

2018 Spring Raptor Migration at Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland

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Spring 2018 brought mixed results, with some impressive counts, but also with some that were very concerning. The season's total number of migrant raptors, 10,314, was above the ten-year (2008–2017) average of 10,130 (Table 1). Coverage of 468 hours and 83 days was in each case within a few percentage points of average. Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Cooper's Hawk, Bald Eagle, and Red-shouldered Hawk had season counts above their 5-year (2013–2017) averages. Ospreys, especially, were delightfully numerous; the count of 699 was the second highest ever. Sadly, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel continued their long-term and worrisome declines. To illustrate, the daily record high count for American Kestrel is 387, achieved in 2004. However, the entire count for this season was just 88. The Sharp-shinned Hawk low count of 598 is unprecedented. Only once since significant coverage began in 1993 has the seasonal count been less than 1000 and that was 845 in 2013. Percent changes in season counts are displayed in the Table 1. Although Cooper's Hawk had a positive 5-year percent change, the long-term trend is also in the downward direction. Merlin numbers have undergone more variability over the years, so that the negative percent changes shown are not significant. These trends have been verified, at least through 2016, using the Raptor Population Index (<http://rpi-project.org/>), a program which analyzes population data submitted to HawkCount (<http://hawkcount.org/>), a national database containing migratory raptor counts.

February: The first count day was 21 February, but adverse weather prevented a return until 26 February. By 27 February, only 5 migrants had been counted. On 28 February, however, favorable weather and winds spurred the migration with 243 raptors tallied, producing a monthly total far above the 10-year average of 91.

March's coverage was reduced by weather to 24 days, but good numbers of Turkey Vultures and Ospreys resulted in an above-average surplus of 500+ migrants.

Table 1. 2018 Common Raptor Species. The 2018 count and 5-year and 10-year percentage changes.

	Black Vulture	Turkey Vulture	Osprey	Northern Harrier	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Cooper's Hawk	Bald Eagle	Red-shouldered Hawk	Broad-winged Hawk	Red-tailed Hawk	American Kestrel	Merlin	Season Total
2018 Count	374	7,213	699	53	598	256	195	186	449	148	88	41	10,314
5-Yr % Change	-15	+15	+60	-21	-48	+6	+10	+1	-13	-31	-66	-18	+3
10-Yr % Change	-8	+24	+53	-4	-60	-24	+31	0	-30	-34	-67	-23	+2

April on the other hand, with 25 days of coverage, was 650+ raptors below average mainly due to a very poor count of Sharp-shinned Hawks. Only 409 were counted, compared to the 10-year April average of 1,163. But, one good bird can make a month memorable and that occurred on 27 April when a Swallow-tailed Kite passed by (Figure 1)!

May's numbers were above average by about 150 based on just 23 days of coverage. Turkey Vultures led the way, masking subpar performances by most other species, except for Mississippi Kite. May 15 was the first date that Mississippi Kites were observed in 2018, but it wasn't just one; it was 8, becoming the second highest daily record. Four others were seen in May, bringing the season total to 12, above the 10-year average of eight.

June's seven days of coverage produced decent counts of Turkey Vultures and Bald Eagles, but the big highlight was a second Swallow-tailed Kite on 2 June, the twelfth record for the hawk watch. Interesting was an abundance of westerly winds this season, and had there been normal numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks, the overall count would have been much higher.

We are not only rewarded by watching migrant raptors parade by, but also by being able to witness thrilling raptor behavior. With more eagles in the air, we often got to see talon-grappling, spats with Ospreys, and synchronous group-flying.



Figure 1. Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*). Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland; photographed by Tom Feild, 27 April 2018.

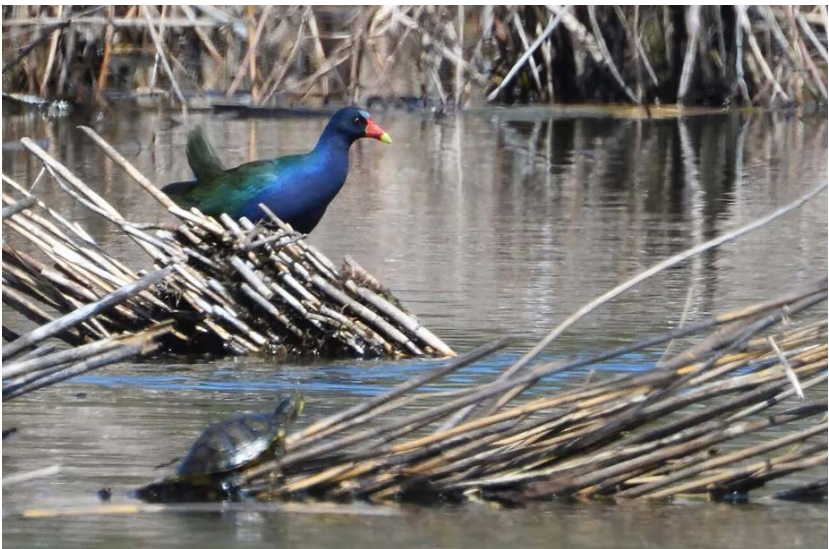


Figure 2. Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinicus*). Species # 281 for Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland; photographed by Dan Walker, 26 April 2018.



Figure 3. Saltmarsh Sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta*). Species # 282 for Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland; photographed by Sam Miller, 26 April 2018.



Figure 4. White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). Flyovers near the stone battery heading toward Swan Creek.; species # 283 for Fort Smallwood Park, Anne Arundel County, Maryland; photographed by Bill Hubick, 28 July 2018.

Non-raptor species added to the enjoyment. A Common Raven flew by on 3 March and Seaside Sparrows visited in early May. A Great Blue Heron captured an Eastern Garter Snake, proceeded to ready it for a meal, and eventually swallowed it whole. It's possible that a Prothonotary Warbler nested in the wooded wetland as it was heard calling several times during the breeding season. Finally, and unexpectedly, three new species were added to the Park's bird list. On 26 April, a stunning Purple Gallinule (Figure 2), seen only a few times previously in Maryland, made the Park its home for almost two weeks. That same day, a Saltmarsh Sparrow (Figure 3) was spied skulking in the reeds nearby the hawk watch. On 28 July (outside of the hawk watch season), two White Ibis were observed flying north up the Bay (Figure 4). The total number of bird species observed at the Park has now reached 283.

Central to the success of this Spring's effort were our loyal counters, namely: Sue Ricciardi, Hal Wierenga, Lynn Davidson, Chris Reed, Dan Walker, Bob Rineer, Ralph Geuder, Paul Fritz, Bill Hubick, Andy Smith, Dan Haas, Jim Stasz, Dave Mozurkewich, Harry and Liz Armistead, John Hoffman, Hugh Hoffman, Linda Baker, Andy and Judy Higgs, Dan Stewart, Tom Field, and Alan and Sue Young. The contributions of other visitors were valuable as well. We are also indebted to the staff at Fort Smallwood Park for their continued support of the count.

Next Spring will bring its own joys and challenges. Are you ready?

[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: <https://www.aacounty.org/departments/recreation-parks/parks/fort-smallwood/>]