

West Skyline Spring Count Summary 2024

Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory conducted the West Skyline Hawk Count (WSHC) from March 1 - May 31, 2024. This was the seventh consecutive year of the spring count, and the 16th complete count season. 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. The WSHC recorded 605.68 hours, the second highest in the history of the spring count. There were several large weather systems that shortened or canceled the count throughout the season. Zero raptors were counted on 10 individual days. The total raptor count in 2024 reached 26,776 and included 16 raptor species. March tallied 3,085, April 13,338, and May 10,353 respectively. 99 species of non-raptors were counted as migrants as well, totaling 28,527 individual birds. For complete raptor and non-raptor data from 2024, check out [Trekellen](#).



Spring weather in Duluth is typically slow to arrive, with snow and ice lingering into April or beyond. A mild winter with minimal snowfall left Enger Tower and Thompson Hill snowless for the first three weeks of March. Additionally, ice cover on the lake was less than 1% on March 1. These mild temperatures persisted until March 24, when a four day snow storm dropped 24-30 inches across the Northland. April temperatures averaged only 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit above the long term average, and produced fairly average raptor flights. The end of the month developed a string of consecutive days with light NE winds associated with southern warm front passage. These conditions can be ideal for Broad-winged Hawk flights; birds are pushed northward by southerly winds, but cool air off the lake eliminates major thermal development and keeps the flight low.



Early May produced one more significant low-pressure warm front that rounded out an excellent flight of Sharp-shinned Hawk and falcons. However, late May became highly variable, with some warm, sunny days reaching 75-80F, and some blustery cold days with a biting lake breeze. When winds off the lake reach 25+ mph, wind chills can easily be in the low 30s in May. One cold frontal passage on May 11 dumped wildfire smoke from British Columbia into the Duluth area, greatly reducing visibility and



motivation for a raptor flight on May 12. All weather data from the National Weather Service at weather.gov.

The 2024 raptor count totals finished above the long-term average; Bald Eagles (5833) and Broad-winged Hawk (11706) combined for over half of all raptors counted. Two species set seasonal high counts this year. Turkey Vultures (3938) were a constant presence along the ridge, and the highest individual count occurred on April 11 (562). The record high count was also set for Peregrine Falcon (34). Local Peregrines can be seen daily below Enger Tower, hunting pigeons in the harbor, but most migrant Peregrines passed by in late April and early May on their way to Arctic nesting grounds. The only notable low count was a single American Goshawk.



In addition to the two high counts, 8 species were recorded in above average numbers: Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Golden Eagle, American Kestrel and Merlin. The largest Bald Eagle flight occurred on March 31 (407). There is a typical second pulse of Balds in late April and May when southern eagles arrive post-nesting in the deep south, notably 277 on May 5. Northern Harrier can be a cryptic species to hawk watch for. Many Harriers lack the fear of water other raptors possess, and some may simply cross the lake or stick extremely close to the shoreline. Being powered migrants, Harriers may not wait for thermals to develop like soaring species, and move immediately at first light and throughout the day.



The best Sharp-shinned Hawk flight occurred on May 5 (358), at the Thompson Hill site. Another powered migrant, these petite accipiters often stick low to the shore, but a light breeze from the northeast can push them up just enough for prime viewing at the hawk watch. There is a similar effect from a lake breeze on Broad-winged Hawks, although these thermal dependent buteos can also build to impressive numbers on southwest winds. The Broad-winged total of 11706 is just above the long term average of 10583, but is significantly higher than counts from the previous four years. Swainson's Hawks are an unusual migrant, and the count typically records 2-7. The four Swainson's this year are just slightly above the long term average. Golden Eagles (117) never arrived in a grand way, with only a high count of 11 on March 14. Historical high counts can soar into the 30-50 range, but these birds were likely affected by lack of snow and returned north early.



American Kestrels (96) neared 100 for the second year in a row! Merlins (61) rounded out an excellent falcon year, with all three expected falcons remaining above average. Rough-legged Hawk (181) sunk to the lower end of the spectrum this spring. Rough-leggeds are another variable migrant that can wander long distances in response to weather, although it is hard to say how a warmer late winter affected these birds.



Red-tailed Hawks (2276) appear to be remaining on the low end for now. The average count from 2005-2024 is 2732, but from 2000-2004 the average was 6438. This change is something to watch, as fall counts of Red-tailed Hawk have also declined in the last 30 years (HMANA Raptor Population Index). Osprey (119) also continue to be seen in lower than average numbers. Cooper's Hawk (33) and Red-shouldered Hawk (3) are not usually seen in high numbers, and these counts are slightly lower than historical totals.



The spring count sees small numbers of diurnally migrating non-raptors. Highlight species are a small variety of ducks, Sandhill Cranes, Northern Flickers, Blue Jays, Bohemian Waxwings, American Robins and finches. The most numerous non-raptor was Bohemian Waxwings, with an astounding 8040 birds! The earliest ever Sandhill Crane was seen on March 6, an obvious indicator of a warm winter. Other highlights included a Red-headed Woodpecker, several Olive-sided Flycatcher and 3 Townsend's Solitaires! Resident birds have now returned to the count sites, including Clay-colored Sparrows and Chestnut-sided Warblers, and a Connecticut Warbler briefly sang below Enger Tower on its way to the boreal forest.



Thank you to the countless visitors and hawk watchers who appreciate the spectacle of migration in Duluth. The support from the community in Duluth certainly makes this count a special place. Thanks to all for your good spotting, great conversation, fresh pastries and company this season! The WSHC could not exist without the support of Frank Nicoletti, serving as a relief counter and offering his wisdom on the beauty of watching hawks. I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to Ralph Larsen, John Edwards, Ed Longhway, Jim Harkness, David Carman, Steve Kolbe, Neil Gilbert, Jan and Larry Kraemer and Kate Nicoletti. Your commitment and love of birds inspires me every day! I am also grateful for the help and support of Education staff Sara DePew, Margie Menzies and Peter Mundale, helping to share the world of birds with others.



What a wonderful season it was, and as the summer dog days drag by, we will all be counting down the days for migration to begin again! Fall counts begin at Hawk Ridge on August 15th, and we hope to see you there. Click [HERE](#) for full season count and click [HERE](#) for the daily and monthly raptor counts via HawkCount. Thanks and hope to see you at the watch this fall!

Sean McLaughlin
Spring Counter

