

VIDEO REVIEW: *Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors*

by Jane Stein

Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors, by Dick Walton and Greg Dodge. Brownbag Productions. 1998.

Learning field birding is darn tough. You can't wake up one morning and say to yourself, "Today I'm going to go out and really nail those vireos." Well, you could, but the likelihood of getting enough clear views on any given day to make a study of the differences is not very high.

It's even worse for hawks. Outside of a handful of not-entirely-predictable days during the fall migration, you can search all day and not encounter more than a few Red-tails, maybe a couple of Turkey Vultures, and (if you're lucky) one or two "Here it comes, there it goes" birds that might have been an accipiter of some kind.

Unlike passerines and even shorebirds, hawk identification is far less a matter of plumage patterns than it is of "jizz," particularly how the bird moves in the air, which is where you mostly see them. With a few exceptions, most hawks, especially immature ones, sport various kinds of streaky brown and cream feathers, and birders seldom get close enough for long enough really to see the plumage, anyway. As a result, printed field guides aren't much help, and most birders, truth be told, are generally exasperated by hawks.

But now Dick Walton, who taught us all to Bird By Ear, has come to the rescue with a splendid new, long-overdue video on hawk identification called *Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors*. This is not a popular video full of pretty pictures like "Hawks Up Close," but rather a no-nonsense, honest-to-goodness, all-business treatment of nineteen species of hawks in flight taped by Walton and Greg Dodge at Wachusett Mountain, Cape May, and other hawk-rich places.

Most birds are shown in multiple examples, accompanied by Walton's clear and simple narration pointing out the basic characteristics of shape and flight behavior that distinguish one from another. Only rarely does the video resort to stop action to show a flight silhouette or plumage pattern, which is a major plus. Pretty much everything you need to see is visible in the full-motion sequences themselves.

The digital video showed crisp and clear on my basic home equipment, but the "production values" are otherwise virtually nonexistent, reflecting the no-nonsense name of the maker, Brownbag Productions, under which Walton has also released several excellent video guides to butterflies and dragonflies.

The video covers not only the commonly occurring Eastern raptors, but occasional to rare visitors, as well: Golden Eagle, Black Vulture, Mississippi and Swallow-Tail Kites, and Swainson's Hawk. The only bird missing, in fact,

is Gyrfalcon which, while understandable, is still a disappointment, particularly after last winter's experience with the elusive Logan Airport Gyr.

The few problems with this video lie in opportunities missed. There is no split-screen, alas, which would have enabled side-by-side comparisons of problem species, such as Sharp-shinned versus Cooper's Hawk. Similarly, more thought could have been given to the sequencing, which goes straight through from Turkey Vulture to Swallow-tailed Kite in taxonomic order. A little less linearity would have made it a more effective teaching tool. Similarly, brief treatment of some of the raptor impersonators that occasionally embarrass us all, such as Mourning Doves and gulls, would have been nice.

The video ends with a twenty-three-segment quiz (the answers are included in the accompanying booklet). The quiz is a lot of fun for folks with a bit of experience and a fast hand on the rewind button, but probably too rapid-fire and too hard to be anything but discouraging for the neophyte.

These are, however, relatively minor failings in an otherwise superb video that fills a big gap in the identification guides available for field birders. It's an essential acquisition for hawkwatchers of all experience levels, of course. The many general birders who have had little exposure to the techniques in the hawkwatcher's bible, Dunne and Sibley's *Hawks in Flight*, should find the video a revelatory introduction to the "jizz" approach to hawk identification. In fact, anyone with less than 100 percent confidence in their hawk identification skills — and that is virtually all of us — should find this video very satisfying.

Jane Stein, an Arlington, Massachusetts-based freelance writer and editor, is vice president of Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch.

Hawkwatchers in need of a quick brush-up (or a crash course) before the fall hawkwatching season can purchase a copy of Hawk Watch: A Video Guide to Eastern Raptors for \$34.95 by calling (800) 343-5540 or visiting Dick Walton's web site at <http://www.concord.org/~dick/>