



The Rough-leg

NEWSLETTER AND SPRING 2026 MIGRATION REPORT

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Summer 2026

David Brown Returns for 2026

David Brown returned this year for his second season as the official raptor counter at the Derby Hill Bird Observatory, sponsored by Onondaga Audubon. His dedication was evident in the many hours he spent counting and photographing raptors and other migrating birds. Each evening, he shared videos and updates through his YouTube channel, LycoBirds, as well as Facebook, eBird, and the HawkCount Database.

David generously shared his knowledge with visitors, using his photographs and videos to teach bird identification and migration biology. His beautiful photographs and season summary are featured in this edition of "The Rough-Leg."

This spring, Derby Hill welcomed many familiar faces and first-time visitors, including school groups, Boy Scouts, hikers, and families eager to experience the spectacle of spring migration. Our priority is to provide a welcoming and educational environment while preserving the Observatory as a premier migration-watch site. This requires extensive volunteer hours and ongoing financial support. As a nonprofit organization, Onondaga Audubon depends on the generosity of supporters like you. Your contributions help sustain our conservation, education, and research programs and ensure the continued operation and maintenance of the Derby Hill Bird Observatory. We invite you to make a gift today using the enclosed donation card and envelope. Your support helps preserve Derby Hill's legacy and inspires future generations to appreciate and protect the natural world.

Thank you for your continued commitment to Onondaga Audubon and our mission.

With Gratitude,

Dorothy (Dori) Joiner

Dorothy Joiner

President, Onondaga Audubon

2026 Hawk Count Summary

Species	2026 Season Count	10-year Average	2026 Peak 1-day Count
Black Vulture	13	3	4
Turkey Vulture	40,059	27,712	10,624
Osprey	309	381	29
Golden Eagle	68	61	8
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3,447	2,884	429
Cooper's Hawk	314	247	28
American Goshawk	2	6	1
Northern Harrier	627	508	49
Bald Eagle	1,313	983	84
Broad-winged Hawk	45,914	34,248	6,401
Red-shouldered Hawk	499	527	77
Swainson's Hawk	1	1	1
Red-tailed Hawk	2,898	2,626	412
Rough-legged Hawk	65	80	20
American Kestrel	445	363	62
Merlin	81	60	10
Peregrine Falcon	12	24	2
TOTAL	96,067	70,736	11,365

March 1 - May 31, 2026



Text and photography by David Brown, Derby Hill Bird Observatory hawk counter, Spring 2026.

Introductory Note from the Counter, David Brown:

Spring 2026 was my second season at Derby Hill and my eighteenth as a professional hawk counter. After six seasons at the Braddock Bay Hawk Watch near Rochester, I was used to the volume of raptors that migrate along the south shore of Lake Ontario, but Derby Hill takes it to another level with higher totals and closer looks. After an exceptional first season I was eager to return to see how another season would compare. The result was an even higher raptor total and a handful of new species. I have come to appreciate the parts of Derby Hill that are unique, such as living on-site, being close to the lake, and the large non-raptor migration. This fall I will be returning for my tenth season as the counter at the Ashland Hawk Watch in Delaware.

The hawk watch was conducted at the Derby Hill Bird Observatory in Mexico, New York. This location near the southeast corner of Lake Ontario is a major concentration point for migrating raptors. Raptors that are migrating north in the spring hit Lake Ontario and head east to go around the lake rather than making a long water crossing. The count was held daily in March, April, and May except on days when weather conditions prevented any raptor migration. The count was conducted from one of two lookouts depending on the wind direction. When the wind had a southerly component, the count was held at the North Lookout adjacent to the cottage at 36 Grand View Avenue. When the wind had a northerly component, the count was held at the South Lookout located eight-tenths of a mile south of the lake along the east side of Sage Creek Drive. On a straight west or east wind the choice of lookout was left to the discretion of the counter. Hourly weather readings were taken using a Kestrel 3500 weather meter.



Immature Bald Eagles.

Season Overview

The 2026 Derby Hill Hawk Watch was the 48th consecutive season with full-time coverage. The count was run for 657.75 hours over 88 out of a possible 92 days. The count was canceled due to weather on four days and shortened to four hours or less on an additional eight days. March and April had a good cycle of weather with frequent fronts bringing days of favorable winds. May had fewer days with southerly winds, especially towards the end of the month.

A total of 96,067 migrating raptors of seventeen species were counted this season. This was the second-highest season total ever, surpassing 2025's total of 95,401, but falling short of the record of nearly 102,000 raptors set in 2019. This year's total was 36 percent above the ten-year average of 70,736. Eleven raptor species had totals above the ten-year average, including record highs for Black Vulture and Turkey Vulture. One species tied the average and five were below. The rarest raptor of the season was a Swainson's Hawk.

Trektellen was used to submit hourly totals from the field, making the data immediately available on the internet. Totals of all bird species were reported on eBird checklists. Daily video summaries that included photos, identification tips, and forecasts were published to the LycoBirds channel on YouTube. Nocturnal flight calls were recorded overnight when conditions allowed.

March

A total of 15,140 migrating raptors were counted during 188.5 hours of observation in March. This was the second-highest March total ever. The count was canceled two days due to weather and shortened to four hours or less on an additional five days.

The first day with more than a hundred migrants was March 7. Southwesterly winds on March 9 brought a flight of just under five hundred migrants including several hundred Turkey Vultures, nearly a hundred Red-tailed Hawks, and the peak flight of the season for Red-shouldered Hawk. March 15-16 brought a combined total of over 1,300 including more than a thousand Turkey Vultures and an adult American goshawk.

The first day with over a thousand migrants was March 25. The three day period of March 24-26 brought a combined total of over 4,300 migrants driven by strong Turkey Vulture flights and two days of triple-digit Red-tailed Hawks. On March 29 more than 3,000 Turkey Vultures migrated. The peak day of the month was March 30 with 3,719 migrants including over 3,500 Turkey Vultures and four Black Vultures.

April

April had the highest total ever with 69,576 raptors counted during 243.25 hours. The count was canceled



Red-winged Blackbird (left) and Red-headed Woodpecker (right) at Derby Hill Bird Observatory.

one day and shortened to less than four hours one additional day. The peak day of the entire season was April 3 with 11,365 migrants including a record flight of over ten thousand Turkey Vultures. The period of April 8-10 brought a combined total of more than 7,200 migrants. April 14 brought more than 5,600 total raptors and was the first big Broad-winged Hawk flight with over 4,500. April 18 had strong southeast winds that resulted in excellent looks at low-flying raptors all day and another total over five thousand. The combination of being a Saturday during peak migration time along with a favorable forecast nearly a week ahead resulted in over 150 human visitors with one driving eight hours from Ohio. April 21-23 was a period of three good flights with a combined total of more than 12,000 migrants. The four day stretch of April 26-29 brought nearly 17,000 migrants including the peak flight of Broad-winged Hawks. Sixteen days in April had over a thousand migrants.

May

In May, 11,351 raptors were counted during 226 hours. The count was canceled one day and shortened to four hours or less on two days. The peak day of the month was May 4 with 1,901 migrants. This was the only day in the first half of the month with over a thousand migrants and the only day in May with over a thousand Broad-winged Hawks. The good flights became sporadic after that. May 9 and 13 each had over eight hundred migrants. May 16 had over nine hundred migrants including over 500 Turkey Vultures.

The last two four-digit days of the season were May 18 and 19 with a combined total of over 2,500 migrants including the best two Bald Eagle flights of the season with 166 total and over 1,400 Broad-winged Hawks. The weekend of May 23-24 had excellent winds, but a lot of rain that kept raptor totals low. In the last week of the count an omega block weather pattern set up, bringing repeated pleasant weather with sunny skies and light northwesterly winds that were unfavorable for big raptor flights. The last five days were held entirely at the South Lookout. In the last twelve days of the month a total of only 1,665 migrants were counted. A meteor fireball was seen low on the southeast horizon from the South Lookout on May 30.

Species Accounts

Black Vulture

A record thirteen Black Vultures migrated this season. This is more than double the previous record of six and more than four times the ten-year average. March and April were tied for the peak month with six each. The final one migrated on May 9. A new single-day record of four was set on March 30, occurring in a group of three plus an individual.

Turkey Vulture

A record 40,059 Turkey Vultures were counted. This was 45 percent above the ten-year average. The first migrated on March 1. A new single-day record of 10,624 was set on April 3. In a single hour there were 6,421 Turkey Vultures which was higher than the previous single-day record. April was the peak month with 23,167. This was the highest April total ever. The March total of 12,997 was the second-highest ever. In May, 3,895 were counted which was also the second-highest ever. After surpassing 35,000 Turkey Vultures for the first time ever last spring and now 40,000 this season it seems that Turkey Vulture totals continue to strongly increase.



Female Osprey.

Osprey

This season's total of 309 Ospreys was 19 percent below the ten-year average. The first Osprey migrated on March 22. The peak flight was 29 on April 28. April was the peak month with 216. Eighty were counted in May and thirteen in March. Ospreys nested on the cell phone tower near the South Lookout again this year.

Golden Eagle

The total of 68 Golden Eagles was 11 percent above the ten-year average. The first of the season migrated on March 2. The peak flight was eight on April 9. April was the highest month with 36 followed by March with 30. The remaining two migrated on May 8 and 9.

Sharp-shinned Hawk

The total of 3,447 Sharp-shinned Hawks was 20 percent above the ten-year average. The peak flight was 429 on April 28. The peak month was April with 2,700. May was next with 570 then March with 177.

Cooper's Hawk

The total of 314 Cooper's Hawks was 27 percent above the ten-year average. The peak flight was 28 on March 15. March was the peak month with 192, followed by April with 108. The remaining fourteen migrated in May. A local pair of Cooper's Hawks was frequently seen.



Adult American Goshawk.

American Goshawk

Two American Goshawks migrated this season. This is below the ten-year average of six and shows the continuing decline of this species. The first was an adult at the North Lookout on March 15. It passed over the tree line between the first and second fields. It was a much better look than the adult seen last spring and was close enough for decent photos. This species has become scarce and the adult plumage is becoming exceptionally rare to see at Derby Hill.

The second was a juvenile at the North Lookout on April 9. A large crowd was gathered for an excellent flight with sunny skies and southeast winds bringing a steady flow of low raptors in good light. A juvenile Peregrine Falcon dove low across the valley in front of the lookout, made a large swoop inland then cut back overhead. Immediately afterwards a large, bulky hawk popped up above the trees in front. It turned and revealed a long tail confirming it as a goshawk. It soared a few times on the way across the field then powered through low over the crowd. As it was flying away the peregrine circled back and made several dives at it!

Northern Harrier

The total of 627 Northern Harriers was 23 percent above the ten-year average. With the exception of last spring's unusually high total of 889, this was the highest harrier total since 2013. The first harrier migrated on March 3. The peak day was April 9 with 49. April was the highest month with 413, followed by 120 in May and 94 in March.

Bald Eagle

This season's 1,313 Bald Eagles was the third highest total ever and 34 percent above the ten-year average.

Bald Eagle migration extended throughout the entire season. The first southern juvenile Bald Eagle migrated on April 21. These are juveniles born in the south over the winter and are identified by their fresh plumage. The peak day was May 18 with 84. Another 82 migrated the following day. The peak month was May with 594. April was next with 512 then March with 207.

Broad-winged Hawk

The total of 45,914 Broad-winged Hawks was the third-highest ever. It was 34% above the ten-year average. The first of the season was exceptionally early on April 3. The first day with over a hundred broad-wings was April 13 and the first day with over a thousand was the next day with over 4,500. The peak count was 6,401 on April 27 with about half at the North Lookout and half at the South Lookout. The majority of the flight occurred in April with 40,098. Eleven days in April had over a thousand broad-wings. The remaining 5,816 migrated in May, with only one day having more than a thousand. Only 717 broad-wings were counted after May 19 as an omega block weather pattern brought unfavorable winds.

Red-Shouldered Hawk

The Red-shouldered Hawk total of 499 was five percent below the ten-year average. The peak day was March 9 with 77. March was the peak month with 411. The April total was 87. A late adult migrated on April 30. The final one was a juvenile on May 9.

Swainson's Hawk

The only Swainson's Hawk of the season was a dark-morph on April 3. It was spotted in front at the top of a group of soaring raptors. It glided past high on the lake side. The ten-year average is one.



Adult Red-tailed Hawk.

Red-tailed Hawk

The total of 2,898 Red-tailed Hawks was ten percent above the ten-year average. The peak count was 412 on April 3. April was the highest month with 1,810, followed by 864 in March and 224 in May. No dark-morph red-tails were noted this season. A mostly white red-tail was seen on March 30. The same hawk was photographed earlier the same day in Orleans County. Comparing the time and locations, the hawk would

have traveled approximately 109 miles of lakeshore in just over three hours, averaging about 35 miles per hour!



Light-morph Rough-legged Hawk.

Rough-legged Hawk

This season's total of 65 Rough-legged Hawks was 19 percent below the ten-year average. Light-morphs were more numerous with 47 compared to only 18 dark morphs. The peak day was March 7 with 20. March was the highest month with 50. The remaining 15 migrated in April.

American Kestrel

The American Kestrel total of 445 was 23 percent above the ten-year average. The first kestrel migrated on March 7. The peak flight was 62 on April 18. April was the peak month with 363, followed by 65 in March and 17 in May. The final migrating kestrel was counted on May 19. A pair of kestrels was commonly seen from the South Lookout through the end of the season and is likely nesting.



Male Merlin.

Merlin

The count of 81 Merlins was 35 percent above the ten-year average. The first Merlin migrated on March 4. The peak day was April 4 with ten. April was the highest month with 38. The March total was 29. Fourteen were counted in May. The final two Merlins migrated on May 24.

Peregrine Falcon

The Peregrine Falcon total was the lowest since 2015 with only twelve counted which was half of the ten-year average. The first peregrine wasn't seen until March 23. April was the peak month with five. The March total was four and three were counted in May. The peak flight was two on March 24. The final peregrine was seen on May 13. The most memorable peregrine of the season was a juvenile diving on a juvenile goshawk on April 9.



This Wood Stork marks the first record for this species in Oswego County.

Nonraptor Sightings

Including the seventeen species of raptors, just over 200 species of birds were detected this season. Non-raptors were tracked via eBird checklists. The raptor count was the higher priority, so some non-raptor totals were estimated.

Geese, Swans, and Ducks: Snow Goose was seen on 16 days in March with a high count of 13,000 on March 8. Ross's Goose was seen on four days in March for a total of five individuals. Flocks of Brant were seen on four days in May with a high count of 168 on May 13 and about 350 total individuals. Cackling Goose was seen mixed in with Canada Goose flocks on four days in March for a total of eight. The peak day for Canada Goose was March 9 with over 12,000. Mute Swan was seen on 10 days with a high count of nine on March 8. Tundra Swan flocks were seen on March 9 and 10 for a total of 84. Twenty-two species of ducks were recorded with highlights of three Harlequin Ducks on March 6 and three Surf Scoters on April 30.

Cuckoos: Both Black-billed Cuckoo and Yellow-billed Cuckoo were detected as nocturnal migrants in May, but none were seen during the day.

Nighthawks: Common Nighthawk arrived on May 15 and was seen on eight days with a high count of 83 on May 26. Eastern Whip-poor-will was heard singing nocturnally on the evening of May 8 and the morning of May 22.

Swifts: The first Chimney Swift arrived on April 30.

Hummingbirds: The first Ruby-throated Hummingbird arrived May 4 and the high count was 10 on May 16.

Rails and Gallinules: Virginia Rail and Sora were detected as nocturnal migrants. Common Gallinule was heard as a nocturnal migrant and also calling from the marsh in late May.

Cranes: Sandhill Crane was seen on 27 days between March 8 and May 18. The high count of 70 on April 3 was a new record for Derby Hill.

Shorebirds: Ten species of shorebirds were detected this season. The high count for Killdeer was 21 on March 7. The first American Woodcock arrived on March 9. Wilson's Snipe was seen on four days in April and also recorded winnowing at night. A Pectoral Sandpiper was seen in the field behind South Lookout on three days in late April. Solitary Sandpiper was seen on nine days with a high count of 15 on May 9. The other shorebirds species were Semipalmated Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs, and Least Sandpiper.

Gulls and Terns: Six species of gulls were seen this season. Bonaparte's Gull was seen on 13 days between March 27 and April 13 with a high count of 58 on April 7. Iceland Gull was seen on four days with a total of six individuals. The only tern species were Caspian Tern and Common Tern.

Loons: Red-throated Loon was seen on the lake on two days in April. The high count of Common Loon was 60 on April 20.

Cormorants: The first Double-crested Cormorant arrived on March 20. The high count was 2,675 on May 2.

Bitterns and Herons: American Bittern was detected as a nocturnal migrant. Least Bittern was heard calling from Sage Creek Marsh on two days in May. A Snowy Egret migrated west along the lakeshore on May 9. The first Green Heron arrived on April 29. Great Egret was seen on five days for a total of six and a high count of two on April 4. The high count of Great Blue Heron was 17 on April 17.



Vesper Sparrow.



American Herring Gulls fighting over a fish over Lake Ontario.

Kingfishers: The first Belted Kingfisher arrived on March 16.

Woodpeckers: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was seen on seven days in April with a high count of two on April 8. An aberrant plumage sapsucker with a pale bill was seen on April 13. Red-headed Woodpecker was seen from April 27 through the end of the season with a high count of three on May 9. The high count for Northern Flicker was 455 on April 16. A flicker with a mix of red and yellow feathers was seen on April 4.

Flycatchers: Eight species of flycatcher were seen including Alder Flycatcher and Acadian Flycatcher. The high count of Eastern Kingbird was 94 on May 13.

Vireos: Yellow-throated Vireo, Eastern Warbling Vireo, and Red-eyed Vireo were the only species of vireo seen this season. Blue-headed Vireo and Philadelphia Vireo were not recorded.

Corvids: The high count of Blue Jay was 5,580 on May 5. The peak American Crow flight was 7,300 on March 7. Fish Crow was identified by call on 17 days with a high count of five on April 28. Common Raven was seen throughout the season with a high count of eight on March 24.

Swallows: Horned Lark was seen on seven days from early March through mid-April with a high count of 80 on March 26. The first Tree Swallow arrived on March 9. Northern Rough-winged Swallow returned on April 10. The first Purple Martin was seen April 16 and at least three pairs attempted nesting in the box down the front slope of the North Lookout. Cliff Swallow returned April 18. Bank Swallow was first seen on May 4.

Kinglets: Golden-crowned Kinglet arrived March 30. Ruby-crowned Kinglet was first seen April 10.

Nuthatches: White-breasted Nuthatch was present the whole season. Red-breasted Nuthatch was detected on 14 days. The first arrived on April 15 and the high count was six on May 18.

Creepers: Brown Creeper was seen on three days starting March 26.

Gnatcatchers: The first Blue-gray Gnatcatcher arrived on April 17.

Wrens: Carolina Wren was only detected on two days, compared to last year when it was present throughout the season. A Winter Wren was heard singing on April 2. Northern House Wren returned on April 24. A Sedge Wren was found on May 18. The next day it was seen carrying nesting material. It continued through the end of the season and frequently sang all night and into the morning. Analysis of nocturnal flight call recordings revealed it first singing the evening of May 16.

Mimics: Brown Thrasher arrived on April 13. Gray Catbird arrived on April 27. Northern Mockingbird was not seen this season.

Thrushes: Gray-cheeked Thrush was recorded as a nocturnal flight call in May and one was seen in the woods. Swainson's Thrush was heard as a nocturnal migrant in May.

Waxwings: Cedar Waxwing had a high count of 425 on May 18.

Pipits: American Pipit was detected on nine days with a high count of five on March 18.

Finches: Evening Grosbeak was seen on five days in the second half of the season with a high count of seven on May 13. Purple Finch had a high count of 760 on April 18. Two Red Crossbills were photographed in morning flight on April 14. Pine Siskin was recorded on 30 days with a high count of 185 on May 13. The high count of American Goldfinch was 450 on May 13.

Longspurs and Snow Bunting: Lapland Longspur was seen twice with five on March 9 and one on April 5. Snow Bunting was seen six days in March with a high count of 98 on March 7.

Sparrows: Thirteen species of sparrow were detected. Fox Sparrow was heard singing on two days. Vesper Sparrow was seen on six days in April, including one at the North Lookout. Lincoln's Sparrow was seen 12 days in May.

Blackbirds and Orioles: Bobolink returned May 5 with a high count of 810 on May 13. Orchard Oriole was detected on 10 days, mostly a lingering immature male. Baltimore Oriole returned May 4. Red-winged Blackbird had a high count of 35,000 on March 22. The peak flight of Rusty Blackbird was 350 on April 18. Common Grackle had a high count of 20,000 on March 25.

Warblers: Twenty-five species of warblers were detected. Highlights included Golden-winged Warbler, Hooded Warbler, and Prairie Warbler. Yellow-rumped Warbler had a peak of 300 on April 28.

Tanagers, Grosbeaks, Buntings: Scarlet Tanager arrived May 5. Rose-breasted Grosbeak returned May 4. Indigo Bunting was first seen on May 13.

Nocturnal Flight Calls

Nocturnal flight calls were recorded on 55 nights throughout the season, mostly on nights of favorable migration conditions in April and May. An OldBird 21C microphone was placed in the yard outside the door of the cottage and was connected to a MacBook Pro running Audacity software. The audio was played over a speaker and a cell phone running Merlin was placed next to it overnight to provide a summary of what species called each night. The original recordings were also saved for later analysis.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Onondaga Audubon Society for hosting me again. Thanks to Dave Fitch for being my main point of contact and maintaining the property. Thank you to Kim Steininger and Dave Wheeler for assisting with the count. I appreciate all the other volunteers and visitors who contributed to another successful season.



One of the 40,059 Turkey Vultures that flew over Derby Hill Bird Observatory in 2026, setting a new record.

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A pair of Eastern Bluebirds perched on the Derby Hill sign located at the South Lookout.

Derby Hill Bird Observatory Records

	Earliest Arrival	Latest Departure	High Season Total	Peak Day	Number	Usual Peak Period
Black Vulture	Feb 27	Jun 2	13	Mar 30, 2026	4	x
Turkey Vulture	Feb 18	Jun 18	40,059	Apr 3, 2026	10,624	Apr 1-Apr 30
Osprey	Mar 17	Jun 18	1,063	May 5, 1998	194	Apr 20-May 15
Swallow-tailed Kite	Apr 16	May 14	1	x	x	5 singles only
Mississippi Kite	May 10	May 25	1	May 10, 1990	1	2 singles only
Bald Eagle	Feb 18	Jun 18	1,437	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	1,433	Mar 24, 1994	224	Mar 20-Apr 20
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Feb 20	Jun 20	9,998	Apr 28, 1984	2,286	Apr 5-May 10
Cooper's Hawk	Feb 18	Jun 18	1,099	Apr 1, 1981	158	Mar 20-Apr 10
American Goshawk	Feb 15	Jun 17	398	Mar 29, 1973	88	Mar 1-Mar 30
Red-shouldered Hawk	Feb 20	May 31	1,772	Apr 5, 1993	720	Mar 15-Apr 10
Broad-winged Hawk	Apr 8	Jun 26	63,702	Apr 19, 2025	19,642	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	18,398	Apr 11, 1995	4,363	Mar 10-Apr 20
Rough-legged Hawk	Feb 12	Jun 2	581	Feb 27, 2000	121	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 21	May 31	103	Apr 19, 2003	14	Apr 10-May 10
Peregrine Falcon	Feb 21	May 30	32	Apr 24, 2022	7	Apr 20-May 10
Gyrfalcon	Feb 16	Apr 7	1	x	x	4 singles only