

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Watching Jewel Basin Like a Hawk!

By Keith Hammer

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Jewel Basin's Mount Aeneas has long been a favorite hike for its grand vistas. It is also becoming known as a great spot to watch the fall migration of hawks, eagles, and other birds as they fly by at a recently recorded rate of 56 birds per hour!

The following article was written by American Bird Conservancy's Dan Casey for Flathead Audubon Society's newsletter, the Pileated Post. It is provided here in full with his good graces and my heartfelt thanks. Dan can be reached at (406) 756-2681 or dcasey@abcbirds.org.

Surveys Reveal a Hidden Jewel in Our Backyard

By Dan Casey

The Jewel Basin Hiking Area sits on the rim of the Flathead Valley northeast of Bigfork, an extremely popular and accessible network of trails, peaks and lakes on Flathead National Forest land. For years, Susannah and I have taken day hikes to Mt. Aeneas, the highest peak in the area, with our girls and with visitors. And every time we did so in the fall, we saw just enough hawks and eagles that I suspected it might be worth checking as a monitoring site. Our (busy) lives being what they are, it only took a couple decades to get around to trying to confirm this suspicion. But based on two visits this fall, "the Jewel" just might be one of the best hawk migration sites in the Northern Rockies, particularly for accipiters (Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, and Northern Goshawks).

With the encouragement of Steve Hoffman, the Executive Director of Montana Audubon and a long-time hawk-counting aficionado, we selected a day with an approaching northern cold front and WSW winds (predicted highs in the 70's didn't hurt, either.) Steve had joined us on a scouting trip in August, when we selected a spot on the ridge that looked promising, but saw just 3 passing birds (a Cooper's Hawk, a Red-tailed Hawk, and a Turkey Vulture). On our big day, we arrived at the parking lot at 9:45, and after stopping for an hour at a midway hilltop to check the skies for passing birds (30 in the first hour we were there), we moved to our preselected spot on the ridge by 1:00 pm. In the next 2.5 hours watched as 124 mixed raptors passed. We had 112 birds between 1:00 pm and 3:00, a remarkable rate of 56 birds/hr! (Usually, a rate of 10 birds per hour is used as a benchmark for sites worth monitoring). Our vantage point was on the ridge below Mt. Aeneas, about ¼ mile north of the microwave building, overlooking Picnic Lakes.

Our totals for the day were 168 passing birds of 7 species: Sharp-shinned Hawk (104); Cooper's Hawk (28); Red-tailed Hawk (14); Golden Eagle (8); American Kestrel (4); Northern Goshawk (3); Osprey (1); and 6 unidentified. The best part of our vantage point on the ridge was that 90% of the birds going by came within 50 meters or less, some less than 10m away, from just below to just above eye level. This incredible day convinced us that the site clearly deserved more coverage during this and future fall seasons. Five other Audubon members joined us for our second visit, October 9th. On this day the winds were from a less favorable direction (ESE), but we still saw 43 raptors of 8 species in 4 ½ hours (11:30 – 4:00), with Sharp-shinned Hawks (20) again leading the pack. Other species sighted included 8 Red-tailed Hawks, 4 Golden Eagles, 4 American Kestrels, 3 Cooper's Hawks, 1 Rough-legged Hawk, 1 Northern Harrier, and 2 (local) Bald Eagles. Again, most of the birds gave us breathtakingly close eye-level views.

So, that makes more than 200 hawks, eagles and falcons of 10 species in just over 8 hours of surveys. These numbers mean the site probably will have real value for tracking trends in raptor populations, particularly the forest-dwelling accipiters breeding in Canada. This in addition to the pleasure of sitting on a ridge at 7100 ft, looking out over the valley to the west, and east toward the snow-covered Great Northern Mountain and the peaks of Glacier. Throw in sunshine, singing Townsend's Solitaires, migrating bluebirds and butterflies, and a flock of Gray-crowned Rosy-finches for good measure. Sound appealing? Unfortunately, the migration period has now ended. But next year we will be working with Montana Audubon to find a way to man this "station" for the season (roughly Sept. 1st through Oct. 20th), including recruiting volunteers from our ranks. The ridge is about a 1.5 hr hike from the parking lot, with a gain of about 1340 feet over 2+ miles. But clearly worth the effort on a beautiful fall day!

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Dan Casey counts birds as they migrate across the Swan Crest along the north ridge of Mount Aeneas. Susannah Casey photo.