

## **How to Watch for Hawks**

Toby Gordon coordinated the Pilot Mountain Hawk Watch from 1991 – 2003. He put together the following guidelines for effective participation as a hawk watch observer at Pilot Mountain State Park.

Thank you for taking the time to count migrating hawks at Pilot Mountain State Park; your contribution to this project is valuable. Counting hawks can be exciting – 13 species of raptors are seen regularly at the Little Pinnacle Overlook and few spectacles compare with seeing a “kettle” of hundreds of hawks making their way south. Counting migrants also advances raptor conservation. The data you gather during the count period will be used to improve our understanding of raptor populations in North America. That’s the good news, the bad news is that hawk-watching isn’t an easy activity. Sometimes birds of prey fly close enough to the Little Pinnacle to be seen easily without binoculars, but usually more work is required. The following strategies are offered to help make your time on the mountain as productive and enjoyable as possible.

### **Finding Raptors**

Once you’re onsite and are ready to begin, you might start by scanning. Scanning means following a pattern to cover a large area with your binoculars. A good way to start is to look as far NW as you can and then follow the horizon to the right. Do this slowly so you can really see what’s out there and stop when you see the edge of the Big Pinnacle. Didn’t see any birds? That’s OK, try moving up so you’re looking above the horizon and scan back to your starting point. From here you can raise your binoculars another field of view and scan again. If scanning is new to you, practice it a few times because it’s a valuable skill for hawk-watching. If you’re covered the north side of the Big Pinnacle, try the south side.

Suppose you find a bird while scanning and you want to show it to the people around you. Instead of lowering your binoculars and pointing, continue tracking the bird so you don’t lose it. Announce what you see so everyone can look for it and give landmarks if you can: “I’ve got a bird here, it’s just below the horizon and passing a silver water tower. I can just see Highway 52 at the left edge of my field.” This should give others enough information to find your bird and you can start comparing observations.

If you get tired of scanning (guaranteed to happen) try looking around without binoculars. Look overhead, and look anywhere where there is good cloud cover –the clouds make it much easier to see birds. Even while you’re eating lunch or talking to a friend you can look around for the occasional migrant. If three people are looking at a bird in one direction, look elsewhere –maybe you’ll catch a hawk slipping by. If there are vultures flying pay attention because migrants often approach them. If there are no clouds it will be tough to find birds against the blue sky. Here again, look at the vultures and you may find other birds.

### **Potential Problems**

Local birds can be confusing at the Little Pinnacle. If there are no migrants passing through the observation area, look around for locals and try to keep track of them. How to tell them apart? Migrants generally appear in the north, pass by and never look back. Occasionally a migrating peregrine falcon will spend thirty minutes or more checking out the area but usually migrants just keep going.

Another potential problem is that birds can appear different in different wind conditions. A broad-winged hawk riding a thermal on a hot day bears little resemblance to the same bird on a cold day with a strong north wind. Just be aware of this and watch carefully as birds fly through.

If you can not identify a bird don't worry about it. There's nothing wrong with recording a bird as Unidentified Buteo or just Unidentified. Observe carefully, take your time making identifications, compare your impressions with other hawk-watchers and use books. For reference in the field I like: *Hawks in Flight* by Pete Dunne and *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors* by Wheeler and Clark. If you're interested in the history of raptor conservation, you might enjoy *The Mountain and the Migration* by James Brett.

Good luck and thanks again. I hope you see something amazing.

### **Hawk-watching in a Nutshell**

#### **Finding Raptors:**

- Scan regularly
- Look everywhere because hawks can appear anywhere
- Look overhead too
- look at clouds since they make it easier to see migrants
- If everyone else is looking at the same bird, look elsewhere you might find something new
- If there are no clouds and it's hard to focus on blue sky, look at vultures, airplanes, distant mountains; anything to help your eyes focus.
- Spotting scopes limit your field of view but some people use them effectively

#### **Once you have a bird**

- Keep your glass on it and give landmarks if possible so others can locate it
- Take your time making an identification
- In addition to field marks, consider the flying style of the bird as well as its behavior
- If you see a "kettle" of broad-wings count it as many times as you can because they often grow or diminish as birds enter or leave the group
- Keep track of drifting kettles. If a kettle breaks up near Sauratown Mountain and soon a line of Bws appears overhead, count them to make sure it's the same group

### **Potential Problems**

- Local birds can be confusing so take some time to look for them and exclude them from your count
- Clear blue skies make it difficult to pick out migrants, make your eyes focus by looking at other things, vultures, mountains etc.
- Fatigue can reduce your effectiveness so be aware of it.