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# FALL IS HAWK WATCH TIME!

Fall is when birds of prey migrate.  
Attend a Hawk Watch Event to see  
and learn about fascinating raptors.

BY XXXXX XXXXXXXX PHOTOS BY XXXXX XXXXXXXX



Broadwing Hawk

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Peregrine Falcon



Hitchcock Nature Center

Each fall, from September through December, bird-of-prey enthusiasts gather at hawk watches around the state to observe and count eagles, hawks, falcons and other raptors as they migrate south. Using thermals and up-drafts along major river valleys, thousands of these fascinating creatures follow Iowa’s “hawk highways” as they make their way south from northern nesting grounds.

With organized hawk watches all across Iowa, nature lovers can attend one in their area. Across the state—from west to east—here are four hawk watches to choose from:

### Hitchcock Nature Area Hawk Watch, XXX County

It’s long been known that Iowa’s Loess Hills create thermal up-drafts that aid raptors during migration. For instance, the occurrence of a cold front brings northwest

winds, which strike western sides of these hills, creating updrafts that allow raptors to conserve energy by riding them southward during migration.

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“The data from Hitchcock and other Hawk-watches across the eastern U.S. is used by the Hawk Migration Association



Coopers Hawk

High Trestle Trail



Redtail Hawk

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of North America to reveal trends and population changes throughout the eastern half of North America,” says raptor biologist and hawk watch facilitator Jerry Toll. (Hawk-watch International collects and analyzes data from hawk-watches across the western states.)

Populations can be affected by climate change or loss of habitat. These watch events are ways raptor populations are monitored. Other methods, such as Christmas Bird Counts have limitations as several raptor species have already migrated.

“Hawk-watches provide a better picture of the meta-populations of raptors,” says Toll. To staff the hawk watch tower from September thru December, Hitchcock volunteers make it happen. Long-time volunteer Clem Claphake says “Hawk-watches have value as indicators of how raptor populations are doing, and in particular we’ve witnessed a big drop in numbers of migrating American

kestrels over the last few years. Our baseline data from early years allowed us to see this trend. The high population of migrating raptors along the Loess Hills also indicates it will never be a good place to put wind turbines. We already have data to back this up.”

### High Trestle Trail Hawk Watch, Boone County

Once a lofty railroad trestle spanning the Des Moines River between Woodward and Madrid, the High Trestle Trail Watch is held at the over-look, at the west end of the beautifully reconditioned and enhanced bridge. Having completed a sixth year, organizer and retired DNR wildlife diversity biologist Doug Harr stresses hawk watches allow discovery of migration routes unknown for certain species. And sometimes here in central Iowa we find some raptors we didn’t expect. For instance,



## Favorite Moments from Past Hawk Watch Events

Etched into his memory, Mark Proescholdt of the Grammer Grove hawk watch recalls mid-September migrations of broad-winged hawks.

"Some of the kettles (groups of hawks) number into the hundreds and it is just spectacular," he says. "One day I and two friends from Madison County counted 996 broad-wings in the last 1.5 hours of the day. The thermals had died down and broad-wings were coming lower and lower—eventually settling into the trees nearby to spend the night. And of course anytime you spot a merlin or peregrine falcon, it's wonderful!"

Doug Harr of the High Trestle Trail watch says "a couple years ago we were standing at the overlook. We watched a peregrine falcon dive and chase some pigeons right under the High Trestle Bridge. So we were actually looking down at this peregrine falcon diving under the bridge and reappearing on the other side. It was a miss for the falcon, but was the highlight of the day, for those who witnessed it."

Last fall's Marquette Hawk Watch left an imprint on Billy Reiter Marolf. "Every half-hour, shuttles transported the public from the Driftless Area Wetlands Center up to the Bower Tract; a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, where hawks were trapped and banded by two staff from the McBride Raptor Project. A tent was set up, and participants watched banding and

raptor release throughout the day. About 90 people rode the shuttle to the bluff top, excited to watch trapping, banding and release of wild birds."

Hitchcock naturalist Rene Stroud says visiting 7th graders peppering staff and volunteers with questions showed their excitement. Seeing the migration in person reminds people that everyone is connected, she says.

"It's helpful for people to learn that some of these raptors fly clear to Argentina and may have difficulty finding food along the way or be affected by pesticides when they arrive. This helps widen one's perspective and provides a bigger view of this phenomenon," says Stroud.

"I recall being on the observation tower when a raptor flew by very close—providing an amazing look at the details of the bird. There was silence from the crowd until the bird had passed by, followed by a collective "aaahhhh!" It almost felt like we were up there with the raptor ourselves."

### Hawk Watch Locations & Dates

- Raptor flights generally begin around 10 a.m. when thermals start, and end around 6 p.m. during peak fall season in late September and October, but weather conditions can alter this daily timetable dramatically.
- Hitchcock Nature Center Hawk Watch 27792 Ski Hill Loop, Honey Creek—Hawk watch daily, on nature center observation tower – Sept. 1 to Dec. 20. [712-545-3283](tel:7125453283), [pottcoconservation.com](http://pottcoconservation.com)
- High Trestle Trail Hawk Watch 2335 Qf Ln, Madrid—viewing platform at west end of the High Trestle Trail Bridge spanning the Des Moines River valley between Woodward and Madrid. For parking, follow Hwy 210 west of Madrid, turn left onto Qf Ln. Walk or bike one mile of trail to the west end of the bridge. Scheduled for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sat. in early October. For more details contact Marlene at [515-291-3000](tel:5152913000) or email [mehresman@iowawildlifecenter.org](mailto:mehresman@iowawildlifecenter.org).
- Grammer Grove Hawk Watch - 2030 - 127th Street, Liscomb – Watch dates and days of week may vary – check the Marshall County Conservation Board early Sept. for dates and times.
- Marquette Hawk Watch - 509 US-18, Marquette. To date the Hawk Watch has been timed for the 2nd weekend of October, but the date may change. Check with [DriftlessAreaWetlandCentre.com](http://DriftlessAreaWetlandCentre.com) or [563-873-3537](tel:5638733537) for dates and times.



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American Kestrel

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Swainson's Hawk



Driftless Area Wetlands Center

although the Swainson's hawk is generally found out west, we did see a couple coming down the Des Moines River. Birds are simply one good indicator of the health of the environment." These records are sent to the DNR's wildlife diversity program to help track hawks and other birds of prey and to monitor how each population is doing. The other benefit is educational—pointing out raptors as they pass by to the public and watching people get excited.

"If we can get people to understand more about birds that migrate through Iowa, they may also begin to understand how important the environment is to those raptors. This is the perfect place, adjacent the High Trestle Bridge on this viewing platform, which commands a great view of the Des Moines River valley. And being located along one of the most popular bike trails allows bikers and hikers to cross the bridge and stop by to look

through a spotting scope and learn about raptors."

### Marquette Hawk Watch, Clayton County

A tradition at Effigy Mounds National Monument since 1984, three to four years ago the annual hawk watch was handed over to the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the Driftless Area Wetlands Center at Marquette and Upper Iowa Audubon" says Billy Reiter Marolf of the USF&WS. "The Upper Iowa Audubon folks set up scopes and have binoculars available at the Driftless Area Wetlands center. These expert birders identify birds for the public, as they fly over. About 200 people stop by the wetlands center, and staff from The Minnesota Raptor Center may bring several live birds and do four raptor programs throughout the day," he says. This watch is often timed



Bald Eagle

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Golden Eagle



Sharpshinned Hawk



Grammer Grove

for the second weekend of October during National Wildlife Week, but banders would like to hold it a couple of weeks earlier to catch more diversity and to perhaps catch the broad-wing hawk migration.

### Grammer Grove Hawk Watch, Marshall County

“Twenty-seven years ago, on the way home from a canoe trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota, my mom stopped at the hawk watch at Hawk Ridge, in Duluth, Minnesota,” explains Grammer Grove Hawk Watch organizer Mark Proescholdt. It was her inspiration that led to the first hawk watch at Grammer Grove.

“Mom passed away a few years ago, but I’ve continued the hawk watch. Right now I count hawks on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, which are my days off,” he says,

adding lots of volunteers also make it happen. The watch occurs 12 miles northwest of Marshalltown at Grammer Grove Wildlife Area along the Iowa River valley.

“All hawk watches are valuable in monitoring the numbers of various raptor species as they migrate south. When all hawk watches report in, that’s when we can see any trends that may stand out,” says Proescholdt. Their data is sent to the Hawk Migration Association of North America, the DNR, the Iowa Ornithologists Union and the Marshall County Conservation Board.

“A couple of times I’ve been asked for hawk migration numbers by those contemplating placement of wind turbines. We usually coordinate with Marshall County and other organizations to invite the public to attend on weekends, and we’ve also been visited by home-schooled groups,” he says. 🐾