

Kiptopeke Hawkwatch Report 2025

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



Our fall staff, board members and advisors return to the platform in 2025. Nancy Barnhart (selfie-taker), Brian Taber (sitting), Babs Giffin (dark coat), Baxter Beamer (brown coat), Sage Church (green shirt), Audrey Anderson (sitting).

the southern tip of the peninsula is the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch, where birders have been observing and counting migratory raptors since 1977. This fall was the 49th consecutive year of the Kiptopeke hawkwatch. Full-time hawkcounters have been counting since 1995 between the months of September and November. Since 2023, the last seven days of August have been added to the count period.

This year, the counting season began on August 25 and ended on November 30. Raptors were counted every day during this period, except one weather day, for a total of 97 count days. 960 hours and 43 minutes were spent counting this fall for an average of just under 10 hours per day. A total of 28,773 raptors were counted this fall. This season was also significantly better than the 10-year average of 19,756 raptors. Aside from last season, there has not been a season with over 23,000 raptors since 2009. 15 raptor species, not including vultures, were recorded from the hawkwatch this season, including a new Kiptopeke Hawkwatch first in the form of an **American Barn Owl**.

Over 1,000 individuals were recorded for seven different species. These included:

- 8,955 Sharp-shinned Hawks
- 7,807 American Kestrels
- 2,753 Osprey
- 2,405 Broad-winged Hawks
- 2,261 Merlins
- 2,218 Cooper's Hawks
- 1,044 Northern Harriers

These were the same 6 species that recorded over 1,000 individuals in the past two seasons, with the addition of Northern Harriers.

Monthly Counts

August | Nine species and 169 individuals were seen in 79.75 hours of counting in August.

September | 13 species and 17,122 individuals were seen in 319.85 hours in September which is significantly higher than any other September on record besides 1995, 1997 and 2024. This historic month is elaborated below.

October | 12 species and 10,433 individuals were seen in 303.2 hours in October. This October total is 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 500 or more raptors. However, over 5,000 raptors were counted in the first two days of the month alone. The **season-best day** of 3,173 was on October 1, followed by 2,066 on October 2.

November | 11 species and 1,049 individuals were seen in 258 hours in November. This November total is on track with the 10-year average of 1,213. This season's November total was the same as the 2024 season. Only two seasons since full-time counting began have had fewer than 1,000 raptors in November. Those two seasons (2015 and 2022) were also the only two seasons to ever count for less than 150 hours in November and had the least amount of total count hours since before full-time counting began.

Typically, the peak raptor flights at Kiptopeke occur in the first week of October; however, this season, there was an early/extended peak flight period. Peak flights occurred consistently from mid-September until October 6. Having peak flights earlier 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, Broad-winged Hawks and Merlins. A total of 10 days this season had over 1,000 raptors. Of those 10 days, four had over 2,000 raptors. The **first 1,000-bird day** of the season came on September 19 with 2,359 raptors. The **single-day high count** for the season was on October 1 with 3,173 raptors. Those 10 days alone accounted for 17,751 individual raptors, which was 61.7% of the total number of raptors observed this season. Consistent Northeast winds in late September and early October were a major contributing factor once again.

Species Accounts

The **Osprey** flights got off to another slow start this year. There was only one triple-digit day in the first half of September. With 2,753 Ospreys counted this season, it was a below-average season for Osprey compared to the 10-year average of 3,122, but still better than 5 of those 10 seasons. There were only 9 triple-digit Osprey days this season. The peak single-day count was 409 on September 20. Peak Osprey flights occurred between September 19-22 and September 27- October 1. These nine days accounted for eight of the nine triple-digit days and 1,658 total Osprey, or 60% of the entire season total.

Bald Eagles are a tricky species to count here at Kiptopeke. Many recognizable immature individuals pass by the platform multiple times a day/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 must 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, 307 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 October 25 with 19 migratory individuals.



Northern Harrier in molt taken at Kiptopeke Hawkwatch by Steve Thornhill.

1,044 **Northern Harriers** were counted this season. This was the best harrier year for Kiptopeke since 1999 and the first year with over 1,000 individuals since then. There were some exceptional harrier flights this fall, with a single-day high count of 92 on October 1. There were also harrier counts of 69 and 68 on September 20th and 27, respectively. It was another excellent September for harriers with 498. This is the third best September for this species after 1999 and 1995. 413 Northern Harriers in October were also well above the 10-year average of 305 for this species.

8,955 **Sharp-shinned Hawks** passed over the hawk platform this fall. This was almost double the recent averages for this species. There has not been a ten-thousand Sharp-shinned Hawk year since 1999, but five other seasons in the two thousands have had as many or more Sharp-shinned Hawks as this season. Peak flights for this species were consistent from September 19 until October 7. The peak single-day total for this species occurred on September 19 with 1,507 individuals. Other peak flights of 914, 892 and 812 also occurred in this window. 7,201 individuals (80% of the season total) were counted during this 19-day peak flight period. This is similar to the percent of Sharp-shinned Hawks seen during peak flights last season as well. Sharp-shinned Hawks accounted for 31.1% 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. 2,218 Cooper's Hawks this season was higher than the ten-year average of 1,945, but still within the realm of normalcy. Cooper's Hawks peaked slightly later than most of the other raptors this season. Peak flights occurred between September 28 and October 6, with 1,043 individuals during that period. This accounted for 48.8% of all Cooper's Hawks counted this fall. The peak single-day count occurred on September 29 with 200 individuals, and there was a total of six days with over 100 Cooper's Hawks.

Red-shouldered Hawks had another solid season for the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch with 161 individuals counted. 128 of those birds came in November, with a peak flight of 17 on November 14. There were five days with double-digit Red-shouldered Hawks, all of which came in November. As with Red-tailed Hawks, many of these species are likely migrating in December or further to the West, depending on the year.

As a coastal hawkwatch site, **Broad-winged Hawks** are not usually seen in large numbers, but 2,405 Broad-winged Hawks this season surpassed the previous season's total once again and made for the fifth-ever and third consecutive 2,000 Broad-winged Hawk season in Kiptopeke's history. There were six days with over 100 Broad-winged Hawks this season. The season high count of 612 was recorded on October 2. This was only the second November since 1994 without a Broad-winged Hawk, the other being 2001.

299 **Red-tailed Hawks** this season was the lowest season total since 2006 and the second-worst season since full-time counting began. This is a very similar total to last season, and there was never really a significant Red-tailed Hawk movement this fall. The best Red-tailed Hawk days this season were 24 and 22 on November 18 and 24, respectively. More may have come through in December after the end of the count, or they all went West. With all the snow in early December, there were likely some good buteo flights at Kiptopeke.

Two **Swainson's Hawks** graced the platform this fall, both of which made appearances on multiple days. The first individual was an intermediate immature bird that first passed the hawkwatch in the afternoon on October 4 and then again early in the afternoon on October 5. The second individual was likely a long-staying individual from Machipongo who finally came by the hawkwatch on October 30 and the next two days as well. This was the first season with multiple Swainson's Hawks since 2021.

Four **Golden Eagles** made for the second-lowest season total since full-time counting began. The first two were seen on November 2. This season's total was not too far below the 10-year average of 8.5 individuals; however, it felt like a very slow season for Golden Eagles after the last two exceptional double-digit seasons. As with some of the buteos, this species is likely still moving in December as well.

7,807 **American Kestrels** were counted this fall. It was another excellent season for this species at Kiptopeke, with more than any season, aside from last year, since 2001. American Kestrels had some decent flights in mid-September, averaging over 200 a day from September 12-14. Peak flights resumed on September 19 and continued until October 6. 6,349 kestrels were seen within this 18-day window. This accounted for 81.3% of the total American Kestrels seen this season and 22.1% of the total birds seen this season. There was a total of 20 triple-digit American Kestrel days this season, eight of which had over 300 individuals. The best flight was on October 1 with an astounding 1,459 American Kestrels. Much like with many of the raptor species, the kestrels dropped off significantly after October 6.

2,261 **Merlins** were counted this season. Aside from last season, this was the best September for Merlins with 1,545. 1999 also had 1,545 in September. Aside from last season's record-setting numbers, this was the best Merlin season since 1997 and one of the best at this site. There were also some incredible single-day totals with 318 on October 1 and 264 on September 21. There was a total of six triple-digit Merlin days this fall. Merlins peaked quite early again this season, and after October 1, they really slowed down. Interestingly, Cape May had nearly 1,000 Merlins in mid-October.



Merlin taken by Steve Thornhill at the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch.

541 **Peregrine Falcons** this season was significantly lower than the 10-year average of 688 individuals. This was the fourth lowest Peregrine Falcon season total since full-time counting began. There were 10 days this season with 20 or more Peregrine Falcons, two of which were over 50. The single-day season high count came on September 28 with 58 Peregrines.

15 **Mississippi Kites** were counted this season. Three in August and 12 in September. Surprisingly, most of the Mississippi Kites this season came late, between the 19 and 28 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 2015. Mississippi Kites have been near annual since then, but there were only two records before 2015. The previous season-high count was 10 in 2020.

One **American Barn Owl** passed over the hawkwatch in the fading twilight on September 11. This is the first record for this hawkwatch; they are a known migrant over the Eastern Shore and Kiptopeke. Barn Owls typically move in the dark, so they are difficult to detect from hawkwatch sites.

Non-Raptor Observations

A total of **205 species** were seen from the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch platform this fall!

A few of the many **non-raptor highlights** from the hawkwatch this fall included:

Olive-sided Flycatcher	Clay-colored Sparrow
Wood Stork	Lark Sparrow
Two Sandhill Cranes (2)	Evening Grosbeaks (2)
Hudsonian Whimbrel (2)	Golden-winged Warbler
Long-tailed Ducks (8)	Cave Swallows (multiple days)

Other **notable finds within the park**, but away from the hawkwatch, include:

Olive-sided Flycatchers (multiple)	Connecticut Warbler
Mourning Warbler	Harlequin Duck
Lawrence's Warbler	Snow Bunting
Black-billed Cuckoo	Iceland Gull.

Notable High Counts from Kiptopeke Hawkwatch 2024 Season

69	Green Herons	September 8
93	Common Nighthawks	September 11
246	American Redstarts	September 19
488	Wood Ducks	November 2
10,438	Yellow-rumped Warblers	November 7
2,237	Cedar Waxwings	November 9
117,358	American Robins	November 9

114	Common Loons	November 18
297	Purple Finches	November 18
14,933	Red-winged Blackbirds	November 18

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 has put in alongside me the past two falls. Baxter Beamer, our morning flight counter, also spent many afternoons on the hawkwatch, covered the hawkwatch on multiple occasions and provided daily updates on the blog and social media throughout the season. This season would not have been possible without the strong work ethic, positive attitudes and dedication shown by Audrey and Baxter every single day. The amazing work that CVWO does, and the people who keep it 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, Daniel Irons, Aylett Lipford, Andrew Rapp (middle management), Steve Thornhill, Wayne Valentine and Hal Wierenga.

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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