

Mid-Atlantic region prime hawkwatching territory

By Bill Murphy



Diversity is a quality savored by birders, both diversity of species and of locale. Local hawkwatchers are fortunate in that the mid-Atlantic region has more hawkwatching sites and a greater variety of them than does any other part of the United States.

The two most famous hawkwatching sites, **Hawk Mountain** and **Cape May**, are somewhat outside our local area. Each is approximately a four-hour drive from D.C. However, because they lead the list of internationally famous hawkwatching sites, I mention them here.

Hawk Mountain has riveted the attention of the North American hawkwatching community since the site was rescued from gun-toting "sportsmen" in the late 1930s. Cape May was brought to the public's attention by Roger Tory Peterson in his 1950s articles on the concentration and shooting of hawks at Cape May. Two raptor specialists, Bill Clark and Pete Dunne, pushed Cape May firmly into the hawkwatching limelight in the 1970s through their extensive hawk trapping and banding activities there. Read Jack Connor's new book, *Season at the Point*, for a wonderful insight into what goes on during a typical autumn at Cape May.

Closer to home, more than a dozen sites near Washington consistently reward hawkwatchers. Claudia Wilds' book, *Finding Birds in the National Capital Area*, thoroughly describes most of these sites. For detailed descriptions and directions on getting there, you cannot go wrong by consulting her book.

An initial caveat—to see hawks you must visit the sites under the correct meteorological conditions, two or three days after a cold front from the north or northwest has passed. Winds from a northerly direction are almost essential for hawkwatching. On the other hand, precipitation seems to matter little to falcons, ospreys, and northern harrier but grounds most other raptors and most hawkwatchers as well.

Dan's Rock and Washington Monument State Park, two ridge lookouts in western and central 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 fly-by.

Dan's Rock is located in Allegany County, three hours from Washington. Located on the same ridge as many of the popular Pennsylvania hawkwatching sites such as The Pulpit, Wagonner's Gap, Hawk Mountain, and Bake Oven Knob, it receives the same flow of raptors that they do. Few area birders have made the trip to Dan's Rock. It is manned only sporadically.

Washington Monument State Park is a much closer site. Located on a steep-sided ridge between Frederick and Hagerstown, Washington Monument State Park can be reached in about 80 minutes from DC. Hawkwatchers look for raptors from atop a 40-foot stone turret. Views are best on the western slope; hawks passing on the eastern slope are obscured by treetops. It is usually manned by members of the Washington Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society.

Fort Smallwood Park is an outlying Baltimore City park near Glen Burnie, Maryland. Consisting of a northward-pointing triangle of parkland at the mouth of Baltimore Harbor, Fort Smallwood is the closest landfall south of North Point, which lies on the north side of the harbor. Birds are tunneled to Fort Smallwood in the following manner: Southbound migrants 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. Upon reaching North Point, they must decide whether to fly a 15-mile loop around Baltimore Harbor or make a two-mile crossing at Fort Smallwood. Guess which route they choose? Fort Smallwood is good for all species and is unexcelled among inland sites for falcons.

Located in Clarke County, Va., **Snickers Gap** is the most recently discovered hawkwatching site in the Washington area. In fact, it has been discovered since the publication of Wilds' book, so I will give specific directions on how to get there. To reach it take Rt. 7 (Leesburg Pike) west for 41 miles (use the Leesburg bypass) to Rt. 601. Turn left on Rt. 601 and then immediately right to the gravel drive and the parking lot, which serves as the hawkwatch site. The site is usually manned by members of the Virginia Chapter of the Virginia Society of Ornithology (VSO).

Known for large numbers of passage Broad-winged Hawks in late September, the **Rockfish Gap** hawkwatch is the most luxurious in the East, located as it is near the swimming pool behind the Holiday Inn in Afton, Va. To reach the site, drive south to Charlottesville and take Rt. 64 west. At the crest of the Blue Ridge, exit onto Rt. 250 east. You'll see the Holiday Inn on the ridge top. It is usually manned by members of the VSO.

In autumn, **Assateague Island** is a superb location for spotting falcons -- Peregrines, Merlins, and Kestrels. These pointy-winged species hug the seacoast, especially Merlins and Peregrines. Both species are much more common along the coast than anywhere inland. Assateague Island is uncontested as the place in our area to view Peregrines.

Prime time for viewing at Assateague is early September through mid-October; for the other locations, September through early November. The best all-around book on hawk identification is Bill Clark's *Hawks* in the Peterson field guide series. Advanced hawk watchers will study *Hawks in Flight* by Pete Dunne *et al.* The experts at all of the manned sites are glad to help beginners learn the somewhat technical field marks. Here are some basics:

Buteos. Ninety percent of the buteos passing during September are Broad-winged Hawks, the only species that forms large flocks, called "kettles." Adults have one or two wide white bands on their dark tails. After the late September flood of Broad-winged Hawks, the ID challenge with the wide-winged buteos becomes one of picking out translucence, either a narrow crescent in Red-shouldered Hawks or an amorphous blob in Red-tailed Hawks.

Falcons. These species are built for speed with pointed wings and a bullet profile. 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 that it is a Peregrine.

Merlins often spook shorebirds, too, so be careful in your IDs. A dark falcon that passes near another bird of any size and does not take a swipe at it is probably not a Merlin. Merlins are half the size of Peregrines, slightly larger than a Blue Jay.

The Kestrel's combination of long tail, light-colored belly, and banana-shaped wings serve to identify this beautiful little falcon. Kestrels are the most common falcon everywhere near Washington, especially during migration.

Accipiters. In total numbers of passage migrants, the most abundant raptor species throughout the area are the accipiters. All are ambush specialists that feed on birds. Their aerial signature is a flutter-soar-flutter-soar wingbeat and a T-shaped profile. At the small end is the Sharp-shinned Hawk, a robin-sized bird that makes up about 80 percent of the annual totals at all eastern hawkwatches. A Cooper's Hawk looks like a Sharp-shinned Hawk that has been stretched on a rack, with a longer neck and tail than a sharpie. Goshawks are so rare at regional hawkwatches before November that you should not worry much about them. Late in the season a key point to watch for is their accipiter flight style in combination with long wings. They resemble Red-shouldered Hawks in flight. This is one species for which you will need to study the field guides.

Harriers. Northern Harriers in large numbers pass our area but often go undetected at high altitudes. They seem to prefer to avoid other hawks, flying very early and very late in the day. This species can hardly be confused with any other because of its combination of long tail, brilliant white rump, bounding flight, and the manner in which the wings are held upward in the shape of a "V."

Ospreys. The Osprey or fish-hawk is most common in September but continues to trickle through until late October. This largely white species has M-shaped wings that look as if something has taken a bite out of each one near the body. When seen head-on, the wings often look bowed downwards. Ospreys frequently travel in groups, and many are seen carrying their bag lunches—fish—in their talons.

Eagles. Key attractions at all lookouts are Bald and Golden Eagles. Any eagle sighting makes a hawkwatching trip a success. Bald Eagles are early migrants, with most individuals passing in late August and early September. Golden Eagles are just the opposite. Late October and November are the best times to see them. In recent years the number of Golden Eagles seen at ridge sites seems to have jumped substantially, although the increase in sightings may be due to the availability of Clark's field guide.

Several aspects of hawkwatching appeal to birders. First, hawks generally arise well after dawn, waiting for good winds or rising thermals. Second, hawkwatching requires almost no physical activity once the site is reached. Third, the challenges never end. Once the easy species are mastered, the tough ones can remain challenges for years, and even old pros often log "unidentified accipiter" in their notes.

Dress warmly for hawkwatching after mid-September. Remember that the north winds that bring hawks originate in the Arctic. Dress accordingly, much heavier than you think you should. Wear shoes with good traction, especially if you are headed for ridge sites where you may be hiking up a rough trail. Take a cushion to sit on, a thermos filled with a hot beverage, and plenty of food to stoke your internal furnace. Binoculars are essential and scopes are often useful. Photography is quite difficult, with the best luck being afforded by medium-length lenses and fast film.

Good luck in your hawkwatching! If the hawkwatching bug bites you, join the Raptor Society of Washington. Monthly meetings are held at the National Wildlife Federation headquarters in Vienna, Va. For more information call Paul Napier at 703-620-1755.

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