

Hitchcock Nature Center HawkWatch Report

Fall of 2021

Season Overview:

The fall of 2021 was an interesting season for the Hitchcock Nature Center. There was only a small handful of days that I was rained out and the breaks between variable winds (east, south, west, etc.) were spaced out well between weather systems/winds pushing down from the north throughout the first three-quarters of the season. Cloud conditions on some of the days with north winds were low in elevation, causing me to think that there were still a number of birds that were missed throughout the fall, but compared to many years in the past, the conditions were good. The biggest exception to the 2021 season had to have been the warm weather lingering on through the end of the season. It only snowed lightly on one day in December and there were a handful of days in the last month in the mid-to-high 70s. This undoubtedly dropped down the number of birds passing through in the late-season such as Bald Eagles, Red-tailed Hawks, and Rough-legged Hawks, yet it was still the best fall in a number of years for both Red-tails and Rough-leggeds. Despite the overall good turnout this season, numbers-wise, there were still a lot of birds that could have passed through that didn't. Broad-winged Hawks are often blown slightly west of their normal route when the wind conditions are right, however, this did not happen this season, and thus their numbers were low for the count. Similarly, Swainson's Hawks will occasionally be blown by Hitchcock (east of their normal route) in the low thousands, however, the season's total for this species was only 101 individuals. Less so wind-related, Osprey had its record low year this fall which still remains a mystery to me, however, due to the extended warm season it is quite possible that there was a considerable amount hanging out to the north waiting for the lakes to freeze over. Sharp-shinned Hawks and Merlins had an unusually early push around the first and second weeks of the count, and Duluth, Minnesota had a similar experience this fall. A record count of 12 Red-shouldered Hawks was detected this fall breaking the previous high count by one. Throughout the season we counted 7,725 raptors migrating by the tower and logged in 591.5 hours making for an average of 13 raptors per hour.

Species Analysis:

Turkey Vulture - 3,642

Numbers slightly above average. With the warm fall lingering rather late the season started off slow in terms of movement of this species. However, starting on October 13th there was a large push with the strong south winds.

Osprey - 57

*Record low count. This fall many of the volunteers were rather surprised by how thin the

Osprey movement was. Given how warm the fall season was, it's likely that there were an exceptional number of individuals lingering around reservoirs to the north, however, that does not fully explain the low numbers in my opinion.

Bald Eagle - 493

Numbers down from average. The low count for the fall is undoubtedly due to the retained warm weather lasting through the end of the count and a lack of any large late-season cold front.

Northern Harrier - 200

Down from average but the highest count in over 7 years. This species was pushing through during the entire season with a peak in late Oct/early Nov.

Sharp-shinned Hawk - 700

Down from overall average but highest count in 6 years. This fall there was an exceptionally early push of Sharp-shinned Hawks with 75 individuals on Sep 12th and numbers trickling down from there till the normal peak season around October.

Cooper's Hawk - 189

Third lowest count in history. Although this was a poor fall for this species, this number reflects the rather consistent decline in accipiter numbers over the last few years.

Northern Goshawk - 3

A rather low count but noted as an overall slow season at other locations too, such as Duluth. These birds all came through in around mid-October and most surprisingly, they were all adult birds (juveniles are more expected this time of year).

Red-shouldered Hawk - 12

*Record high count. This fall's count breaks the previous record of 11 individuals in 2012. The majority of these birds were juveniles but towards the latter portion of their migration, they were adults.

Broad-winged Hawk - 363

Low Count. Given the wind conditions during the early season, this species mostly passed through to the east in Central and Eastern Iowa.

Red-tailed Hawk - 1,729

Below average numbers but highest count in 5 years. Seeing decent numbers of Red-tailed Hawks moving through this fall was an encouraging sight, as this species' numbers have had a considerable drop in the last few years. This year's influx is likely due to mostly ideal weather conditions during the peak season for this species.

Rough-legged Hawk - 42

*Second highest count for Hitchcock. I am quite confused as to why there have been such small numbers of Rough-legged Hawks spotted here in past falls but this number was about what I expected for the season, despite the warm weather lingering through the end of the season.

Swainson's Hawk - 101

Low Count. Given the wind conditions in early October, this species passed through to the west around Central Nebraska where birders reported flocks into the high hundreds.

Ferruginous Hawk - 1

A rare/low-density migrant here with most years having only one. A single juvenile individual flew by the tower on Sep 24th, a rather early date for this species at Hitchcock.

Golden Eagle - 12

Number below the overall average but more in line with recent years. The majority of these birds pushed through mid-Oct and early Nov.

American Kestrel - 64

Exceptionally below average. The drop in numbers at this site is likely due to an overall decrease in the population of American Kestrels, but it is also quite possible that this number is also affected by weather conditions pushing birds through the Missouri River Valley during their peak season

Merlin - 64

*Highest count of this species in 12 years. There was an odd movement of 11 Merlins on September 7th before a large weather system pushed south and numbers slowly trickled down from that day on and balanced out.

Peregrine Falcon - 37

Numbers below average. This total can potentially be attributed to the lack of coverage in the late afternoon during the early season when these birds will often pass through.

Prairie Falcon - 1

I was rather surprised to only spot one Prairie Falcon throughout the entire season, however, this is more than often the total for most seasons. A single bird was observed moving south on October 13th, a day with strong south winds and an exceptional flight of raptors.

Mississippi Kite - 4

The number of this species that is located in a given season seems to fluctuate throughout the duration of Hitchcock and this is likely due to the amount of successful breeding to the north which doesn't consist of more than a few pairs on a good year.

Unidentified accipiter - 7

Of the 7 accipiters that weren't able to be identified to subspecies, two of these birds were likely Northern Goshawks but only viewed briefly at a distance.

Unidentified buteo - 1

Unidentified raptor - 3

Total 7,725