

Hawk Ridge West Skyline Spring Count Report 2025

Aaaaand it's a wrap at the West Skyline Hawk Count (WSHC)! Per protocol the count was conducted from March 1st – May 31st, and this was our 8th consecutive spring of the count! This westernmost spring hawk watch on the Great Lakes is made possible thanks to a generous donation, for which we are very appreciative.

The 2025 spring count season ran for 551 count hours and spanned 89 days (we did not count on 3 days due to weather). On the days we counted, we had 4 days during which we did not observe any migrating raptors and 4 days on which we counted over 1,000 raptors! Our highest raptor count day tallied 3,366 raptors (April 24), and the season total ended at 26,402 raptors of 15 species. Not bad for a couple of pull-offs by the side of the road!

The first month of the count (March) proved to be generally cold though mostly snow-less, with multiple weather systems causing several days straight of strong easterly winds. Despite this, we saw decent eagle movement this month, with one day of more southerly winds bringing in our highest-ever day count of Golden Eagles (58 on March 11) as well as this spring's high count of Bald Eagles (613).

April also proved to be on the chillier end, though some days saw highs in the 60s. The middle of the month produced a few days of south winds that saw stronger raptor flights, especially of Red-tailed Hawks; unfortunately, those days also coincided with poor visibility, making counting a challenge! Broad-winged Hawks began to move more by the end of the month, taking advantage of the lighter easterly winds.

May took a sudden turn in temperature, with the first week seeing highs in the 80s! The rest of the month juxtaposed high temperatures with much chillier ones, with predominantly easterly winds (about 2/3rds of the days had east or northeast winds); this seemed to discourage raptor flight for the middle half of the month, though the very last few days of May saw an uptick in raptor movement. Warblers and swallows certainly stole the show in May, with fiery Blackburnian Warblers, brilliant lemon-Yellow Warblers, and swirling flocks of Cliff and Tree Swallows being a definite highlight for this finally-green month.

Speaking of stealing the show, this spring saw our highest-ever Turkey Vulture season count, a whopping 5,759 birds—almost 2,000 birds above the previous season high! A species well-adapted to human disturbance and warmer climates, Turkey Vultures have been increasing dramatically in numbers over the course of the WSHC. We're excited to see what next year's count is of these wobbly but lovable raptors! Similarly, Peregrine Falcons have been increasing in numbers over recent years, and this season saw our all-time high of 39 birds, some of which were not-so-politely escorted north out of the area by our local nesting pair. We also counted our second-highest-ever season totals of Bald and Golden Eagles, at 6,451 and 173 birds, respectively.

Continuing with the trend of decent falcon numbers, this year's Merlin count (59) was above average as well; this species seems to be increasing since the conception of the spring count. The last few years have seen relatively high numbers of Northern Harriers, and the spring 2025 count of 87 was overall above average.

Several species ended up around or slightly below average: Sharp-shinned Hawk (1,975), Cooper's Hawk (34), Red-shouldered Hawk (2), Broad-winged Hawk (9,417), and American Kestrel (64). The past 8-year average of the tiny but fierce Sharp-shinned Hawk has hung around 1,979 birds, though the early years of the spring count during 2000-2005 typically saw over 2,000 birds, potentially corroborating with the overall decreasing population of this species (IUCN Red List). Cooper's Hawks have similarly been decreasing overall, with the past 8-year average sitting at just below 40 birds, but past years in the early 2000s showcased higher numbers than that. Just a few Red-shouldered Hawks wander into the Duluth area every spring, with the count typically seeing fewer than 5 birds. Broad-winged Hawks are extremely variable year-to-year depending on the winds, and the last 8 years saw numbers ranging from around 6,000 to approximately 18,000 birds! Finally, the first few years of the count often saw over 100 kestrels, but the past 8 years averaged at only 66 of these colorful falcons.

A few raptors were notably below average. The last 8 years averaged at about 150 Ospreys (and the first few years of the count averaged over 200!), but during the most recent couple of years we counted only just above 100 fish hawks (123 this year). A trend consistent with the fall count, American Goshawk numbers have crashed since even 25 years ago, when over 20 birds could be seen from WSHC; now we are lucky if we get one (this year we saw one stunning powder-blue adult!). Red-tailed Hawk numbers continue to be down from the early 2000s, when counts regularly soared above 5,000 birds; our 8-year average sits at 2,700 birds with this year tallying only 2,034 birds, the lowest count for the last 8 years; Rough-legged Hawks (169) were also below the 8-year average (245), but this species is highly variable year to year. This year we did not count any Swainson's Hawks, which we typically see 2-6 of; they may have been affected by the overwhelmingly east winds during the peak period (late April through May) of this predominantly western species.

And yes, we did count non-raptor species as well! We tallied 20,597 individuals including 85 identified species of waterfowl, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, swallows, finches, warblers, and other non-raptor birds! This spring saw excellent numbers of both Trumpeter and Tundra swans, with a nice variety of ducks and some shorebirds including the count's first Blue-winged Teals and Black-bellied Plovers. We counted our highest-yet number of Sandhill Cranes and a truly spectacular number of the huge but graceful American White Pelicans (4,227 birds, over 2,000 above the previous season high!)—including St. Louis County's all-time high count of 468 pelicans on May 3rd. Apart from waterfowl, we saw our highest-yet numbers of Northern Flickers (286), Cliff Swallows (388), Snow Buntings (23), and Pine Siskins (3,277), plus White-winged Crossbills and a singular southbound meadowlark, which were both new for the count.

All in all we had a great year, and we want to give a special shoutout to all the people that made this count possible! Frank Nicoletti, Sean McLaughlin, Peter Mundale, and Ezra Hosch

provided invaluable support as relief counters, and John Edwards, Ralph Larsen, Ed Longhway, Dave Carman and others gave their precious time and effort as volunteer counters (and pastry bringers!). A huge thanks to our education staff—Margie Menzies, Chris Schnurbusch, Lydia Ihde, Dawn Mackety, and Alder Nichols—who not only provided relief and count support, but also encouragement, entertainment, and sustenance in times of need! A special thank-you is due to Emily Pavlovic for her wisdom and logistical support. And as always, THANK YOU to every person who stopped by, chatted, and enjoyed the incredible avian sights of West Skyline Hawk Count! We hope to see you next year at the count, and don't forget to stop by this fall at Hawk Ridge!

Marie Hosch
Spring Counter