive **246**, breaking the previous record set in 2009 by 23 birds.



- **American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* (AMKE)**

Peak Migration: late Aug - early Oct
Record Daily High: 744 on 9 Sep 2002
Record Seasonal High: 3,637 in 2002
10-year average 1,355

American Kestrel is the smallest falcon we see here in Duluth, MN and in large part it times its migration to the big flights of migrating dragonflies for which it eats on the wing.

Numbers of Kestrels have been in decline for years now due to habitat loss and other actors. This year **697** were counted, well below the 10-year average. This is likely, not just because of the decline of the species, but also because of the season's weather as a whole.



- **Merlin *Falco columbarius* (MERL)**

Peak Migration: Sept –Oct
Record Daily High: 73 on 9 Oct 1997
Record Seasonal High: 399 in 2016
10-year average 267

The dynamic and super aggressive Merlin is always a joy to watch at the Ridge as it seems anything that moves a Merlin has to investigate at great speed and often seemingly attack or bother.

In 2018, **238** were documented, slightly below the 10-year average, but not by much, suggesting numbers are holding steady or continuing to rise. Merlin, unlike the Kestrel which is predominantly a rural country bird, will take up residence in areas atop a tall evergreen tree more often than not. Food for them is also in abundance with many small birds and non-native species such as House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) on hand.

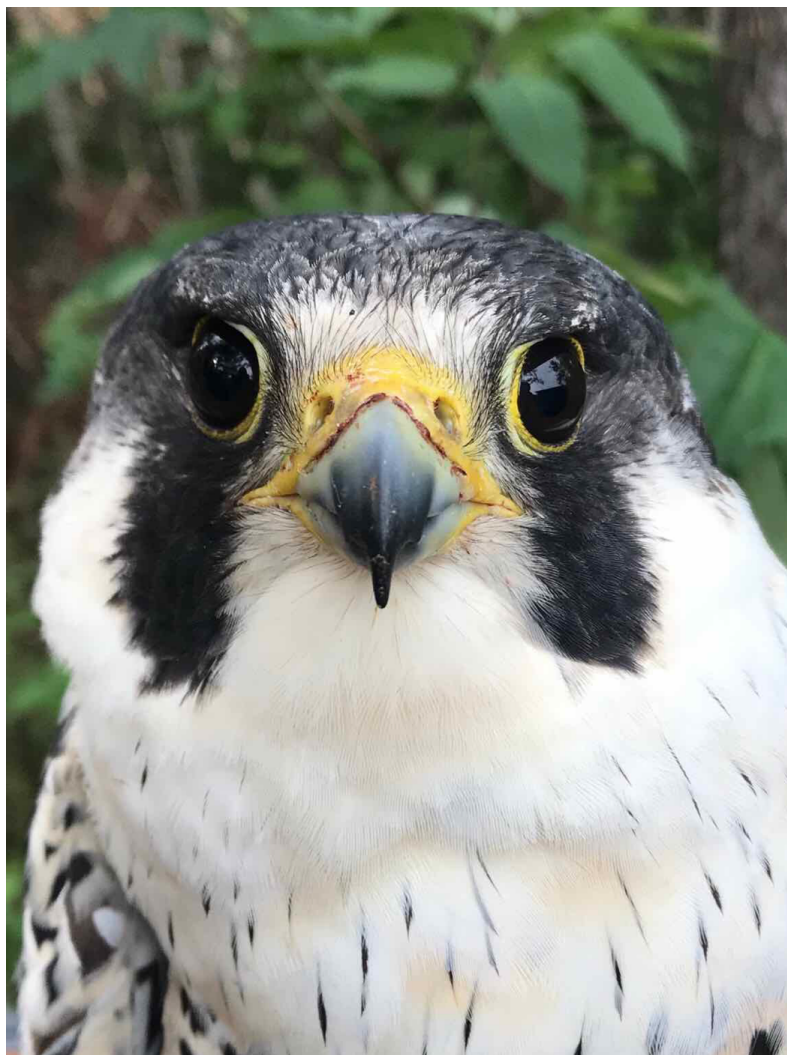


- **Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (PEFA)**

Peak Migration: mid Sept – early Oct
Record Daily High: 33 on Sept 20, 2013
Record Seasonal High: 182 in 2016
10-year average 116

The great ‘wanderer’ (the definition of Peregrine) is a species that has bounced back tremendously after the banning of D.D.T. pesticide alongside the massive resurgence of the Bald Eagle for the same reason. Many of the birds we see could be individuals that summer up along the North Shore of Lake Superior, but could also quite easily be birds that nest up in the Arctic tundra as some of the birds we document are of a sub-species ‘Tundra’ showing a paler breast and the juvenile birds sporting pale crown.

The 2018 season recorded **110**, which considering the poor season is a good number and right around the 10-year average. The highest one-day total this year was a spectacular **23**. Had the weather been more cooperative this year, perhaps it could have been a stellar year for them?



Non-focal species (Passerines)

Geese, Swans & Ducks

- **Greater-white fronted Goose** (6)
- **Snow Goose** (58)
- **Cackling Goose** (68)



- **Canada Goose** (10,836)
- **Trumpeter Swan** (42)
- **Tundra Swan** (51)
- **Trumpeter/Tundra Swan** (38)
- **Wood Duck** (15)
- **American Widgeon** (1)
- **Mallard** (141)
- **Blue-winged Teal** (1)
- **Northern Pintail** (2)
- **Green-winged Teal** (12)
- **Redhead** (55)
- **Ring-necked Duck** (16)
- **Lesser Scaup** (28)
- **Greater/Lesser Scaup** (50)

- **Aythya Sp.** (361)
- **Surf Scoter** (7)
- **White-winged Scoter** (2)
- **Black Scoter** (3)
- **Long-tailed Duck** (2)
- **Common Goldeneye** (86)
- **Hooded Merganser** (5)
- **Common Merganser** (19)
- **Red-breasted Merganser** (30)
- **Merganser sp.** (21)
- **Duck sp.** (154)

Loons & Grebes

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- **Red-throated Loon** (9)
- **Common Loon** (83)
- **Loon sp.** (1)
- **Red-necked Grebe** (5)

Cormorants, Pelicans, Herons & Cranes

- **Double-crested Cormorant** (196)
- **American White Pelican** (595)

A good year for pelicans. Often coming through in good flocks up around 100 at times. Frequently they put on a good show circling by the ridge getting lift.

- **Great Blue Heron** (10)
- **Great Egret** (1)
- **Green Heron** (1)

- **Sandhill Crane** (958)



Great season for Sandhill Cranes providing some fantastic looks coming slowly down the ridge. Many came quite late this year.

Shorebirds

- **Black-bellied Plover** (29)
- **American Golden-Plover** (65)
- **Plover sp.** (9)
- **Dunlin** (1)
- **Pectoral Sandpiper** (9)
- **Calidris sp.** (1)
- **Wilson's Snipe** (63)
- **American Woodcock** (1)
- **Spotted Sandpiper** (2)
- **Solitary Sandpiper** (10)
- **Greater Yellowlegs** (17)
- **Lesser Yellowlegs** (5)
- **Greater/Lesser Yellowlegs** (3)
- **Large shorebird sp.** (1)
- **Shorebird sp.** (19)

Jaegers, Gulls & Terns

- **Parasitic Jaeger** (1)
- **Bonaparte's Gull** (151)
- **Ring-billed Gull** (35)
- **Herring Gull** (102)
- **Gull sp.** (68)
- **Tern sp.** (1)

Doves, Cuckoos, Nighthawks & Swifts

- **Mourning Dove** (8)
- **Black-billed Cuckoo** (1)
- **Common Nighthawk** (8,918)



A species we see early in the count season. This year was a decent year as some 40,000 were counted by Steve Kolbe down along the shoreline during the last 2 weeks of August. Conditions worked in their and our favor this season as they prefer warm muggy evenings with light winds. Nighthawk migration is early but one of the spectacles of the year. Hawk Ridge is the best place in the world to see them in such numbers.

- **Chimney Swift (199)**



Hummingbirds & Kingfishers

- **Ruby-throated Hummingbird(117)**
- **Belted Kingfisher (36)**

Woodpeckers

- **Red-headed Woodpecker (6)**



Some years you can go an entire season without seeing one as their range does not really extend as far as Duluth and the NE region of MN. Therefore, to see 6 is a good count!

- **Red-bellied Woodpecker (4)**

- **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** (181)
- **Downy Woodpecker** (2)
- **Black-backed Woodpecker** (4)

After last seasons' banner year for both this species and Three-toed Woodpecker it was somewhat expected to not match such lofty numbers, and that's what happened. Black-backed Woodpeckers generally move in numbers like last year on a loose 10-year cycle.

- **Northern Flicker** (585)

We had some really good days of Flicker migration this year, so hitting almost 600 was pretty special.

- **Woodpecker sp.** (1)

Flycatchers

- **Olive-sided Flycatcher** (14)
- **Eastern Wood-Pewee** (1)
- **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** (1)
- **Alder-Willow Flycatcher** (1)
- **Least Flycatcher** (37)
- **Empidonax sp.** (3)
- **Eastern Phoebe** (4)
- **Great Crested Flycatcher** (3)
- **Eastern Kingbird** (36)

Not a great total by season's end, but we did have one day with a flock of 16 together. This species is known to do that elsewhere, but at HRBO we don't see that too often as they move in singles or pairs, so a flock of 16 was quite special.

- **Tyrannidae sp.** (1)

Shrikes

- **Northern Shrike** (31)



It seemed an age to see the first one of the season this year, so we did not end up with any fantastic final tally. Nevertheless, towards the end we were lucky enough to catch and band one as you can see above. It's always a risk holding them gloveless as they can tear your fingers up in a hurry. This one individual was very well behaved and did minimal damage!

Vireos

- **Blue-headed Vireo** (3)
- **Philadelphia Vireo** (18)



- **Red-eyed Vireo** (80)
- **Vireo sp.** (1)

Jays & Corvids

- **Blue Jay** (26,499)



Blue Jays grace HRBO every year in big numbers for being this far north. 26,000+ is a good number for the Observatory and always a crowd and counter favorite.

- **American Crow** (3,798)



Not a huge year as seasons past have provided, it was their cousins the Ravens who turned up the heat with a great year!!!

- **Common Raven** (1,329)



As mentioned above, it was a good year for ravens with days of really decent flights along the shoreline.

Larks & Aerialists

- **Horned Lark** (8)
- **Purple Martin** (5)
- **Tree Swallow** (35)
- **Bank Swallow** (2)
- **Barn Swallow** (69)
- **Cliff Swallow** (160)
- **Swallow sp.** (242)

Chickadees , Nuthatches and Creepers

- **Black-capped Chickadee** (12)
- **Boreal Chickadee** (2)



• **Red-breasted Nuthatch** (1,165)



By no means did we get the numbers the East Coast got this year, but we did have a really good year. Depending on food availability they have to move, and move they did. Not known for being the best flyers like swallows, etc, it was remarkable to see groups of 5-10 moving together and most surprising of all was how high this diminutive little bird would be observed. Despite appearing to struggle against strong winds they would carry on regardless making their way south at altitudes rarely seen for tiny little nuthatches.

- **White-breasted Nuthatch** (6)
- **Brown Creeper** (29)

Wrens & Kinglets

- **House Wren** (4)
- **Winter wren** (7)
- **Golden-crowned Kinglet** (20)
- **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** (173)
- **Kinglet sp.** (27)

Turdus, Sialia, Catharus & Allies

- **Eastern Bluebird** (134)
- **Mountain Bluebird** (1)



Arriving late in the season this bird stuck around the platform area for over a week feeding and hawking insects along the rock faces where the sun would penetrate enough.

- **Townsend's Solitaire** (10)

Another species from the West which is an annual sighting. 10 though is a good number, often passing through with flocks of robins.

- **Veery** (6)

- **Gray-cheeked Thrush** (1)

- **Swainson's Thrush** (61)



- **Hermit Thrush** (23)

- **Catharus sp.** (169)

- **Wood Thrush** (1)

- **American Robin** (35,082)

Our most common Thrush we see during the daytime is another highlight and spectacle for many as thousands of robins a day pass through. A good season on the whole for this species.

Mimics

- **Gray Catbird** (35)



- **Brown Thrasher** (2)

Pipits

- **American Pipit** (137)

Waxwings & Buntings

- **Bohemian Waxwing** (370)
- **Cedar Waxwing** (10,312)



- **Waxwing sp.** (76)

- **Lapland Longspur** (275)
- **Snow Bunting** (160)

Warblers

- **Ovenbird** (1)
- **Northern Waterthrush** (5)
- **Golden-winged Warbler** (2)
- **Black & White Warbler** (28)
- **Tennessee Warbler** (531)

Despite many species having a bad reproductive year it seems Tennessee's were one of the few exceptions. One has to remember warblers and other small passerines that pass through go down as not positively identifiable, so the true numbers for many species are never known.

- **Orange-crowned Warbler** (6)
- **Nashville Warbler** (94)
- **Mourning Warbler** (4)
- **Common Yellowthroat** (15)
- **American Redstart** (240)
- **Cape May Warbler** (21)
- **Northern Parula** (12)
- **Magnolia Warbler** (73)
- **Bay-breasted Warbler** (5)
- **Blackburnian Warbler** (4)
- **Yellow Warbler** (7)
- **Chestnut-sided Warbler** (16)
- **Blackpoll Warbler** (54)
- **Black-throated Blue Warbler** (1)
- **Palm Warbler** (177)
- **Pine Warbler** (1)
- **Yellow-rumped Warbler** (1,739)
- **Black-throated Green Warbler** (31)
- **Wilson's Warbler** (2)
- **Warbler sp.** (20,503)

Sparrows

- **Le Conte's Sparrow (1)**

A rare find for HRBO and a really late date (Oct 21st) was seen along the trail behind the count platform. Photo: Peder Svigen

- **American Tree Sparrow (51)**
- **Chipping Sparrow (29)**
- **Clay-colored Sparrow (3)**
- **Fox Sparrow (24)**
- **Dark-eyed Junco (297)**
- **White-crowned Sparrow (13)**
- **Harris's Sparrow (1)**
- **White-throated Sparrow (10)**
- **Savannah Sparrow (3)**
- **Song Sparrow (4)**
- **Lincoln's Sparrow (1)**
- **Sparrow sp. (6)**

Tanagers & Grosbeaks

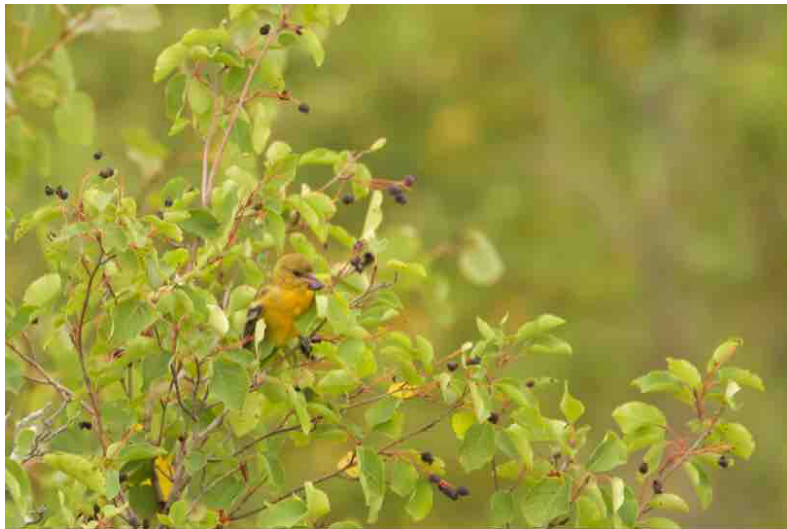
- **Scarlet Tanager (8)**
- **Rose-breasted Grosbeak (144)**

Bobolink, Blackbird & Orioles

- **Bobolink (3)**
- **Red-winged Blackbird (107)**
- **Yellow-headed Blackbird (1)**
- **Rusty Blackbird (5,097)**
- **Brewer's Blackbird (1)**
- **Common Grackle (1,221)**



- **Baltimore Oriole** (26)



- **Blackbird sp.** (134)

Grosbeaks & Finches

- **Pine Grosbeak** (1,360)



- **Purple Finch** (10,163)

What a super year for Purple Finches. The 5,000+ number for Finch Sp. were mostly counted on big Purple Finch days, so I suspect the majority of that number were likely Purple Finch too.

- **Red Crossbill** (240)
- **White-winged Crossbill** (2)
- **Common Redpoll** (2,038)
- **Pine Siskin** (1,291)
- **American Goldfinch** (1,449)
- **Evening Grosbeak** (1)
- **Finch sp.** (5,088)

- **Passerine sp.** (19,308)