

Golden Eagles in Ohio: An Overview of the Species in Ohio and Eastern North America

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Golden eagles *Aquila chrysaetos* have never been common or easy to find in Ohio. The ornithological record for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is based primarily on birds shot by farmers or caught in leg traps. Thus it was as trophies that most golden eagle records reached Ohio's early ornithologists. The majority of birds collected during this period were immature eagles, and their unwaryness in the presence of humans may explain the relatively large proportion that ended up as mounted specimens. Milton B. Trautman described an up-close view of an immature golden eagle at Buckeye Lake in December 1928, and commented on "the apparent tameness of this eagle" that "seems characteristic of this species in Ohio. I have noted this tameness or stupidity in 2 other immatures seen elsewhere in the state, and other observers have likewise noted a lack of wariness." He added that he knew of seven specimens of immature golden eagles taken in Ohio between 1922 and 1933 (Trautman 1940).

However unwary, golden eagles were hard to come by in more recent years as well, with an average of five to eight sightings per decade from the 1940s through the 1970s (Peterjohn 2001). Most of these sightings came from northern Ohio, though golden eagles were also found on occasion throughout the state, primarily in the central and western counties.

The number of golden eagles observed in Ohio and throughout eastern North America began to trend upwards in the 1980s, and by the late 1990s Ohio birders were reporting five to 15 or more annually (Peterjohn 2001), including overwintering eagles in southeastern Ohio. Regional hawk watches such as Holiday Beach in southern Ontario, the Southeastern Michigan Raptor Research sites south of Detroit, and the Black Swamp Bird Observatory spring migration hawk watch centered at Magee Marsh, all now regularly report numbers of golden eagles unheard of a mere 20 years ago. The increase is likely the result of improving productivity among eastern Canadian breeding populations. Some attribute the increase in golden eagles in part to the banning of DDT in 1972 as well as the "banning of strychnine poisoning for Coyotes and Wolves, reduced use of leg-hold traps to capture furbearers, increased restrictions on guns, and greater public awareness and appreciation of raptors" (Wheeler 2003).

Most of eastern North America's breeding golden eagles were probably born in Labrador and Quebec. "An estimated 200 pairs and 400 juveniles and subadults inhabit Quebec in the summer. Virtually all pairs are found north of a line from the southern tip of James Bay east to Sept-Îles," with the largest strongholds on "the

east shore of Hudson Bay and on the Ungava Peninsula" (Wheeler 2003). Breeding has not been confirmed in the Maritime Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, but summering birds have been sighted in New Brunswick and the Cape Breton Peninsula of Nova Scotia (Wheeler 2003).

In the eastern United States, golden eagles are known historically to have bred in only a handful of places and only in small numbers in the eastern states of Maine, New Hampshire, and New York (Wheeler 2003). For all practical purposes, these breeding populations no longer exist. Golden eagles in Maine last attempted to breed in 1997, but were unsuccessful; the last successful pair of nesting golden eagles in New York was recorded in 1970, with a failed attempt in 1980. It was a huge surprise when a pair of goldens nested in Michigan's Kalkaska County in 1997. They have not nested there since. Golden eagles are seen occasionally in summer in the southern Appalachian Mountains, but no proof of breeding has ever been recorded. A pair of golden eagles from a Georgia reintroduction program nested in Tennessee in 1993, 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2001, while a pair from the same program kept Georgia on their minds, nesting in the Peach State during the 1990s (Wheeler 2003).

Golden Eagle Migration in Eastern North America

Golden eagles are short- to moderate-distance migrants, with juveniles migrating before subadults and adults. Though young birds from the small population of reintroduced eagles in Georgia and Tennessee do disperse from natal areas, they do not migrate per se (Wheeler 2003). This means that the golden eagles that migrate through Ohio or winter here are most likely of Canadian origin. Most migrating golden eagles use the Appalachian corridor to reach their wintering grounds, but a few migrate down the Mid-Atlantic Coast or around the Great Lakes (Wheeler 2003).

In general, spring migration of golden eagles in eastern North America involves retracing northward the southbound routes followed in fall. Adult migration peaks in March; juveniles and subadults peak in April, and stragglers are possible well into May (Wheeler 2003).

Golden Eagle Migration in Western Lake Erie

A number of Great Lakes migrant golden eagles reach Ohio each fall. Fall hawk watch stations along western Lake Erie such as Holiday Beach in Essex County in southwestern Ontario, and the Lake Erie Metropark and Pointe Mouillee State Game Area watches in Michigan just south of Detroit sometimes record the first juvenile goldens of the year in mid-September, but more typically observe juveniles beginning in early or mid-October. The movement of juvenile golden eagles along Lake Erie peaks in late October, and numbers of subadults and adults are strongest in November, with a few passing through possibly even into December (Wheeler 2003).

To give some sense of how many golden eagles move through western Lake Erie in the fall, consider some figures from Southeastern Michigan Raptor Research (SMRR). SMRR president Paul Cypher reports that the organization's counters



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Map by John Economidy, taken from the new guide *Raptors of Eastern North America* by Brian K. Wheeler, Princeton University Press, 2003.

tallied an average of 60 golden eagles each fall between 1992 and 1998. In 1999, the numbers exploded—as was the case in hawk watches in other areas of the eastern United States and Canada—and SMRR counted a record 245 golden eagles that year. They broke that record a year later with 252 in 2000, followed by lower but still robust totals of 174 golden eagles during the fall 2001 season, and 110 in fall 2002 (Paul Cypher, pers. comm., SMRR web site). Cypher explains that during this period a “significant number of birds recorded were non-adult.” As an example “in [2001] 8% were adults, 32% were unknown and the rest were non-adult” (Paul Cypher, pers. comm.).

Golden eagle numbers from the hawk watch at Holiday Beach, which sits on the north shore of Lake Erie in Ontario, are lower than those recorded by SMRR for the same period, but mirror the general pattern. Holiday Beach hawk watch counters recorded 28 golden eagles in 1998 followed by 134 during the boom year of 1999, 103 in 2000, 85 in 2001, and 66 in 2002 (Holiday Beach Migration Observatory web site).

Spring migration in western Lake Erie is not so thoroughly documented as fall migration. However, there have been efforts in the western Great Lakes region to set up spring hawk watches (Mark Shieldcastle, pers. comm.). The Johnson Beach spring hawk watch at Indiana Dunes on the south shore of Lake Michigan, for instance, records an average of one golden eagle every two years, mostly in April (Indiana Audubon web site). Another spring site hawk watch site is on the southern shore of Lake Huron in Port Huron, Michigan.

The Niagara Peninsula spring hawk watch on the Niagara escarpment just south of Lake Ontario is a long-standing spring hawk watch, operating since 1975. In spring 2002, the Niagara Peninsula watch recorded 8 golden eagles, a number “very close to the recent and long-term average.” For 2001, they report “Golden Eagle numbers were down from a record high of 13 [in 2000] to just 6.” But the Niagara Peninsula counters don’t consider this indicative of a trend, since numbers of golden eagles “tend to vary considerably from year to year.” (Dieroff 2001, 2002).

The Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) in Michigan’s upper peninsula between Lake Superior and Whitefish Bay has an active spring hawk watch. In 2003, for instance, the Observatory’s counters tallied 75 golden eagles between March and the end of May. In 2002 counters observed 44 golden eagles. In 2001 and 2000 the Observatory counted 70 and 95 golden eagles respectively (WPBO web site).

In Ohio, spring migration of golden eagles generally involves a handful of birds passing through western Ohio anywhere from February through early May (Peterjohn 2001). For example, the spring migration hawk watch by Black Swamp Bird Observatory (BSBO), a rare example of a long-running spring hawk watch in the western Lake Erie region, reported three golden eagles in 2001, and five in both 2002 and 2003 from sites between Sandusky Bay and Toledo. BSBO’s principal hawk watch site is located at Magee Marsh.

The Winter Status of Golden Eagles in Eastern North America

Golden eagles pretty much desert Canada, crossing the US border, during winter. Wintering golden eagles in eastern North America are concentrated in a range extending from southern New England south into the central and southern Appalachian mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The eagles prefer montane regions in this portion of the Appalachians. Golden eagles also “regularly winter in isolated areas” in the Midwest, including Wisconsin, southern Michigan, western and southern Illinois, and southern Indiana (Wheeler 2003), and, of course, Ohio. Numbers of over-wintering golden eagles in the Midwest are always lower than in the core portion of the eagles’ eastern North American winter range. Sporadic wintering of golden eagles also occurs in western Kentucky, western Tennessee, and Louisiana (Wheeler 2003).

One spot Ohio birders visited in an attempt to see wintering goldens, prior to the discovery of the eagles at The Wilds, was Lake Monroe in Monroe County, Indiana—nonetheless a long drive from Ohio. Another location in Indiana for finding occasional golden eagles in winter is in “Parke County [west central Indiana] near the Wabash River and Sugar Creek, where upwards of 75+ bald eagles winter and a few pairs nest” (Don Gorney, pers. comm.). Such meetings of the two North American species ought to provide opportunities to work on separating immature golden eagles from subadult bald eagles! In southern Michigan, three to five golden eagles winter most years (Allen Chartier, pers. comm.). One Michigan location that has hosted wintering golden eagles, and not too far away from many Ohio birders, is the Allegan State Game Area in Allegan County (Johnson 1999).

Winter Status of Ohio Golden Eagles

Ohio golden eagles in old accounts are best considered transients or accidental residents from December through February (Peterjohn 2001). Most winter records from Ohio involve one eagle, occasionally two, and are concentrated in the northern half of the state, with a few records in the southern half of the state. A record from February 1904 of eight golden eagles perched on ice along the Lake Erie shore (Baird 1905) sounds suspiciously like a group of subadult bald eagles. Separating golden eagles from subadult bald eagles at a distance was often a tricky identification problem in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, in some cases still is today, despite advances in optics and increased knowledge of the different plumages involved. Concerns that golden eagles are being misidentified, coupled with the fact that not all observers provide documentation for their sightings, obscures the true status of golden eagles in Ohio so far as many authorities are concerned. However, enough golden eagles are being documented thoroughly or viewed by multiple—even numerous—observers to convince even the most conservative minds that golden eagle sightings are now increasing in number relative to the past 100-plus years.

Recent Fall and Winter Golden Eagle Sightings In Ohio

The region’s big year for golden eagles at western Lake Erie hawk watches was echoed in Ohio, where a noticeably strong fall period netted six sightings between 24 October and 8 November 1999, all involving immature or subadult birds, followed by “unprecedented numbers of documented sightings,” consisting of at least nine golden eagles during the winter 1999-2000 season. Interestingly, in addition to an eagle that wintered at The Wilds, winter reports came to light from 9 February of an immature bird near Chillicothe, and another eagle was photographed near Lake Hope in Vinton County on 28 February (*The Ohio Cardinal* 23:1 and 23:2).

Fall 2000 was another good period for golden eagles in Ohio, with five birds reported between 19 October and 26 November (*The Ohio Cardinal* 24:1). There were three records from winter 2001: two from The Wilds and one from the Chandlersville (Muskingum County) Christmas Bird Count (*The Ohio Cardinal* 24:2). In fall 2001, four birds were reported between 30 October and 11 November. A fifth bird was reported in Noble County on 17 September 2001, twelve days before the SMMR’s counters recorded their first golden eagle of the season (*The Ohio Cardinal* 25:1). Winter 2001-02 saw a wing-shot bird on 8 December in Morrow County, but no birds were reported from The Wilds until a single bird on 9 March (*The Ohio Cardinal* 25:2 and 25:3). It’s assumed this bird over-wintered. Catching us up to the present, there was one fall report of two golden eagles in Lucas County on 23 October 2002, and three birds, one adult and two immature, over-wintered at The Wilds 2002-03 (*The Ohio Cardinal* 26:1 and 26:2). The majority of golden eagle sightings in Ohio involve immature or subadult birds.

The Wilds’ Wintering Goldens

Today, Ohio birders enjoy an unprecedented era so far as golden eagles are concerned. Not only are they finding more golden eagles during spring and fall migration, as well as during the winter, than ever before, but since the winter of 1996-97, golden eagles have over-wintered in and around The Wilds in Muskingum County in southeastern Ohio. Prior to this time, there is little hard evidence for over-wintering golden eagles in Ohio, though a pair may have wintered near Toledo in Lucas County during the winter of 1947-48 (Mayfield 1948). Perhaps other golden eagles might have stuck around longer during Ohio winters of decades past, but they tended to end up caught in leg traps or shot and stuffed. As mentioned above, getting shot is still an occupational hazard for golden eagles: the wing-shot golden eagle from Morrow County in December 2001 was eventually picked up by Ohio Division of Wildlife personnel, but its damaged left wing had to be amputated (*The Ohio Cardinal* 25:2). And with wingspans of six to seven feet, electrocution from accidental contact with utility lines while perching on poles is another hazard golden eagles face, as was evident when an electrocuted golden eagle turned up—or dropped dead—in Adams County in January 1992 (*The Ohio Cardinal* 15:2).

In a way, the golden eagles of The Wilds have become part of the folklore of Ohio birders. And, as is often the case with folklore, the actual history behind the

story is muddled enough that today nobody knows for certain how many winters the birds have been visiting this large grassland situated atop a reclaimed strip mine in Muskingum County. David St. John first reported one wintering at The Wilds in February 1997 (Vic Fazio, pers. comm.). Golden eagles were apparently seen by Wilds employees during the winters of 1997-98 and 1998-99, but documentation of The Wilds' wintering goldens didn't occur until the winter of 1999-2000 when David St. John photographed an immature and Bill Murphy provided written documentation of an adult (Fazio, pers. comm.). During the winter of 2002-03, as many as three golden eagles (two immature and one adult or near-adult) could be found at one time at The Wilds until mid-March. Numerous Ohio birders were able to make the trip to see at least one golden eagle; and as is often the case, "good" birds bring more birders, and additional reports of The Wilds' eagles throughout the winter season of 2002-03 (and one hopes in subsequent winters) should help us better understand the winter status of the species in Ohio.

Finding Golden Eagles in Ohio During Migration and Winter

Birders who wish to see golden eagles in Ohio have a few different strategies to choose from. Here's the Cliff's Notes version: 1) Pay regular visits to the Magee Marsh Hawk Watch during spring migration, look up in the sky and wait, 2) Visit the Oak Openings region in late-October or early-November, look up in the sky and wait, 3) Wait for someone to report goldens at The Wilds during the winter, drive out there, look up in the sky or across the horizon, and wait.

During spring migration, a handful of golden eagles generally pass through northwest Ohio. The odds are against running into one on any given day, but the Black Swamp Bird Observatory does record them most springs at their hawk watch sites, including the main site at Magee Marsh. As is the case at the fall hawk watches in western Lake Erie, the BSBO spring hawk watch "seem[s] to be seeing [golden eagles] with more regularity," according to Mark Shieldcastle. The experience of BSBO hawk watchers in spring is similar to that of observers at fall sites—that is, golden eagles migrate in the late afternoon (Mark Shieldcastle, pers. comm.). So catching sight of one in Ohio in the spring requires setting aside time and focusing one's attention—perhaps even giving up on warblers and songbirds for a day or two—in order to improve one's odds.

The chance to see migrating golden eagles in the fall increases considerably, especially in northwest Ohio. Birders would probably benefit from keeping track of the reported daily totals from SMRR <www.smrr.net> and the Holiday Beach Migration Observatory <www.hbmo.org> posted on the internet. But this will be of limited benefit because while daily reports indicate when birds are moving, it's not necessarily the case that one could track down tomorrow in northwest Ohio eagles seen today in Michigan or Ontario. Still, birders can check the pulse of migration by following regional hawk watches on the internet.

The prime site for golden eagles in Ohio is in the Oak Openings region in western Lucas County. Tom Kemp compiled 28 golden eagle sightings from western Lucas County from the years 1988 through 1998. Birds were sighted

between 19 October and 25 November, with 22 of the sightings occurring between 27 October and 11 November. Of the 28 birds tallied in this 10-year period, 20 were juveniles or subadults (Kemp 1997).

The typical day for golden eagles to pass through Lucas County had westerly winds, with 22 of 28 birds seen on days with at least some west wind. Additionally, all but three of the eagles from Kemp's sample were afternoon migrants, in keeping with their apparent preference for afternoon flights during migration. Kemp advises "to add this species to your state list, bundle up in your warmest clothes, and choose a spot with a good view of the northern sky; try the corner of Girdham and Reed Rds., in the Oak Openings or areas near Toledo Express Airport" (Kemp 1997).

With the presence of over-wintering birds at The Wilds in recent years, it's easier today than at any time in Ohio birding history to see golden eagles. As is so often the case with rare or uncommon birds, the attraction of The Wilds is the landscape. During migration and in the winter, golden eagles are attracted to "semi-open montane regions, especially areas with open 'bald' landscapes," and to a lesser extent, "dry or wet semi-open lowland regions with meadows, rivers, lakes, and marshes." They often share such areas with bald eagles (Wheeler 2003).

The Wilds is nearly 10,000 acres in size, and sits atop reclaimed strip mines in Muskingum County, southeast of Zanesville. Much of the property is open grassland. According to its website, The Wilds "manages approximately 6,000 acres [of] non-native grassland," but plans are apparently underway to replace "large sections with Ohio-genotype tall grass prairie" (The Wilds web site). It will be interesting to see what effects management practices of grasslands at The Wilds will have on both breeding and wintering birds in the area.

In the winter of 2002-03, most golden eagle sightings in The Wilds were along Zion Ridge Road and International Road. This might change year to year, assuming that goldens continue to winter at The Wilds, but there should be plenty of information available on various birder "grapevines." The Wilds is also a good spot in winter to catch sight of rough-legged hawks, northern harriers, short-eared owls, and the occasional large African mammal, so even if one doesn't see a golden eagle on a trip to the area, there ought to be something to look at during the visit.

Historically, southeastern Ohio would have had little appeal to over-wintering raptors or breeding grassland birds, but years of surface mining and other land uses have left huge tracts of open land in this formerly wooded part of the state. In addition to the 10,000-acre Wilds property, there are four state wildlife areas in southeastern Ohio encompassing over 61,000 acres, much of it open grassland or mixed successional shrublands, grasslands, wetlands, and lakes. Any of the following sites, as well as other areas in the vicinity, would be worth checking for golden eagles and other raptors in winter: the 11,171-acre Crown City Wildlife Area along the Gallia/Lawrence county line; the 14,300-acre Egypt Valley Wildlife Area in Belmont County; Tri-Valley Wildlife Area's 16,200 acres in Muskingum County; and the 19,000 acres of Woodbury Wildlife Area in Coshocton County (McCormac 1999). In addition to designated parks and wildlife areas, there are additional

reclaimed strip mining sites in southeastern Ohio between St. Clairsville in Belmont County and McConnellsville in Morgan County (Al Parker, pers. comm.). It's likely, too, that southeastern Ohio has any number of additional areas that might be suitable for golden eagles in winter.

An organized and concerted effort by birders running winter raptor counts in southeastern Ohio might turn up a number of wintering golden eagles and other raptors in places where they had previously not been known to winter. Such an effort, if under taken at least once in January, would also be of benefit to the ongoing Ohio Winter Bird Atlas project.

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The beach at Caesar Creek State Park in Warren County produced this nice Franklin's gull on 12 July 2003. Photo by Bill Hull.