

Highlights from January 18 Winter Raptor Outing

Chuck Aid. January 20, 2020 :



Rough-legged Hawk – adult male (c) Bill Schmoker

One of the more enjoyable birding ventures to pursue each year is to go out in search of winter raptors. Here in Colorado we have some raptors that are only around in the summer and they then migrate farther south for the winter: Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Mississippi Kite, Swainson's Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon. We also have a few species whose numbers remain relatively constant throughout the year: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, and American Kestrel. However, there are a number of species that not only breed in Colorado, but their numbers actually increase during the winter due to the arrival of migrants that bred farther north but choose Colorado as the place to spend the winter: Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle, and Prairie Falcon. And, furthermore, there are a couple of species that are only found here in the winter: Rough-legged Hawk and Merlin. The bottom line – winter is when the raptor watching is best! And, the prized species at that time are Rough-legged Hawk and Merlin!



Ferruginous Hawk – adult (c) Rob Raker

So, if you're thinking of becoming a raptor expert, and are saying, "Oh, good, I only have 17 species to learn." Hold your horses! First of all, there are an additional four or five species that occur rarely in Colorado, then each species has almost a gazillion different looks – male vs female, youngster vs adult, dark-morph birds vs light-morph birds, various subspecies, etc. Venturing into this ID realm is not for the faint of heart.

Nonetheless, a group of us boldly ventured forth on Saturday to do our best against these odds, and we didn't do too badly, getting to see six species: Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, and American Kestrel. More specifically, we saw a male Northern Harrier – distinctive buoyant flight with wings raised in a dihedral, clean light gray plumage with wingtips dipped in black ink; we saw a whole variety of different aged Bald Eagles – it takes them five years to obtain full adult plumage going from all brown to the eventual classic adult with white head and tail; we saw several adult western light-morph Red-tailed Hawks – beige to white breast and belly with a streaked belly-band and a dark chin – and one intermediate or rufous-morph Red-tail – beautiful rufous coloring on its breast; from a distance we saw one Rough-legged Hawk doing a prolonged hovering as it scanned for prey, and we got good looks at two adult female Rough-legs with their light gray head, small bill, vertical streaking on the breast, and strong black belly-band with a slight lighter streak down its middle; we saw a good mix of Ferruginous Hawks – lots of white underneath, large bill – and we saw one dark-morph Ferruginous with its whole front a beautiful rich dark rufous color; and then we saw a good variety of male and female American Kestrels. So, a lot to look at!

Best of luck in all your raptor ventures!

Chuck

Species Name	Species Count
Canada Goose	4,355
Cackling/Canada Goose	2,600
Common Merganser	46
Rock Pigeon	550
Eurasian Collared-Dove	37
Ring-billed Gull	42
Northern Harrier	1
Bald Eagle	43
Red-tailed Hawk	20
Rough-legged Hawk	3
Ferruginous Hawk	7
Northern Flicker	3
American Kestrel	18
Blue Jay	2
Black-billed Magpie	15
Horned Lark	170
European Starling	514
American Robin	33
House Sparrow	18
House Finch	4
American Tree Sparrow	1
Western Meadowlark	8
Red-winged Blackbird	180