

Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch Raptorthon 2023 summary

By Vic Laubach

Although challenging, our Raptorthon this year on May 1 was another success; ending with 81 species including 10 raptor species (Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, American Kestrel, Bald Eagle, Osprey, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, and Eastern Screech Owl)! Our team (Vic Laubach, Lynne Parks, Rich Wood, and Robyn Puffenbarger) made it to Paddy Knob (on the Virginia-West Virginia border at 4,478ft elevation) at 7:20am only to find cloudy, windy, freezing conditions! These conditions remained with us throughout the day, with a high of 48F, 15-20mph winds, and intermittent rain/snow/sleet! Nonetheless, we found a few good birds at Paddy Knob including Broad-winged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Least Flycatcher, Veery, plenty of Dark-eyed Juncos, and 4 warbler species (Ovenbird, Black-and-white, Redstart, Black-throated Green). On our drive north to Blue Grass we found an Osprey, Hermit Thrush, Wood Duck, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Killdeer. At the Trout Hatchery north of Monterey, we found lots of swallows (Northern Rough-winged, Tree, and Barn), a Bald Eagle, Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow Warbler, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. At Forks of Water we found a big highlight of the day: a singing Yellow-throated Warbler in a Sycamore above the river! Nearby we also found a Red-shouldered Hawk, American Kestrel, Common Merganser, and House Wren. Along Wimer Mountain Rd to the West Virginia Border we found a Solitary Sandpiper, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, a flock of 24 Double-crested Cormorants flying over, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, 2 Black Vultures, and another Osprey. In Blue Grass we met up with John Spahr who took us to a nearby Eastern Screech-Owl nesting box containing a grey-phase owl sitting on eggs (or perhaps hatchlings). Nearby we also found a Downy Woodpecker, Veery, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, and a singing Bobolink. At a pond along Laurel Fork Rd we found a Least Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and Savannah Sparrows.

By this time (2pm), the cold rain became persistent, so we headed back to Augusta County where the weather was a bit more comfortable. At Ramsey's Draft we found White-throated Sparrows, a Blue-headed Vireo and 6 warbler species (Louisiana Waterthrush, Blackburnian, Black-and White, Redstart, Pine, Black-throated Green). Along West Augusta Rd we found another Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, Orchard Oriole, and Blue-winged Teal. We reached our final destination, Bells Lane in Staunton, at 4pm where we found some White-crowned Sparrows, Brown Thrasher, and a Kestrel. Robyn had been reminding us all day that we haven't seen a Chickadee, and we feared we'd end up chickadee-less! However, as we were walking to our vehicle to head home, a lone Carolina Chickadee called out from a nearby tree as if to say "Wait, don't forget about me, your 81st species of the day!"

The weather certainly made things interesting, but it was mostly just a conversation topic, among many other topics of great conversation while driving around all day in our warm vehicle! Thanks for driving Rich! Fun times, great memories and good birds made for another successful Raptorthon! We're very grateful for all of our sponsors this year!



Bramble Hill, Vic Laubach



Ovenbird, Vic Laubach



Rockfish Gap Hawk Watchers, Vic Laubach



Broad-winged Hawk, Vic Laubach



Lesser Yellowlegs, Vic Laubach