

[From Fall 1998]

Eastern Shore Raptor Watching

As all birders know, it is that time of year again to see migrating birds pass by as they move south. There's no better place to observe this trek than the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is located on the southern-most tip of the Delmarva peninsula, between the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay. During the fall, migrating birds follow the Atlantic coastline and the shoreline of the Chesapeake. When the birds reach the 18 miles of open water at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, they sometimes pause and wait for favorable winds before crossing. This creates an excellent opportunity for birding, especially for raptors (birds of prey).

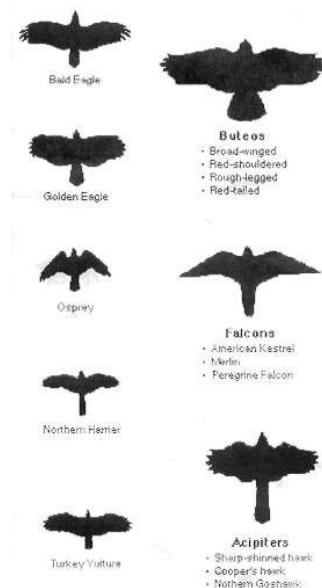
Common raptors which can be seen passing through the refuge include American kestrels, sharp-shinned hawks, Cooper's hawks, northern harriers, merlins, broad-winged hawks, red-tailed hawks, ospreys, turkey vultures, black vultures, and peregrine falcons. You might also see red-shouldered hawks and bald eagles as well as raptors which are rare to the east coast -such as golden eagles, northern goshawks, Swainson's hawks and rough-legged hawks.

Raptor banding is also done on the refuge, and hundreds are banded during this time of year by Reese F. Lukei from The Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service volunteer. The banding of these birds is done to provide data on the migratory trends and routes of different birds of prey.

When visiting the refuge during the fall to see birds of prey migrating, there are a few tips which can be helpful. The best weather conditions for viewing these raptors are the clear days following the passage of cold fronts with associated northerly winds.

The most numerous raptors during September include merlins, kestrels, peregrines, sharp-shinned, Cooper's, ospreys and broad-wings. Later on in the season (October and November) other birds to watch for include turkey vultures, black vultures, red-taileds, the occasional red-shouldered hawk or maybe even a rare glimpse of a golden eagle or northern goshawk.

Raptors are best seen in the morning. Their numbers slowly decrease towards the afternoon, then increase towards the later part of the afternoon, tapering off towards the evening. Early rising raptors to look for would be sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, then later on in the morning kestrels and red-tailed hawks make their appearance. During the late afternoon towards evening merlins become active.



As the fall season continues, we welcome all birds of prey, as well as anyone who wishes to visit the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge to see these amazing animals migrate.

(I would like to thank Reese Lukei, as well as Marshall Iliff, Jamie Cameroon, Brian Sullivan and K.E.S.T.R.E.L. for their research information)

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