
With An Eye on Raptors

Hawk Watching into Your Golden Years: Stiles Thomas Gives Us Hope

By Paul Roberts

Do you occasionally daydream about how much hawk watching you can do once you retire? Do you actually know anyone who has actively watched migrating hawks in eight different decades? I can answer “yes” to both questions. Can you?

Stiles Thomas of Allendale, New Jersey, was born on December 25, 1923. While in high school Stiles began hunting and can recall shooting at hawks occasionally. However, when a friend told him hawks were beneficial he stopped shooting at and started watching them.

In 1956 when Stiles heard that people were watching migrating hawks in Montclair, New Jersey, he got a small group of friends together and drove to the Watchung site there. They arrived at 7 a.m. so they wouldn't miss anything, only to learn that most hawk watchers and most Broad-winged Hawks start a bit later in the day.

Earlier in that decade (1951) the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife had contacted observers in 29 states and Canadian provinces to establish a coordinated weekend watch on two weekends in September with the objective of gathering standardized observations during an 8-hour period on each of four days from as many lookouts as possible. While Stiles was visiting Montclair, someone mentioned this attempt at coordinating hawk watches across the eastern U.S. and Canada and floated the idea of establishing an interception line of hawk watches across New Jersey and adjacent New York the following year. That hawk watcher mentioned the possibility of Mt. Peter, a summit on Bellvale Mountain, near Greenwood Lake, New York, being a good hawk watch site. The next August (1957) Stiles took his family to visit Mt. Peter, where they saw a Bald Eagle migrating. The organizers of the interception line picked two days, one in September and one in October of that year, to cover the selected sites. Stiles returned in September and had a good Broad-winged Hawk flight, so he organized a consecutive-day hawk watch at Mt. Peter beginning in 1958.

Stiles covered Mt. Peter to 1970, when John Rex told him about a place called Hook Mountain in New York, where Rex had seen migrating hawks while he was hiking there in the 50s.



Stiles Thomas at Mount Peter. Photo by Jim Wright

In 1970 Stiles visited Hook and found hawks often came in very close. The next fall Stiles started a consecutive-day hawk watch at Hook. He had to make some sacrifices, however. At Mt. Peter you could park near a nice restaurant and walk about 100 yards to the outlook. It was a comparatively long haul up to the Hook Mountain site, and no restaurant was nearby for refreshments and restrooms, but Stiles was amply rewarded. In 1972 he counted 115 Northern Goshawks at Hook, and 85 in '73, the last “invasion” of that magnitude


in the east. Stiles became a leading figure in the “Bi-State Hawk Watch Coalition” established in the 70s to better organize watches and share data on migration across the New Jersey-New York highlands region.

The 1960s and 1970s saw dramatically increased interest in birds of prey and in hawk watching, and a number of new hawk watch sites were established and covered. Early in the 70s, Stiles was invited to the home of Mike Harwood, in Connecticut, to discuss with other leading hawk watchers the need to establish a hawk-watching umbrella organization that would develop standardized procedures for recording and reporting hawk migration counts for all of North America. Stiles became a member of the planning committee for the First North American Hawk Migration Conference, which was held in Syracuse, New York, in April 1974 and established the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA). Stiles gave presentations at the conference on the two new hawk watch sites he had established in New York.

Stiles continued to cover Hook Mountain, building a strong cadre of hawk watchers who gradually took responsibility for the site with the Rockland Audubon Society. Stiles was more interested in watching hawks and exploring other potential sites than in continuing responsibilities for covering a specific site. Stiles also encountered issues with his vision, which required two successful cataract operations. However, in 2010 Eric Nelson, who works for the New Jersey Department of Parks and Forestry, asked Stiles to become director of the State Line Hawk Watch in Alpine, New Jersey. Linn Pierson, who had

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established the State Line Hawk Watch in 1997, had coordinated the watch until she passed in 2007. The state wanted to be sure this valuable hawk watch in a state park would continue. Stiles had been a 1st sergeant in the 13th Airborne Division in WWII, leading paratroopers. Coordinating a hawk watch while in good health in his 80s should not be too difficult. Once again Stiles was rewarded for his efforts. In addition to many good days of hawk watching at his third major site, on September 28, 2011 Stiles saw 98 Peregrine Falcons and 147 Osprey at State Line. This year he was rewarded with a seasonal flight of 308 Red-shouldered Hawks, an all-time State Line record. Stiles also feels richly rewarded by the number and enthusiasm of volunteer hawk watchers who over the years have continued to conduct the seasonal watches at Mt. Peter, Hook Mtn. and State Line.

This past spring at HMANA's conference in Rochester, New York, Stiles Thomas received HMANA's Maurice Broun Award, which "honors individuals who have made outstanding, long-term or major contributions of time and effort to HMANA itself or the goals of HMANA." Beyond his invaluable contributions to the early years of organized hawk watching, and to the formation and growth of HMANA, Stiles has shown that given good health, one can enjoy watching hawks and contribute to our knowledge of their migrations well into your "Golden Years." 



Stiles Thomas with Red-shouldered Hawk. Photo by Jerry Barrack

Raptor Migration at the Aubrey Cliffs, Arizona

By Kyle McCarty

Arizona has only a handful of known hawkwatching sites. The best documented and well-known are Hawkwatch International's Lipan and Yaki Point monitoring stations at the Grand Canyon.

To learn more about where and how many raptors migrate in the state, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) began hawkwatching at the Aubrey Cliffs with a pilot migration count in the fall 2010. Located about 12 miles northwest of Seligman in Yavapai County, the site was chosen because it was already known to support nesting and wintering raptors, and it seemed the Aubrey Cliffs was a route and stopover point for migrants as well. In fact, the Aubrey Valley and cliffs are one of Arizona's Important Bird Areas largely due to high concentrations of raptors in the area.

The Aubrey Cliffs rise 300-400 meters above the valley floor and extend 25-30 kilometers in a north-south direction, creating updrafts on westerly winds and a nice line for birds to follow as they move south. Along with favorable topography, larger raptors are attracted to the abundance of Gunnison's prairie dog colonies in the valley and to the uplands loaded with

cottontails and jackrabbits. Despite an elevation of 6450 feet, the site experiences mild and predominately sunny conditions in September and October. Access to the area is limited as some of it is on private property.

The 11-day pilot count in 2010 was timed to observe peak migration in mid-September to mid-October. During 82.5 hours of survey, 578 raptors were counted (7.0 birds per hour). Encouraged by these results, AZGFD expanded the counts in 2011-2013 to cover as many days as possible between September 1 and October 31. Staffing limitations kept coverage to about four to five days each week. Overall, 17 species of migrants were detected. Several of these occurred in low numbers and were not seen every year, including Bald Eagle, Northern Goshawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk and Merlin.

The first year of an expanded count was 2011. September started slow with daily counts reaching highs of 26 migrants on the 1st and 40 birds on the 15th. But life was good for hawkwatchers in the latter half of the month when activity peaked. The first "big" day was September 16, which saw 76 migrants, most of them Sharp-shinned Hawks and American