

Jewel Basin Hawkwatch 2021- A Record Breaking Season!

By Bo Crees



Primary counter Joshua Covill and volunteers scanning for approaching raptors

Where can you go on a one hour hike and arrive at a breathtaking vista point from which you can watch a grizzly bear foraging for hours from a safe distance, mingle with mountain goats, and see hundreds of migrating raptors that regularly pass so close that you can actually see the color of their eyes? I know of only one such location: the Jewel Basin hawkwatch. This site sits atop of a narrow, steep ridge less than a mile northwest of the summit of Mt. Aeneas and about 9 miles northeast of Bigfork. The dozens, if not hundreds over the years, of dedicated staff and volunteers that monitor raptor movement at this site every fall know how incredible this hawkwatch is. Even on slow days, when less than a handful of raptors pass by every hour, it is a fantastic place to be. On good days, when Sharp-shinned Hawks, Golden Eagles, Cooper's Hawks and Red-tailed Hawks, in addition to 14 other raptor species, may fly by at a rate of one or more every minute, the experience is simply unforgettable.

The Jewel Basin hawkwatch is accessed via the Camp Misery trailhead which is at the end of the bumpy, winding and steep Jewel Basin road that originates about a mile northeast of Echo Lake. This popular trailhead can be extremely busy in the summer but is relatively quiet in September and October. The hike up to the hawkwatch is beautiful and enjoyable. It initially meanders through a mature spruce/subalpine fir forest with dense understory, where hikers commonly encounter Steller's Jays, Canada Jays, Mountain Chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Pine Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins and the occasional Northern Pygmy Owl. About a mile up the trail you traverse an old burn covered with grouseberry, huckleberry and mountain ash that paint the mountainsides with beautiful fall shades of red and yellow. The trail then switchbacks through a subalpine fir forest with fairly dense, smaller trees stunted by the harsh weather common at these higher elevations. About 1 to 1.5 hours into the hike, depending on your pace, you reach a narrow ridgeline with a large communication structure. At that point you can see the summit of Mt. Aeneas just over a half mile to the southeast, the scenic lakes of the Jewel Basin, including the popular Picnic Lakes and Black Lake, and the Jewel Basin hawkwatch site less than a ¼ mile to the NW along the ridge, all spread in front of you. Mountain goats and Dusky Grouse are commonly encountered around this area, and often entertain hawkwatchers during periods of slow raptor movement.



A Sharp-shinned Hawk near the owl decoy used to briefly detour passing raptors for a better look

But “slow” would not be a good descriptive term for the 2021 hawkwatch season at Jewel Basin. Partners are having an incredible, record-breaking year at this world-class raptor migration site, and the season is not even over! The previous record of 3,411 raptors in a season has been shattered this year, and as of October 11, 2021 the still-increasing number of raptors observed at Jewel Basin is sitting at an amazing 4,078!

We have also recorded- or are rapidly approaching- new season high totals for the majority of the 17 species we normally see at the site. Atop the list, as always, is the Sharp-shinned Hawk. The previous season high for this species was 1,778, and so far this season we've recorded 2,342! Other species observed at record numbers are Cooper's Hawk, with 595 this year compared to the previous record of 504, Broad-winged Hawk, with a previous season high of 41 individuals and 56 this year, the uncommon Swainson's Hawk, with 7 observations this year more than doubling the previous record of 3, and 4 observations of the even less common Ferruginous Hawk, which up to this year was never seen more than once per season. We are currently sitting at 314 Red-tailed Hawks and are likely to surpass the previous record of 321. It has also been a phenomenal falcon year at the hawkwatch, with 61 Merlins (previous highest season total = 39), 24 Peregrine Falcons (22) and 27 Prairie Falcons (21). We are only 2 birds short of breaking the season high total of 100 American Kestrels!



One of the 60 Golden Eagles observed on Oct. 5

On October 4th I counted raptors at the hawkwatch all by myself, as no other volunteers showed up, which is somewhat unusual. I was quite busy for much of the day and ended up with a total of 251 raptors, the most I've ever seen at the Jewel Basin site. As many hawkwatch volunteers know, time seems to fly on such days, and before you know it it's 5:30 p.m. and raptor movement, along with the rush of spotting and identifying these amazing birds, begins to wind down. The following day, October 5th, ended up being much more remarkable. I hiked up with long time "Jeweler" Dan Casey on a gorgeous fall morning, and conditions looked promising for a great raptor flight. And what a flight it was! With the help of about ten volunteers we recorded an incredible 488 raptors that passed by at a rate of about one per minute! This was the 2nd best day in the 14 year history of the Jewel Basin hawkwatch. Of the 488 raptors, 334 were Sharp-shinned Hawks (2nd best 1 day total for this species) and 60 were Golden Eagles (best Golden Eagle day of the season at that point). The total of 16 Merlins was exactly double the previous 1 day record for this species!

Another noteworthy day I was fortunate to experience earlier in the season was September 14, when Joshua Covill and I spotted an incredible 30 Broad-winged Hawks (previous 1 day record was 21) that circled over the hawkwatch in three distinct kettles. It's been years since I've seen Broad-winged Hawks in Montana, so seeing so many, up close, was particularly thrilling.



An uncommon dark morph Broad-winged Hawk, one of the record-breaking 30 observed on Sept. 14

Over the history of the Jewel Basin survey site, 36,845 raptors have been recorded, including 24,139 Accipiters (Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Northern Goshawk)! The local Flathead Audubon Society has been key to funding and staffing this success and this year's primary observers include Joshua Covill, Dan Casey, BJ Worth, Nickie Broesel, Rod Walette, Pete Fisher, and myself, Bo Crees. Numerous volunteers, most notably Pam Williston, have also contributed many hours of observation.



Joshua Covill ignoring a goat while searching for raptors, and several volunteers scanning the northern horizon for incoming birds

As of October 11, there have been 41 survey days, totaling 268 survey hours; and an all-time high average of 14 birds per hour, and 99 birds per survey. We have had 15 days with more than 100 raptors, eight days with more than 200 birds, and two with more than 300 birds, including the aforementioned 2nd best day ever with 488! An absolutely fantastic season at one of the best hawkwatch sites in the western United States!