



Yard Birds

Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois

by Robert Fisher



Rough-legged Hawk photo by Vicky Sroczynski.

Watching hawks from a lawn chair in your yard

As autumn begins, groups of dedicated raptorphiles (aka hawk watchers) are trooping up to the tops of mountains (or maybe just up to the tops of closed and capped landfill hills), setting up lawn chairs, unfolding blankets, positioning scopes and tripods for easy viewing – beginning their vigil – scanning the skies to the north for those distant specks, which resolve themselves into one of North America's greatest birding spectacles – migrating raptors. This annual pilgrimage takes place at hundreds of sites all across North America. For many birders it's the highpoint of their birding year; seeing a Northern Goshawk, or a Golden Eagle drifting majestically overhead, or a Merlin zipping past your lawn chair at eye level, surely going at least 100 mph!

My wife, Karen, and I know that feeling. We're now dedicated hawk watchers at the Greene Valley Forest Preserve (a closed landfill site in DuPage County), only 15 minutes from our house. We've also learned to shrug off those remarks we hear: Don't most hawk watches take place on a mountaintop, not on top of a pile

of garbage?! OK, so we're not Hawk Mountain, nor Hawk Ridge, but the view is pretty spectacular (like a kettle of distant Turkey Vultures drifting above the even more distant Chicago skyline). We've even learned to ignore that lovely methane aroma wafting over us from the nearby standpipes.

After all, Illinois is not exactly famous for its mountainous terrain.

Before we began formally hawk watching at Greene Valley, we were, and still are, avid back yard hawk watchers – like many IOS members who don't live close to one of the state's two active hawk watch locations in far northeastern Illinois, at Greene Valley and Illinois Beach State Park. Many of us keep daily records of the birds seen in (or above) our yard throughout the year, with an emphasis on the phenology of those observations – the date on which we first, or last see a particular species. And raptor migration is very much a phenological phenomenon.

We can't see the Chicago skyline from our front porch, but we do have a clear and unobstructed view of the sky to the north and west. Even in

our back yard, which faces south, we watch for raptors sailing overhead as we work to prepare our garden for the approaching winter. What better excuse can you ask for to stop working, than an Osprey sailing by as he heads south in mid September. Or a small kettle of Broad-winged Hawks corkscrewing slowly higher, silhouetted against one of those puffy cotton candy cumulus clouds that dot the sky during an early autumn cold front. Binoculars are always close at hand as we deadhead our perennials, or pull weeds (especially that super pest, creeping Charlie), or just sit on the front stoop watching the sky to the north, waiting and hoping for that first ever yard Golden Eagle to pass overhead.

Should you be reluctant to try and identify distant raptors soaring above your yard – sometimes they're nothing more than specks in the great blue dome overhead – the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA) has a terrific website <http://hmana.org>, where you can download and print out a two-page guide to the silhouettes of the raptors