

College Creek Hawkwatch 2024

by Brian Taber

This was the 28th consecutive late winter and spring season of the [College Creek Hawkwatch](#), located on the James River, 3 miles southeast of Williamsburg, conducted by Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory. It's the only late winter and spring hawkwatch run annually in Virginia. It was conducted from February 21 through May 31. The hawkwatch completed 91 days (highest) and 272.5 hours (highest).

Boosted by record coverage and a huge Turkey Vulture flight, the total of 3,215 birds is the highest totals by more than 500 birds. The species total was 14, which is the average.



Middle Peninsula Bird Club visits College Creek Hawkwatch.

The protocol remained the same as the previous 27 seasons: a daily watch was conducted, weather permitting, between about 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. This has been shown to be the period when hawks and vultures typically cross the river, apparently taking advantage of the air warming in the morning. Attempts to see birds crossing earlier and later in the day have not been met with success. Also, these mostly morning counts regularly tend to show these flights both

beginning and ending, usually with a bell-shaped curve. All hawks and vultures crossing the river headed north were tallied.

The biggest days were 260 On March 30, which was the biggest day ever; 253 on March 14, 210 on March 11 and 165 on both March 13 and April 2; the third week in March was by far the best week of the season with 954 birds; There were 9 days of 100+ birds this season, which compares to 7 such days last year and 3 days of 200+; 98 on May 20 was a big day for late season.

Species Accounts including all 28 years:

Black Vulture | 136, fifth highest

Turkey Vulture | 2,715, an all-time high and accounted for 84% of total

Osprey | 117, fourth lowest since 2003. Prior to this, coverage and totals were much less; no

explanation for the apparent decrease

Bald Eagle | 85, sixteenth highest

Northern Harrier | 33, thirteenth highest

Sharp-shinned Hawk | 24, tied for third lowest; *continuing a recent slow trend*

Cooper's Hawk | 33, second best and the second time Cooper's outnumbered Sharp-shinneds

Red-shouldered Hawk | 17, all-time best

Broad-winged Hawk | 2, tied for third lowest; *they are rare at this site*

Red-tailed Hawk | 23, tied for fourth lowest; *might they be staying farther north?*

American Kestrel | 9, tied for second lowest; *a species of concern across the east*

Merlin | 10, an all-time high; *rare at this site*

Peregrine Falcon | 6, the all-time high; *they are not seen annually*

Mississippi Kite | 1, matching annual average of one

Monthly Totals: February was 94 over 8 days; March at 1970 over 29 days was an all-time best month; April was at 666 over 27 days and was fifth best; and May at 485 was second best. March totals clearly propelled the season with 61% of the total.

Birds per hour by month: February was five; March was 21; April was nine and May was six.

Birds per hour for the season was 12.

The 1,000th bird of the season, a milestone we track, was seen on March 14, the earliest date for that mark all-time; the season was also earliest to 2,000 on March 31. **The 3,000 mark was reached for the first time on May 16.**

Adult **Bald Eagles** were regularly seen overhead and over Kingsmill and Hog Island, presumably breeding birds, which again caused us to be very conservative in the totals. No adults were recorded as migrating.

Another interesting way of looking at the data is to see how many days a particular species was recorded. The numbers below show those days in a row of recordings out of 91 days of coverage:

Black Vulture	33	Red-shouldered	9
Turkey Vulture	81	Broad-winged	2
Osprey	39	Red-tailed Hawk	12
Bald Eagle	40	American Kestrel	6
Northern Harrier	21	Merlin	6
Sharp-shinned Hawk	12	Peregrine Falcon	6
Cooper's Hawk	19	Mississippi Kite	1



Southern Broken-dash observed at College Creek on March 25 (new early date). Photo by Nancy Barnhart.

The non-raptor highlights included **American White Pelicans**, often more than 50, on many dates and a high count of 99; **Tundra Swan** flyovers on several dates; 22 **Black-bellied Whistling Ducks** on March 2 were a first for the site as they passed from James City County to Hog Island; distant photos were obtained; **Blue-winged Teal**; **Wilson's Snipe**; **Wild Turkey**; **Tricolored Heron**; **Glossy Ibis**; **American Pipit**; and hundreds of periodic cicadas in May.

The 2024 daily totals were entered into the database at Hawkcount.org, which also sends the data to eBird.

There were visitors on many days from a number of states and countries. We handed out brochures and answered questions. Posts were again made regularly to the VA List Serve and on its Facebook page. Many thanks to dedicated regular volunteers Bill Williams, Nancy Barnhart and Deborah Humphries for coverage.

Table 1. Season Totals with previous 10-year average.

SPECIES	TOTAL (10 YR)	PEAK FLIGHT & DATE	RANGE OF OCCURRENCE
Black Vulture	136 (125)	20 on 5-20	2-26 to 5-28
Turkey Vulture	2715 (1643)	233 on 3-30	2-21 to 5-31
Osprey	117 (150)	14 on 4-2	2-25 to 5-13
Mississippi Kite	1 (1)	1 on 5-8	5-8
Swallow-tailed Kite	0	n/a	n/a
Bald Eagle	85 (110)	7 on 5-9	2-21 to 5-30
Northern Harrier	33 (30)	6 on 4-2	3-1 to 5-20
Sharp-shinned Hawk	24 (37)	7 on 4-26	2-24 to 4-29
Cooper's Hawk	33 (17)	4 on 3-30 & 4-1	2-22 to 5-13
Red-Shouldered Hawk	17 (8)	5 on 3-8	3-1 to 3-30
Broad-Winged Hawk	2 (7)	1 on 5-22 & 5-25	5-22 to 5-25
Red-Tailed Hawk	23 (28)	3 on four dates	2-21 to 5-9
American Kestrel	9 (16)	2 on three dates	3-14 to 4-7
Merlin	10 (5)	4 on 3-14	3-8 to 5-9
Peregrine	6 (under 1)	1 on six dates	3-5 to 5-20
Unidentified	4	n/a	n/a
Total	3,215 (2181)	260 on 3-30	2-21 to 5-31