



BACKGROUND

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Nature's Greatest Airshow: Now playing at a mountain near you

If watching a hawk, eagle or falcon lifts your spirits, good news has arrived: this autumn, you have every chance of spotting one at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the world's first refuge for birds of prey.

This year marks the 72nd Annual Autumn Hawkwatch at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, held daily each year August 15 through December 15.

Some call it one of the greatest spectacles of nature. Each season, an average 18,000 birds of prey will soar over the Sanctuary's rocky North Lookout, a 1,500-foot outcropping on the Kittatinny Ridge in east central Pennsylvania. Many fly past at eye level.

People flock to the Sanctuary for a glimpse of the birds and the Appalachian Mountain scenery. Visitors bring binoculars, pay a modest trail fee, walk to a scenic overlook, and start scanning the sky. Trained staff and volunteers announce approaching birds to make hawkwatching easy and enjoyable.

Passing through in late summer are ospreys, bald eagles and American kestrels. In early morning, colorful songbirds pass in waves on their own migration. This also is the last chance to enjoy the still-green, but subtly changing Appalachian Mountain views and balmy weather.

In mid-September, broad-winged hawk numbers build. These small, round-winged raptors gain altitude in circling thermals, or rising columns of air, before gliding by gracefully. If your timing is right, you can spot hundreds of broadwings in one afternoon, and sometimes more than 1,000. For example, on September 12, 2007, counters recorded an incredible 7,639 broad-winged hawks, the largest one-day count to pass Hawk Mountain since 1978.

By mid-October, northwest winds bring the greatest species diversity—16 in all—and fall foliage is at its peak. During prime conditions, visitors can get good views of red-tailed, red-shouldered, rough-legged, sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, northern harriers, peregrine falcons, and merlins.

In November, the migration begins to ebb, but this is when hawkwatchers can expect to see golden eagles and northern goshawks. By December, the skies have emptied, but the North Lookout draws visitors seeking solitude and an occasional bald eagle.

Raptor Migration

The phenomenon of migration is an age-old story: raptors have followed the Appalachian Mountain southward for longer than we probably know. Weather determines how many birds will pass; the best flights follow a cold front, when northwest winds prevail. When the air is still and hot, fewer birds tend to be seen.

Raptors, or birds of prey, also use pockets of warm, rising air called thermals to fuel their long-distance journeys. Thermals allow birds of prey to ascend quickly to thousands of feet and then glide in the direction of their destination. Because thermals do not occur over water, migrating birds hug the Appalachian Mountain, and grab a free ride by soaring south on this energy-saving migration highway.

Visiting Hawk Mountain

No one need walk far to enjoy both the mountain and the migration. South Lookout is just 100 yards from the parking area, and here, trails are smooth and wide. For those with limited mobility, an all-terrain wheelchair is available at the Visitor Center. A golf cart is on hand during autumn weekends.

In addition to intimate views of soaring birds, Hawk Mountain's overlooks provide sweeping vistas of fall foliage and a patchwork of farmland and fields dot the valley floor. The autumn colors of the central Appalachian forest traditionally peak in mid-October.

North Lookout, a two-mile, round-trip walk, straddles the ridge, offering a 200-degree panorama of ridges and valleys. Those who plan to visit North Lookout or beyond should wear boots and layered clothing, and carry a daypack supplied with all the essentials for a day in the woods: water, light snacks, raingear, traveling first aid kit, binoculars, camera and whistle.

General Information

The Visitor Center, Wings of Wonder raptor gallery, bookstore and gift shop are open year-round, from 9 am to 5 pm, and from 8 am to 5 pm in autumn. Located about 25 miles north of Reading, the Sanctuary is just 7 miles north of I-78 and Cabela's.

Trail fees cost \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors and \$3 for children ages six to 12. Children ages 5 and under are free. On weekends, September through November, trail fees increase to \$7 for adults and seniors. For more information, call 610-756-6961 or visit www.hawkmountain.org.

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