

Raptor Count at Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park - Spring 2019

The massive raptor migration that passes Brockway Mountain each spring is hopefully quite well known to readers of this newsletter. In the years of dedicated three month counts since 2010 we're recording over 10,000 raptors migrating past each year.

But no one has ever really figured out just where our eastbound Brockway migrants actually go – after they pass Brockway. Our studies out at Manitou killed any notion that the hawks kept going past Manitou across Lake Superior to the north or east. The thousands of raptors we saw at Manitou sure seem to return to the mainland Keweenaw. Brockway observers do see numbers of raptors moving west past the mountain and a few theorists of Keweenaw raptor migration have concluded that its likely that most raptors moving through the tip of the Keweenaw actually continue their migration by flying SW along the Keweenaw and rounding Lake Superior at Duluth and going north from there. But what evidence is there that that actually takes place?

Over the last couple years I've done a couple half day counts at the Porkies and have seen a modest westward movement of raptors there. So last winter the CCA board voted to fund a modest raptor count at the Porkies in the spring of 2019. We hired Ryne Rutherford to count raptors at a place called East Vista at the eastern edge of the Porcupine Mountains State Park. We figured if he cherry picked which days to count that by doing thirty days of counting we'd get a reasonable preliminary idea of how much raptor movement there is at the Porkies. And is it mainly moving west?

Yes, its moving west. The count recorded 875 westbound raptors during 29 days of 6 hour counts. To compare to Brockway - the Brockway count for those same days totaled 2,011. The leading species at the East Vista count was Turkey Vulture at 222, Bald Eagle at 163, Broad-winged Hawk at 155 then Sharp-shinned Hawks at 104. The count period ran from 15 March through the 8th of May. Counts conducted later in May would likely have increased the percentage of Broadwings recorded.

Personnel from the Porkies felt that counts would best be conducted along the escarpment. I strongly felt that East Vista was the better location. On 6 May I was able to come help Ryne and we conducted simultaneous counts at East Vista and at Cloud Peak along the escarpment. East Vista recorded 295 westbound raptors and Cloud Peak only recorded 76. As the birds approached East Vista from the east, they split into three flows. One path stayed close to the lakeshore and stayed below the ridgetop. The second path went right over head and likely passed along the escarpment. The third pathway steered southwest and continued out of sight. It seems likely that an observer along the escarpment might only see the "overhead" birds and some of the "southwest" birds and almost none of the "lakeshore" migrants. The numbers from our one day of simultaneous count lend some credence to that theory.

On the five days of highest raptor counts four days had NE and N winds and one day had SW winds. On all five of those days the Porkies East Vista count had more westbound birds than Brockway had eastbound birds.