

Maryland: A first-rate hawkwatching state

Article and photographs by Bill Murphy



When I was a little boy in upstate New York, a pair of Kestrels delighted our family by laying claim to our vacant bluebird box, a foot-long section of a hollow tree with a strategically located knothole. A few weeks after the pair had arrived, my dad slowly raised the hinged wooden lid so we kids could peer down and see the eggs. As he did so, the incubating Kestrel inside threw herself on her back, razor-sharp talons poised and ready for action, instinctively protecting the next generation of Kestrels.

We merely watched on that day, but later we took one of the downy young from the nest and raised it until the following spring. Although I look back now with chagrin, knowing that our adoption may not have been strictly legal, the memories I retain remain a source of happiness for me.

We named our bird "Killy," after her ear-splitting cry, although "Killykillykilly killykillykillykilly" would have been more accurate. Killy spent those long winter months on the second floor of a partially heated garage across the road from our house.

Memories made through my childhood eyes still see a mighty falcon plummeting down from the cobwebby rafters, black eyes flashing, to carry off bits of raw liver that I had placed on my head. Besides eating liver, Killy also must have been a good mouser, because for the entire winter she shared the room companionably with, and did not devour, a Palm Warbler that darted in during a snow storm. The two of them, in unison with the hundreds of chicks basking in the incubator that occupied much of the floor, produced a pleasant barrage of sound that served as a wonderful antidote for the sterile silence of the deep New York snow outside.

A large part of me longed to fly away with Killy when we released her that crisp spring day. Perhaps it was best that she left, because had she stayed I might have become a falconer, focused on a single captive hawk instead of on the endless stream of birds of prey that delights me now. Hawkwatching is a passion, for me born of a wild Kestrel. And as the luck of the Irish would have it, my wanderings have brought me to Maryland, one of America's premier hawkwatching states.

Maurice Broun publicized Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, to the point where it used to be the only place that most American birders thought of when hawkwatching was mentioned. Then Roger Tory Peterson wrote an article on the migration of hawks at Cape May, New Jersey. Years later two dedicated raptor specialist, Bill Clark and Pete Dunne, brought Cape May, New Jersey, firmly into the limelight with their extensive hawk trapping and banding activities.

Other famous locations around the country sometimes have wonderful concentrations of migrating hawks, too, but none has consistently outperformed Hawk Mountain or Cape May. In fact, many people have yet to hear of the others—Whitefish Point, Michigan; Derby Hill, New York; Bake Oven Knob, Pennsylvania; Linden Fire Tower, Virginia; and so on. Maryland has always been overlooked, seemingly offering little, so birders in our area with a passion for hawkwatching eventually found themselves elbow-to-elbow at either Cape May or Hawk Mountain.

Why not try hawkwatching in Maryland for a change? We have mountains to the west and the seacoast to the east, a hearty dose of Hawk Mountain and a dash of Cape May, too. Hawkwatching guidebooks list three spots in Maryland from which good numbers of hawks can be seen—the Atlantic coast, Dan's Rock, and Washington Monument State Park, detailed directions, to which can be found in Claudia Wilds' *Finding Birds in the National Capital Area*. The understanding, of course, is that you must visit these places in spring or fall and under the correct meteorological conditions: two or three days after a front has passed, warm and from the south in the spring, cold and from the north in the fall. Winds from the same relative directions are essential for hawkwatching; a windless day is often hawk-less. Precipitation seems to matter little to the falcons, Ospreys, and Northern Harriers but will ground most other raptors.

The Maryland Seacoast. Assateague Island is a superb location for spotting falcons—Peregrines, Merlins, and Kestrels—in the fall. These pointy-winged species are prone to hug the seacoast, especially Merlins and Peregrines, and they are much more common in migration along the seacoast than anywhere inland. Peregrines in the fall prey

mainly on the almost innumerable migrating shorebirds that feed in tidal guts and gather by the thousands in shallow impoundments. Although a pair nests on the FS&G building in downtown Baltimore and another pair nests on the north span of the Bay Bridge, Assateague Island is uncontested as *the* place in Maryland to see Peregrines.

Years of hawkwatching on the seacoast have taught me identification clues for falcons to use in addition to those provided in the field guides. For example, if you see what looks like a large pigeon flying with powerful wingbeats a hundred feet above the beach at Assateague, and if all the other birds take wing as it approaches, chances are good that it is a Peregrine. Merlins often stir up the shorebirds, too, so be cautious in your identifications.

Merlins have an endearing behavioral trait that sometimes helps identify them quickly—if you see a very dark falcon that passes near another bird of any size and does *not* take a swipe at it, it is probably not a Merlin. I tend to think of a Merlin as an aerial closed fist—ten inches of fearless pugnacity. Merlins look chocolate brown or black, with gold on the breast of adult males; late afternoon sun brings out the gold in breathtaking intensity. Merlins beat their wings almost constantly, sometimes at blurring speed, especially when in pursuit of prey. This aerial style contrasts with the more relaxed flight style of the other falcons, which intersperse considerable gliding and soaring with the beating.



For the male Kestrel, the combination of a light-colored belly and a perfectly straight row of neat round dots along the back edge of the wings serve to identify this beautiful little falcon. Kestrels are the most common falcon everywhere in Maryland, and often they turn out to be the most common raptor seen during a day of hawkwatching.

Dan's Rock and Washington Monument State Park. These two ridge lookouts in central and western Maryland, respectively, are choice places on certain days from which to see large numbers of the soaring hawks—the buteos, accipiters, and eagles—with an occasional Northern Raven, Red-headed Woodpecker, or Ruby-throated Hummingbird as an extra flyby. Dan's Rock, located in Allegany County, three hours from Washington, D.C., has traditionally been considered to be the best hawkwatching site in Maryland, but it is too remote to have generated many loyal fans. Over the years Washington Monument State Park has become a favorite site for area birders. Located between Frederick and Hagerstown, Washington Monument State Park can be reached in about 80 minutes from D.C. Once there, hawkwatchers climb to the flat top of a 40-foot turret and point their optics northwest seeking passing raptors. The vigorous growth of trees next to the tower has made viewing to the north and east hopeless, and on easterly winds many migrants pass unobserved.

Key attractions at any of the lookouts are Bald and Golden Eagles. Any eagle sighting makes a hawkwatching trip a success. The de-finitive article on eagle identification in North America was written by Bill Clark and appeared in *American Birds* 37:822-826, 1983. Bald Eagles are early migrants, with most individuals passing in late August and early September. Golden Eagles are just the opposite, and late October and November are the best times to see them. In recent years, the number of Golden Eagles seen at ridge sites in Maryland has jumped substantially. The species apparently is doing very well in Canada or expanding its range in the East, a theory sub-stantiated by a report this summer of a Golden Eagle on territory on the New Hampshire/ Maine border, an area in which Golden Eagles have hitherto been unknown as breeders.

Fort Smallwood Park. The Maryland site that has created the most hawkwatching excitement in the past decade is Ft. Smallwood Park, an outlying Baltimore City park near Glen Burnie. Consisting of a northward-pointing triangle of woodland at the mouth of Baltimore Harbor, this park is the jumping-off point across the Patapsco River/Baltimore Harbor for northbound migrants and is the nearest landfall for southbound migrants from the northeast. This situation makes Ft. Smallwood an exceedingly rare prize, an all-season hawkwatching spot. On suitable days between April 25 and May 5, as many as 1,000 hawks may be seen between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. In fact, more than 1,500 hawks were seen there in six hours last April. High counts at Ft. Smallwood of 282 Ospreys and 32 Merlins in one day may have set national records. Rarities such as Swainson's Hawk, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Anhinga have also been reported here.

This is the way Ft. Smallwood works for raptors: In spring, winds from the southwest assist northbound migrants, but they balk at crossing the Bay, so they trace the Bay coastline north. At Ft. Smallwood they must choose to fly 15 miles in a loop around Baltimore harbor or make the two-mile crossing to North Point via Ft. Smallwood. In the fall, raptors riding northerly winds swing around the head of the Bay at Havre de Grace or are blown in on northwest winds from the Pennsylvania ridges and have the same choice to make when they reach Baltimore Harbor. Either way, they

concentrate over Ft. Smallwood.

The most abundant raptor species here include the accipiters—Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, and, rarely, Goshawk—all ambush specialists. The definitive identification article on separating these species was written by Bill Clark and appeared in *Birding* 16:251-263, 1984. Just remember that a Cooper's looks like a sharpie that has been stretched on the rack—it is longer-necked and longer-tailed than any sharpie. Goshawks are so rare at Maryland hawkwatches before November that you should not worry too much about them, but a key point to watch for is that they fly like an accipiter—flap, flap, flap, sail—and have long wings like a Red-shouldered Hawk, which is the species with which Goshawks are most often confused.

Northern Harriers in great numbers pass Ft. Smallwood in both spring and fall, sometimes at extremely high altitudes. This species can hardly be confused with any other because of its combination of long tail, white rump, bounding flight, and the manner in which the wings are held upwards in a V.

Spring adult buteos—Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, and Broad-winged Hawks—pose few problems, but identifying immatures can be perplexing even to experienced hawkwatchers. After September's flood of 90 percent of the fall Broad-winged Hawks, the problem in Maryland becomes mainly one of seeing either a narrow crescent (Red-shouldered) or an amorphous blob of "white" translucence (Red-tailed) near the wingtip. Experts at all of the popular sites are glad to help beginners learn these somewhat technical field marks.

So if you find yourself in the mood for raptor watching now and then, why not take your pick of Maryland's best hawkwatching spots— Dan's Rock, Washington Monument State Park, Ft. Smallwood Park, or the Atlantic coast. And let no one say that Maryland is not a premier hawkwatching state.