

Mount Brown Hawk Watch
Summary Report 2018
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Introduction

We officially kick-started the Mount Brown Hawk Watch Program in September 2018. This was in spite of wildfire threatening to shut it down for a second year in a row. It was a fitting year to start the program, given that 2018 was the “Year of the Bird”, in celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Our main focal species, the Golden Eagle, is a long-distance migrant.

Glacier National Park (GNP) boasts one of the most important Golden Eagle (GOEA) migration routes in North America. Biologists recorded nearly 2000 GOEA migrating past Mt. Brown annually from 1994 through 1996. Recent trend data from outside GNP, however, indicate significant declines in their numbers, attributed to environmental contaminants, habitat loss, prey declines, and climate change. We are in a position here in GNP, to collect additional data on migrating GOEA numbers to aid in the population assessment and conservation of GOEA and other raptors by establishing a Hawk Watch site.

On August 23, we provided a training session at the Apgar Education Center, sharing an overview of the program, our objectives, and protocols with 25 staff members and volunteers. We also hosted a Migration Day Education Event on October 13, from 12-4 pm at the Lake McDonald Lodge site that was open to the public. We met by the interpretive sign that informs people about the importance of Mount Brown for migrating raptors. Although the weather and winds were very poor for migrating raptors (east winds with only two birds in four hours), we had about 50 visitors stop by to learn about the project.

We surveyed migrating raptors in two locations in 2018. The main location was on the Mount Brown Trail about 800 feet below the Mount Brown Lookout. The second location was near the Lake McDonald Lodge in front of Jammer Joe’s parking lot.

Mount Brown Observation Point

Our first day surveying from the Mount Brown observation point (OP), did not occur until September 14 because of restricted access to the trail due to concerns about the Howe Ridge. Once we gained access to the site, we successfully conducted 23 days of raptor surveys. We had 20 volunteers and four staff members invest 338.5 hours at the site. We missed some survey days due to restricted access for volunteers and poor weather conditions.

As planned, observers committed to surveying two or more days in row, were treated to a rare overnight stay in the Mount Brown Lookout where both sunrises and sunsets were magnificent! Observers at the Mount Brown OP were often rewarded with close-up views of migrating eagles (Figure 1).

We counted 2,013 migrating raptors at the Mount Brown OP in 2018. Of these raptors, 84% (n= 1,683) were Golden Eagles (Figure 2). Peak migration occurred on October 16 (Figure 3). This was a day for the record books as we counted 484 migrating raptors, 448 of which were Golden Eagles. Volunteers were exuberant when we surpassed 400 raptors (Figure 4)!



Figure 1. Picture of immature Golden Eagle from Mount Brown observation point, catching thermals to gain altitude before migrating further south.

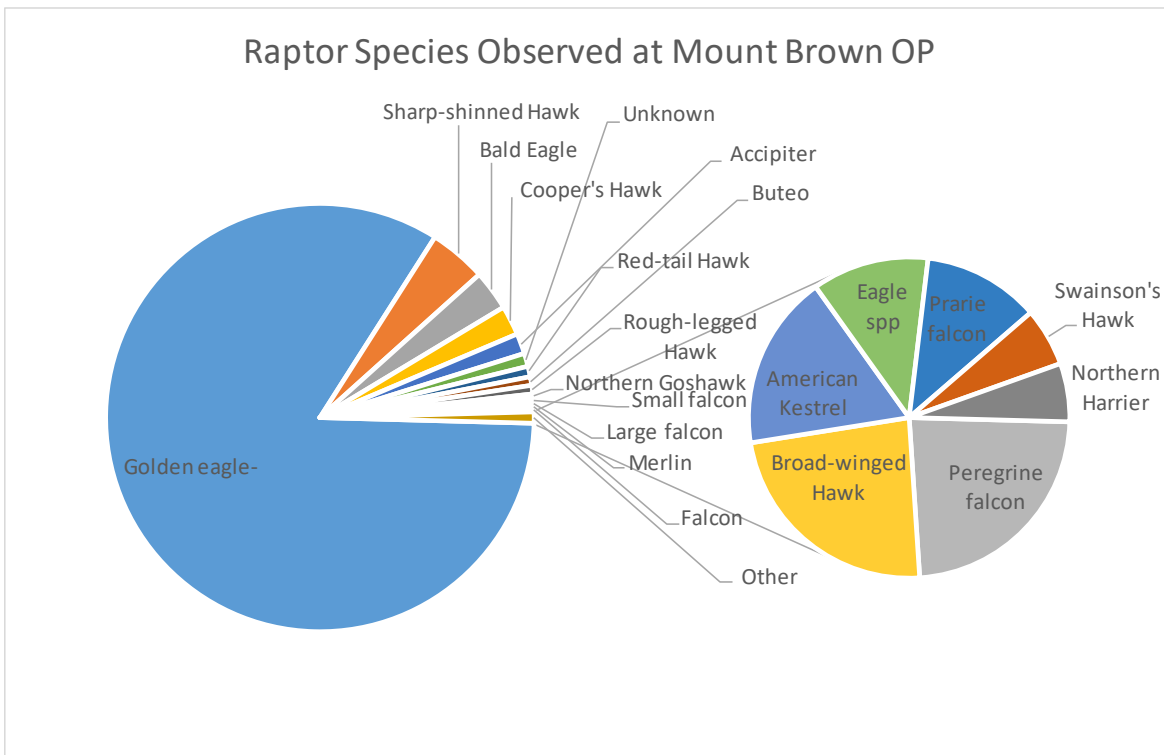


Figure 2. Graph showing proportion of migrating raptors by species counted at Mount Brown OP, 2018.

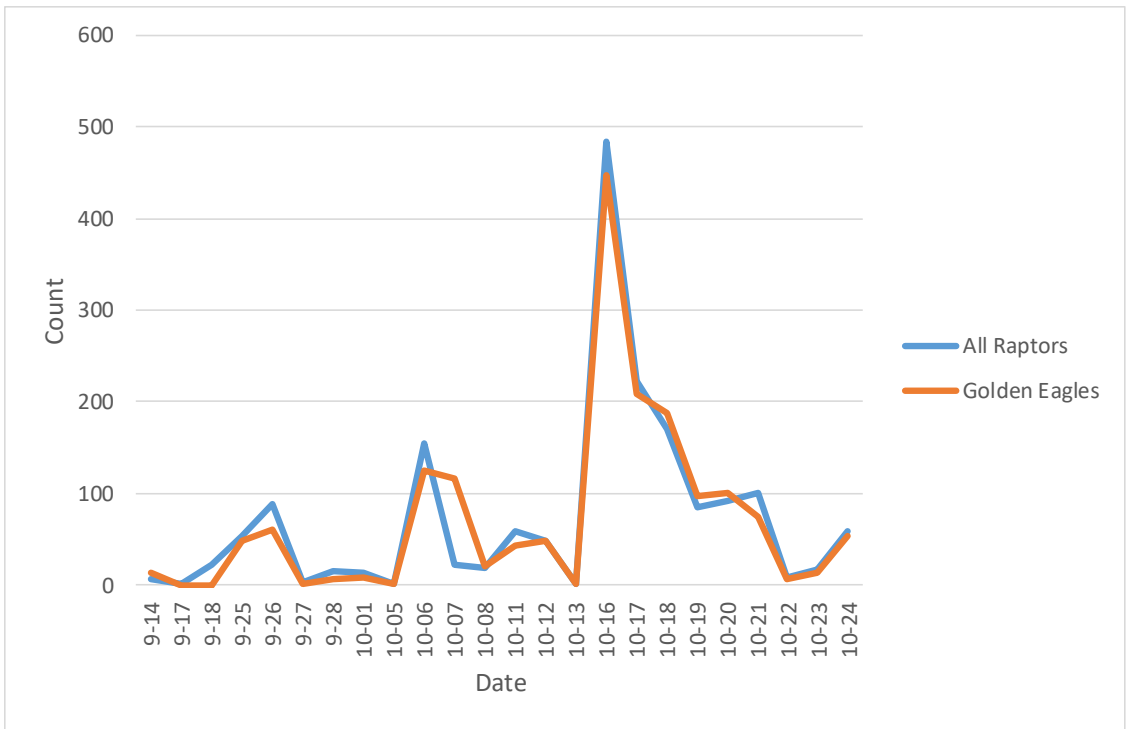


Figure 3. Number of migrating raptors, and Golden Eagles alone, counted at Mount Brown OP by date, 2018.



Figure 4. Volunteers posing as the number “400” and a Golden Eagle to demonstrate how many raptors they had counted so far that day at the Mount Brown OP. By the day’s end, we had counted 484 raptors.

Lake McDonald Lodge Observation Point

We also surveyed migrating raptors from the Lake McDonald Lodge OP on 13 different days in 2018. Again, due to restricted access from the fire, inclement weather, and limited staff and volunteers, we were not able to survey every day. Four staff and nine volunteers invested 85.5 hours at this site in 2018.

From this OP we counted 328 migrating raptors, 77 percent (n=251) of which were Golden Eagles. We recorded a larger proportion of unknown raptors from this OP compared to Mount Brown due to the distance away of the migrating birds.

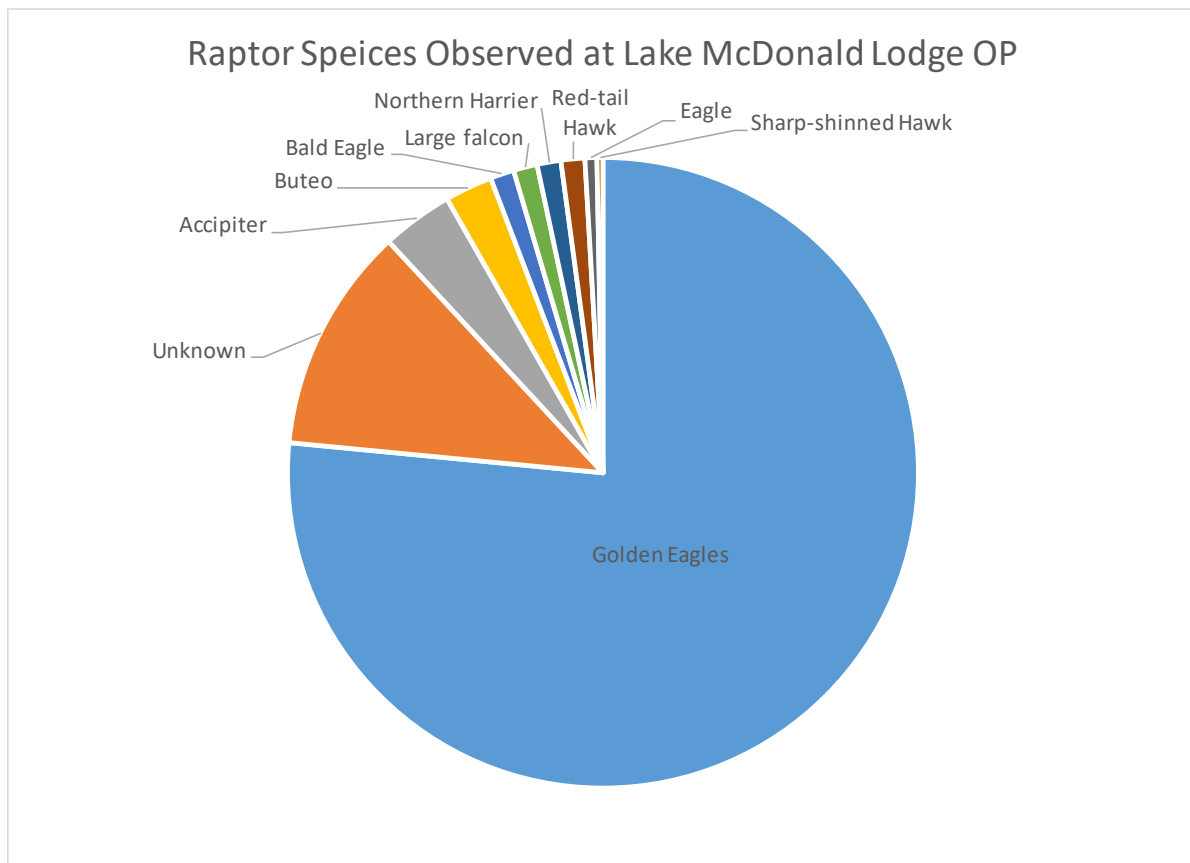


Figure 5. Graph showing proportion of migrating raptors by species counted from Lake McDonald Lodge OP, 2018.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the volunteers who helped to make this program a reality. We could not do it without you! Many NPS staff also assisted with this project by directing and refurbishing the Mount Brown Lookout and its facilities, trail improvements, and delivering supplies. Special thanks to Glacier National Park Volunteers Associates and Glacier National Park Conservancy and their donors for the financial support. Without this support, this project would not be possible.