

Hawks Aloft



Falcons:

Rapid wing beats
Pointed wings
Long tapered tail

Species:

American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon

Accipiters:

Flap, flap, glide
Short rounded wings
Long tail

Species:

Coopers Hawk
Northern Goshawk
Sharp-shinned Hawk

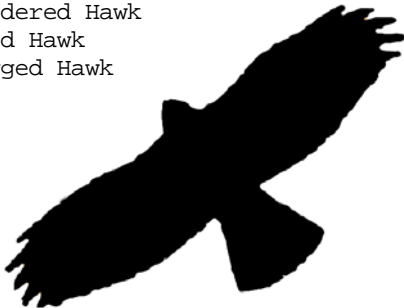


Buteos:

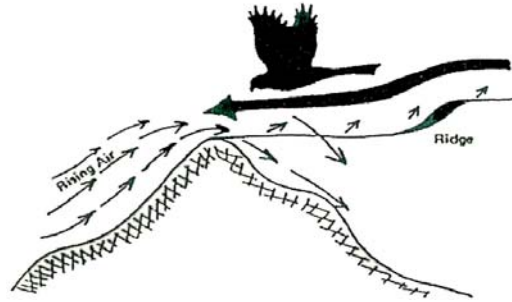
Soaring flight
Broad wings Broad
rounded tail

Species:

Broad-winged Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk



Why hawks visit the Holyoke Range



The Mount Holyoke Range captures surface winds striking the side of mountain ridges that create updrafts upon which migrating hawks ride. When the northwest breezes blow, hawks and hang gliders alike can be found riding, gliding and soaring above Joseph Allen Skinner State Park.

Come visit the park and enjoy its natural beauty. Birdwatching can be productive most any time of year and hawkwatching in the fall is a special event.

Joseph Allen Skinner State Park
Department of Conservation and Recreation
P. O. Box 91, Hadley, MA 01035
413.586.0350
email: holyoke.range@state.ma.us
Website www.mass.gov/dcr

Hawks at the Mt Holyoke Range

Joseph Allen Skinner State Park



Photograph by Jonathan Gottsche

Flights of Fancy

As the days shorten, the natural world begins to prepare for the coming of winter. One way many birds cope with the harsh northern winters is to migrate to more southern latitudes. Many species of hawks do just that, and the Summit House atop Mt. Holyoke, above the Connecticut River Valley, is one of the finest spots to watch this spectacular natural phenomenon in North America.

Hawk migration begins in mid-September and continues through the month of November with different species moving through at different times. The show begins with large flights of Broad-winged Hawks around the middle of September. If the weather conditions are right, it is not unusual to see from one to several thousand hawks pass by the Summit House.



The proper weather conditions include a steady northwest wind and at least partly sunny skies. This marks the approach of a high pressure weather system. The tail wind aids the hawks and the sun warms the earth, which results in rising currents of air called thermals. The soaring hawks rise up on the thermals and then “peel off” at speeds approaching 20 MPH until they catch another thermal and begin the process over again. This method makes it possible for the birds to travel many miles without ever flapping their wings.

Broad-winged Hawks are known for migrating in large groups called “kettles”. It is not unusual to see upwards of a hundred birds in a “kettle” soaring over Mt. Holyoke. The Broad-winged Hawk is in a family of hawks called buteos. They generally have broad wings and tails and spend most of their flying time soaring. Other buteos that can be seen migrating past the Summit House include the Red-tailed Hawk and the Red-shouldered Hawk.

There are also two other families of hawks that are common migrants. The accipiters or true hawks can be recognized by their long tails and broad stout wings. They also have a characteristic flap-flap-flap-glide pattern to their flight. Three species of accipiters commonly seen are the Sharp-shinned Hawk, Coopers Hawk and the Northern Goshawk.



The third family of raptor is the falcons. This family includes the American Kestrel, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon. They can be recognized by their long tails and narrow pointed wings. They also generally fly with steady wing beats.

The Peregrine Falcon can also be seen from Mt. Holyoke. This bird was once considered quite rare because of pesticide poisoning but has since made a comeback and sightings are increasing every year. An occasional Northern Harrier will be seen and even a few Bald Eagles have been spotted by hawk watchers on Mt. Holyoke as some nest in the area.

Whether or not you are a birdwatcher, the spectacle of hundreds of Broad-winged Hawks soaring overhead is unforgettable.