



Hawk Migration



The above picture is a composite (each hawk was in a separate photo). All were taken at the Hawk Hill area of Golden Gate Park on October 19th, 2002, where many more were photographed and even more were seen. Hawks can be seen above, next to and below you from the hill top as they migrate past. Some of them come very close and some stay very high or so far away that the only people who see them need to use a spotting scope. Every time you see the Golden Gate Bridge on TV or in the movies, think about all the hawks you can see there.

For gardeners in the northern two thirds of the country, the fall is a time to clean up the leaves, plant a few bulbs and pack things up for the winter. Even in the south where the pace is known to be slower, by Yankee standards anyway, the fall is a good time to reflect on how things looked over the summer and begin planning for next year.

For those of us who do both of the two big American hobbies of gardening and bird watching, spring is obviously a big time, but the fall has a special treat in store for fall bird watchers.

The migration of birds of prey can be a spectacular thing to watch. Raptors as they are called, include falcons, hawks, eagles, vultures and a few other birds of prey like the fish-eating osprey, but do not include owls.

Most raptors migrate south from northern areas or down from higher altitude nesting areas to find better sources of prey during fall and winter. While on migration, birds of prey use air currents, such as rising thermals and updrafts on wind-facing hills, to maintain their altitude. Even a pocket of warm air rising from a blacktop parking lot can help them stay aloft. Since thermals and updrafts from hills occur over land, many hawks do not from readily fly over open water.

From an altitude of only a few hundred feet, their field of view is expanded to many miles. Once they reach as high as they can by circling within a thermal, they will fly a steady direction to the next hill where they can get another updraft.

Because they depend on these wind currents, the birds may become clustered together in almost any local. Sometimes you will see hundreds of these sometimes-rare birds circling in the same thermal. This spectacular view is called a kettle of hawks. The number of hawks in a kettle can be counted as they spin out of the top and begin their long downhill glide to the bottom of the next thermal.

As they travel along ocean and lake coastlines and mountain ridges, they sometimes come to locations that make them easy to see. Almost every area of the country has one of these hawk-watching points. Many times an organization has been formed to protect the land in that area or to capture and band some of the birds so that we can find out where they go.

One of the oldest of these locations and organizations is at Hawk Mountain Pennsylvania. The 2,400 acre refuge was established in 1934 and is now an international center for research on raptors. Hawk Mountain is within a three hour drive of Washington DC and New York City. Check out their web site www.hawkmountain.org to get directions and to see how many hawks, eagles and falcons have been seen this fall.

On the west coast, there is a bottleneck in the raptor highway along the coast at the Golden Gate. The southward migrating raptors are squeezed by San Francisco Bay on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Thousands of individuals of up to nineteen raptor species pass through the Marin Headlands each fall.

The Golden Gate Raptor Organization banding program, has banded more than 13,000 raptors. An unobtrusive numbered leg band allows the bird's movements to be tracked if a found hawk is reported to the federal Bird Banding Lab.

To date, they have received more than 400 band recoveries, which show raptor migration paths along the Pacific Coast. Some hawks banded at the Golden Gate have traveled as far north as the Washington-British Columbia border, and as far east as Idaho. Some

raptors migrating through the Golden Gate may fly as far as Argentina to reap the benefits of the southern hemisphere summer.

Some of the birds they have banded have been fitted with a radio telemetry transmitter. This allows satellite tracking of the bird. Several of the hawk research organizations do this and they often show maps on their web sites to show where the birds have been. Check the Golden Gate web site at www.ggro.org. Other great hawk watching and bird watching locations are Point Reyes in California, Cape May in New Jersey and Point Pelee in Ontario, which extends into Lake Ontario. Each of these places is also a good place to watch many other birds besides the raptors and are among the top ten places to watch birds in all of North America.

Other good hawk watching web sites can be found at
www.birdsource.org
www.peregrinefund.org
www.hawkwatch.org
www.birding.com