

minutes.

Hawk watching as an organized phenomenon is possible thanks to the propensity raptors show for following traditional flight paths; hence, hawk watching is associated with famous, long-standing observation areas such as Cape May, New Jersey and Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania. A look at the geography of those sites offers clues as to what causes the spectacular concentration of migrating raptors.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

Cape May is at the tip of a peninsula. Southbound hawks and other migrants concentrate there before heading over the open waters of Delaware Bay. Hawk Mountain, an open patch on a long ridge, presents raptors with favorable updrafts so they can migrate long distances with minimal exertion.

Illinois offers no geographical features quite as conducive to large-scale migration watching as those renowned sites. But a look at a map of the state does reveal some natural migration pathways. The foremost is the Lake Michigan shoreline. Raptors avoid flying over large bodies of water whenever possible. Hence, many raptors migrating south from Canada follow the western Lake Michigan shoreline. After these birds cross the Illinois line, some hug the lake shore and some profit from whatever updrafts and thermals they can find along the lake front bluffs to the west. Hawks migrating through Illinois also follow the Des Plaines River through the Chicago suburban area.

The other major geographical

feature through which raptors funnel into Illinois is the Mississippi River. It is an easy path to follow, especially because the steep bluffs provide sufficient updrafts for soaring.

These major flight lines, though, seem to break up quickly. South of the Chicago area raptors no longer have a shoreline to follow, so they move along a broad front. So too do those in the western part of the state, particularly south of Savanna, where the Mississippi River bluff is much less pronounced than farther north.

'Hawk watching presents both strenuous identification puzzles and heart-pounding excitement.'

"No real natural barrier exists in southern Illinois to make a flyway for hawks," said Judy De Neal of Harrisburg. She noted that the Shawnee Hills, which may provide some updrafts, lie mainly in an east-west orientation.

De Neal said she has had some luck spotting hawks driving along Route 3 north of Chester south to Grand Tower which parallels the Mississippi River. Large lakes in southern Illinois may also attract migrating hawks. A kettle of 2,000 broadwings was seen there one day the early part of last October.

RIDING THERMALS

Many raptors, particularly

buteos, eagles and vultures, try to ride thermals on their way south. Thermals are born when hot air rises over sun-warmed patches of ground, plowed fields, parking lots or other areas that absorb more sunlight than their surroundings. Hawks take advantage of this free ride by rising in thermals as high as they can, then gliding down from the top of the air column to, ideally, the base of another thermal.

The masters of this energy-saving technique are the Broad-winged Hawks, soaring buteos that congregate in kettles of up to one-thousand individuals. A boiling kettle of broadwings is a spectacle of flight that is difficult to surpass.

Some raptors care less for thermals. Falcons, for example, tend to muscle south in fall rather than soar. This variety of flight styles adds much to the diversity of watching migration. Seeing a Peregrine Falcon speed by at 60 or more miles per hour can be an exciting experience.

Hal Cohen, a biology professor at the College of Du Page, began enjoying the thrill of hawk migration at Mt. Hoy in 1985. Mt. Hoy, a clay-capped landfill no longer in use, reaches 150 feet above the surrounding Blackwell Forest Preserve. The preserve is about 30 miles west of downtown Chicago. To the west is the Du Page River. To the east is the subtle ridge line of the west Chicago moraine, whose modest elevation provides enough updrafts to attract some raptors.

Mt. Hoy is a valuable lookout because it stands so high above the surrounding terrain. From the summit, watchers