Illinois Beach State Park has been a Midwest hotspot for monitoring raptor migration for 10 years.

Hawk Watch

Story and Photos
By Vic Berardi

Six to eight weeks after leaving their breeding grounds in the arctic region, rough-legged hawks can be spotted migrating over Illinois.

It is a late October day with cold brisk winds coming from the northwest. White puffy clouds grace the deep blue sky. A cold front passed through late afternoon the day before.

For the die-hard raptor lovers present at the Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch this means that the larger hawks, the buteos, will begin arriving in sizable numbers. One of the most anticipated raptors is the rough-legged hawk, *Buteo lagopus*, a bird that travels all the way from the arctic region.

The rough-legged hawk begins its journey sometime in mid- to late September and arrives in northern Illinois about six to eight weeks later, a journey of more than 2,000 miles. It travels singularly or in small groups over the vast forests of the Canadian wilderness on its way to its wintering areas in Illinois. En route to Illinois, this hawk sometimes passes within eyesight of the hawk watchers at Illinois Beach State Park. One can only imagine what a bird—born just a few months earlier in arctic wilderness—contemplates as it ventures over heavily populated areas.

As intriguing as the rough-legged hawk is, it isn't the only raptor the hawk watchers are hoping to see. Northern goshawks and golden eagles are amongst the rarer birds seen every year, but a total of 16 species are regularly seen. As many as 20 species have been seen over the hawk watch's 9-year history.

The Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch is an organized raptor migration-monitoring site located on the shore of Lake Michigan in northeastern Illinois near Winthrop Harbor. It is within the confines of the North Unit of the state park, otherwise known as Camp Logan, formerly an Illinois National Guard

Juvenile red-tailed hawks (above) and sharp-shinned hawks (right) are among the earliest migrating raptors.

training facility from 1892 to the early 1970s. Buildings from that era remain, and are listed on the National Register of Historical Places.

The hawk watch officially began tallying data in 2000; however, the research and selection of the current site was done in 1998 and 1999 by the author. Having spent several years contributing to the raptor migration count at Concordia University, located just north of Milwaukee, it was conceivable that raptors continued their migration down the shoreline well into Illinois. In support of this theory, an organized count was conducted in the early 1980s by David Johnson and Joel Greenberg in the South Unit of Illinois Beach State Park. The results of their monitoring program were the basis for all future studies.

Why is this particular location conducive to monitoring raptor migration?

Most hawks, eagles and falcons avoid water crossings. They also rely on weather conditions that enable the best mode of long-distance flights—soaring and gliding when thermal lift is present. On days with strong, westerly winds these thermal lifts drift closer to the shoreline. As a result, raptors are subject to this phenomenon and collect in large numbers along the lake front.

Individual species in their fall migration are somewhat predictable and their frequencies of occurrences can be graphed and statistically analyzed. Such studies are being conducted at the Hawk Watch by Paul Sweet, an ornithologist and instructor at College of Lake County in Grayslake (data can be viewed at hawkcount.org.).

Generally, the first raptors seen are dispersing juvenile red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), broad-winged hawks (*Buteo platypterus*) and sharp-shinned hawks (*Accipiter striatus*). As these species continue, ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) and falcons increase.

By late September, broad-winged hawks push through, and in some years can be seen in great numbers. In 2003, the broad-winged hawk count was 9,553, with more than 3,000 seen in a single day.

The osprey, an Illinois-endangered species, is an uncommon migrant and occasional summer resident. Their primary breeding range is in southern Canada.

As October progresses, sightings of bald eagles (above), golden eagles and sharp-shinned hawks increase.

Peregrine falcons of the arctic subspecies (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*) come through from late September into early October, and are followed by the merlin (*Falco columbarius*). The Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch tallies more merlin than any other count site west of the Atlantic Coast, with an annual average of 393.

As October progresses, sharp-shinned hawks and buteos increase, and both bald (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and golden (*Aquila chrysaetos*) eagles also appear. In late October into early November, northern goshawks (*Accipiter gentilis*) appear along with rough-legged hawks.

But by far, the most common raptor species counted is the red-tailed hawk, with an annual average of more than 1,600. Typically only the Eastern (*B. j. borealis*) subspecies is seen, but on occasion the dark morph western (*B. j. calurus*) subspecies also are present. The red-tailed hawk is closely followed in numbers by the sharp-shinned hawk which averages more than 1,300 annually. Other raptors seen in various quantities are the northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) and American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*).

Over the years some raptor rarities have been seen, including Missippippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*), prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) and, in 2008, the site's first gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*).

The Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch has become a nationally recognized raptor migration monitoring site and is a study site in the Raptor Population Index which is conducted jointly by the Hawk Migration Association of North America, Hawkwatch International, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and Bird Studies Canada. Information on the RPI project can be found at rpi-project.org.

The Illinois Beach State Park Hawk Watch, now entering its 10th year, is a remarkable event, and one that will be enjoyed by all—non-birders, beginning and experienced birders—who visit.

With more than 1,600 sightings annually, the red-tailed hawk is the most common raptor species seen, including a few dark morph red-tailed hawks.

At a glance

Hawk Migration Association of North America: Visit hmana.org for directions and further information.

Illinois Beach State Park Lake, Zion, IL 60099
Telephone: 847-662-4811
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r2/ilbeach.htm
Details: See the Web site for park and hawk watch hours. The organized count is conducted from the last Saturday of August until the last Sunday of November, a period of approximately 90 days. One to two of the 21 volunteers are present, weather permitting, every day during that time frame from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. to conduct the day's tally of raptors observed migrating. Some days are shortened due to weather, and other days stretch a bit further in hours to accommodate a migration of raptors that may occur later in the day.