

West Skyline Hawk Watch (Spring Count) 2018 By Frank Nicoletti, Spring Count Director

The West Skyline Hawk Watch (WSHC) was conducted this spring and will continue for the next 9 years, thanks to a generous donation. It is hoped to continue for a number of years to come. Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory is excited about gaining knowledge about the spring migration through Duluth and how it compares to the fall counts. This is also a great way for public outreach and continuing the education of raptor and bird conservation in the Western Great Lakes Region.

Counts have been conducted and published in the past from 1997-2006 (Nicoletti, 1998 and 2009) and in 2009 and 2010 when Karl Bardon conducted the count. The years following after Karl's stint were again done on occasions with just limited observation each year. The same protocol was used this season as been in past years with the use of two count sites depending of wind direction (Nicoletti, 2009). As was done at Hawk Ridge during the fall count, we used Dunkadoo to record all the weather and count data. These counts and data can be viewed through the Dunkadoo data base as well as at hawkcount.org. Each day, a summary and total of birds counted were put into eBird to continue that important data base.

The 2018 season was conducted from March 1 through May 29. A total of 32,603 raptors were counted of 17 species observed during of 86 days covered out of 90 possible. The four days not covered were do to inclement weather. A total of 562.25 hours were covered giving an average of just over 6.5 hours per day. The hawk per day and hourly rate was 379 and 58, respectfully.

This season's count of 32,603 was the second highest total in the histoy of WSHC with 33,228 in 2004. Most species were recorded in higher then normal numbers with the exception of Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel. It's unclear at this point why the numbers were well below the 2000-2005 averages which is currently the most useful set of data we can use (Nicoletti, 2009). Certainly species which have shown steady increases in fall counts, such as Turkey Vulture, Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle and Peregrine Falcon, were recorded in record numbers this spring. Surprisingly, we had only one daily record, Merlin with 13 on 20 April.

Some of the highlights this spring were the following: record Bald Eagle season total of 5,480, which comes close to Hawk Ridge's best flight posted last year of 6,099 (continuing into June may have eclipsed that fall total); the third spring record of Mississippi Kite, this one a sub-adult seen on 26 May and the two other records are in 1997 and 2001; a grand total of 7 Swainson's hawk; 7 dark morph Broad-winged Hawks among the almost nearly 18,000 that migrated past; and an adult light morph Harlan's were special for sure.

We also recorded non-raptor species and numbers observed or heard from the lookouts. A total of 172 species were recorded. We did some early morning flights

to see to what the extent of non-raptor movement could be detected from the count sites. Certainly the wide expanse of the sky helped with some species like waterfowl and larger soaring birds. It was not generally as effective in counting and identifying small passerines, such as locations as Park Point would be, but certainly gave us an idea of what the migration was like on a daily basis. Among some of higher species counted were: Canada Goose- 7,032, Tundra Swan- 1,774, Common Loon- 710, American White Pelican-1,244, Blue Jay-2020 and American Robin-4,201. Certainly spending that much time observing over the Duluth skyline and over the Lake Superior shore produces some unusual sightings among the 172 species observed, which included the following: Greater White-fronted Goose, Mute Swan, Ruddy Duck, Red-throated Loon, Great Egret, Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Parasitic Jaeger, Little Gull, Iceland Gull, Snowy Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Totals and daily count can be found on the Dunkadoo site.

We had a good number of visitors who came out to view the spectacular migration. This included the birding community as well as the general public. John Richardson through a MOU grant was on hand many days teaching and talking about the spring and fall migration. We also had five school groups who also came out for programming with Hawk Ridge Education Staff, Margie Menzies and Emily Wilmoth. Margie also held two raptor ID workshops. In all, about 650 folks came out this season. We are planning to add more education programs and events during the spring migration.

I would to thank Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory for their interest and to the special anonymous donor for making this important research possible to continue this count. Thanks to the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Savaloja Fund, John Richardson was on hand to help at the lookout with educating visitors and helping with the count. His contributions to the overall experience at the count should be recognized, as they made a positive difference. Steve Kolbe was helpful as a relief counter to cover a few days when I needed off. Thanks to all the folks who made it out and helped in various ways. Thanks to Kate, my wife, who continues to support me and my passion in life.