

Raptors Meet and Greet in Michigan

Michigan is along a flyway birds follow when they migrate. Birds travel north in the summer and south in the winter. Whitefish Point, on the Michigan shore of Lake Superior, is a popular social area for birds and bird watchers. Whitefish Point Bird Observatory is on the Point at the northwest entrance to Whitefish Bay. During the migrations, birders can see more than 300 species of migratory and northern birds. That number includes carnivorous birds like hawks, eagles, owls, and falcons. Whitefish Point is the rest stop of choice for birds before and after they make the 17-mile flight between Michigan and Canada.

Spring comes late (May) and winter comes early (October) in northern Michigan. In fact, it is usually cold or chilly. By the middle of March, the eagles begin arriving, followed by the Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks. Near the end of April, the smaller hawks make their appearance. In late May, the falcons pass through. There are water birds and songbirds as well. The fall migration is from August through November. The peak visiting times for birders are April and October.

To protect the sand dunes and beaches, bird watchers use a boardwalk and climb wooden stairs to the viewing platforms. Decks and boardwalks help protect the natural habitat. Birds use the Point to rest and eat before continuing their journey. The nearby environment must provide sufficient food and protection for them. Predatory birds eat other birds, rabbits, mice, voles, lizards, fish, and snakes. Their preferred habitats include woodlands, swamps, lakes, rivers, and coastlines. If the local environment is contaminated or destroyed, the birds have a hard time. The jack pines and sandy shore host the birds that rest along the coast. Farther inland, marshes and small lakes offer more resting sites. The area includes several small lakes, as well as the Shelldrake and Tahquamenon Rivers.

Migratory birds face threats from many sources: predators, hunters, toxins, power lines, wind turbines, and loss of habitat. Nearby development breaks natural areas into smaller pieces. Invasive non-native species of plants and insects change the local ecosystem. The increasing popularity of bird watching is making more people aware of dangers to birds. Government agencies, wildlife organizations, and concerned groups are working to protect endangered birds. They try to conserve and restore bird habitats. The American peregrine falcon moved to the Recovered Species list in 1999 and the bald eagle moved in 2007. This happened because caring people made changes to help these birds of prey survive and thrive.

There are more than 480 species of raptors in the world. They play a critical role in the food chain. They increase bio-diversity. They are a barometer of the quality of our earth as a habitat for the rest of us. We can learn important information by studying raptors.

Experts count how many raptors travel known flyways during the semiannual migrations. These counts help explain the improving or eroding state of the raptor populations. Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, operated by the Michigan Audubon Society, is one of the recognized migration pathways.

Activities

Learn about taxonomies

The website for the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, has great information about birds. This is the Web address for their Bird Information Center.

<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/infocenter.html>. Scroll through the list of birds and click on a name to see a description and pictures of the bird. Then look at the left of the screen and see the word Taxonomy. If you click on Taxonomy, you will see the detailed information about the bird's classification. Remember to click on Back to List to back up to the previous page.

Identify birds

If you really know your birds, try the identification game at <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/trend/birdquiz.html>. Pick the correct name and species from the list to match the photo, winter home, summer home, or bird song. You can choose if you want to try the beginner or advanced level.

Answer the questions

The table below lists some of the raptors you might see at the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. The table includes the Latin names we use to describe and group these birds. Describing living things by putting them in specific groups is part of taxonomy. According to the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, taxonomy is the science dealing with the description, identification, naming, and classification of organisms. That means you can tell which birds are relatives by their Latin names. All birds are in the class Aves. Read the following table:

1. Can you count three different families?
2. Can you find two species of hawks?
3. How can you tell that Merlin and Kestrel are really falcons?
4. How many feet across is the wingspan of a Golden Eagle? Is that more than your height?
5. Which is the shortest raptor on the list?
6. Which birds eat other birds?
7. What do you call a bird that eats animals? (1) raptor, (2) carnivore, (3) predator, (4) bird of prey, (5) all of these.

Common Name	Family	Species	Height	Wingspan	Habitat	Food
Cooper's Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Accipiter cooperi</i>	15-1/2"	28"	forest, woodland	birds
Northern Goshawk	Accipitridae	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	19"	42"	deep woods	birds, grouses, squirrels
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>	10-1/2"	21"	woods	birds
Golden Eagle	Accipitridae	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	32"	78"	mountain, foothill, grassland	rabbits, rodents, birds
Red-tailed Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	18"	48"	open area	small mammals, birds, reptiles
Rough-legged Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	19"	52"	open area	voles, lemmings
Red-shouldered Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>	16"	40"	woodland, swamp	snakes, lizards, frogs, insects
Broad-winged Hawk	Accipitridae	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>	13"	33"	dry woodland	birds, reptiles, amphibians
Northern Harrier	Accipitridae	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	16-1/2"	42"	field, grassland, prairie, marsh	mice, rats, birds, snakes, frogs
Bald Eagle	Accipitridae	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	32"	80"	lake, river, coast	fish, birds, carrion
Osprey	Accipitridae	<i>Pandion haliaeetus</i>	22"	54"	lake, river, coast	fish
Turkey Vulture	Ciconiidae	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	25"	72"	open area, dumps, urban	carrion
Black Vulture	Ciconiidae	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	22"	54"	open area, dumps, urban	carrion

Merlin	Falconidae	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	12"	23"	forest, farm, urban	birds, lizards, snakes, insects
Peregrine Falcon	Falconidae	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	15"	40"	open area, urban, coast	birds
American Kestrel	Falconidae	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	8-1/2"	21"	open area	voles, mice, birds, insects

All birds are in the following taxonomy.

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Subphylum	Vertebrata
Class	Aves
Order	Ciconiiformes

Check out these books at your library to learn more about raptors and birders:

Dunn, Jon L. and Alderfer, Jonathan. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Fifth Edition*. National Geographic, 2006, 504 p. A classic reference for field identification, including 4,000 color pictures and range maps

Kaufman, Kenn. *Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005, 392 p. Features digitally enhanced photographic images with characteristics not apparent in photographs. Organized by bird family groupings and not standard taxonomy.

Liguori, Jerry. *Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors in Flight*. Princeton University Press, 2005. 144 p. Provides clear information to help with the identification of hawks from different angles.

Paulson, Dennis. *Shorebirds of North America: The Photographic Guide*. Princeton University Press, 2005, 384 p. Over 530 photographs help with the identification of shorebirds.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Knopf, 2000, 544 p. 6,600 illustrations of over 800 species in North America with clear descriptions by a noted authority.

Wheeler, Brian K. and Clark William S. *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*. Princeton University Press, 2003, 198 p. An authoritative, photographic field guide to raptors in North America.

Websites:

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/bald-eagle.html>

This National Geographic website has audio and video of the bald eagle and links to information on other animals.

<http://www.adoptabird.org/>

This website has pictures and biographies of birds seeking financial sponsorship in Apopka, Florida.

<http://www.birdsofprey.blm.gov/nat-res/bop-id.htm>

This website of the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area in southwest Idaho has information on identifying raptors.

http://www.ezlink.ca/~thebrowns/HawkCliff/hcf_gallery.htm

This is the website of the Canadian Hawk Cliff Foundation photo gallery.

<http://www.golden-eagle.org/ppageidx.htm>

This website has pictures from the Lindsay Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek, California.

<http://www.hawkmountain.org>

This is the website of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the oldest conservation area in the United States for birds of prey.

<http://www.jaybat.com/birdsahoy/hawks/>

This website has pictures of hawk watches in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

<http://www.migrationresearch.org/mbo/id/idlibrary.html>

This is the website of the McGill Bird Observatory, a member of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network, and is a project of the Migration Research Foundation, with support from McGill University's Avian Science and Conservation Centre.

<http://www.nhauadubon.org/birdinfo/pmro.htm>

This is the website of the New Hampshire Audubon's Pack Monadnock Raptor Migration Observatory in Miller State Park in Peterborough.

<http://www.owsem.org/album07/2007mages.html>

This is the website of the Osprey Watch of Southeast Michigan and has lots of photograph from local birders.

<http://www.smrr.net/>

This is the website of the Southeastern Michigan Raptor Research (SMRR) that monitors the hawk migration.

<http://www.wpbo.org/Photos.html>

This is the website of the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory photo gallery.

Bibliography

Audubon Pennsylvania, *Conservation Plan for the Kittatinny Ridge in Pennsylvania*, December 2006, <http://pa.audubon.org/PDFs/KittatinnyConservationPlan-Apr2007.pdf>.

Bird Quiz, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, United States Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/trend/birdquiz.html>.

Margaret Fowle, *Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative: Annual Report to Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department*, December 2005, <http://www.nwf.org/wildlife/pdfs/baldeaglereport2005.pdf>.

Hawkcount Monthly Summary for May 2007 for Whitefish Point, a project of the Hawk Migration Association of North America, http://hawkcount.org/month_summary.php?rsite=286&go=Go+to+site.

Tina Lassen, *Moon Handbooks Michigan, Second Edition*, Emeryville, CA, Avalon Travel Publishing, 2002.

Patuxent Bird Identification InfoCenter, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, United States Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/infocenter.html>.

Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition, New York, Random House, Inc., 2001.

Lewis Smith, *Nations flock together to save birds of prey*, *The Times*, October 22, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article2709035.ece>.

Donald and Lillian Stokes, *Stokes Field Guide for Birds: Eastern Region*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1996.

Kim Van Fleet, and Stacy Small, *Ridgetop Important Bird Areas, Raptors, and Wind Turbines*, Audubon Pennsylvania News, January 19, 2006, http://www.audubon.org/chapter/pa/pa/news_20060119.html.

Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, <http://www.wpbo.org/>.

Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, Department of Natural Resources, State of Michigan, <http://www.dnr.state.mi.us/publications/pdfs/wildlife/viewingguide/up/33whitefish/index.htm>.

Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, Exploring The North: The Upper Peninsula and Northern Wisconsin Traveler, <http://www.exploringthenorth.com/birds/birds.html>.