

West Skyline Spring Count 2019

FINAL REPORT

By Frank Nicoletti and John Richardson

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory conducted the West Skyline Spring Count full-time in starting in the spring of 2018. It will now continue for the next 8 years, thanks to a generous donation, and 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 full-time. The years following were done on occasions with just limited volunteer observation each year. The same protocol was used this season, as in past years, with the use of two count sites depending of wind direction (Nicoletti, 2009). However, we used Dunkadoo via a tablet to record all the weather and count data. These counts and data can be viewed real-time online through the Dunkadoo database as well as at hawkcount.org. Each day, a summary and total of birds counted were put into eBird to continue that important database.

The 2019 season was conducted from March 1 through May 31. A total of 30,904 raptors were counted of 16 species observed during of 79 days covered out of 91 possible. The twelve days not covered were due to inclement weather. A total of 516 hours were covered giving an average of just over 6.5 hours per day. The hawk per day and hourly rate was 391 and 60, respectfully.

This season's count of 30,904 was the third highest total in the history of the WSHC with 32,602 and 33,228 in 2018 and 2004, respectfully. Most species were recorded in higher than normal numbers with the exception of Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, 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 were recorded in record numbers this spring. We had two daily records, Bald Eagle with 1,076 on 21 March and 53 Golden Eagle 17 March.

Some of the highlights this spring were the following: Record Bald Eagle season total of 7,727 which is the highest count of any site in the country. Hawk Ridge's best flight posted in 2017 of 6,099. The migration was certainly late this spring, so likely continuing into June would have eclipsed 8,000. Also always great to document is the migration of some of the less common migrants. We had 5 Swainson's Hawks, 4 dark morph Broad-winged Hawks, adult light morph Harlan's and adult Krider's were special for sure.

We only recorded 111 species this year (vs 172 species in 2018), but you could be forgiven for thinking it was not another amazing spring migration. Many species were late this year, with only a few days of optimal weather. Many big pushes of birds just kept going while the going was good, so we missed them. We were fortunate to see Red-headed Woodpecker and Black-backed Woodpecker which are uncommon in the northland. Also, a Lesser Black-backed Gull which are rare in the spring. Further down the taxonomic pole a single Townsend's Solitaire from the western parts of the US made a brief appearance. We see maybe 4-5 in the fall.

Waterfowl came in overnight as they do and settled in the bay and in the lake is good numbers. However, due to the conditions we never saw them leave as they seemingly left after sun-down. Thus, we did not get the chance this year to record the numbers we did last year.

We had a record number of visitors who came out to view the spectacular migration. Our visitation more than doubled from 2018 (650 to over 1400)! This included the birding community as well as the general public. John Richardson was on hand many days teaching and talking about the spring migration and Margie Menzies teaching school and group programs. Thanks to a grant from the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union (MOU) Savaloja Fund, we were able to provide a naturalist to have school groups come out to view and learn about the spring migration firsthand. A total of 13 school programs were delivered to over 250 students Pre-K through high school. We also held our first Spring Migration Celebration weekend which included field trips, hawk watch, and workshop as well as an evening talk by Carrol Henderson on the Peregrine Falcon recovery in Minnesota.

I would like to thank Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory for their support and to the special anonymous donor for making this important and educational opportunity possible to continue this count. Thanks to the MOU Savaloja Fund for granting funds to help make our school programming possible and to Margie Menzies and naturalist staff for education efforts. Thanks to John Richardson for helping with the count and educating visitors. Thanks to Steve Kolbe, Stephen Nelson, Ralph Larsen and Ed Longhway were also helpful volunteers with the count. Thanks to all the visitors and members who made it out and help in various ways. To Kate, my wife who continues to support me and my passion in life.

MONTHLY SUMMARIES

March 2019

No two years are the same in Duluth at the hawk watch. Last March, and what seemed like all spring we were delivered day after day of easterly winds pushing birds away from Duluth and making it harsh counting conditions and lower numbers than we would like.

This March, the opposite appears to be the case. Despite a cold start to the month and a slow two weeks the winds have been very much in our favor and the numbers reflect that.

Only 3 days was the count conducted at Thompson Hill, surprising even to the well-seasoned and founder of the spring count Frank Nicoletti!!

The later half of March proved to be an extraordinary experience not only for the counters, but the hoards of visitors we have had the fortune of seeing here. Thanks to you all and hope to see you in April!

As you have seen in our recent postings on Facebook it's the BALD EAGLES that have stolen the show posting some big numbers.

The highest 1-day total between March 1st-15th, 42, with 225 total individuals. The rest of the month we had 4,657 with the 21st producing a new North American 1-day record of 1,076!!!

No less impressive, we have a new season total already for GOLDEN EAGLES, 186 already!!

As the majority of the northern population of breeding Bald Eagles as now north of us we are starting to transition to the RED-TAILED HAWKS and other raptors; in addition to, a good chunk of the waterfowl, sparrows, blackbirds and other non-raptors.

We have not seen too much for non-raptors so far, but we have seen our first KILLDEER, GREAT BLUE HERON, SANDHILL CRANE, and a smattering of early AMERICAN ROBINS, COMMON GRACKLES and waterfowl.

April is an exciting time as bird life and warmer temps (usually!) make it a great time to come visit the count. Of course we will be counting everyday and will be at Enger Tower on West Skyline Parkway, otherwise we will post on FB if we are at Thompson Hill if winds swing easterly.

Don't forget to sign-up for our events this April which you can find at hawkridge.org, we will have field-trips, a presentation on Peregrine Falcons by Carrol Henderson and much more.

Eyes to the skies everyone, and hope to see you at the count!!

March/April Summary:

Spring migration in Duluth is a special time.

Hawk Ridge is well known for one of the best Fall migration counts in the nation, but the Spring migration count is now also gaining some well-deserved attention! Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory (HRBO) is happy to provide educational opportunities for the public to view, enjoy, and learn from counters and naturalists during both the Fall and Spring migration.

Having count interpretation and education about the migration for visitors has proved to be very popular and valuable. This has been made possible thanks to funding from the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union in 2018 and 2019.

The Spring count starts March 1st and continues through the end of May. HRBO staff conducts the count on West Skyline Parkway at either one of two sites depending on wind direction.

This March proved challenging in the first half as winter appeared reluctant to let go!

Nevertheless, that did not stop HRBO recording a world record one-day count for Bald Eagles with 1,076. In addition, a record number of Golden Eagles have also been recorded with 207 so far.

I should also mention that we have had more visitors than ever before according to Frank Nicoletti the Spring Count Director since the spring count's inception back in 1997.

In his words "seeing 60+ people on a Saturday in Mid-March braving the cold is a true testament to what we do and offer!"

We just wrapped up our first HRBO Spring Migration Celebration weekend at the end of April. With education staff on hand, we were able to offer a workshop, 3 fields trips, kid's activities, and interpretation

about the birds and migration. Carrol Henderson also delivered a wonderful presentation "The World of the Peregrine Falcon and its Return to the Skies of Minnesota". The event weekend was well attended and received great reviews from the participants!

There's still time to visit the Spring count and enjoy the bird migration! Broad-winged Hawks are now moving through in good numbers, with one day the last week in April with over 4,000. There are many more to come, and the neo-tropic migrants have hardly started yet!

22,000 raptors have been tallied so far, and May should bring plenty more!

May Summary:

As with March and April, May came in like a lion, it remains to be seen if it will go out like a lamb!

Duluth receive 9.1" of wet heavy snow on the 9th, perhaps winters' finally cruel joke of the 2018/19 winter? Let's hope so!

Persistent east winds made hawk counting a rather cool endeavor in May as the chill from the remaining ice on Lake Superior slowly receded and thankfully returned to liquid form.

It wasn't a huge season for BROAD-WINGED HAWKS, but we were nevertheless treated to one day of spectacular views as low kettles churned above our head. A true spectacle where viewers were left in awe, oh and so we're the counters!

We are just over 6,000 for May and just under 13,000 for the season as of the 17th. BALD EAGLES have continued to impress with 729 in May, made up of many young birds, and/or birds from the South coming up for a cooler summer.

I must say, on the season itself we have reached 7,203 BALD EAGLES with plenty of days left of the month. That is an incredible number!!

We have had an amazing flight of GOLDEN EAGLES too, 212 so far (a record for HRBO) with 5 more tallied this month.

It was slightly disappointing haul of SHARP-SHINNED HAWKS this spring with only 2,480, I think many travel low as many are observed from Park Point, which is well out of our viewing.

Usually, the passerine flights are much anticipated in May for everyone, but as of the 17th we have seen relatively very few neo-tropic migrants. They will come, I promise!

It has, as always been a hugely successful spring count with record attendances of visitors. I look forward, as I am sure you do, to reading Frank Nicoletti's final seasonal report of Spring 2019.

Thanks to everyone who came out to keep us company and enjoy the birds. We look forward to seeing you all in fall 2019, it's not that far away folks!!

Season Wrap-up Summary:

Spring migration is always a special time, birds are eager to get to their nesting grounds and we are equally excited and eager to see them.

You never know how many birds, or what you might see, 'life's like a box of chocolates' right!?

Last year was incredible with 172 species recorded. Of course, we are always at the mercy of the weather and the Lake. As Frank Nicoletti always reminds me, "the lake giveth, the lake taketh away."

We only recorded 111 species this year, but you could be forgiven for thinking it was not another amazing spring migration. Many species were late this year, with only a few days of optimal weather. Many big pushes of birds just kept going while the going was good, so we missed them. We were fortunate to see Red-headed Woodpecker and Black-backed Woodpecker which are uncommon in the northland. Also, a Lesser Black-backed Gull which are rare in the spring. Further down the taxonomic pole a single

Townsend's Solitaire from the western parts of the US made a brief appearance. We see maybe 4-5 in the fall.

Waterfowl came in overnight as they do and settled in the bay and in the lake in good numbers. However, due to the conditions we never saw them leave as they seemingly left after sun-down. Thus, we did not get the chance this year to record the numbers we did last year.

Nevertheless, what we may have missed in quantity, we definitely made up in quality. As Frank will remark in his report, we smashed the season record for Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles (7,729) and a North American one-day record with 1,076 Bald Eagles on March 21st!!!

We had a record turn-out for visitors this year, with people making it from as far away as Canada and states across the county. As the notoriety of HRBO spreads we have people from all over the world make a stop at the count as part of their trip. It's an education for all of us!

Also, we had our inaugural Spring Count Festival with field trips to Sax-Zim Bog at night, and morning trips to Park Point and the West Waterfront Trail. The evening program was really well attended as Carol Henderson gave a wonderful presentation on one of the peoples favorites, the Peregrine Falcon.

Hard to believe the birds will be heading back soon and we will have to count them all again. Such a hard life! ;)

Thank you to all who visited and huge props to the wonderful volunteers who make it all possible, you are the best!

Have a great summer and we look forward to seeing you in the fall August 15th-November 30th, it's right around the corner!!

John Richardson HRBO