



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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Talons and Thermals

Thousands of fierce predators are at this moment staging a spectacular migration over the Marin Headlands. There's a place, among the old military bunkers overlooking the Golden Gate, where you can watch at a safe distance from their deadly talons as dozens of them glide by, and all this while enjoying pizza and fine wine!

OK, so you have to bring your own wine and pizza, and there is no reason to fear these particular predators unless your pants are full of voles or field mice. I'm talking about the thousands of hawks and other birds of prey that pass over the Marin Headlands each fall on their southward migration. From now through mid-November, you can have front row seating for the fancy flights of up to 19 different species of raptors from atop Hawk Hill in the headlands. In addition to the birds, Hawk Hill offers sublime views of the Golden Gate and Frisco, not to mention a great vantage point for laughing at shivering tourists.

Hawk Hill is one of the best places on the west coast to enjoy hawks and falcons because up to 30,000 or more birds of prey can pass over this one spot during the migration season. Many of southward migrating hawks prefer to travel over land rather than water, and as they move down the Marin peninsula and reach the southern tip of the Marin Headlands they are squeezed by water on the Bay and Pacific sides to Hawk Hill.

Here, if the fog cooperates, you can watch falcons, hawks, eagles, ospreys, kestrels, merlins, vultures, kites, and harriers rising on thermals and riding updrafts like elevators, or circling to gain altitude for crossing the Golden Gate. Every once in a while a hawk will go for it, tucking into a screaming dive to make the two-mile crossing in seconds flat.

Volunteers with the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory (www.ggro.org) monitor the migration every fog-free day from August through December, counting hawks and identifying species. During lulls in the action, you can bribe these experienced birders into giving you identification tips – just wave a slice of warm pizza in front of them! The hawk counting is almost as impressive as the migration itself, a chaotic yet organized frenzy of sightings, identification, and communication as hawks are “passed off” by observers from one quadrant of the sky to another watcher’s quadrant.

Now is the perfect time to have that pepperoni and vole pizza delivered to Hawk Hill – the highest diversity and numbers of raptors pass by in late September and early October. Currently featured are broad-winged, red-shouldered, sharp-shinned, Cooper’s, and ferruginous hawks, as well as American kestrels and osprey. October will be prime time for white-tailed kites, golden eagles and northern harriers, and by November peregrine falcon, merlin, and red-tailed and rough-legged hawk numbers will peak.

The GGRO gives “hawk talks” at noon every Saturday and Sunday through the end of October. They even have a Hawkwatch Hotline to get the latest on hawk numbers and species - call (415) 561-3030 x2500.

Directions: Take the Alexander Ave. exit off Hwy. 101 (south of the Waldo Tunnel), following signs to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Stay left, turn left at the stop sign, and turn right up the hill onto Conzelman Road. Follow Conzelman for 1.8 miles to the very top of the road before it becomes one way. Walk up the west side of the hill past the locked gate to the crowd of people with binoculars.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.