

Kiptopeke Hawkwatch Report 2024

By Sage Church

The Delmarva Peninsula is a south-facing peninsula that comes to a point in coastal Virginia. This peninsula acts as a funnel for Southbound migrating birds during the fall. At the Southern tip of the peninsula is Kiptopeke State Park, where the [Kiptopeke Hawkwatch](#) has been observing and counting migratory raptors since 1977. This fall was the 48th consecutive year of the Kiptopeke hawkwatch. Full-time hawkcounters have been counting since 1995 between September and November.



Andrew Rapp (left), Audrey Anderson (middle) and Sage Church (right) giving a raptor demonstration and talk to a local group.

This year, the counting season began on August 23 and ended on November 30. Raptors were counted every day during this period for a total of 100 count days. 966.75 hours were spent counting this fall, for an average of just under 10 hours per day. This marked a new season record for hours at Kiptopeke. The most hours in a previous season were 965.45 hours in 1996. A total of 31,409 raptors were counted this fall. This was the first 30,000

raptor season since 1999. This season was also significantly better than the 10-year average of 18,869 raptors. However, there has not been a season with over 22,000 raptors since 2009, so comparing this season to any other season in recent history is not very useful. Fourteen raptor species, not including vultures, were recorded from the hawkwatch this season. Over 1,000 individuals were recorded for six different species. There were 9,083 Sharp-shinned Hawks, 7,833 American Kestrels, 4,368 Osprey, 3,347 Merlins 2,158 Broad-winged Hawks and 2,115 Cooper's Hawks. These were the same six species that recorded over 1,000 individuals last season as well, but all six of them had higher totals this season. Northern Harrier fell just shy of 1,000 individuals with 977.

Ten species and 340 individuals were seen in 86.25 hours of counting in August. Thirteen species and 17,782 individuals were seen in 332.5 hours in September. This September total is significantly higher than any other September on record besides 1995 and 1997. This historic month is elaborated upon in the next paragraph. Twelve species and 12,238 individuals were seen in 308.5 hours in October. This October total is significantly higher than the 10-year average of 9,811 but is very similar to the best October totals since 2000, with 15 of the last 23 seasons having October totals between 10,000 and 15,000. This October started with six straight days of 1000 or more raptors, and then we never had more than 350 raptors in a day again. Twelve species and 1,049 individuals were seen in 239.5 hours in

November. This November total is somewhat lower than the 10-year average of 1,221. Only two seasons since full-time counting began have had less than 1,000 raptors in November.

Typically, the peak raptor flights at Kiptopeke occur in the first week of October. However, this season was strange in that there was an early/extended peak flight period. The third week of September had 8,074 raptors. This was mostly comprised of Merlins, American Kestrels and Sharp-shinned Hawks. The last nine days of September were slightly less productive, with 6,444 raptors made up of mainly the same species. There was then a second peak in the first week of October with 9,763 raptors. Having peak flights early in September, coupled with the normal peak flights in the first week of October, allowed for huge season totals in American Kestrels, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Ospreys and Merlins. A total of 14 days this season had over 1,000 raptors. These 14 days alone accounted for 21,061 individual raptors, which was 67.1% of the total number of raptors observed this season. This total is also higher than the 10-year average for season totals and higher than last season's total. Three of those 14 days had over 2,000 raptors, with the single day high count for the season coming on September 20th with 2,935 raptors.

The first 1,000 bird day of the season came on September 16 with 1,007 raptors. This was the earliest date for a 1,000-bird day since 1999. There was also a flight of 490 raptors, mostly American Kestrels, on September 3. This was another historically early flight. Consistent northeast winds were the main contributing factor for so many historically large and early raptor flights.

Species Accounts

The **Osprey** flights got off to a bit of a slow start this year with five triple-digit days in the first half of September. There were more kestrels in the first half of September than Ospreys. They picked up in the second half of September and the first week of October. There were 4 days with over 200 Ospreys (three more days in the 190s) and 19 days with over 100 Ospreys. The single day high count for Ospreys was 288 on October 1. A season total of 4,368 Ospreys made for the best Osprey season since 1997 and the fourth best ever. Peak Osprey movements took place in the third week of September and the first week of October, as was the case with many raptor species this season. Between September 18 and September 24, Osprey migrated consistently each day, and 1,015 Ospreys were observed during that period. This accounts for 23% of the season total. Between September 30 and October 6, a similar movement of Ospreys occurred, with a total of 1,224 during that 7-day period. This accounted for 28% of the season total. During these two 7-day windows, over 51% of the entire season's Osprey total were seen.

Bald Eagles are a tricky species to count here at Kiptopeke. Many recognizable immature individuals pass by the platform multiple times a day and multiple days in a row. Therefore, it is important to be cautious when it comes to counting Bald Eagles and we only count birds that are moving with intent. That being said, every counter has to make judgment calls on some of these Bald Eagles, leaving more room for error when it comes to counting them than with any other species. With this in mind, 373 migratory Bald Eagles were counted this fall, which was lower than the 10-year average of 505 individuals. The best Bald Eagle flight of the season was on November 13 with 27 migratory individuals.

977 **Northern Harriers** were observed this season. This was the best year for Kiptopeke since 1999 and the first year with over 900 individuals since then. The harriers peaked between September 19 and October 6 with over 20 individuals on all but five days in that 18-day period. There were also five days with over 50 harriers, and the single day high count for the season was 79 on September 20. There were 419 harriers in September, and no more than 289 had been seen in September since 1999. These large harrier flights and high September numbers are due to steady Northeast winds on peak flight days.

9,083 **Sharp-shinned Hawks** passed over the hawk platform this fall. This was almost double recent averages for this species. There has not been a ten-thousand Sharp-shinned Hawk year since 1999, but four other seasons in the 2000s have also had over 9,000 Sharp-shinned Hawks. This species saw the same two flight windows as seen with the Ospreys. Peak flights for this species occurred between September 19 and September 23, and again between September 28 and October 6. 3,799 individuals (41.8% of the season total) were seen in the first five-day peak flight period. At least 600 individuals were seen on each of these days, and the season high count of 1,056 occurred on September 20. 3,611 individuals (39.8% of the season total) were seen in the secondary nine-day peak flight window. Over 80% of the season's Sharp-shinned Hawks were seen within these two peak flight periods, and there were only two triple-digit Sharp-shinned Hawk days outside of these two periods. Sharp-shinned Hawks accounted for 28.9% of the season's total raptors.

Cooper's Hawks are a species that has not seen a dramatic decline in numbers throughout the hawkwatches history, unlike species like Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels. 2,115 Cooper's Hawks this season was higher than the 10-year average of 1,998 but still within the realm of normal. Cooper's Hawks peaked slightly later than most of the other raptors this season. Peak flights occurred between October 2 and October 8 with 839 individuals during that period. This accounted for 39.7% of all Cooper's Hawks counted this fall. The peak single-day count occurred on October 5 with 170 individuals, and there was a total of five days with over one hundred Cooper's Hawks. As seen in past seasons, the ratio of Sharp-shinned to Cooper's Hawks became closer to a 1 to 1 ratio after peak flights when both species numbers were declining.

This season was the first ever 200-plus **Red-shouldered Hawk** season for the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch with 206 individuals. 142 of these birds came in November with peak flights of 20 and 17 on November 9 and 13, respectively. There were six days with double-digit Red-shouldered Hawks, all of which came in November.

As a coastal hawkwatch site, **Broad-winged Hawks** are not usually seen in large numbers, but 2,158 Broad-winged Hawks this season just barely surpassed last season's total and made for the fourth 2,000 Broad-winged Hawk season in Kiptopeke's history. The season average since full-time counting began in 1995 is 1,187 individuals. Every Broad-winged Hawk flight of more than 50 individuals occurred in the same two peak flight windows as most of the other raptors. 521 Broad-winged Hawks were seen between September 19 and September 23, accounting for 24.1% of the season total. 1,312 Broad-winged Hawks were seen between September 29 and October 6, accounting for 60.8% of the season total. These two peak periods accounted for a combined 85% of the season's total Broad-winged Hawks. An impressive peak count of 380 took place on October 3 and was followed by 277 individuals on October 4.

313 **Red-tailed Hawks** this season was the lowest season total since 2006 and the second worst season since full-time counting began. This is likely due to how warm November was and a lack of significant cold fronts to push them down from the North. Most of the Red-tailed Hawks likely waited until big freezes/snow in the North and then passed through in December. A large cold front on November 30 and in the first few days of December likely brought some numbers of Red-tailed Hawks through the Eastern Shore. Cape May saw a similar trend in Red-tailed Hawks this season.

Fifteen **Golden Eagles** made for another great season for this species. The first one was seen on October 8 and October ended with a total of five. The 10 individuals in November came between November 2 and November 13, with a peak count of four on November 3. The 10-year average of 7.5 individuals was doubled this season, and back-to-back double-digit seasons have not occurred since 2004 and 2005.

After last season's record-breaking slow start for **American Kestrels**, this season had a historically early start for the species. The earliest large flight of American Kestrels in the history of the count occurred on September 3 with 347 individuals. Eventually, 5,240 kestrels in September made up the bulk of the season's 7,833 individuals. This was the best September total since 1999, and the fourth best September ever. These historic September totals can likely be attributed to persistent Northeast winds in the second half of September. The winds for the September 3 flight were also from the Northeast after a cold front the night of September 2. 2,516 American Kestrels in October were also the best October total since 1999, aside from last season's historically late flight of 2,721 in October. This season as a whole was the best season for kestrels since 1999, and the first season with over 7,000 individuals since 2001. American Kestrels had the same two peak flight periods as many other species, but they also had another peak flight period in the second week of September from September 12 until September 16. During this period, there were 1,316 kestrels (16.8% of the season total).

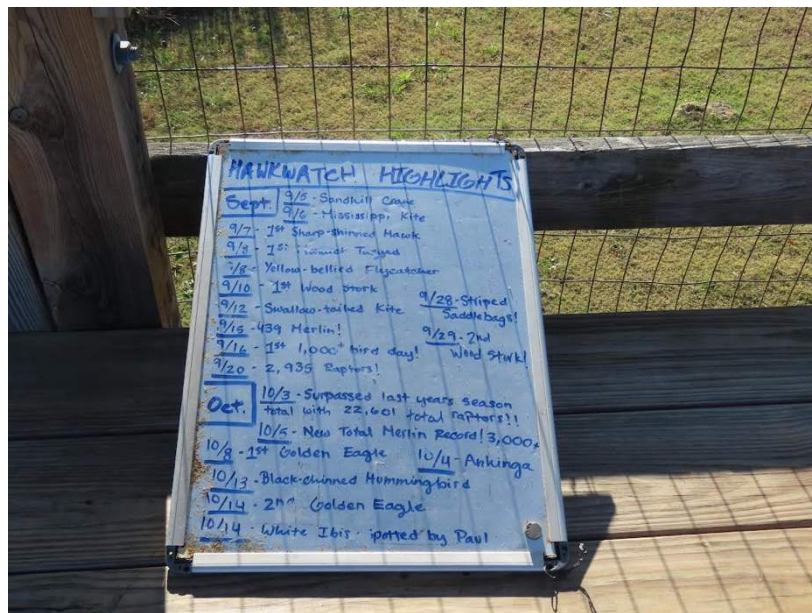


Audrey Anderson, Nancy Barnhart and Sage Church keeping warm late in the hawkwatch season.

The next day, there were no kestrels due to heavy rains and then the peak flights resumed from September 19 through September 23. 2,298 kestrels (29.3% of the season total) were seen in this five-day period. The peak single-day count for American Kestrels came during this period, with 1,193 individuals on September 20. The third peak period occurred between September 28 and October 6. 3,049 kestrels (38.9% of the season total) were seen during this nine-day period. Of note during this period was a flight of 729 American Kestrels on October 5, when the winds

This season was a historically great year for most species, but the **Merlins** had the most astonishing season of them all. We counted 3,347 Merlins this season. This was the first ever 3,000 Merlin season in the history of Kiptopeke, and possibly any hawkwatch sight in the world. The previous season-high count for Kiptopeke was 2,780 Merlins in 1997. The previous September high count was 1,545; this September had 2,261 Merlins. This was the third October with over 1,000 Merlins, totaling 1,068. There were also some incredible single-day totals, including the third highest number of individual Merlins recorded in a single day at Kiptopeke with 439 on September 15. This was followed by 390 individuals on September 16. Other notable high counts included 299 on September 30, 359 on October 1 and 237 on October 2 (this was the date that the previous single season Merlin record was broken). 3,000 Merlins were reached on October 5. The peak flights for Merlin experienced two major peaks encompassed within two more spread out and scattered peak windows. The major concentrated peaks were already mentioned in the peak single day counts on September 15-16 and September 30 through October 2. 1,724 Merlins were seen on these five peak days; this made up 51.5% of the season total. Other peak periods occurred at the same time as many other species, in the third week of September and the first week of October. There was a total of 10 days with over 100 Merlins and another two days in the 90s.

individuals. This was one of the lowest Peregrine Falcon totals since full time counting began. The peak flights for this species occurred between September 28 and October 6 with 370 individuals during that nine-day period. This accounted for 60% of the season total. The peak single-day total was 77 individuals on October 5. There seems to be a lot of fluctuation in Peregrine Falcon numbers from season to season, so even though this year was great for almost everything else, the Peregrines did not come in numbers.



Kiptopeke Hawkwatch notable observations through mid-October.

Five **Mississippi Kites** were counted this season. Two in August and three in the first week of September. This is a species that is expanding its range Northwards, and as a result, it has become annual and is expected at this hawkwatch site in the first few weeks of the season.

However, this species was very rare at this site up until 10 seasons ago, so a 10-year average would not accurately depict this species status at Kiptopeke. There were 32 records of this species at Kiptopeke before this season; 21 of those individuals were seen in the last four seasons, and all but two of them were seen in the last 9 seasons.

One **Swallow-tailed Kite** was seen on September 12! This was the seventh ever record for this hawkwatch and the first since 2020. This is another species that may become increasingly common here, but currently, it is still very rare on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

Non-Raptor Observations

A total of 202 species were seen from the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch platform this fall! A few of the many non-raptor highlights from the hawkwatch this fall were an Ash-throated Flycatcher, the third Common Merganser for the hawkwatch, two Wood Storks, the third Anhinga for the hawkwatch, Black-chinned (the fourth for the hawkwatch) and Rufous Hummingbirds, two Clay-colored Sparrows, multiple days of Cave Swallows and a Kiptopeke first Striped Saddlebags.

Notable High Counts from Kiptopeke Hawkwatch 2024 Season

13,824	Eastern Kingbird	August 30, a new national record
2,267	Bobolink	August 30
20	Common Nighthawk	September 2
2,081	Barn Swallow	September 2
16,251	Blue Jay	October 3 (season total: 114,205 Blue Jays)
43	Red-bellied Woodpecker	October 6
3,772	Northern Flicker	October 6
51	Red Admiral	October 21
381	Fish Crow	October 27
125	House Finch	October 27
393	Eastern Bluebird	November 7
48,534	American Robin	November 8
143	Wood Duck	November 9
289	Cedar Waxwing	November 26

A huge thank you to everyone who visited the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch this fall! We could not have asked for a better community around us. Once again, I would like to thank Brian Taber, Nancy Barnhart and the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (CVWO) for providing us with the opportunity to count raptors at the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch. I also want to thank my co-counter Audrey Anderson, for the countless hours she put in alongside me this fall. This season would not have been possible without her unwavering work ethic and positive attitude. The amazing work that CVWO does, and the people that keep it



Sage Church and Audrey Anderson bundled up at Hawkwatch

going are truly inspiring. It is an honor to be able to contribute to an organization and project like CVWO and the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch.

A special thank you to Bob Ake, Paul Anderson, Harry and Liz Armistead, Mario Balitbit, Rudy Cashwell, Ocean Church, Lynn Davidson, Kai Dickson, Chris and Betsy Foster, Deborah Humphries, Daniel Irons, Jonathan Irons, Andrew Rapp, Steve Thornhill, Wayne Valentine and Hal Wierenga. I would also like to thank Sean Dixon and Kiptopeke State Park for their continued support and collaboration.

This season was one to remember, from the raptors to the community and everything in between. I hope to see everyone back on the platform again next fall!

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