

2017 Spring Raptor Migration at Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland

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Ahhhhh! That’s the sigh of relief over the rebounding of spring 2017’s numbers from spring 2016’s. Even though there were still more inclement weather days than one would like, the total number of migrant raptors counted during spring 2017 was about average and a whopping 32% above last spring’s meager count. There were 431 hours of coverage spanning 82 days, 8% and 5% below their respective five-year (2012–2016) averages, but still much better than 2016 (Table 2). Species results were mixed. Seven of the twelve most common raptor species were below their 5-year averages: Black Vulture, Sharp-shinned, Cooper’s, Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, and Red-tailed Hawks, and American Kestrel. The remaining five were above average: Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, and Merlin. A new seasonal record of 225 individuals was established for Bald Eagle. Percent changes appear in Table 1.

Table 1. 2017 Common Raptor Species. The 2017 count and 5-year percentage changes.

	Black Vulture	Turkey Vulture	Osprey	Bald Eagle	Northern Harrier	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Cooper’s Hawk	Red-shouldered Hawk	Broad-winged Hawk	Red-tailed Hawk	American Kestrel	Merlin
2017 Count	279	6850	565	225	76	1061	209	95	339	178	122	59
5-Yr % Change	-36	+21	+40	+42	+13	-13	-24	-48	-35	-15	-58	+23

Notably, counts for six species have declined significantly over the long term. A review of running 5-year averages from 2006 through 2017 (i.e., 2006–2010, 2007–2011, etc.) shows a steady downward trend for Northern Harrier and Sharp-shinned, Cooper’s, and Broad-winged Hawks. Comparing the 2006–2010 five-year average with that of 2013–2107, Northern Harrier seasonal counts have declined by 41%, Sharp-shinned Hawk by 45%, Cooper’s Hawk by 48%, and Broad-winged Hawk by 42%. In addition, counts for Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel have also declined greatly, but not so steadily. For Red-tailed

Hawk, recent 5-year averages are less than half of what they were in the mid-1990s and for American Kestrel, the same can be said compared to those of the late 1990s.

Table 2. 2017 Monthly and Seasonal Count Summaries, Five-year Count Averages (2012-2016), and Ten-year Count Averages (2007-2016). (Due to the rounding off of the individual five-year and ten-year species averages, they do not necessarily add up to the total five-year and ten-year averages.)

Survey Days and Hours	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Total	Five-year	Ten-year
	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017	Average (2012-2016)	Average (2007-2016)
Survey Days	4	24	27	22	5	82	86	88
Survey Hours	15.75	104.00	166.00	123.75	21.50	431.00	466	485
Species								
Black Vulture	2	100	142	29	6	279	438	404
Turkey Vulture	59	3,077	2,752	909	53	6850	5672	5,668
Osprey	1	149	358	49	8	565	405	451
Swallow-tailed Kite	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Mississippi Kite	0	0	0	3	0	3	10	9
Bald Eagle	4	31	96	87	7	225	158	136
Northern Harrier	0	3	59	14	0	76	67	89
Sharp-shinned Hawk	0	48	776	237	0	1,061	1221	1,659
Cooper's Hawk	0	39	137	33	0	209	274	371
Northern Goshawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-Shouldered Hawk	7	39	46	3	0	95	183	192
Broad-winged Hawk	0	0	153	181	5	339	523	657
Swainson's Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-tailed Hawk	1	41	103	32	1	178	210	239
Rough-legged Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Golden Eagle	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	1
American Kestrel	0	28	91	3	0	122	291	304
Merlin	0	6	36	17	0	59	48	52
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4
Unidentified Accipiter	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	13
Unidentified Buteo	0	0	3	2	0	5	6	11
Unidentified Eagle	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Unidentified Falcon	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	4
Unidentified Raptor	0	1	3	1	0	5	7	14
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	74	3,564	4,757	1,600	80	10,075	9,527	10,275

February: The 2017 season began on 24 February, delayed by adverse weather. Four days of coverage resulted in 74 raptors, 20% below the ten-year (2007–2016) average for that month.

March's weather permitted only 24 days of coverage, but 22–25 March produced a total count of 2275 raptors with 1550 tallied on 25 March itself, the

third highest daily total ever. Moreover, a record 1485 Turkey Vultures were counted that day, besting the old record of 1457 from 23 March 2003. Also, single Golden Eagles were observed on 6 and 7 March. Count-wise, March's 3564 raptors were 10% below the 10-year average.

April's weather fared better, allowing 27 days of coverage, and the count of 4757 raptors ended about average. It also featured a 1000+ raptor day with 1012 counted on 2 April, again fueled by Turkey Vultures (895). 10 April was notable for high seasonal daily counts of five species: Northern Harrier (17), Cooper's Hawk (23), Red-shouldered Hawk (11), Red-tailed Hawk (28), and American Kestrel (22). Note though, that all these "high" counts are actually fairly low historically.

May was a robust month, albeit on only 22 days of coverage, and the total raptor count of 1600 was 9% above average. Remarkable were 11 Merlins on 14 May. Mississippi Kites were scarce this season with only 3 counted, perhaps because a prey species, periodical cicada (*Magicicada* Davis spp. [Hemiptera: Cicadidae]), was more numerous in other parts of the flyway.

With Ospreys and Bald Eagles being more numerous this year, skirmishes between the two were more frequent. On 8 April, four different Bald Eagles got in a tangle with an Osprey carrying a fish, which was dropped and then retrieved by one of the eagles.

Other delights included a new species, #280 for the Park: two adult Black Skimmers on 7 May (Figure 1). Two to three Red-headed Woodpeckers made the Park home for several weeks, although they declined to stay to nest. A Northern Gannet was observed on 7 April, and a Brown Pelican flew past on 10 April.

The hawkwatch was fortunate to have a good number of counters aiding the effort, namely, Sue Ricciardi, Hal Wierenga, Lynn Davidson, Ralph Geuder, Bob Rineer, Dan Walker, Chris Reed, Paul Fritz, Bill Hubick, Andy Smith, Dan Haas, Jim Stasz, Harry and Liz Armistead, John Hoffman, Linda Baker, Andy Higgs, Hugh Hoffman, Dan Stewart, Greg Smith, Mary Jane McMillan, Steve Whitcomb, Alan Johnston, and Alan and Sue Young. Other visitors over the season enhanced the count. The staff at Fort Smallwood Park also extended their usual much appreciated support. Good news on the older data front: Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson have recovered detailed records from most of the 1981–1983 seasons, for which previously we only had summary data.

The 37th year of spring migration counts at Fort Smallwood Park is now complete. Year 38 will be here before long. Get ready!



Figure 1. Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*). Species # 280 for Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland; photographed by Bill Hubick, 7 May 2017. Two adults flew in off the Bay, circled near the hawkwatch and around the pond before heading north. Minutes later they reappeared on the Chesapeake Bay and headed south.

[Fort Smallwood Park is located in northeastern Anne Arundel County at 9500 Fort Smallwood Road, Pasadena, Maryland. It is situated at the tip of a peninsula where the Patapsco River and Rock Creek meet the Chesapeake Bay. The park is operated by the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks. Additional Fort Smallwood Park information can be found at: [http://www.aacounty.org/departments/recreation-parks/parks/fort-smallwood/.](http://www.aacounty.org/departments/recreation-parks/parks/fort-smallwood/)]