

HAWKS OVER THE HUDSON HIGHLANDS

PAUL JEHEBER

Fifty miles north of New York City where the Hudson River cuts through the gorge formed by Breakneck Mountain on its east bank and Storm King Mountain on the west bank, the Hudson Highlands afford one of the more spectacular scenic wonders in eastern United States. Here the river and mountains blend together to present a sight of unparalleled natural beauty and grandeur.

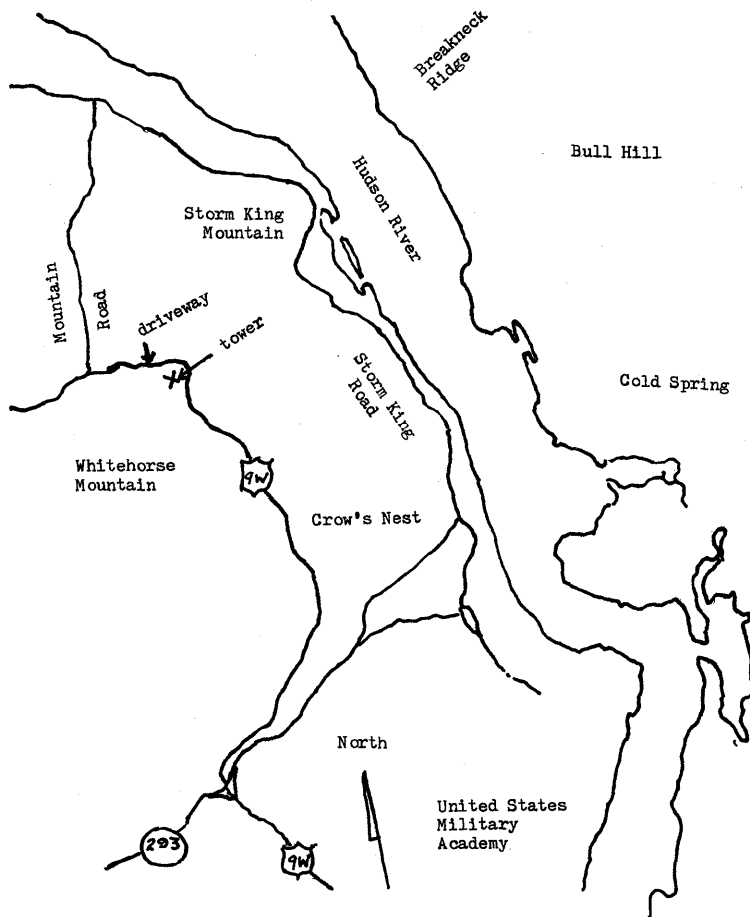
This is especially true in early fall when the many species of deciduous trees are changing their cloak of rich greens of spring and summer dress to the more vivid hues of red, yellow, bronze, gold, and brown of fall attire. It is at this time of the year, when the air takes on its first hint of frost, that it is possible to witness one of nature's exciting phenomena—the fall migration of the birds of prey. This family of birds utilizes the thermals rising from the many ridges in the area to speed them effortlessly along the southward journey to their wintering grounds in Central America and northern South America.



Goshawk

Photo by Paul Jeheber

Whitehorse Mountain is about 8 miles north of the Bear Mountain Bridge. The Jeheber driveway is opposite the first break in the center island on Rte. 9W as you proceed north. The tower is an easy ten minute walk from here.



The ridges in the Hudson Highlands run in a northeast, southwest direction funneling the birds down the Appalachians over sites that have gained wide acclaim as being the best hawk-watch sites in the country. Hawk Mountain in northeastern Pennsylvania and Bake Oven Knob some eighteen miles north on the same series of ridges are two such sites. In southeastern New York are Hook Mountain and Mount Peter where many birds are observed every fall. But coming

into its own more recently is a watch site on Whitehorse Mountain in Orange County, New York, some fifty miles north of the George Washington Bridge. An easy ten-minute walk from New York State Highway 9W just southwest of Storm King Mountain brings one to the overlook on which has been erected a tower and bench for the express purpose of watching and recording hawk movements through the area.

The tower on Whitehorse Mountain is high enough above the trees to afford the observer a 360° view of the surrounding ridges. Directly in front or to the northeast can be seen Breakneck Mountain. To the south of Breakneck Mountain is Bull Hill. These two mountains are east of the Hudson River, about one mile distant.

Birds coming from the northeast use these two mountains to gain the altitude needed to glide across the Hudson to again be caught up in thermals rising from Storm King Mountain, which is immediately in front of the tower, and Crow's Nest Mountain just southeast of the tower. North of Storm King Mountain on the west side of the Hudson and Breakneck Mountain on the east bank, the terrain flattens out somewhat so that the birds naturally head for the mountains to take advantage of the thermals. The mountains in the immediate area vary in elevation from roughly 1200 to 1400 feet.

From August 28 through November 9, 1975, over 8800 birds were counted. By the middle two weeks of September the Broad-wing migration has peaked with large flights moving south. These birds are gregarious during migration and flocks of better than 500 in number are not uncommon. "Kettling" takes place at this time. Resembling a vortex of windblown leaves, the birds mill about within a thermal until sufficient altitude is achieved, and then they "peel" off for the next ridge where the same procedure is followed. It is extremely difficult to count the birds as they are swirling about in a large kettle but it is nonetheless very exciting.

The highest one-day count in 1975 was 3436 birds on September 15th. The next high count was 2811 birds on September 22nd. On nine days during September of 1975 there were 100 or more birds observed. During October there were four days in which there were 100 or more birds counted. Seven Golden Eagles were recorded during the 1975 season—four in September, two in October, and one in November. The only hawk not recorded during the 1975 season was the Rough-legged but had the watch been carried to a later date it is entirely possible that this bird might have been seen as well.

To a birder, hawk-watching is a special and separate phase of his



Red-tailed Hawk

Photo by Paul Jeheber



Peregrine Falcon

Photo by Paul Jeheber

hobby. Once he has gained access to the site, there need be no further expending of energy as he just sits and waits for the birds to come to him. Binoculars and spotting scope are almost mandatory in hawking. But spending time on the mountaintop has its compensations. Not only are the view and the setting extremely exhilarating and peaceful in a beautiful environment but one is often rewarded with sightings of ducks and geese winging their way southward, cormorants, shorebirds, warblers, Pileated and Red-headed Woodpeckers, bluebirds and many monarch butterflies. But should there be days when there is very little or no activity over the ridges, these days cannot be considered lost or wasted. To get out and enjoy nature at one of her most radiant times of the year, when fall colors are so glittering, is reward enough in itself to those who take the time to observe and appreciate the beauty in nature around us.

Other than the relaxation, enjoyment of nature, and the personal enjoyment derived from pursuing one's avocation, there are results obtained that are helpful to those concerned individuals who feel our birds of prey demand more protection. Numbers, migratory routes, dates and all pertinent data—cloud cover, wind velocity and direction, temperature, sighting times plus numbers of different species—this information when forwarded to one central location from all the manned watch sites will supply much needed information on this majestic family of birds. So, birders, make an effort to spend at least one day on a mountaintop this fall and learn how enjoyable and rewarding it can be.

Box 251, Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y. 12520

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Jeheber until very recently was the supervisor of the Entomology Unit at the United States Military Academy. The work of this unit includes wildlife management and disease control of the flora on the 16,000 acre grounds of the USMA. He finally realized that the work interfered with "the things he really wanted to do," so he retired. Those things "he really wanted to do," include wildlife photography, travel, and bird watching. He has already extensively traveled in North America from Mexico to Alaska, photographing the wildlife with emphasis on birds. Some examples of his photos appear in this article. His long list of organizations includes the Explorer's Club, in which he states he is "very active." He built the observation tower on Whitehorse Mountain about three years ago.