

HOOK MOUNTAIN: HIGHWAY FOR HAWKS

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in collaboration with STILES THOMAS

In Upper Nyack, New York, about two miles north of where the Tappan Zee bridge spans the Hudson River at its widest point, there is a sheer cliff rising 730 feet above the shoreline. This is Hook Mountain, the northernmost outcropping of the Palisades.

One might think that the name for Hook Mountain derives from its shape, since the mountain forms a ridge which runs from north to south and then "hooks" sharply to the west. But nomenclature is rarely so logical and thus the name for Hook Mountain stems instead from a Dutch term, "Verdrietige Hoeck" which means troublesome point. As the seventeenth century river boats approached this area of the Hudson, they invariably lost a good deal of time as the mountain would block the wind. Hence the term "Verdrietige Hoeck," subsequently shortened and anglicized to Hook Mountain.

It is precisely because of the nature of wind currents surrounding Hook Mountain that it has recently received much attention from bird watchers and naturalists. Much to the surprise of metropolitan New York area bird watchers, who associated hawk migration with distant areas such as Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania, it has been discovered that Hook Mountain is an excellent site for observing migrating raptors. The birds of prey can be seen not only in large numbers, but also at close range, often at eye level or below. The hawks seek the short East-West ridge and fly close to the observation site in order to take advantage of updrafts created by the steep slope of the mountain. And all of this occurs within sight of the New York skyline!

Just as favorable winds attract migrating hawks, so do the migrating birds of prey attract an unusual species of bird watcher—the hawk watcher. Hawk watching is in many ways a strange pastime, involving long hours and frequent disappointments, rewarded by a few moments of exhilaration when a large kettle of Broad-winged Hawks or a rarity such as an eagle comes soaring gracefully toward you. The fascination produced by the power and beauty of hawks can only be understood by experiencing such moments. There are many devotees of the increasingly popular sport of hawk watching. Most are generally interested in bird watching, but there are some ardent devotees who would ignore close-by bluebirds and other in-

teresting passerines in favor of a glimpse of the distant silhouette of a hawk.

Although birders and naturalists have long been fascinated by the phenomenon of hawk migration, the sport of hawk watching did not begin in any organized fashion until the establishment of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in 1934. In that year, a militant conservationist, Mrs. Charles Noel Edge, leased (and later bought) a large tract of land along the Blue Mountains in Pennsylvania which had been a favorite shooting stand for misguided hunters engaged in the "sport" of slaughtering migrating hawks. She hired a remarkable young naturalist, Maurice Broun, as caretaker for the property. With his courageous wife Irma, Broun withstood intimidation from frustrated hunters, set about managing the newly created sanctuary and collecting the first systematic records of raptor migration. The entertaining story of Hawk Mountain can be found in Maurice Broun's book, *Hawks Aloft* (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1949).

As Maurice Broun's work gradually became known in ornithological circles, several other hawk lookouts were established in the 1940's and the sport of hawk watching was born. Increasing in popularity ever since, there are now about one hundred hawk watches throughout North America. In 1974 the Hawk Mountain Association and the National Audubon Society co-sponsored the first North American Hawk Migration Conference, held that spring in Syracuse, New York. The conference was an enormous success and resulted in the creation of the Hawk Migration Association of North America, which provides standardized reporting procedures and other organizational aids so that valuable observations collected by hawk enthusiasts may be utilized by migration researchers. Thus the sport of hawk watching has become not only an enjoyable pastime but also an important adjunct to research which will ultimately be beneficial to the hawks.

Despite the increasing popularity of hawk watching, up to 1970 there were few lookouts in the vicinity of the metropolitan New York area. The Montclair, New Jersey lookout was begun in the early 1950's, followed in 1959 by the Mt. Peter Hawk Watch in Orange Co., New York. But sizeable flights at these locations are generally limited to the Broad-wing movement in September, and New York City birders often traveled to Cape May or to the Kittatinny Ridge lookouts to watch hawks at other times.

No one suspected that there was an excellent hawk lookout along the Hudson, within view of New York City. No mention of hawk

migrations at Hook Mountain is made by Arbib, *et al.* (*Enjoying Birds Around New York City*), Bull (*Birds of the New York Area*), or even Deed (*The Birds of Rockland County*). Hook Mountain was known as a former nesting site for Peregrine Falcons and wintering ground for Bald Eagles, but no mention is given to other birds of prey.

Unbeknownst to other birders, one man had discovered tremendous autumn hawk flights at Hook Mountain. John Rex, a German-born bird watcher now residing in West New York, New Jersey, had heard of the eagles in the area and had noticed Hook Mountain during his frequent canoe trips on the Hudson. (He once canoed all the way from New York to Albany.) In the late 1940's he began making day trips to the Hook on a regular basis, and in the 1960's he introduced Ed and Lana Mills, two of New York's most ardent hawk watchers, to the area. By the late 1960's perhaps a half-dozen birders from the city made occasional trips to the Hook each autumn. Ironically, it was not until 1970 that local birders in Rockland County became aware of the extent of the migration at Hook Mountain. This occurred when the author of this report, after spending a day searching for migrating hawks elsewhere, returned to his home under the cliffs of the Hook and noticed a kettle of Broad-wings settle down for the evening. The next day he bushwacked to the top and discovered that the observation site he had long been searching for was in his own back yard.

About the same time that he was making this discovery, the Mills invited Stiles Thomas to the Hook. Stiles Thomas is a leading hawk watcher in the New York-New Jersey area. He was Eastern Director for the Society for the Preservation of Birds of Prey, and he had founded the Mt. Peter Hawk Watch. He was immediately convinced that Hook Mountain was a premier location for a watch, and he set about applying his considerable organizational skills to the formation of a formal hawk watch. The following summer he called a meeting of the little band of hawk watchers who frequented the Hook, and in the autumn of 1971 the first Hook Mountain Hawk Watch was begun.

The first watch proved to be an enormous success. After a slow start, the Broad-winged Hawks began to appear in large numbers, but perhaps it was the sighting of three Bald Eagles and a Golden Eagle in the third week of the watch that did more than anything else to stimulate interest in the effort. In all, some 7067 raptors were observed during the 1971 watch, with 13 species of hawks represented.

Perhaps as significant as the numbers seen was the fact that many of the hawks would pass at very close range. The sight of a Sharp-shinned Hawk darting through the trees to attack an owl lure would produce more converts than a dozen hawk silhouettes high overhead.

The optimism generated by the 1971 success was somewhat dissipated by poor weather and poor numbers in the first weeks of the second watch in 1972. The relationship between weather conditions and migration patterns is not at all clear, with many confusing and often contradictory theories on the part of both ornithologists and laymen, but one thing is certain, poor weather makes for poor hawking. In any case, there was a substantial decrease from 1971 in the numbers of hawks seen in September and October of 1972, probably due to the poor weather. But just as the watch was drawing to a close, one of the more rare and beautiful birds of prey, the Northern Goshawk, began to appear almost daily. It was decided to continue the watch into November, an effort that was well rewarded by an exceptionally large flight of goshawks. In all some 112 "gos" were observed, probably the greatest southward migration for this species since 1927, making 1972 the year of the goshawk.

In 1973 record numbers of hawks were observed at the Hook. Weather conditions were generally favorable throughout the watch, with fair skies and prevailing north or northwesterly winds. The watch began on a good note, with a mature Bald Eagle on the first day, September 8. This proved to be a harbinger of things to come. On September 10, 1315 hawks passed by the Hook, and three days later there was a record flight of 2903 raptors, including another Bald Eagle in the middle of a low flying kettle of 300 Broad-winged Hawks. As Walter Friton, a Hook Mountain regular, put it, "It was like a battleship with her escort." The 1973 total of 7762 Broad-wings was more than twice either of the two previous years. Toward the end of September, the Broad-wings decreased, but Sharp-shinned Hawks took up the slack. The good weather continued in October, providing a constant passage of a variety of hawks, geese and passerines.

In November of 1973 the goshawks reappeared, although not with the same frequency as the previous year, thus following the general pattern for this species. Periodically these big "blue darters" migrate down from the Far North in exceptional numbers, followed by an "echo" flight the next year, and then they again became rare.

It would appear that each year the Hook Mountain Hawk Watch

produces one highlight which stands out, and 1974 was no exception to this pattern. Just as 1972 was the year of the goshawk and 1973 was the year of record numbers overall, 1974 was highlighted by a record flight of accipiters. Weather conditions were mixed throughout the watch, with prolonged periods of haze and unfavorable winds but generally followed by fair skies and northwest winds. These conditions resulted in a good flight overall, with the total number of raptors close to that of the record 1973 flight. However, totals can be deceptive, as they are largely determined by the fickle nature of the local Broad-wing movement, and the feature of the 1974 watch was the accipiter flight. Record numbers of Sharp-shins were seen; the goshawk, while less numerous than during the influx of the two prior years, continued to be observed in numbers suggesting a range extension; and perhaps most encouraging was the record number of Cooper's Hawks, offsetting a pattern of continuous decline throughout the east.

Table 1 presents a summary of each species observed in the four years of the Hook Mountain Hawk Watch. The most common hawk observed is the Broad-wing, which generally migrate in the middle of September. It should be noted that although by far the most common raptor seen, Broad-wings constitute only about one half of the hawks seen at Hook Mountain. At many lookouts, these chunky buteos account for 80% to 90% of the hawks seen. The next most common raptor observed is the aggressive Sharp-shinned Hawk. Sharp-shins reach a peak in early October and often provide spectacular displays as they dive at other hawks or at an owl lure. Other species of hawks commonly seen include the American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, Osprey, Marsh Hawk and Red-Shouldered Hawk.

TABLE I
Summary of Hook Mountain Hawk Watch
1971 - 1974

	1971	1972	1973	1974
Goshawk	2	112	87	19
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2,095	1,694	1,932	2,667
Cooper's Hawk	37	43	20	55
Red-tailed Hawk	347	452	462	374
Red-shouldered Hawk	85	93	146	177
Broad-winged Hawk	3,295	1,105	7,762	6,324
Rough-legged Hawk	0	1	2	1

Summary of Hook Mountain Hawk Watch (continued)

	1971	1972	1973	1974
Golden Eagle	5	3	7	3
Bald Eagle	5	1	3	4
Marsh Hawk	200	102	162	177
Osprey	256	122	206	178
Peregrine Falcon	4	7	2	2
Merlin	7	7	9	8
American Kestrel	623	324	354	512
Unidentified Hawks	103	89	162	188
TOTALS	7,064	4,155	11,316	10,689

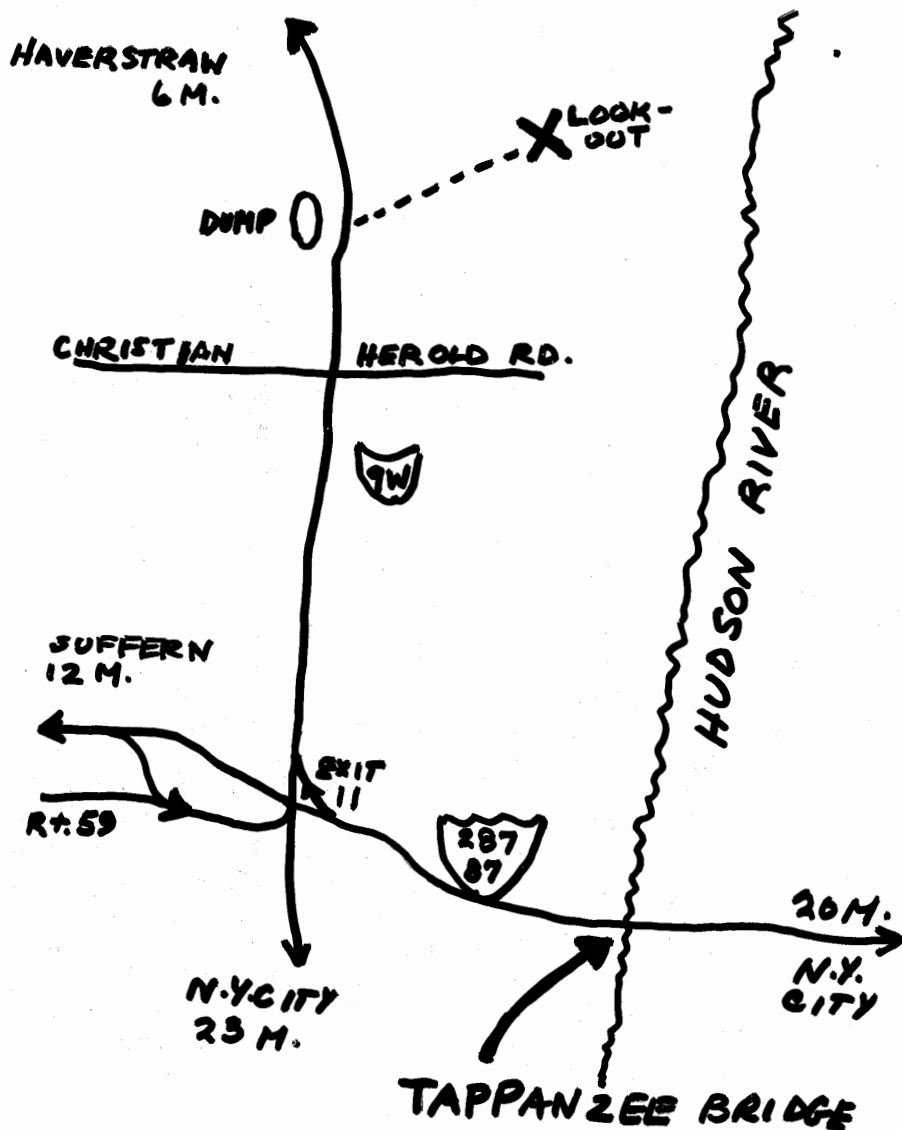
Editors' Note: Due to corrections, the figures for 1974 differ slightly from those of other sources.

The autumn hawk watching season can be divided into three periods. The first wave of migration occurs in the middle of September when the Broad-wings pass in large kettles. This is also the most likely time to find the Bald Eagle. In late September and early October the Sharp-shins are seen in large numbers. This is also the period in which one finds the greatest variety of raptors. On several days there have been as many as eleven different kinds of hawks seen at the Hook. The third period of the migration occurs from late October through November when the Red-tails pass. It is then that one has the best chance to see a goshawk or a Golden Eagle.

It should also be noted that there is a spring hawk migration at Hook Mountain as well. The spring flight, for reasons as yet unknown, is generally more spread out. Consequently the numbers observed do not approach autumn figures but there are often excellent days. For example, on April 27 of this year there was a flight of some 909 hawks of ten species including both a Bald Eagle and a Golden Eagle.

Adding to the observers' pleasure at the Hook is a variety of birds other than hawks—various warblers, nesting bluebirds, an occasional Pileated or Red-headed Woodpecker, tremendous flights of swallows, winter finches, loons, shorebirds and a variety of ducks. Large flocks of cormorants, brant and geese are regularly seen. One of the most unusual sights ever witnessed at the Hook occurred on October 6, 1973. As a flock of about 200 Canada Geese passed very high over the Hudson River, one bird suddenly dropped and tumbled wing over wing into the river, an apparent victim of a heart attack.

HOOK MOUNTAIN



The 1975 Hook Mountain Hawk Watch will begin on September 6 and continue into November. Experienced leaders will be on hand each day, weather permitting, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Anyone who would like to assist in this project should contact Stiles Thomas, P.O. Box 168, Allendale, New Jersey 07401. Hook Mountain can easily be reached by car or public transportation. A marked path to the top of the Hook begins on the east side of Route 9W about two miles north of the New York State Thruway. Cars should be parked at the "dump" at the top of the hill. The entrance to the path is found by walking about 200 feet south on 9W and crossing to the east side. A stencilled arrow in the roadway points to the trail. Uphill walking time is about 20 minutes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eric Single is a research analyst who lives in Upper Nyack, New York. Upon receiving his doctorate in sociology from Columbia University in 1973, Mr. Single set about combining his vocation (research) with his avocation (birding). He is currently director of the Jamaica Bay Preservation Project, a study of visitor impact at Jamaica Bay sponsored by the National Park Service. He is also president of the Rockland Audubon Society, clearinghouse chairman of the Hawk Migration Association of North America, Eastern Director of the Society for Preservation of Birds of Prey, and lecturer on hawks for the New Jersey Audubon Society. In addition, he is a member of the Linnaean Society and the Federation of NYS Bird Clubs.

Stiles Thomas is director of the Hook Mountain Hawk Watch. He is a member of the executive board of the Hawk Migration Association of North America and is past president of the Fyke Nature Association. He was formerly Eastern Director of the Society for the Preservation of Birds of Prey and has been a director and treasurer of the New Jersey Audubon Society. He is engaged in activities of the Nature Conservancy, especially in areas relating to the endangered Prairie Chicken and has devoted much time to bluebird nesting box campaigns. Mr. Thomas is a master wood carver, specializing in birds of prey, and is the owner of an insurance agency in Allendale, New Jersey.