

Fall 2003 Hitchcock Nature Area Hawkwatch Report

August 15, 2003--December 20, 2003.

Overall Summary

This was an important year organizationally for the hawkwatch, as we finally reached the promised land of full coverage. This was due to the hard work of the Hitchcock Nature Area staff (Brett Ford, Chad Graeve, Tina Popson, and Carol Young) and the dedication of Jerry Toll who served as our paid hawk counter/educator this season. On the whole, it was a pretty good but somewhat mixed season. About half of our twenty listed raptor and vulture species (Turkey Vulture, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle, and Prairie Falcon) posted solidly average to excellent numbers. The other half posted slightly below average to disastrous numbers with one species—the accidental Black Vulture-- missing altogether. With over 600 hours of coverage this season, we'd also hoped to crack the 10,000 raptor/vulture barrier for the first time. As it was, we fell just short—9,772 raptors and vultures of nineteen different species were counted as they headed south past HNA. While the extra coverage produced numerous season records, only one new day record (10 Rough-legged Hawks on 12/16/03) was produced. Passage rates declined because of increased coverage of less-than-perfect weather days.

The season's start in August was very slow with hot weather predominating; many days also lacked strong winds of any direction. What southbound movement present was probably of a fairly "broad-front" nature and Hitchcock's hawkwatchers saw precious little of it. Counts for the month fell well short of 200 birds. What southbound movement there was consisted of mostly immature Turkey Vultures with a sprinkling of raptors; a few Mississippi Kites among the latter were the only real highlights of the month. Non-raptors weren't moving in great numbers either with early season migrants such as Common Nighthawks and American White Pelicans making less than impressive showings. Fairly average movements of Eastern Kingbirds and Chimney Swifts and the appearance of a few mild surprises (such as 3 Forster's Terns on the 15th) failed to overcome the sense that the non-raptors were slow out of the gate as well.

The first decent raptor day came on the 29th, when the back side of a low-pressure system brought 10-15mph north winds in its wake. While the 40+ birds seen that day were a welcome change from the rest of the month's slow flight, what was truly extraordinary about that day was this little flight's diversity—11 raptor/vulture species! The Northern Harrier (2), Broad-winged Hawk (5), and Swainson's Hawk (11) all made their 2003 debuts on the 29th.

Early September started off in less than scintillating fashion as well; of the first 12 days of the month, two were completely lost to rain/fog, and few of the remaining days produced much in the way of migration. The one non-raptor bright spot was the exceptionally strong showing by Red-headed Woodpeckers during their traditional peak period in the first third of September. Their flight was also divided essentially 50/50 between adults and juveniles. Past flight ratios had heavily favored adults, so this must have been a highly productive year for this species in terms of breeding success. Two of the more notable raptor flights occurred on the 3rd, when 74 raptors and vultures of 5 species (including 6 Ospreys) moved through, and on the 12th, when 97 Turkey Vultures spearheaded a total flight of 116 raptors and vultures.

Raptor and non-raptor numbers continued to be moderate through the mid-September period with perhaps the most memorable day coming on the 18th, when fairly strong south winds sparked a low altitude push of 88 raptors and vultures of 8 species. What was truly memorable about this day, however, was the push of Chimney Swifts that developed over about a two-hour period in the late morning. They were tacking into the wind, gliding, using updrafts, and moving in what was a fairly narrow band of air right over the Lodge. Jerry Toll's count, for the day, of this stream of swifts was a conservative 4,000.

September 20th is often viewed as the "real" start of the Hitchcock season as this is when raptor numbers traditionally begin to spike. In 2003, the timing was exact. As another low pressure system moved through, temperatures climbed and steady southeast winds whipped over Hitchcock's ridges. These conditions produced the first good day of the season on the 20th as 211 raptors and vultures of nine species moved

through low, tacking into the southeasterly wind and giving observers on the Badger Hill counting point some great close-in views. This flight was dominated by Turkey Vultures (111), but Broad-winged Hawks (38), and Sharp-shinned Hawks (31) also made good showings. The latter often passed Badger Hill at below eye-level-- at times skimming inches above the grass on the hillsides below the counters. American White Pelicans (668) straggled through, above the hawks and vultures, in meandering kettles and Chimney Swifts (1,000) also buzzed by (sometimes within a few feet of the Badger Hill counters). When two Mourning Warblers were found lurking in a brushpile directly below Badger Hill late in the afternoon, a truly enjoyable day was complete. The cork was now out of the bottle, and three of the next five days saw flights of 100+ raptors and vultures.

The last five days of September were nothing short of outstanding as a slow moving but fairly strong Pacific frontal system brought dropping temperatures and stronger (mostly northwest) winds. Daily raptor/vulture totals over this span were 253, 345, 289, 352, and 911. Migrants of all sorts were on the move over Hitchcock: Turkey Vultures, Swainson's Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks were joined by large numbers of Blue Jays, Franklin's Gulls, American White Pelicans, and Double-crested Cormorants. Both buteo species plowed though a bit early, but the Swainson's Hawk peak would prove to be somewhat shallow in comparison to the stronger and later flights of 2000 and 2002. The 30th would prove to be the best day (numberswise at least) of the entire 2003 season-- 911 raptors and vultures of 12 species were counted with Swainson's Hawks (522) and Red-tailed Hawks (206) predominating. The Swainson's Hawks, perhaps because they were a day or two ahead of what we've come to expect, uncharacteristically really took their time-- kiting and kettling over Hitchcock's ridges and mingling with Turkey Vultures and other raptors. At a couple of moments during the afternoon, between two and three hundred raptors and vultures soared together above Hitchcock. Such moments are truly why those of us who spend so many hours at HNA each fall keep coming back for more! Interestingly, few non-raptors found conditions on the 30th conducive, with only Blue Jays (386) putting in any kind of a showing.

October began with a steady if unspectacular push of raptors. On 10/1, a balanced flight of 192 raptors of nine species moved through with Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, and Sharp-shinned Hawks predominating. The light northwest winds that day also brought in the season's first Northern Goshawk. Another Pacific cold front moved through on the 4th. That day was Hitchcock's 2003 "Hawkfest", and the hawks responded with 287 raptors and vultures moving south over HNA. Turkey Vultures (106) and Red-tailed Hawks (90) dominated this flight with Swainson's Hawks (44) and Sharp-shinned Hawks (23) also putting in decent showings. A close-in Peregrine Falcon provided the day's highlight. Non-raptors included 360 American White Pelicans and 18 Yellow-rumped Warblers.

After a solid opening to the month, which saw 100+ flights on six out of the first seven days, two slower days followed. A more active weather system moved in on the tenth, however, just in time for the IOU Fall Meeting. As Iowa's birding elite began to arrive at the Lodge on Friday afternoon, the leading edge of a solid mid-October pulse of raptors and vultures was beginning to move through. 10/10 ended with a count of 178 raptors and vultures of six species. Loose kettles of Turkey Vultures dominated this low altitude flight into south winds. Two Merlins, including a well-seen Taiga male, were the day's highlights. Rain shut down the flight, and washed out the field trips, on Saturday morning. In the early afternoon, however the showers subsided, the sun eventually showed itself, and raptors, vultures and other migrants headed south. Turkey Vultures (99), Sharp-shinned Hawks (77), Red-tailed Hawks (55), Swainson's Hawks (22), and American Kestrels (17) dominated a flight of 291 raptors and vultures of 10 species. A Northern Goshawk was seen by many watchers from both observation points and proved to be the day's highlight. The non-raptor flight was also strong: 3,870 Double-crested Cormorants, 1,495 Blue Jays, 513 American Crows, 474 Canada Geese, and 110 Northern Pintails.

The flight on 10/12 into southwest winds was even better for raptors and (especially) vultures. Eleven species and 341 individuals were counted with the highlights being three Merlins and yet another Northern Goshawk. Turkey Vultures dominated this flight with a count of 131. 113 Red-tailed Hawks and 66 Sharp-shinned Hawks were also counted that day. The IOU weekend was polished off in fine still with the designation of Hitchcock Nature Area as Iowa's first official Important Bird Area. After a one-day lull, another Pacific cold front moved through and the birds filled the air again on 10/14. 380 raptors and vultures of eleven species were on the move that day. These included 184 Red-tailed Hawks, 132 Turkey

Vultures, and 42 Sharp-shinned Hawks. This day brought an unusual number of the more sought after species—2 Merlins, another Northern Goshawk, and the season's first Prairie Falcon. The non-raptor flight was dominated by Double-crested Cormorants (4,297), American Crows (1,195), and Ring-billed Gulls (235). An injured Song Sparrow found near the Lodge served as a reminder of how perilous a spectacle migration is for birds.

The next big push was triggered not by a cold front, but by a strong low pressure system that brought gusty south winds and temperatures that eventually rose into the 80s. It seems counter-intuitive, but these sorts of conditions often trigger strong flights at HNA in the early and mid-season. 10/17 saw a flight of 376 raptors and vultures of nine species. A season-high 208 Turkey Vultures were joined by 133 Red-tailed Hawks and 25 Sharp-shinned Hawks as the dominant species in the flight. The flight on 10/18 was even better. The 18th was a clear, calm hot day. Temperatures were, however, cool in the morning (though they reached 85 degrees by mid-afternoon). Thus, thermals were definitely present but never got so strong that the birds “vanished” into the cloudless sky. Movement between around 10:30am and 4pm was so constant that the counters were in a befuddled and exhausted/excited state by the end of the day. At 4pm, the thermals apparently died and the flight abruptly ceased. By then, however, 544 raptors and vultures of eight species had passed overhead: Red-tailed Hawks (322) and Sharp-shinned Hawks (129) had posted season-high numbers, and Turkey Vultures (64) and Northern Harriers (18) had also posted solid showings. The non-raptor flight had been diverse and balanced with American Crows (1,500) leading the way.

The next seven days of October all saw flights of 70 or more raptors and vultures. The best day of this stretch was the 25th when a Golden Eagle was the highlight of a day that featured a fairly strong push of Red-tailed Hawks along with a strong flight of non-raptors: 4,000 American Crows, 2,000 Red-winged Blackbirds, and 1,500 Common Grackles. The end of October brought several days of the dreaded combination of cloudy skies and easterly winds. The first three days of November saw similarly poor conditions and very poor hawk numbers. Things finally perked up a bit on the 4th when strong northwest blowing steadily at up to 25mph got some birds moving despite overcast conditions. 93 hawks and eagles of 7 species moved through with Red-tails (52), Bald Eagles (15) and a season-high 20 Northern Harriers dominating the raptor flight. This was a day, however, that was dominated by other migrants: 1,725 Snow Geese, 4,375 American Crows, 671 Ring-billed Gulls, 2,200 American Robins, 10,500 Common Grackles, an astonishing 1,100 Rusty Blackbirds, and (for a good measure), a Bonaparte's Gull, a Herring Gull, and a late (but still...) Great Egret.

The next late-season push developed on 11/8-- a day of mild temperatures and light variable winds. At first, this hardly seemed the sort of day that would produce much movement, but it did. The birds were far out over the Missouri Valley and high up riding thermals, but the conditions were clear and sunny, and the hawkwatchers present that day quickly learned to favor scopes over binoculars. By the end of the day, 155 raptors of six species had been tallied. Bald Eagles led the way (78) closely followed by Red-tailed Hawks (67). A good showing of 5 Rough-legged Hawks nearly tied the old (1999) day record (6) and prefaced things to come later in the 2003 season. 3,500 American Crows and 5,000 Common Grackles flew south with the raptors. As usual, we picked raptors out of the streams of crows. Things slowed down again until 11/15, which is the date of the annual “Eaglefest” at Hitchcock. As opposed to “Eaglefest”2002, there were actually migrant eagles passing through in 2003. By the end of the day, we had tallied 40 Bald Eagles, 29 Red-tailed Hawks and a handful of other raptors. American Robins (9,000) and American Crows (2,850) put in very good showings and a close-in group of 17 Brewer's Blackbirds provided an unexpected treat.

Northwest winds whipped the watch again on November 18th, as a flight of 122 raptors of 6 species pushed through in the chilly conditions. Bald Eagles (55) and Red-tails (52) led the way with Snow Geese (5,000) the most prominent non-raptor migrant. Conditions remained slow until a stronger Pacific front put the deep freeze on the Great Plains. 11/23 saw clouds of Snow Geese in the air heading south from DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge; our Snow Goose count for that day was a season-high 250,000! 74 Bald Eagles, a Golden Eagle, and a Sandhill Crane were also on the move. Good thermalling conditions, with light northwest winds, brought about a Bald Eagle bonanza on 11/25. 120 raptors including 102 Bald Eagles moved through that day—one kettle found by Karen Barnett included 18 of these magnificent raptors! The end of the month featured several days with northwest winds, but the “migratory pipeline” appeared empty and temperatures remained stubbornly in the low 40s.

December also started off slowly with cloudy calm conditions and light southerly winds. Single digit flights often prevailed until December 10th when a strong cold front moved through over the wintry snowscape of the Loess Hills and Missouri River Valley. 62 hawks and eagles of five species moved through that day. This flight was, as expected, dominated by Bald Eagles (38) and Red-tailed Hawks (21), but the bird of the day was an adult dark-morph Ferruginous Hawk. Geese were on the move south as well with 3,970 Snow Geese and 734 Canada Geese recorded. After this brief burst, however, the pace of migration really slowed. On the 14th, fog enveloped the Lodge (with only glimpses of the near valley visible from time to time and the Missouri Valley completely shrouded in mist and cloud). At one point, however, an adult Bald Eagle suddenly appeared out of the ghostly fog near the Lodge and apparently targeted Lightning (one of Hitchcock's two canine residents), who was wandering from the Lodge toward the parking lot. Lightning saw the eagle moving towards her and hid under a parked SUV! The eagle pulled up over the vehicle and continued south...

The next strong cold front whipped through on the 16th, and the birds were flying again. 67 hawks and eagles of 5 species moved through with the mix reflecting the "lateness" of the flight: 42 Bald Eagles, 13 Red-tails, and a new single-day record 10 Rough-legs. A Golden Eagle also turned up as an added bonus along with such late-season non-raptors as Snow Geese (8,300), Canada Geese (209), and Purple Finches (134). The season's final big flight on 12/18 was, fittingly, probably 2003's coldest day for hawkwatchers, who were forced to shelter behind the corner of the Lodge—away from the pounding and bone-chilling northwest winds. 90 hawks and eagles passed by that day with Bald Eagles (53) dominating the flight; Red-tails (22), and Rough-legs (7) also made good showings. Rarities were the highlight of this day, however, with a light-morph immature Ferruginous Hawk and two Prairie Falcons putting in appearances. Clem Klaphake and Jerry Toll also witnessed an estimated 4.5 mile tailchase that pitted a hungry Bald Eagle against a lone Snow Goose. In the end, the goose got away. The last two days of the count, even the Christmas Count on the 20th that turned up Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs, Killdeer, and an unexpected winter resident Northern Harrier, were something of an anticlimax after this last very memorable "big" day on the 18th.

Post-season thanks are in order to a host of people this season. First and foremost, our heartfelt thanks go out to the Hitchcock Nature Area staff—Brett Ford, Chad Graeve, Tina Popson, and Carol Young all show continuing dedication to and vision for Hitchcock Nature Area and are an inspiration for all of us.

Without the "Hitchcock regulars", the intrepid band of hawkwatchers who are most frequently the ones suffering through scorching early September heat or a bone-chilling mid-November "Alberta Clipper", there wouldn't be a hawkwatch at Hitchcock. Thus, Jerry Toll [Hitchcock's paid counter and educator this year], Sue Mattix, Clem "Hard Luck" Klaphake [whose bad-weather hawkless Thursdays this season were the stuff of legend], Don Paseka and Janis Paseka, Don Maas, Jim Meyer (who once again gave up vacation time to look for Swainson's Hawks), Mark Orsag, Pat Williams, Babs and Loren Padelford (our hawkwatch's founders), Karen Barnett (whose luck with hawkwatching was much better than her luck with her softball team), Carr Heaney (who was a regular Monday observer), Sandy Reinken (whose hawkwatching skills grew by leaps and bounds in a few short months), and Mary Kramer (who has a pet deer and probably wouldn't turn down a pet Bald Eagle) all deserve thanks and acknowledgement for their consistent dedication to a worthy enterprise.

A host of other people lent their time, skills, and support this year. Lee Schoenewe, Aaron Brees, Ann Johnson, Paul Hertz, Ric Zarwell, Jim Sinclair [and everyone else from IOU!], Bob Fuchs, Janet Greer, Cliff and Donna Rahel, Rick Schmid, John Hall, Robert and Linda Johnson, Laurine Blankenau, John and Marilyn Mancini, Karen Kahle, John Bissell, Wayne Nicholas, Phil Holland, Howard Mattix, Richard Pochard, Phil Hahn, Dick Reyer, Al Reyer, Cynthia Reyer, Lynea Hinchman, Betsy Finch, Denise Lewis, Paul Tebbel, Elaine Bachel, Nancy Hinnah (and everyone else from Nebraska Raptor Recovery), Kay Neumann, Kim Jarvis, and many others too numerous to name all contributed, in one way or another, to our collective efforts. We also met a lot of nice people this year as well, visiting Hitchcock from Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, and three or four other states and two foreign countries, on field trips from area birding groups, at the IOU Fall Meeting, at Hitchcock's "Hawkfest" and "Eaglefest," or at the Nebraska Raptor Recovery Fundraiser. Thanks for coming and hope to see you again this fall!

And now, the numbers...

Hitchcock Nature Area Hawkwatch Totals—Fall 2003

Days: 113*

Weighted [Two counting points staffed plus adjusted unweighted hours] Hours: 636*

Species seen since inception to present

1. Black Vulture 0.
2. Turkey Vulture 2,812*
3. Mississippi Kite 9
4. Bald Eagle 908*
5. Osprey 66
6. Northern Harrier 218
7. Sharp-shinned Hawk 948*
8. Cooper's Hawk 169
9. Northern Goshawk 9
10. Red-shouldered Hawk 6
11. Swainson's Hawk 1,059
12. Broad-winged Hawk 121
13. Red-tailed Hawk 3,132*
14. *Ferruginous Hawk* 2*
(1 dark-morph adult and one light-morph immature)
15. Rough-legged Hawk 59*
16. Golden Eagle 17
17. American Kestrel 130
18. Merlin 25
(Both Taiga and Prairie forms recorded)
19. Peregrine Falcon 25
(Both *tundrius* and *anatum* forms recorded)
20. *Prairie Falcon* 4
unidentified raptor 53

Total: 19 species. 9,772 individuals*

Raptors per weighted hour: 15.4

Swainson's Hawks—2 dark and 4 rufous morphs.

Red-tailed Hawks—39 Harlan's (including 3 light morphs), 23 Western dark morphs, 3 Western rufous morphs, 8 Krider's, and 14 dark morph Red-tails (indeterminate between Western and Harlan's).

Rough-legged Hawks—7 dark morphs.

Italics denote a species requiring documentation and records committee approval in Iowa.

*Denotes new season record.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

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1. Black Vulture—0. We missed this one this season. The IOU-accepted record from September 22, 2002 remains the only record for this species at HNA.

2. Turkey Vulture—2,812. 2003 proved to be a breakout year for this species—something that had been anticipated for a couple of years. Passage rates shot to over 4 birds an hour despite the overall downward effect on passage rates discussed earlier. This year's season total was an absolutely runaway new record. The peak flight came very late this year; 208 vultures were counted on 10/17. The last bird was recorded just six days later on (the fairly typical date of) 10/23. This species is clearly becoming a more common breeder on the Northern Great Plains. Their movement past Hitchcock may be undergoing a temporal shift

as well. Almost as many birds were counted in October as in September; this seems to be the continuation and strengthening of a trend that has been observed the last several seasons.

3. Mississippi Kite—9. We thought that we had the Mississippi Kite's migration pattern at HNA all figured out. 2003 proved that this wasn't quite so. This is a very uncommon early season migrant, and this season's drought conditions and the fast early start in August had many of us anticipating a big year for this species. Alas, it was not to be. Numbers and passage rates dropped, adult birds were nearly impossible to find, and the flight was (atypically) more or less over by September 1. The first two kites (including the only adult of the season) showed up on 8/22. The only non-August bird was counted on 9/23; this was a fairly typical late date. The peak flight of 3 occurred early on 8/28. While 2003's results don't invalidate the "drought theory" of kite migration at Hitchcock, they do demonstrate that it may need to be refined.

4. Bald Eagle—908. Despite a decline in passage rates, 1.84 in 2002 vs. 1.43 in 2003, this was still a pretty good year for Bald Eagles. As with all species this year, passage rates were negatively affected by the shift to full coverage. The first bird passed through on 9/13, and there was a strong push of 53 as late as 12/18. Some certainly continue to trickle south after the traditional end to the season on 12/20. November was again the big month this year with the peak flight of 102 coming on 11/25.

5. Osprey—66. The Osprey flight was quite poor this year. Overall numbers were down from 71 Ospreys in 2002 despite the vastly increased coverage hours. What happened to passage rates can be imagined. Karen Barnett, Jerry Toll, and Mark Orsag did see an Osprey carrying a fish this season—a rare sight at Hitchcock. The early bird of the 2003 season flew by on 8/15. Peak flights of 7 on the 16th and 17th of September showed fairly typical timing and volume. The surprise of the season was the late bird seen by Jerry Toll on 12/2. This is a new HNA record for lateness.

6. Northern Harrier—218. This was an above average year for this species. This season's total was the 2nd best ever at HNA. Passage rates did dip slightly (0.36 birds an hour in 2002 to 0.34 birds per hour in 2003). Since this species often flies in inclement or simply unfavorable conditions shunned by other raptors, the harrier count probably benefited more from the increased coverage than most others. The Northern Harrier logged in as the 6th most abundant raptor migrant at HNA in 2003—an uncharacteristically high placement. The two early birds showed up punctually on 8/29, and the late bird moved through with similarly typical timing on 12/10. A wintering individual was found just north and east of Hitchcock by Christmas counter Janet Greer on 12/20. The peak flight of 20 was typical in volume but a little on the late side (11/4). This year's decent showing calls into some question the apparent pattern of decline for this species at HNA. The coming years should provide more definitive clues as to the health of Northern Harrier populations north of HNA.

7. Sharp-shinned Hawk—948. This constituted a new season record, by one bird, over 2000. Passage rates were, however, notably lower due to the increased hours in 2003. The early bird was on 9/2, and the last day of the watch on 12/20 was graced by a clearly southbound bird. The peak flight was a bit late (10/18) but not without precedent in its timing. The peak flight volume was above average (129); this was the second best one-day flight in HNA history. Numbers for this species at HNA seem to demonstrate a little less annual variability than at many other hawkwatch sites.

8. Cooper's Hawk—169. This species posted poor numbers in 2003. Passage rate declines were steep, and even the overall numbers were inferior to those of recent seasons. The late migrant bird passed by on 11/2. The peak flight of 13 was shallow in volume but fairly typical in timing (9/20). One bird was found wintering in the area during the Christmas count on 12/20.

9. Northern Goshawk—9. This was a surprisingly good showing. Overall numbers were up over 2002 while passage rates held basically steady. The cycle for this species seemed to be headed downward, but we got an increase for this very uncommon migrant instead. Two birds that passed over HNA during the IOU Fall Meeting can only be described as well-timed. Flight timing and peak volume were all fairly typical. The early bird appeared on 10/1, the late bird on 11/21, and the typically shallow peak flight of 2 took place right on schedule on 11/5.

10.Red-shouldered Hawk—6. This is an occasional to rare migrant, and any season where we see more than two or three can be counted a success. Passage rates and overall numbers for this species were up in 2003. The timing of the flight was very typical. The first bird appeared on 9/26. The last moved through on 11/21. The peak flight of two (which ties the single day record) occurred on 11/11.

11.Broad-winged Hawk— 121. What happened to the Broad-wings this year is an unsolved mystery. The trend had been slowly but steadily up in recent years, with an unusually strong flight in 2002. This year's total was an unmitigated disaster. Numbers and passage rates nosedived to their lowest level ever at HNA. A possible corollary, Duluth's Hawkwatch had an incredible 100,000+ Broadwing day mid-September. We saw very little fallout from that day suggesting that weather patterns pushed at least some of the more westerly Broadwings that we normally see past Duluth this year and down the Mississippi River valley. Future study of this possible correlation has merit. Broad-wings were the sixth most abundant raptor at HNA during the fall of 2002 but fell to ninth place in 2003. The 2003 early date for this species was 8/29 (5), the late date was 10/1 (2); the extremely shallow peak flight of 38 occurred on 9/20.

12. Swainson's Hawk— 1,059. This species showed a marked decline from a record count in 2002, but again the total was in the semi-respectable low to average range for this site. The birds moved through, albeit without the alacrity of previous seasons, a bit early. The somewhat shallow peak flight of 522 occurred on 9/30. The first 11 birds appeared on 8/29, and the late bird moved through on 10/17. The latter timing is again fairly typical.

13.Red-tailed Hawk— 3,132. This constituted a new season record, however, passage rate declined slightly, 4.92/hr in 2003 compared to 5.17/hr in 2002, even though nearly 1,000 more birds were seen this season. This is still the most abundant migrant raptor at Hitchcock. This 5% decline in passage rate, however, is a leveling off of declining rates that in the previous 3 years had been in the 20th percentile. If current trends continue, Turkey Vultures will probably equal or outnumber Red-tails in the not-too-distant future. The Red-tail flight in 2003 was atypical only in the strong early push at the end of September. The 206 Red-tails seen on the 30th were truly a surprisingly high count. Peak flight timing and volume—322 on 10/18-- were far more typical. October was, as usual, the peak month. The various color morphs also recorded fairly typical numbers with only the Krider's Red-tails putting in an unusually strong showing. We also found no partial albino birds this year.

14.*Ferruginous Hawk*—2. Both individuals came in December this year. This was a new season record. The 12/10 bird was an adult dark morph (our second dark bird ever at HNA). The 12/18 bird was a light-morph immature. This species is pretty clearly an annual (or at least nearly annual) late season rarity. They are always an exciting, if by now not totally unexpected, find. Their movements past Hitchcock seem to be somewhat related to snow cover. This is something that we'll need to look into further in coming years. Both 2003 sightings have been submitted to the IOU records committee and are undergoing review as this is still considered an accidental species in Iowa.

15.Rough-legged Hawk—59. This was an "off the charts" year for this species. The 59 birds seen this season were a runaway new record, and passage rates were up strongly as well. Like that of the Ferruginous Hawk, Rough-leg migration past Hitchcock seems to have a link to snow cover with good movements of the birds often coming on days with north winds after snow storms in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area. This is something that we will try to chart more precisely in the future. The first Rough-leg was a bit late in arriving (10/26), but the big day was to come in December when a new single-day record 10 Rough-legs were seen on 12/16. Besides the sharp increase in overall numbers, there was a second atypical element to this season's flight. The 2002 percentage of dark-morph birds was 30%. This has been fairly typical of Rough-leg flights over the years and suggests more of an eastern flavor to Hitchcock's Rough-leg mix. [In contrast to other buteos, dark-morph Rough-legs are recorded far more often at eastern North American hawkwatches than at Western ones]. The 2003 percentage of dark-morphs was only 12%; this suggests a more Western flavor to this year's flight and probably tells us where, at least generally, this season's "extra" birds came from.

16.Golden Eagle—17. This uncommon species exactly equaled 2002's record total. Passage rates, of course, dropped in 2003. The early bird was a bit earlier than usual on 10/3, and the last bird cleared

through on 12/16. They rarely seem to come in bunches, and the shallow peak flights of 2 on the 4th and 11th of November were pretty typical in both volume and timing. Golden Eagle numbers show very little annual variation at HNA.

17. American Kestrel—130. American Kestrel numbers and passage rates nosedived this year. While there have been worse seasons in terms of overall numbers, the passage rate for 2003 was the lowest ever. 2002's excellent flight seems to have been the exception, and this year's poorer showing was probably closer to the norm. Hitchcock just isn't a good watch, volume-wise at least, for falcons. The peak flight of 17 American Kestrels occurred on 10/11. This is pretty typical timing for a bad kestrel year at HNA. In better years, the main push seems to come a bit earlier.

18. Merlin—25. These fierce little raptors certainly seem to be far more common, in light of IA-Bird reports, in the central and eastern parts of Iowa than they are out here at Hitchcock. That would make sense, as many of those more easterly migrants and winter residents are probably birds that skirt the western edge of the Great Lakes and then move south. There are several good "Merlin watches" in Wisconsin. As was the case in 2002, we once again bucked earlier trends and saw more Taiga than Prairie Merlins this season... a pity, as the adult male *richardsoni* is certainly one of the most strikingly beautiful raptors in North America. Passage rates were well down in 2003 with overall numbers declining slightly. The early bird's timing was fairly typical on 9/13. The late bird on 12/7 was indeed a bit later than usual. The timing and volume of the peak flight (3 on 10/12) were, however, very typical.

19. Peregrine Falcon—25. This was yet another poor showing by a falcon species in 2003. Both passage rates and numbers (from 33 in 2002) were well down. Early and late timing were fairly typical; the first bird passed through on 8/28, and the last bird moved through on 10/12. The peak flight of 6 on 9/29 was a bit early--like that of the Swainson's Hawk (which has a similar migratory timetable at HNA).

20. *Prairie Falcon*—4. This total ties the season record set in 1999 and again in 2001. This is yet another species that is occasional to rare at Hitchcock but that posts steady numbers from year to year. Once again, these birds stayed true to form. The first appeared on 10/14, the second on 10/20, and the last two on 12/18. The latter sightings equaled the HNA day record for this species (set last year on 10/12). No surprises here at all. This species requires brief documentation; the requisite information on all four birds has been submitted to the IOU.

Unidentified Raptor—53. This total duplicated the 2002 mark exactly. Hopefully, these birds were not the same 53 "that got away" in 2002! Fool us once...

There is one last sad note. Thunder, Hitchcock's beloved "canine hawkwatcher" was hit by a car and killed near Hitchcock Nature Area on the night of December 31, 2003. He'll certainly be missed most of all by his owners—Chad and Amy Graeve. The hawkwatching group, however, will miss him greatly as well. The Lodge deck won't be quite the same without him...

Mark Orsag
January 2004