

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



November 8, 2017

Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread its wings toward the south? Job 39:26

Along with Job, I think we would also have to answer no. However, we do understand, even as the glory days of Indian Summer turn dark and dreary, that all of nature is preparing for winter. Many creatures, of course, just leave Dodge, high-tailing it to a better place in the sun. Among the travelers are many birds of prey, especially those who fish for a living. As these raptors head south, whether in small family groups or large flocks, scientists track the numbers and routes of their migrations to learn more about these magnificent hunters of the sky.

Iowa is home to four Hawk Watches, a fall sport where spectators gather not to cheer on their favorite baseball or football team but to observe and count the many eagles, hawks, falcons, and other raptors traveling south along Iowa's "hawk highways." Fall counts provide data on these fall migrators, usually absent from Christmas Bird Counts, to help give scientists a better overall picture of bird populations here in the United States.

Our closest event is the High Trestle Trail Hawk Watch in Boone County. Each fall bird watchers gather to count raptors from high atop the Des Moines River Valley as well as educate the many bikers and hikers traveling along the trail. Another central Iowa event is the Grammer Grove Hawk Watch in Marshall County along the Iowa River Valley, while in Eastern Iowa the Marquette Hawk Watch occurs on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River at the Driftless Area Wetlands Center.

Iowa's fourth event, the Hitchcock Nature Center Hawk Watch in Pottawattamie County, is ranked as one of the top five hawk watches in the world. Each day from September 1 through December 20 volunteers climb the 56-foot hawk tower at the Nature Center to count raptors. Here prevailing westerly winds collide with the Loess Hills, the unique landform along the Missouri River Valley that we visited last summer, creating thermal updrafts that raptors ride to their wintering grounds.

Each year up to 13,000 raptors representing 20 species are counted along this Western Iowa Superhighway in the Sky. Common sightings include Turkey Vultures, Bald Eagles, along with Sharp-shinned, Swainson's, and Red-Tailed Hawks. The bird watchers also track other avian migrators ranging from Red-Headed Woodpeckers to American White Pelicans. This year's Fall Hawk Watch Festival will be held Saturday, November 18. Sounds like a fun road trip!

I'll close with a favorite moment of past Hawk Watch events as told by Rene Stroud, former Sac County Naturalist who now resides in Pottawattamie County, in the Sept./Oct. issue of *Iowa Outdoors*. "I recall being on the observation tower when a raptor flew by very close – providing an amazing look at the details of the bird. There was silence from the crowd until the bird had passed by, followed by a collective 'aaahhh!' It almost felt like we were up there with the raptor ourselves."

