

The Rough-leg

NEWSLETTER AND SPRING 2021 MIGRATION REPORT

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Summer 2021

ONONDAGA
Audubon



Derby Hill
BIRD OBSERVATORY

Another Successful Count

For decades, Onondaga Audubon has sponsored a spring-migration count of raptors flying over Derby Hill Bird Observatory. For this year's count, professional hawk-counter Karl Bardon returned to Derby Hill for a third season. His report covering raptor counts, migration details, non-raptor movements, and photographic documentation are contained within this newsletter.

Onondaga Audubon is committed to continuing this annual raptor count. The data it collects can inform researchers about the effects of climate change and habitat loss on migrating birds of prey. In addition, our recently installed MOTUS tower is now augmenting Derby Hill migration data with information collected about other bird species whose individuals have been fitted with radio-telemetry tags.

While we continue our involvement with conservation and avian research, we also want to be sure that our Derby Hill sanctuary is well maintained and remains free and open to the public. As a non-profit organization, we rely on volunteers who dedicate their time and talents to keeping our sanctuaries open and our programs running. But we depend on supporters like you for the resources we need to carry out our mission.

Please consider making a gift to ensure that Derby Hill continues to be a premier spring hawk-counting site. You can do this today by using the enclosed giving card and envelope. Your gift will help ensure that Derby Hill remains a place for all to learn about and enjoy the wonders of spring migration and to observe birds and wildlife year-round. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Dorothy Joiner

Dorothy Joiner
President, Onondaga Audubon

2021 Hawk Count Summary

Species	2021 Season Count	10-year Average	2021 Peak 1-day Count
Turkey Vulture	28,069	23,270	2,800
Osprey	273	478	40
Bald Eagle	839	811	66
Northern Harrier	365	471	34
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2,188	3,232	272
Cooper's Hawk	286	282	23
Northern Goshawk	1	12	1
Red-shouldered Hawk	517	501	89
Broad-winged Hawk	21,911	28,132	3,946
Red-tailed Hawk	3,379	3,397	510
Rough-legged Hawk	112	129	16
Golden Eagle	79	59	26
American Kestrel	263	385	28
Merlin	36	63	3
Peregrine Falcon	24	22	4
Short-eared Owl	1	-	1
TOTAL	58,348	61,364	

March 1 - May 31, 2021

Text and major photography by Karl Bardon, Derby Hill Bird Observatory hawk counter; spring 2021

Season Overview

Derby Hill conducted its annual hawk count this spring from March 1 to May 31. This was the 43rd consecutive season for this full-time count, providing an invaluable source of data showing many interesting trends. In 2021 we counted a total of 58,348 raptors, a tally close to the 10-year average. Counts of Turkey Vultures, Bald Eagles, Cooper's Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Golden Eagles, and Peregrine Falcons were above average, while counts of Ospreys, Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks, American Kestrels, and Merlins were below average. There were no records set this season, but the count of only one Northern Goshawk was the lowest season-total ever.



Rough-legged Hawk

The 2021 season was much like last year in that it began during a stretch of relatively warm weather, with March seeing many days of south winds. However, both April and May seemed cooler than normal, with many days of north or west winds during what should have been the peak migration period.

Monthly Review

March

The total of 11,923 raptors counted in March was above average. One of the best days of the month was March 11, the peak day for many early-season species, including 23 Cooper's Hawks, 89 Red-shouldered Hawks, 510 Red-tailed Hawks, 16 Rough-legged Hawks, and 26 Golden Eagles. The highlight of the day was seeing and photographing a rare Red-shouldered x Red-tailed hawk hybrid (see p. 5). Migration remained quite strong throughout March. The month's overall peak day was March 30, when 2,530 raptors were counted, most of them Turkey Vultures.

April

April's count of 32,601 raptors was about average for the month. Migration was modest throughout April, with no really big days. The month's peak day came on the 24th with only 4,386 raptors, most of them Broadwings.

May

A count of 13,819 raptors in May was about average. Nevertheless, the count felt very slow, especially since the last two seasons both produced record May counts. This year, it seemed that migration kept trying to get started through the beginning of May and then, over the remainder of the month, just slowly fizzled out.

Red-shouldered Hawk



Species Accounts

Turkey Vulture

This season's count of 28,069 Turkey Vultures was the second-largest ever, falling short of last year's record of 32,167. The peak flight occurred more than a week later than last year's peak, with two similar days of 2,800 Turkey Vultures on April 8 and 2,759 on April 9.

Osprey

This year's count of 273 Osprey was below average, without the strong movement seen in late April and early May during the previous two years. The peak flight was 40 birds counted May 4. Local Ospreys were once again nesting on the cell tower at the south lookout.

Bald Eagle

The count of 839 Bald Eagles was well above average, but the overall number fell a bit from the record numbers seen in the previous two years. The peak flight was 66 on May 3, far below last year's record peak of 152 on May 25.

Northern Harrier

The count of 365 harriers was below average, with a peak of 34 counted April 9.

Sharp-shinned Hawk

The season total was a below-average 2,188; the peak was 272 Sharpies counted May 4.

Cooper's Hawk

This season's total of 286 Cooper's Hawks was very similar to last year's and a little above average. The peak day was 23 Cooper's on March 11.

Immature Bald Eagle



Northern Goshawk

Only one goshawk was seen this season, an immature on March 9—the lowest goshawk count ever at Derby.

Red-shouldered Hawk

The season total was 517, and the peak day was 89 counted March 11.

Broad-winged Hawk

The count of 21,911 Broad-wings was below average. There were no big Broad-wing days during the usual peak period of late April and early May, nor was there a good push of immatures at the end of the season like there usually is. The peak days were 3,946 Broad-wings counted April 24 and 3,079 counted April 28.

Red-tailed Hawk

Although the season total of 3,379 Red-tails was noticeably better than totals seen in the last two years, this year's total was still below average. There were two peak periods for Red-tails, one in mid-March, when most of the *borealis* moved through, and another in mid-April, when many of the *abieticola* moved through. The peak days were 510 on March 11 and 349 on April 10.

Northern Harrier





Golden Eagle

Rough-legged Hawk

After last year's record-low count of 64, it was nice to see a rebound in Rough-leg numbers this season. A total of 112 were counted, a number still below average. The peak flights were 16 birds counted on both March 10 and March 11.

Golden Eagle

It was an excellent year for Golden Eagles, with an above-average count of 79, including a peak of 26 on March 11 that tied the record day for this species. Interestingly, the previous count of 26 in one day was on April 27, 2011—a full month and a half later than this year's peak. The lack of immature birds in late April and May was noticeable again this year.

American Kestrel

This year's count of 263 kestrels was below average. The peak day saw only 28 on April 28.

Merlin

The count of 36 Merlins was also below average. The peak day was three Merlins, counted March 30

Peregrine Falcon

The total of 24 Peregrines was above average; the peak day was four counted on April 27.

Short-eared Owl

One was seen on March 23.

Sharp-shinned Hawk



Turkey Vulture



Red-tailed Hawks of Derby Hill



Abieticola



Red-tailed Hawk x Red-shouldered Hawk hybrid



Leucistic Red-tailed Hawk



Borealis



Sandhill Cranes



Eastern Meadowlark

Non-raptor highlights

As with the previous two years, I tried to count all non-raptors migrating by Derby Hill, which meant I was out at sunrise nearly every morning. Although early in the season the non-raptor migration was similar to the previous two years, with typical numbers of geese and blackbirds, the songbird migration in May was absolutely dismal. I can honestly say that in 40 years of birding, this was the worst spring songbird migration I have ever seen, particularly for warblers.

This season's total count of 736,093 individual birds of 171 species compares to 788,414 individual birds of 185 species in 2020, and 979,925 individual birds of 198 species in 2019. As with the previous two years, the vast majority of this year's total were geese and blackbirds, including 275,282 Snow Geese; 66,137 Canada Geese; 90,946 Common Grackles; and 111,439 Red-winged Blackbirds. There were also 7,063 Blue Jays; 7,337 American Robins; and 26,672 American Crows. Since Rusty Blackbird is a species of special concern, it is worth mentioning that I counted 4,571 for the season, including a peak day of 1,047 on April 7; these numbers compare to 3,380 Rusties last year and 3,024 in 2019.

Another noteworthy aspect of the 2021 migration was the high number of Fish Crows migrating northward. The season total was 34 individuals, with a peak of 12 counted April 10, and they were seen as early as March 20 and as late as May 24. Some of the other non-raptor highlights were an American White Pelican on March 29; a season total of 45 Sandhill Cranes, including a peak of 18 on March 22; a peak flight of 750 Northern Flickers on April 27; a season total of 1,356 Black-capped Chickadees, including peaks of 311 on April 7 and 332 on April 9; a peak day of 1,404 Yellow-rumped Warblers on April 27; counts of 16 Scarlet Tanagers on both May 16 and May 19; 12 Red Crossbills on March 9; a season total of 972 Common Redpolls; and a season total of 230 Evening Grosbeaks, including a peak of 169 counted May 2.

Acknowledgments

Although it may not have turned out to be the best migration in the world, Derby Hill is still a very relaxing and comfortable place to count birds, and all the wonderful people make it a great place to work. I would like to thank Dave Fitch for making it all possible and for keep the hawk-counter's cottage in such great shape.

I would also like to thank all the people who showed up to watch the migration, help spot birds, and even bring treats, both for me and for the birds. Some two dozen regulars all helped in some way, though of course there were countless other people who came to visit as well. Finally, I would like to give a special thanks to Bill Purcell for giving me a few days off during the season, and especially for doing the last five days of the count, which was a huge help to me.



Blue Jay



Pair of Wood Ducks



Rusty Blackbird



Red-headed Woodpecker

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Andy Saunders

Derby Hill Bird Observatory Records

	Earliest Arrival	Latest Departure	High Season Total	Peak Day	Number	Usual Peak Period
Black Vulture	Mar 15	Jun 2	6	Apr 5, 2017	3	x
Turkey Vulture	Feb 18	Jun 18	32,167	Mar 30, 2020	5,363	Apr 1-Apr 30
Osprey	Mar 19	Jun 18	1,063	May 24, 1998	194	Apr 20-May 15
American Swallow-tailed Kite	Apr 16	May 14	1	x	x	4 singles only
Mississippi Kite	May 10	May 25	1	May 10, 1990	1	2 singles only
Bald Eagle	Feb 18	Jun 18	1,344	May 25, 2020	152	Mar 15-May 20
White-tailed Eagle	Apr 24	x	1	Apr 24, 1993	1	x
Northern Harrier	Feb 15	Jun 18	1,554	Mar 24, 1994	235	Mar 20-Apr 20
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Feb 20	Jun 20	11,582	Apr 28, 1984	3,019	Apr 5-May 10
Cooper's Hawk	Feb 18	Jun 18	1,176	Apr 1, 1981	158	Mar 20-Apr 10
Northern Goshawk	Feb 15	Jun 17	398	Mar 29, 1973	88	Mar 1-Mar 30
Red-shouldered Hawk	Feb 20	May 31	1,805	Apr 5, 1993	722	Mar 15-Apr 10
Broad-winged Hawk	Apr 8	Jun 26	63,639	Apr 22, 1985	18,493	Apr 20-May 5
Swainson's Hawk	Mar 31	May 31	5	x	x	Apr 20-May 20
Red-tailed Hawk	Feb 13	Jun 20	19,531	Apr 11, 1995	4,581	Mar 10-Apr 20
Rough-legged Hawk	Feb 12	Jun 2	656	Feb 22, 1981	165	Feb 20-Apr 20
Golden Eagle	Feb 20	May 27	111	Apr 27, 2011	26	Mar 15-Apr 20
American Kestrel	Feb 19	Jun 20	931	Apr 15, 1972	296	Mar 20-Apr 20
Merlin	Feb 27	May 31	102	Apr 30, 1996	14	Apr 10-May 10
Peregrine Falcon	Feb 21	May 30	32	May 9, 2019	5	Apr 20-May 10
Gyrfalcon	Feb 16	Apr 7	1	x	x	3 singles only