

It's time to fly with eagles at the Allegheny Front hawk watch

By DAVE HURST
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All eyes had been on the impressive, 180-degree view of northwestern Bedford County – until someone spotted the relatively small, speckled-brown-and-white raptor, struggling to glide on some stiff, erratic breezes about 50 feet up and 50 yards inland from the overlook. Then comments flew, too:

“That’s a northern harrier.”
“Look at the wind tossing him.”
“Look at the white on him.” “That’s a pretty look.” “That’s worth the price of admission.”

Actually, interest is the only admission fee required to visit the Allegheny Front hawk watch, which is situated on a 50-yard swath of cleared ridge-top about a half-dozen miles east of Central City.

On this sunny, late-September afternoon, the small parking area was packed. Gentle to moderate breezes were stirring the summit’s thickets of shrubs and hardwoods

with their patches of dark crimson and shades of yellow.

A larger-than-life-sized wooden carving of a golden eagle, perched atop a painted-brown pedestal, announced the place. Nearby a colorful wayside marker displayed the 10 raptors commonly seen here (peregrine falcon, northern harrier, red-shouldered hawk, golden eagle, bald eagle, sharp-shinned hawk, broad-winged hawk, kestrel, red-tailed hawk and osprey) and commemorated a state-record, single-day sighting of 51 golden eagles on Nov. 23, 2003.

Between mid-August and mid-December, if you spend time at this or one of five other hawk watch sites within our region, you are almost guaranteed to see raptors as



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they head south. For the way that raptors migrate makes our ridgetops great spots from which to watch them.

To conserve energy, these majestic fliers soar upward on rising air, then glide as far as possible. Our long, linear ridges are situated in such a way that when winds strike them, they create updrafts upon which the raptors can soar and glide.

So birds of prey follow the ridges each year, making our region a good place to count migrating raptors. Which is what the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA) does. Visit www.hmana.org and you will find the nearest hawk-watching spot and current or past counts of each species.

Within our region – in addition to the Allegheny Front site – there are hawk watch sites at Brady’s Bend on the Allegheny River, the Pulpit on the Tuscarora Mountain, and on Jack’s Mountain, Stone Mountain

and Tussey Mountain.

At the Allegheny Front hawk watch, the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society sees that there are observers and an official counter on site every day from mid-August through at least mid-December. Last year they counted 18,348 raptors during the fall migration.

In the hawk-watching world, this site is known as a good place to see golden eagles. So far this year, more than 2,000 people have visited from places as distant as Hawaii and Texas. Hawk-watch counters and observers regularly travel two hours or more from their homes to spend full days here.

On this overlook, 2,780 feet above sea level, watchers often are peering downward on the migrating birds of prey.

During the summer-like afternoon when I visited, 18 people were lounging in folding chairs, sitting at a snack- and paper-laden picnic table or scattered around the site,

seated on logs, benches and small wooden platforms.

Hawk watchers tend to be a specialized breed in the birding world. Some may have interest in other species, but the ones I talked with appeared to be enraptured by raptors.

They welcome visitors (just don’t bother them while they are in the midst of identifying and counting) and love to talk about the traits and characteristics of the various species.

Sometime this fall, visit one of our region’s sites and try some hawk watching. You might just find yourself soaring on the wings of an eagle.

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For more information on the Allegheny Front hawk watch, visit www.alleghenyplateauaudubon.org.

Dave Hurst loves to hear from readers. You can write to him at 913 Lina St., Johnstown, PA, 15902; or through www.hurstmediaworks.com.