

by Steve Hoffman

We are now nearing the conclusion of our 33rd consecutive full season of scientific counts of migrating birds of prey along the Bridger Ridge, and we are excited to provide everyone a brief synopsis of the 2024 count results thus far. Each year these counts begin on August 27th and conclude on October 31st. This long-term raptor population monitoring project is a partnership between Sacajawea Audubon Society and HawkWatch International. Using these birds as barometers of ecosystem health, the chief goal of this important work is to assess long-term trends of 17 raptor species that use the Bridger Ridge as they migrate from their northern breeding grounds (located in the Pacific Northwest, western Canada and Alaska) to spend the non-breeding period in a warmer climate where prey is readily available.

First, we wish to thank our three intrepid full-time observers: Alicia Wilson, Adam Brown & Rosemary D'Andrea. They have been doing an exceptional, highly professional job throughout the season. The generally strong counts experienced so far this season have been largely due to their outstanding efforts! For eight hours every day they have been consistently scanning the skies for distant, migrant raptors! We wish to express our profound appreciation for their persistent, focused work for the past 7+ weeks!

With only 15 days left for the 2024 Bridger Raptor Migration Count, now is a great opportunity to assess this season's numbers, based on 33 consecutive seasons of counts. Let's start with the good news!

Here are a few of the highlights of the season as of October 16th:

Total raptor count - 2,583 migrant raptors of 17 species

Record high counts have been tallied for both Broad-winged Hawks (211) and Cooper's Hawks (586)

Third highest count ever recorded for American Kestrel (154)

Above-average counts for Turkey Vulture (40), Osprey (18), Northern Harrier (86), Sharp-shinned Hawk (441), Red-tailed Hawk (204) and Merlin (27).

Perhaps the single most surprising result of the 2024 season was the unprecedented count of Broad-winged Hawks totaling 211. The previous season high for this species was 81, recorded one year ago. The long-term average for this species for the previous 32 years was 18. What might have caused this incredible explosion of Broad-winged Hawks?

The breeding range and habitat preference of this species is primarily North America's eastern forests. However, a small portion of their range extends into northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories of western Canada. These birds generally migrate in a

southeastern direction, moving primarily through the Mississippi, Appalachian and Atlantic flyways on their way to winter ranges in Central and South America. Are the widespread wildfires (as a result of the Climate Crisis) in western Canada causing the birds to search for new breeding habitats farther west? Perhaps. Future studies of this species' breeding range and migratory habits are needed to answer this question.

Sacajawea Audubon Society enjoyed another great weekend of public educational efforts at the annual Bridger RaptorFest on October 5th & 6th. In addition to the variety of activities at Bridger Bowl, public visitation at our ridgetop lookout both days was extraordinary, with more than 80 people joining our official counters throughout the weekend. Total daily counts were also good, with 72 raptors of 7 species, including 40 Golden Eagles on Saturday, and 45 raptors of 9 species on Sunday! The weather was perfect both days, although the air quality could have been better.

Of course, the most important finding of this long-term study has been the persistent decline in Golden Eagle numbers. The 2024 count for this species now stands at 626, suggesting that, by the end of October it is unlikely that the Golden Eagle count will reach 1,000 birds. The 32-year average count for this species is 1,260. Hence, it appears that the Golden Eagle population using this Rocky Mountain Front Flyway is continuing to show an ongoing, statistically significant decline. For the past several years the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) has been conducting long-term studies of the Golden Eagle population throughout the western United States. We all look forward to learning more about the likely causes of this decline as these studies continue for several more years.

We wish to sincerely thank Sacajawea Audubon Society members for their continued sponsorship and generous annual financial support for the Bridger Raptor Migration Project. We also wish to express our deepest appreciation for additional critical and generous financial support for the 2024 Bridger Raptor Count from Bill Simkins & Erna Smeets, Gina Carolan, Elizabeth Wakeman Henderson Charitable Foundation, Gallatin National Forest, GCC Trident Cement, Lou Ann Harris, Scotty & Carolyn Heppel, Terri Narotzky, Nick Bolgiano, Lila Bishop, Elizabeth Swanson, and many others! We also wish to extend our deepest appreciation to local volunteer observers Paulette Epple, John Parker and several others.

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