

West Skyline Spring Count Summary 2023

By Sean McLaughlin

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory conducted the West Skyline Hawk Count (WSHC) from March 1 - May 31, 2023. This was the sixth year of the planned 10-year comprehensive count. The westernmost spring hawk watch on the Great Lakes is made possible thanks to a generous donation. Goals of this project include observing, recording and documenting raptor and non-raptor migrants on shores of Lake Superior in Duluth, MN.

Counts were conducted daily, totaling 631.5 hours of observation, the most ever recorded at WSHC. Nine days of poor weather shortened the count to four or fewer hours. The seasonal raptor total numbered 21,298 individuals, with 15 species of raptors observed. 2,200 raptors were counted in March, 9,017 in April and 10,081 in May. There were 119 non-raptor species also seen from the count sites. All migrant data can be followed live on Trektellen, as well as accessed at any time throughout the year. Seasonal totals and high counts are all found [here](#).



Raptor count totals from WSHC are consistent from 2000-2006, 2009-2010, and 2018-2023. Because of the variable effort, count totals will be analyzed using data from 2000-2006 and 2018-2023. The seasonal total of 21,298 is just below the 6-year average (2018-2023) of 23,536. A large percentage of birds that are counted at WSHC are Broad-winged hawks, and variability in weather can lead to counts that differ year to year by thousands. 2023 was a slightly below average Broad-winged year, bringing that seasonal total just under average. However, prime April conditions produced numerous days of flight that brought other species totals higher than previous years. Turkey Vultures had a banner year, and broke the record spring count with 3,213. Northern Harriers tallied the second highest spring with 87, the most since 2004. 324 Rough-legged Hawks were the most counted since 2018.



Falcons were also well represented, American Kestrels (91) had a high count since 2004, Merlin (53) was the third highest ever count, and 29 Peregrine Falcons is a new spring high count. Other raptor counts were more on par. Bald Eagles (4928) was right around average for the six-year period. Bald Eagle have exploded in population in the past 20 years, and all recent counts exceed the 2000-2006 period at WSHC. Sharp-shinned Hawks have fluctuated a great deal in the spring, but 1,952 was closer to the six-year average of 1915. Cooper's Hawk was also near average with 38. Buteos were all near average or slightly below: Broad-winged (7,852), Red-tailed (2,460), Red-shouldered (3), and Swainson's (3). Red-shouldered and Swainson's Hawks are uncommon but annual spring migrants.



Notable low counts include Osprey (106), Golden Eagle (115) and Northern Goshawk (0). All are the lowest counts in the last 5 years, and the first time a Goshawk has not been recorded at the spring count. Raptor highlights include numerous dark morph Red-tailed Hawk, one white Red-tailed, one dark morph Broad-winged Hawk, and the rare migrants like Red-shouldered and Swainson's. Non-raptor highlights included 17 warbler species, Eastern Towhee, Evening and Pine Grosbeak, Great Egret, Great and Lesser Black-backed gulls, and a few days of mass reverse migration of American Robins, Fox and American Tree Sparrows and Rusty Blackbirds.



Education programs continued this spring with groups welcomed to the WSHC sites and Enger Park by Education Director Margie Menzies and Naturalist Sara DePew. There were 10 school groups that visited, the Spring Migration workshop held, and a total of 38 programs delivered. Many eager students and participants in the Spring Migration workshop got to spot raptors flying high (sometimes too high) over the watch and gain some skills at identifying raptors in flight, as well as visiting several other Duluth birding hotspots. It was a great season!



I want to extend a huge thank you to all who came out to help spot and appreciate the wonderful world of bird migration. Our visitors and dedicated watchers are an invaluable asset to the watch and making sure no bird slips by! Thanks to our education staff for spreading the good word and helping spot and interpret the flight. I would also like to thank Frank Nicoletti for helping as a relief counter for covering days off, in addition to his guidance and expertise. I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to volunteers John Edwards, Ralph Larsen, Ed Longhway, Jan and Larry Kraemer and Steve Kolbe. Their help spotting and interacting with folks in the spring makes the watch a better place. Thank you!



Thank you all for your good spotting and your enthusiasm for birds, raptor migration and the natural world. We all hope to see you this fall at Hawk Ridge for yet another wonderful season of migration.