

RITE OF



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Immature sharp-shinned hawk

Passage

Witness the Fall Hawk Migration

BY JANE VACHON

Spiraling effortlessly upward on rising air currents, broad-winged hawks fill the sky. From north-facing peaks in New Hampshire on sunny September and October days, a magnificent sight awaits – regal birds of prey drifting southward on drafts of warm air rising from the valley floors. The annual hawk migration is underway.

“Through the year, you might see the local red-tail hunting on the edges of the highway,” says John Kanter, coordinator of Fish and Game’s Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program. “In contrast, during the fall migration there’s a chance to see a thousand hawks at a time. Get out and enjoy it. It’s impressive to see birds of prey in these numbers, and how many falls are there in a lifetime?”

Riding the Wind

The second or third week of September is peak hawk-viewing time in New Hampshire, as large flocks, or “kettles” of broad-winged hawks pass over, conserving energy by riding big thermal air currents along ridgelines and river valleys on their trek to wintering sites in Central and South America. These high-flying birds are among the first to begin the journey.

Broad-wings are forest hawks, identified by the strong black-banded tail and broad, rounded wings. More than almost any of our other hawks, they depend on the right weather conditions – sunny days and favorable winds out of the north – for their travels. Watch for days with high pressure to the north and clear skies to the south for the best chance of catching the show.

“Look at weather patterns over a large area, because the birds you’re seeing may have started out that morning in Canada,” says Iain MacLeod, Director of Center Operations for New Hampshire Audubon. “When the broad-wings are moving, it’s possible to see 1,500 to 1,600 in a single day. If you hit it on the right day, it can be a spectacular sight.”

Telltale Clues

As many as 15 different raptor species pass over New Hampshire during the fall migration, from the broad-winged hawks that migrate in mid-September to rough-legged hawks and golden eagles later in the season. This variety can keep you

on your toes as you attempt to tell a sharp-shinned from a Cooper’s hawk. Brush up on how these birds of prey compare in size and shape (see silhouettes, on next page, for a start), and you’ll be ready to compete with the experts when that next soaring speck appears on the horizon.

Sharp-shinned hawks are commonly seen from early fall through October, migrating alone or in small groups on their way to wintering grounds. A small hawk, the sharp-shinned has short, rounded wings and a long tail. Watch for a glide alternating with several wing flaps. Another sharp-shinned trademark: aggressive diving at other hawks.

The familiar red-tailed hawk is one of the state’s largest hawks, a soaring bird with wings set in a shallow V. Watch for the red tail! Red-tails are “step migrators.” Migration starts in mid-fall, with birds to the north of New Hampshire moving here, and our resident red-tails heading slightly south. Because of this pattern, red-tails are seen here right through the winter, especially in the Connecticut River Valley and hunting over open areas along major highways.

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Red-tailed hawks watch for prey from their perch and then, with a few powerful wingbeats, glide in, snatching their prey from the ground with their talons. In September, young red-tails are ready to hunt on their own and begin migrating south.



Silhouettes

TELL THE STORY

The key to identifying raptors overhead is learning their relative sizes and the basic shape of wings, tail and body.



TURKEY VULTURE



BALD EAGLE



OSPREY



RED-TAILED HAWK



BROAD-WINGED HAWK



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK



PEREGRINE FALCON

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Raptors on the Move

Hawks are not the only birds of prey on the move southward. You may spot a peregrine falcon on its way to Central or South America (look close for the telltale black mustache visible down either side of its face). Other members of the falcon family include American kestrels and merlins. Falcons are strong, fast fliers and have a characteristic streamlined body shape, long pointed wings and tail that narrows at the tip.

In late September and October, there's a good chance you'll see a migrating osprey in the mix. Ospreys are rebounding in New Hampshire now after drastic declines in the last century linked to pesticides. Osprey hold their wings in an arched position, giving them a shallow M shape, with a black spot marking the outer edge of the wing. Unlike the broad-wings, ospreys don't need perfect traveling weather – you may see them on the move even on a blustery day.

Another thrill is the possibility of seeing a bald eagle. Eagles do sometimes migrate, though adults tend to stay near their nesting territory as long as food is available. Of course you'll recognize the distinctive white head and tail of the adults, and you can't miss their tremendous size and flat appearance while soaring. Young bald eagles are dark with blotches of white on parts of the wings and tail nearest the body.

What's that other massive silhouette drifting by on the thermals? Not a raptor, an important member of nature's clean-up crew — the carrion-eating turkey vulture — is heading south for the winter, too; its broad wingspan and wings tipping upward in a distinctive V shape make the vulture easy to recognize.

Fight for Survival

Watching these beautiful birds, it's hard to imagine that New Hampshire's raptors have been persecuted over the years. Like other predators in New England, hawks and falcons were commonly shot in the 1800s, when even ornithologists

Where to See Hawks:

Get out your bird books and binoculars and head for these popular New Hampshire hawk-watching spots. The best locations are high, with an open view to the north-northwest. Be sure to dress for the weather. More sites are listed at www.nhaudubon.org.

Blue Job Mountain, Farmington: From Route 202A between Center Strafford and Rochester, take Crown Point Road 5.6 miles. Two trails lead a half-mile to the summit.

Little Round Top, Bristol: Take Exit 23 off I-93 and head west. In Bristol, take Route 3A south; at the Historical Society, turn right on High Street, then right on New Chester Mountain Road. A trail through the woods leads to a small fire road that ends at the summit.

Mount Kearsarge, Wilmot: From I-93, take I-89 north to Exit 10. Follow the signs to Winslow State Park on Kearsarge Mountain Road off Route 11. A one-mile foot trail leads from the picnic area to the summit.

Pack Monadnock, Peterborough: From I-93 South, take I-89 to Exit 5 onto Route 202/9; follow 202 to Route 101; look for signs to Miller State Park, where an auto road leads to the summit (see next page).

Pitcher Mountain, Stoddard: Trailhead is on Route 123 northeast of Keene, about 5 miles west of the junction with Route 9. There's a half-mile trail to the firetower at the peak.

