



# Hawk Watch!

## FIELD GUIDE

*By Chris Earley*

A hawk circling high in the sky always seems to bring a sense of wonder and awe to a human observer. Spring migration is a super time to get a good look at hawks and guess where the best place to do that is? Yup, the Niagara Escarpment is Ontario's hawk watching capital in the spring. Specifically, the Beamer Memorial Conservation Area is the best place to go. Here the Niagara Peninsula Hawk Watch counts migrating raptors from March 1 to mid-May every year. *(See side bar)*

*All photos by Robert MacCaw*



Broad Winged Hawk

### Niagara Peninsula Hawk Watch

Visit the Niagara Peninsula Hawk Watch at [www.niagarapeninsulahawkwatch.org](http://www.niagarapeninsulahawkwatch.org) to see their migration summaries and statistics. They also run a very popular open house every year with identification help, migration talk and live bird demonstration.

But why is the Escarpment such a good spring migration site? Migrating raptors don't usually have much time to hunt, so they need to move using as little energy as possible. When they can find them, hawks will use rising columns of warm air called thermals. The birds put their wings out and "float" up on these air currents until the warm air dissipates. Then they glide for long distances and grab another thermal and repeat the process. This takes very little flapping so it saves the bird energy. Unfortunately, thermals don't form well over water and when the hawks hit the Great Lakes they have to go around them. In the spring, this causes the raptors to funnel through the Niagara Peninsula making Beamer such a great spot to see large raptor numbers. Here the birds can use another form of air current to stay aloft. Up drafts from wind hitting the Escarpment can allow our fine feathered friends to stay air born and move northward with little flapping required.

After you start watching hawks, you may decide to identify them as they go by. Easier said than done! Even though there are under 20 different species that may fly by, variations between males, females, immatures and colour phases make it seem like there are hundreds. The following descriptions used in conjunction a pair of binoculars and a good bird book or birding app will help you on your way to becoming a fully

fledged hawk watcher. The descriptions are of what the hawks look like when they are flying overhead, which is what you are most likely to see during the migration period.

**When watching hawks, take note of the following:**

**Shape:** Look at the shape of the wings. Are they long or short? Are they pointed? Also look at the tail. Is it broad or narrow? Long or short? These clues will help you decide what type of hawk it is (i.e. a buteo, a falcon, an accipiter, etc.).

**Flight:** Look at how it is flying. Is it soaring? Is it flapping then gliding a lot? Does it hold its wings in a V shape? This information will also help to figure out what type of hawk it is.

**Size:** This is usually a hard characteristic to figure out, but if the hawk you are trying to identify is in a flock with other species, compare its size with a hawk that you can identify.

**Markings:** Try to look at what markings are on the wings and the tail. Is there a wrist patch? Is the tail banded? Does it have a white tip? Also look at the body. Does it have a belly band? Is it heavily streaked? This information will also help you figure out what species it is.



Red-tailed Hawk

The best way to learn how to identify hawks is to do a lot of looking and refer to field guides. It will be frustrating at first but will be very rewarding after a bit of practice. After you identify a hawk, you can read more about it, learn about its natural history and then try to observe one again. This process not only increases your knowledge but increases your awareness of the world around you.

**BUTEOS**

These hawks have long, broad wings that are rounded at the tips and their tails are relatively short. They soar in circles high in the air and make good use of thermals when migrating. Four different species are commonly seen during spring migration.

**Red-tailed Hawk**

This is one of our best known and most common hawks. The red-tailed hawk is the only hawk in the east with a light



Red-tailed Hawk



Broad-winged Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk



wing border and it has streaking on the breast instead of the adult's rusty barring (bars go across the breast). The Broad-winged Hawk is Canada's smallest buteo and has a wingspan of 82-92 cm.

**Red-shouldered Hawk**

This is a relatively long-winged and long-tailed buteo that is not as common as the other three in this group. Like the Broad-winged hawk, it has a black and white banded tail, but the Red-shouldered Hawk has more bands, with the white ones being thinner. It also has rusty bars on the breast of the adults with the immature birds being streaked instead. These rusty bars are also found on the wing linings of the adult birds. Red-shouldered Hawks have a whitish crescent at the base of their primary feathers that is characteristic of this species but this may be hard to see. This buteo has a wingspan of 94-107 cm.

**Rough-legged Hawk**

This hawk has a long (for a buteo) white tail which has either one dark band (females) or two or more bands (males). The primaries of the Rough-legged Hawk are white at the base and this bird also has a white rump (on the bird's lower back, where the tail feathers meet the body), which may be seen if the bird is circling near the ground. The black wrist patches are very distinctive and the hawk also has a black belly band, which is very prominent on the females but may be completely absent on the males. This bird also has a dark phase that is much more common than the dark phases of the other buteos. Rough-legged Hawks have a wingspan of 122-143 cm.

red tail. Immature (those birds that are in their first year) red-tails, however, have a tail with thin bands instead. Other distinctive field marks are the dark bars on the leading edges of the wings and dark speckling usually forming a belly band on the white underparts. Immature birds are similar to adults but are more heavily streaked (streaks are short lines in a head to tail direction). These buteos do have quite a few different colour phases, ranging from very light to almost black (melanistic) underparts. Red-tailed hawks have a wingspan of 110-141 cm.

**Broad-winged Hawk**

This hawk is renowned for migrating in very large flocks in the fall. One day in 1999 in southern Michigan, 555, 371 Broad-winged Hawks were counted! Spring flocks aren't as big as fall ones but the species can still be quite common on some days in April. This hawk has white underwings that are more pointed than other buteos and are bordered with black. The broad tail has very prominent black and white bars across it. The Broad-winged Hawk has a very rare dark phase. The immature bird is like the adult except that it has a less prominent

Rough-legged Hawk scavenging a hare



## HARRIERS

Harriers are very slim hawks that have long wings, long tails and long legs. They also have an owl-like face. They have a very buoyant flight and keep their wings in a V shape. One species of harrier is found in North America.

### Northern Harrier

The Northern Harrier is a hawk that is sexually dimorphic, meaning that the males and the females do not look alike. The male Northern Harrier is a grey bird that has almost completely white underparts with striking black-tipped wings. The female, on the other hand, is a brown bird with lots of streaking on her underparts. Both have a prominent white rump. The wingspan of this species is 97-122cm.



Sharp-shinned Hawk

## ACCIPITERS

Accipiters have short, rounded wings and long tails. They have a very characteristic flight pattern, described as “flap, flap, flap, glide, flap, flap, flap, glide”, but they can also do a lot of soaring during migration. Size differences between males and females are very prominent in these hawks. There are three species of accipiters that can be seen here.

### Sharp-shinned Hawk

This is the smallest accipiter, having a wingspan of only 53-65 cm. Adults of this species have rusty barring on their underparts whereas the immature birds are streaked with brown. The wings and tail are heavily banded. The Sharp-shinned Hawk has a squarish tail. This and the next species are very hard to distinguish from one another.

### Cooper's Hawk

This accipiter looks almost identical to the Sharp-shinned Hawk, except it is bigger. Probably the best way to distinguish between the two is the tail. The Cooper's Hawk has a tail that is longer in proportion to its body size compared to the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Also, the tail of the Cooper's Hawk is more rounded with a distinct white tip, whereas the Sharp-shinned Hawk has a square tail with an indistinct white tip. Needless to say, these two hawks cause a lot of frustration for beginning hawk watchers! The Cooper's Hawk has a wingspan of 70-87 cm.



### All-day Hawk Workshops

To learn more about how to identify hawks you may want to sign up for the all day Hawk Workshop in September at The Arboretum, University of Guelph. Go to [www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum/educationandevents/workshops.shtml](http://www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum/educationandevents/workshops.shtml) for details.



### Northern Goshawk

As if it wasn't already confusing enough, the Northern Goshawk resembles a large Cooper's Hawk! The goshawk, however, has grey barring instead of rusty barring and has a less distinct white tip on its tail when compared to a Cooper's Hawk. The goshawk also has proportionately longer wings than the other two accipiters. The wingspan of the Northern Goshawk is 98-115 cm.

## EAGLES

Eagles are shaped like buteos but are much larger. Their massive size is breath taking as they pass overhead. There are two eagle species that may be seen in Ontario.

Golden Eagle



### Golden Eagle

The Golden Eagle is a large brown hawk with a wingspan of 185-220 cm. The adults have a dark, faintly barred tail and the immatures have a white tail with a dark band at the end of it. The immatures also have white patches at the base of the primary feathers.

### Bald Eagle

The immature Bald Eagle is similar to the Golden Eagle except that the Bald Eagle is mottled with white, especially on the wing linings. Also, the Bald Eagle has a larger head than the Golden Eagle. Adult bald eagles are more straightforward to identify because they have white heads and tails. Hooray, an easy one! The immatures will not get completely white heads until they are 4 or 5 years old. The wingspan of the Bald Eagle is 180-225 cm.

## OSPREY

The osprey family only contains one species. It is a large fish-eating bird that has long, narrow wings that are usually kept bent at the wrist. The wings of a flying Osprey are held in a slightly arched position as well. Dark wrist patches and black-tipped wings can also be seen as it glides overhead. The males and the females are similar except for the presence of some streaking on the breast of the female. The wingspan of the Osprey is 149-171 cm.

Osprey



## FALCONS

Falcons are characterised by long pointed wings and long tails. Their flight is a rowing motion and they can move very quickly. Four species of falcons may be seen in during spring migration in Ontario.

American Kestrel



### American Kestrel

This is the smallest North American falcon, having a wingspan of only 52-61 cm. The adult male of this species might be the most colourful raptor in the world. It has a rufous breast with black spots on its belly. The male also has a white-tipped tail with usually only one dark band on it. Outer tail feathers are white with a few black spots. The female American Kestrel has pale underparts that are streaked with brown. The female also has a finely banded tail. This falcon can be commonly seen hovering in one spot over a field in search of mice and insects.

### Merlin

The Merlin is a small falcon that has a tail with wide bands on it. Both the male and the female have heavily streaked underparts. Merlins are very powerful flyers. Recently I had one fly alongside my car and it was going at least 90 km/hr! The wingspan of the Merlin is 53-68 cm.





Gyrfalcon



**Peregrine Falcon**

This large falcon has a finely banded tail. The adults have underparts that are barred and spotted, whereas the immatures are streaked with brown. The adults also have a light-coloured breast and are paler than the immatures. Peregrine Falcons have been clocked at speeds of up to 322 kilometres per hour during a dive! This falcon has a wingspan of 94-116 cm.

Peregrine Falcon



**Gyrfalcon**

This is the world's largest falcon. It is normally found in the northern parts of Canada but sometimes may be seen in southern Ontario during the winter months. If you get to see this spectacular bird count yourself as very lucky! This falcon has three colour morphs: white, grey and dark. The white morph is white overall but has dark, short bars on its back and a few on its underparts. The grey morph has faint barring on the tail and flight feathers and darker spots or streaks on its wing linings and body. The dark morph is quite dark all over but has light streaks and spots on its body and wings. In each of these morphs, the immatures

have more markings than the adults. In flight silhouette, this falcon has wingtips that are more blunt than the other falcons. Its wingspan is 110-130 cm.

**NEW WORLD VULTURES**

These are large carrion eaters that soar high in the air while searching for food. They have bald heads and strong beaks which are adaptations for eating from carcasses. Two species can be seen here, though one is quite rare.

**Turkey Vulture**

The black body and two-toned wings (black wing linings and grey flight feathers) make this bird easy to identify. Another important identification feature is the fact that the Turkey Vulture flies with its wings held up in a V shape. Its bald red or pink head (immatures have a grey head) is quite small in relation to its body and is another good identification characteristic. This bird has a wingspan of 160-181cm and can be seen in large numbers during migration.

**Black Vulture**

This southern vulture has started to be more regular in southern Ontario so you should watch for it when looking at flocks of Turkey Vultures. In comparison, the Black Vulture holds its wings flat, has a grey head and short tail and all black wings with grey primaries. It has a wingspan of 140-160 cm.

It seems like a lot doesn't it? If you start by trying to figure out what type of hawk it is (eg. a buteo or an accipiter) and slowly build yourself up from there, you shouldn't have too many problems. Still too much? You can always just lie down in an open area and watch these masters of the sky perform for you. Make sure that you move once in a while, though, or you may fool some Turkey Vultures. •

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Turkey Vulture



