

The Jewel Basin Hawkwatch: A Wonderful Fall Adventure

By Bo Crees



The Jewel Basin Hawkwatch ridge. Raptors use air updrafts to effortlessly course along the ridgeline on their way to their wintering grounds

In the fall of 2007 a friend suggested we hike up to a new hawkwatch site on a high, narrow mountain ridge about 9 miles northeast of Bigfork. At the time, I have never visited a hawkwatch and was excitedly looking forward to the new experience. I've previously heard of several well-known hawkwatch locations such as Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, the Goshute Mountains in eastern Nevada and the Bridger Mountains near Bozeman. I knew these were prominent locations where migrating raptors congregate in order to make their migration more efficient and less taxing energetically. Hawkwatch sites are typically located on ridges that due to geography and wind patterns offer predictable air updrafts. These updrafts allow raptors to gain lift and soar relatively effortlessly along the ridge, sometimes for dozens of miles. This helps them conserve a significant amount of energy on their long journey to their wintering or breeding grounds. Anyone that has been to a hawkwatch is likely familiar with the sight of raptors coursing smoothly through the air for long distances without a single wingbeat. More than 13 years ago Dan and Susannah Casey noticed a large number of raptors taking advantage of updrafts in the vicinity of Mount Aeneas, and the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch was born.

The trail up to the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch is beautiful. The commanding Flathead Lake and Valley views are breathtaking, and I remember being particularly impressed with the gorgeous red and orange colors of the dense huckleberry bushes that cover the slopes and forest floor. As we hiked higher and approached the hawkwatch ridge, the trees became shorter and more wind-twisted (a phenomenon known as “Krummholtz”) as a result of being constantly pummeled by the same strong winds that carry the raptors along. After about an hour we reached the ridge crest and in an instant the stunning Jewel Basin, dotted with lakes, opened up below us. We followed the ridgeline



A Sharp-shinned Hawk attacking the owl decoy. Many small hawks and falcons take a brief detour to check out the owl, allowing for great looks.

to the northwest for several hundred feet and made it to the new hawkwatch location where we met Dan Casey around 10 a.m. As soon as we arrived Dan erected a long pole topped with a plastic Great Horned Owl and secured it to a nearby tree. Great Horned Owls are known predators of many raptor species, and raptors moving along the ridge often make small detours to investigate or briefly attack the plastic owl, allowing for great looks and easy identification. Moments after the owl was set up, a Peregrine Falcon flew in at an incredible speed and made a couple of very close passes- nearly making contact with the decoy- before continuing on. It was the only Peregrine we observed that day, and one of more than a dozen different species that cruised by, if I remember correctly.

During the breeding season raptors have large territories and raptor populations are spread over large geographic regions, so it can be challenging to get useful and accurate population estimates using traditional survey techniques. During fall migration these raptors converge and funnel through a few narrow natural corridors such as the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch ridge, and researchers- with considerable help from many citizen scientists- can get more robust population estimates and trends by closely monitoring these passageways over time.

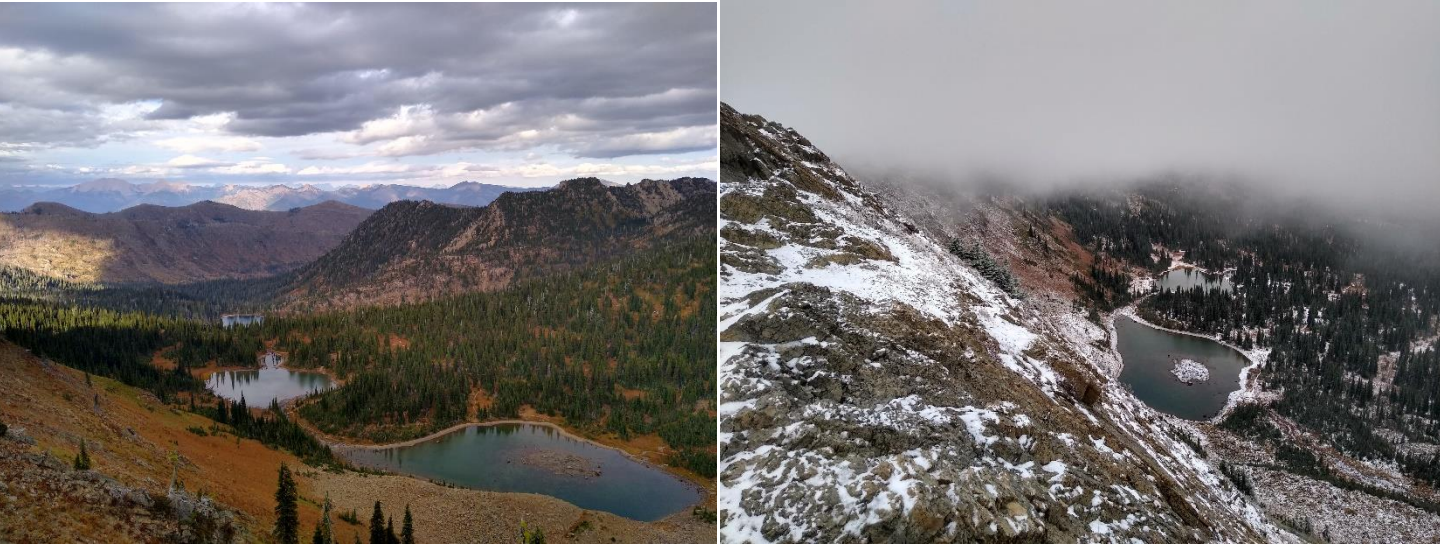
The Jewel Basin Hawkwatch has been going strong since 2007, and a few weeks ago, thirteen years after my initial hike up the mountain, I made it up to the hawkwatch again. I met Joshua Covill- the primary hawk counter that day- at the Camp Misery trailhead on October 8, around 8:15 a.m., and headed up shortly after. As soon as we hit the trail I was flooded with memories. The weather was great, and the hike was just as breathtaking as I had remembered. About 2.8 miles and 1,400 feet in elevation later we were at the top of the ridge, happy to see that several volunteers were already there, ready to count. Hawkwatch sites are popular hangout spots where close-knit communities of dedicated volunteers and opportunistic visitors can enjoy each other's company while collecting valuable data. It ended up being an awesome day. With the help of about 10 volunteers we counted 49 Golden Eagles- the highest one-day eagle total in 2020- and 58 other raptors from 9 different species. The Jewel Basin Hawkwatch is great because in addition to the beautiful scenery you get incredible, close and personal looks of many of the raptors that are moving south along the ridge. Most birds can be easily identified without binoculars, and many smaller raptors such as the Sharp-shinned Hawk- the most commonly seen raptor at this site- make spectacular dives at the resident plastic owl and impress observers with acrobatic maneuvers rarely seen elsewhere.



Sharp-shinned Hawk flying along the ridge and a well-camouflaged Dusky Grouse on rock outcrops below.

We saw fewer raptors on October 9, my second day on the mountain, with 24 Golden Eagles, 20 Sharp-shinned Hawks and 15 other raptors from 8 additional species. Several volunteers showed up and we had a wonderful time even though dense smoke rolled in later in the afternoon and reduced visibility to only a couple of miles. On my third day I was the only person at the hawkwatch, and had to bundle up as strong, cold winds and rain overtook the mountain and a major system rolled in. I ended the count a few hours earlier than normal when raptor activity dropped off significantly. Since hawkwatch sites are usually on high mountain ridges and monitoring continues until late fall, it is common to lose several- sometimes many- days each season to bad weather. Still, I was happy to observe 31 raptors, including 10 Golden Eagles and 16 Sharp-shinned Hawks. Day 4 on the mountain was a write-off, with several inches of snow and intense, frigid winds. I hiked up anyway in hope of seeing a few bold raptors under the low cloud ceiling, but saw nothing but a couple of Mountain Goats, a Dusky Grouse, several resident songbirds and a small flock of Snow Geese.

After about an hour I decided to head down to a lower observation point below the clouds and was amazed to run into two volunteers that were heading up to the frigid, soaked in ridge. Hawkwatchers are tough! The last count in 2020 took place 5 days later, on October 15, when BJ Worth drove up the icy Jewel Basin road and braved 16 inches of snow on the ridge to count 10 raptors, including 6 Golden Eagles.



The beautiful Jewel Basin and Picnic Lakes as viewed from the hawkwatch on day 2 (L) and day 4

Overall, we had a great 2020 fall migration at the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch. It was the third best season ever with a total count of 3,088 birds, which included the highest single day count, a remarkable 595 birds on September 21. On that day we set a new one-day high count total for Sharp-shinned Hawk (351), Cooper's Hawk (132), Red-tailed Hawk (61) and Broad-winged Hawk (21). I wish I was there to witness that flight!

In 13 seasons at the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch hundreds of official counters and volunteers have recorded 32,767 raptors. This year the hawkwatch reached a number of notable milestones--we recorded our 15,000th Sharp-shinned Hawk, our 20,000th Accipiter, and our 5,000th Golden Eagle. Since raptors use migration corridors in a consistent, predictable manner, hawkwatch sites like Jewel Basin- when used as a part of a hawkwatch network across large geographic regions- are an extremely valuable research tool that gives us insight into long term population trends. In addition, they are wonderful, beautiful birding locations where we can spend several enjoyable hours with old friends and make new friends while watching majestic eagles and hawks pass incredibly close by. I would encourage anyone to make the trip up to the Jewel Basin Hawkwatch next fall and take part in this long-term monitoring project. Whether you are an experienced birder or a beginner, it is an unforgettable experience!

The author, the ridge and a mountain goat hanging out nearby

