

**John Anthony Alderman  
Guide to**

# HAWK WATCHING



**at  
Mahogany  
Rock**

**E**very fall thousands of hawks sail the updraft and thermals along the Blue Ridge on their southward journey to winter homes in southern North America or Central and South America. This spectacular event is witnessed and recorded at hundreds of hawkwatch sites from Alaska and New Brunswick to Florida and Texas.

The first documentation of this phenomenon was begun at Hawk Mountain, PA in 1934. In North Carolina the first regular recording of the migration under the direction of the Hawk Migration Association of North America began on Green Mountain, two miles south of Mahogany Rock, in 1981 to 1986. The Mahogany Rock hawkwatch was established in 1986 and is one of five Blue Ridge Parkway count sites\* for HMANA documenting one of the two major routes (the Appalachian Mountain ridges and the Atlantic coastline) for migrating raptors in eastern North America. Bullhead Mountain, two miles north is the newest watch site on the Parkway near Mahogany Rock.

## LOCATION

The Mahogany Rock Mountain hawkwatch is located on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina at Milepost 235. Five miles to the north, the Parkway intersects Route #21, midway between Sparta and Roaring Gap. Fifteen miles to the south the Parkway intersects Route #18 near Laurel Springs. Park on the edge of the road into Mahogany Rock Overlook and set-up on the grass for watching the hawks.

## SITE DESCRIPTION

Located along the Blue Ridge in Alleghany County in northwest North Carolina, the Mahogany Rock Hawkwatch affords limitless views to the west, northwest, north, northeast, and south with lesser outlook over Mahogany Rock Mountain to the east and Folger's Knob/Scott's Ridge to the southwest, from an elevation of 3420 feet along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Sparta, NC, at the intersection of Routes 18 and 21, lies four miles to the north and Stone Mountain State Park extends up to the National Park property near the Mahogany Rock Overlook from five miles to the southeast. (Glade Valley, NC topographic map quadrangle, Latitude 36°32'N, Longitude 81°05'W)

## FACILITIES

The nearest restaurant, restrooms, gas, and lodging are five miles south along the Parkway in Doughton Park; or in Sparta, five miles away via Mahogany Rock Road, Pine Swamp Road east, and Route #21 north. Motel reservations are recommended from mid-September through October because of the influx of leaf watchers. Call Bluffs Lodge in Doughton

Park at 336.372.4499, Alleghany Inn in Sparta at 336.372.2501, Mountain Hearth Lodge (B&B) near Milepost 231.5 at 336.372.8743, or contact the Alleghany County Chamber of Commerce at 800.372.5473 for a list of bed-and-breakfasts.

## CALENDAR OF MIGRATION

Some hawks, like the accipters, may begin moving as early as 8 a.m., but most activity starts after the sun has had time to generate thermals, about 10 a.m. Good flights may continue until 5 p.m., though a kettle of Broadwings or a Bald Eagle has been enjoyed as late as 6:30 p.m.

Beginning with the passage of Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Sharp-shinned, Cooper's and Broad-winged Hawks and a few Kestrels in late August and early September, the movement reaches a crescendo around the third week of September with sometimes thousands of Broad-winged Hawks passing on a single day.

By the end of September and the first fall colors of October, most of the Broadwings have passed leaving Harriers, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, and the Peregrine, Merlin, and Kestrel members of the Falcon family to take over the skies.

When the cold northwest winds of late October and November blow against the ridge, only the Redtail and Red-shouldered Hawks along with vultures and the occasional Golden Eagle can be spotted hugging the mountain slopes.

## GOOD FLIGHT DAYS

What one sees on any one day depends on the weather of the day and the sequence of the weather both at the site and northeast of the site on previous days. Some species of hawks leave on their southward passage according to the calendar, i.e., when the length of day shortens, while others are motivated by the weather and lack of feeding opportunities in their summer territories. Stormy weather may delay departure and clearing weather following a low pressure may start them on their journey. Clearing winds from the west and northwest blowing against the northeast-southwest-running ridge provide the free lift and a southward push. Sun-generated rising thermals in the clearing skies elevate sometimes hundreds of hawks at a time in large "kettles" to great heights before they glide southward off the top of the ballooning bubbles of air.

## HELPFUL EQUIPMENT

Binoculars are a must and a spotting scope is sometimes helpful. Lawn chairs will make the day more comfortable. Bring lunch, snacks, and plenty of liquids, hot or cold, depending on the weather. Dress for mountain-top changing weather: cold wind one moment, relentless sun the next. Besides layers of shirts and jackets to peel or add, a broad-rimmed hat and sun-protection lotion are helpful even later in the fall.

## WHO CAN BE A HAWK WATCHER

Every interested person is welcome at the Mahogany Rock Mountain hawk watch. Learning to identify most migrating raptors comes quickly and even just spotting a hawk, whatever it is, can be helpful to the count. Most important is that the more observers we have, the fewer migrants slip by undetected.

\*Rockfish Gap MP 0; Harvey's Knob M 95.4;  
Bullhead Mountain MP 231-32; Mt. Pisgah M 407.6

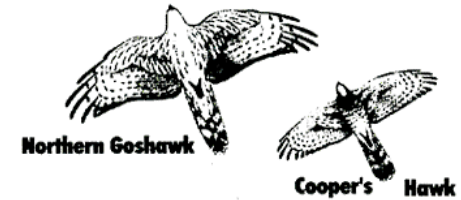
## Calendar of Migration

	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV
Black Vulture	---	---	-----	-----
Turkey Vulture	---	---	-----	-----
Osprey	---	-----	-----	---
Bald Eagle	---	---	---	---
Northern Harrier	---	-----	-----	---
Sharp-shinned	---	-----	-----	---
Cooper's Hawk	---	-----	-----	---
Red-shouldered	---	-----	-----	---
Broad-winged	---	-----	-----	---
Red-tailed Hawk	---	-----	-----	---
Golden Eagle	---	---	---	---
American Kestrel	---	-----	-----	---
Merlin	---	---	---	---
Peregrine	---	---	---	---

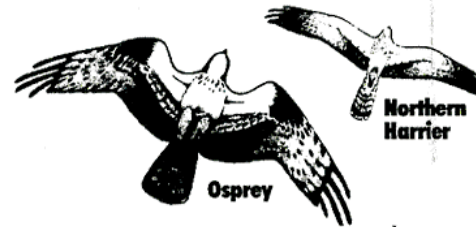
This Guide was partly written by and finally produced in memory of the master of the autumn skies, **John Anthony Alderman (1927-2000)**, recipient of the Golden Eagle Award from the National Audubon Society, organizer and coordinator of the Mahogany Rock Overlook HMANA Hawkwatch for many years, and author of *Wildflowers of the Blue Ridge Parkway*. For more information contact Jim Keighton, Compiler, 909 Bullhead Rd., Sparta, NC 28675 (336.372.5908) or Hawk Migration Association of North America, PO Box 822, Beantown, NJ 07005.

Graphic Design and Layout provided as a community service by the A. Anderson Huber Cyber Campus, Alleghany High School, Sparta, N.C.

## VULTURES



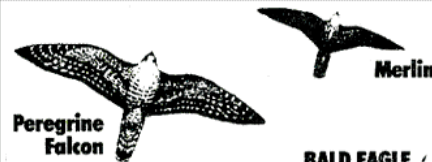
## ACCIPITERS



## BUTEOS



## FALCONS



## EAGLES



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