

2014 Spring Raptor Migration at Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland

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It seemed like the spring 2014 season would never get started. Harsh winter weather kept observers away until late in February, about a week later than usual. Not only that, the migrant flight was also delayed with nine of the twelve more common raptors not observed until two to fourteen days past their median arrival dates. The flight lagged until well into March, but finally did rebound and overall the season was about average. The total number of raptors counted was 10,220, above the 5-year (2009-2013) average of 10,166, but below the 10-year (2004-2013) average of 10,373 (Table 1). Total numbers of days and hours of coverage were 84 and 437 respectively, well below the 5-year averages of 91 and 517. The deficits here are also mostly weather-related. Interestingly, season totals for most species were either up or down by more than 15% compared to their 10-year averages. Up were Black Vulture, Mississippi Kite, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, American Kestrel, and Merlin. Down were Osprey, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Cooper's Hawk.

February: The first day of the season was 22 February 2014, although no migrants were seen. At February's end there had been only 4 days and 13 hours of coverage and 68 raptors counted, all paltry numbers.

March: Early March was much the same, weather-wise and count-wise. Five days of coverage in the first week of March resulted in just 11 raptors, all Turkey Vultures and all counted on 5 March. The month's numbers remained anemic until 22 March, when all heaven broke loose and 1628 raptors were tallied, the second highest daily total and the earliest 1000+ day in a season on record. That single day accounted for more than half of March's raptors. In addition, high daily counts for the season were recorded for Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture (second highest ever), Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Red-tailed Hawk.

April: Remarkably, on 5 April, a second 1000+ day occurred when observers spotted 1209 migrants, including high daily counts for Osprey, Northern Harrier, and best of all, American Kestrel with 260 observed. The flight spilled over into the next day resulting in a two-day total of almost 1700 raptors. The last week of April was especially productive with several days of good counts, notably

Table 1. 2014 Monthly and Seasonal Count Summaries, Five-year Count Averages (2009-2013), and Ten-year Count Averages (2004-2013). (Due to the rounding off of the individual five-year and ten-year species averages, they do not necessarily add up to the total five-year and ten-year averages.)

Survey Days and Hours	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Total	Five-year	Ten-year
	2014	2014	2014	2014	2014	2014	Average (2009-2013)	Average (2004-2013)
Survey Days	4	22	25	25	8	84	91	88
Survey Hours	13.25	100.75	152.5	139	31	436.5	517	489
Species								
Black Vulture	3	121	176	103	0	403	405	349
Turkey Vulture	64	2383	2312	1036	9	5804	5592	5331
Osprey	0	72	231	57	8	368	468	478
Swallow-tailed Kite	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi Kite	0	0	0	13	0	13	9	6
Bald Eagle	0	7	62	63	23	155	133	103
Northern Harrier	0	5	60	19	0	84	82	110
Sharp-shinned Hawk	0	74	942	337	0	1353	1592	1900
Cooper's Hawk	0	66	196	61	0	323	395	465
Northern Goshawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-Shouldered Hawk	0	133	105	0	1	239	203	187
Broad-winged Hawk	0	0	207	439	2	648	707	712
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-tailed Hawk	1	135	137	28	0	301	233	268
Rough-legged Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Golden Eagle	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
American Kestrel	0	33	392	5	0	430	238	349
Merlin	0	3	68	10	0	81	52	61
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	5
Unidentified Accipiter	0	2	4	0	0	6	15	15
Unidentified Buteo	0	1	3	2	0	6	11	11
Unidentified Eagle	0	0	2	0	0	2	4	0
Unidentified Falcon	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	4
Unidentified Raptor	0	0	0	0	0	0	18	20
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	68	3035	4898	2176	43	10,220	10,166	10,373

26 April, when 608 raptors, including 222 Sharp-shinned Hawks were spotted. Still, by the end of April, the total count was below the 10-year average by more than 1000 raptors.

May: Happily, May made up for most of the difference with a surplus of over 800 raptors compared to the 10-year average, and healthy counts of Turkey Vultures, Bald Eagles, Sharp-shinned and Broad-winged Hawks, plus the season's allotment of 13 Mississippi Kites.

June: June featured 8 days of coverage. The dominant migrant was Bald Eagle; in fact, on 2 June, 19 Bald Eagles were tallied, a new high daily record.

Besides the highlights above, there were several other raptor goodies. A pair of Ospreys nested on the border of the Park for the second year in a row (requiring vigilance in attempting to count migrant Ospreys). A pair of courting Cooper's Hawks put on a grand show which included a bout of talon-grappling. Then there was the Eastern Kingbird that just couldn't resist its naturally feisty inclinations and went after a Merlin. The kingbird attacked the "seemingly bewildered" Merlin mercilessly until it obediently exited the area.

There were significant observations of passerines as well as raptors. Of course, the biggest event in that category was the appearance on 12 and 13 April of new Park species #263, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. Kojo Baidoo, a 12-year-old birder, made the discovery! The day before, 17 migrating Palm Warblers were observed near the Fort itself. Earlier in the season, on 10 March, a huge waterfowl movement took place: 3960 Canada Geese in 30 skeins were counted heading north. Bill Hubick observed new Park species #264 on 4 May, a Wilson's Phalarope. On 6 May, a Sora foraged at the edge of the pond, very close to the fence and to observers. Four days later, a Red-headed Woodpecker made a welcome visit. Finally, Warbling Vireos, which had never bred at the Park before 2013, returned to nest for a second year.

The compiler, Sue Ricciardi, was fortunate to have some great counting help this year, namely regulars Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson, Ralph Geuder, Mary Jane McMillan, Bill Hubick, Paul Fritz, Cal and Bud Orvis, Hugh Hoffman, Dan Haas, Greg Smith, Bob Rineer, John Hoffman, Andy Smith, Steve Small, Carol Kwiklinski, Dan Stewart, Linda Baker, Ed Carlson, Dan Walker, Jackie Cooper, Peg Kemp, Harry and Liz Armistead, and Andy and Judy Higgs. Many other visitors also enhanced the count. Again, the counters were fortunate and grateful to have the excellent cooperation of the staff at Fort Smallwood Park.

So there you have it, a season about average by the total number of raptors tallied, but quite special when you peruse all the details. Spring 2015 is guaranteed to make its own special mark. Come be a part of it!