

A Sight for Sore Eyes

With a dedication bordering on the fanatical, hawk watchers endure aching eyes and empty skies – in hopes of one glorious glimpse.

ON THE MORNING of September 19, I awoke well before dawn. There would be no going back to sleep. Could I capture what had set my heart to thrumming? I opened my laptop and started to write.

I am replete. That is one of the things I thought when I woke up this morning. Also, seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Yesterday it was.

I kept writing until someone else in the house got up. What had set me afire: after more than a decade's worth of pilgrimages up the Blue Ridge Parkway to catch the fall broad-winged hawk migration, I had hit the jackpot. The day before, a total of 10,776 broadwings had been counted at Rockfish Gap, where Virginia's Skyline Drive and the parkway meet. It was the second largest single-day count since the hawkwatch site had been established in 1976.

I had been there for The Big One.

I hadn't been alone. Had I been, I would not have seen a fraction of those birds. Most hadn't flown overhead, but far out over the valleys to the east and west. I'm lousy at spotting hawks – even worse at identifying them. But hawkwatchers are generous: they call out what they're seeing – and where. Thanks to those with better, younger, more expert eyes, I saw what I'd come to see.

Hawkwatching is an addiction, one I've shared since 1997 with people like Rose Thomas, one of the Rockfish counters, who told her husband years ago “never to plan anything that involves me for the second half of September.” That's when the broadwings abandon their North American breeding grounds en masse, headed for Central and South America. Rose used to live and work in northern Virginia; she always arranged her vacation to be at Rockfish for the broadwings. Retired now, she and her husband are building a house



More than 1,000 broadwings (someone counted those dots!) kettle west of Rockfish Gap.

not far from the watch. She – and Brenda Tekin and Vic Laubach – are the backbone of the Rockfish count. Although they spell one another for most of the two-month period (Sept. 1-Oct. 31) that the watch is manned, often all three are on hand for the height of the broadwing migration. They were on Sept. 18.

A lot of other people were there too, of

course, people who came and went, which any addict knows is not the way to hawkwatch. You have to put in the hours. You have to show up and stay put. Get discouraged after an hour when nothing is moving, and you'll be driving down the mountain when the hawks reappear. Even on big days they come in spurts. On Sept. 18, there were two big hours, one in the morning and one



Soaring broad-winged hawks like this one use updrafts and thermals to conserve energy on their long flight south.

in late afternoon. Had you dropped in from 11 a.m. to noon, and returned between 3-4 p.m. on the 18th, you would have seen a grand total of 28 broadwings. If you'd been there from 10-11 a.m. and for the 15-minute period from 4:45 to 5 p.m., you could have seen 8,618.

Broadwings expend as little energy as possible on migration, soaring rather than flapping their wings. They rely on thermals – rising columns of warm air – and updrafts to power their flight. Because the aerial elevators they depend on are visible only when a bird is circling up and up in one, they fly together, sometimes in great numbers. As more and more birds reach a mass of rising air, they rise in a swirl, like steam from a kettle's spout. When the highest birds run out of lift, they peel off and stream, slowly losing altitude until they hit another thermal, where they kettle again. Kettle, stream; kettle, stream. When the thermals die toward sundown, they glide down to roost for the night.

Thick cloud cover hung above the Blue Ridge for most of the Big Day. By late afternoon, the sky was brighter off to the west, so Rose and Brenda trained their scopes in

The day before, a total of 10,776 broadwings had been counted at Rockfish Gap. It was the second largest single-day count since the hawkwatch site had been established in 1976.

that direction. About the time I was thinking of packing it in, they called “kettle!” We turned our binoculars toward the distant horizon. I could see nothing, but Vic found it right away. “That’s a huge kettle,” he said. He studied it a moment. “Got to be a thousand birds in that one.”

One kettle with a thousand birds? I couldn't imagine it. How could he tell? Until Rose showed me which bush to look above, I couldn't see anything. And then, suddenly, the birds materialized. Even through binoculars they were no more than specks, slowly revolving in a distant, breathtaking gyre. I heard Gabriel, a homeschooled preteen who has become an excellent hawkwatcher in the two years he's been coming to the watch, suck in his breath. “Oh . . . my . . . God!” I looked over at him. Even his young eyes, exhausted by

a day of straining to find hawks hurtling southward, were bloodshot.

“A sight for sore eyes,” I said.

“Yes.”

Then Vic panned his binoculars north of the huge kettle and found another, not so large but plenty big. How many birds? Three hundred, maybe five. And farther north, another kettle, about the same size. Then someone discovered a fourth, south of the big one. If you moved your binoculars slowly across that part of the sky, you could see all four. I thought of the stories I had written about migrating broadwings in which I had described the way all of them drained from the North American continent in the space of about two weeks. “The word made flesh,” I thought. Each of those specks was a living, breathing bird, a holy construction of feather and muscle and

bone. In that moment I grasped how abstractly I had understood what I'd written. Watching those swirling specks I could see I hadn't really known. There on that hillside I felt the intolerable pressure of the changing season pushing them south.

We stood there, all of us, and just looked. Except for Diane, a photographer I'd seen at the watch in previous years, who had the presence of mind to focus her long telephoto lens on the huge kettle and take some photos. "This is nuts!" she said when she put the camera down.

Within 15 minutes, the birds were gone. Pan your binoculars – as we all did – across that section of sky and there was nothing above the blue rim of mountains but clouds tinged with soft pinks and golds. The hawks' absence was nearly as breathtaking as their presence. We looked and looked for more. We stuck around another hour – and counted five more broadwings. The Big Day ended, as all days do, with the setting sun.

The great writer Flannery O'Connor once explained why she sat at her typewriter for three hours every day: so that "if anything comes I am there waiting to



An osprey's distinctive underwing pattern and 63-inch wingspan always draw oohs and aahs.

The hawks' absence was nearly as breathtaking as their presence. We looked and looked for more.

receive it." If nothing did come – and many days nothing did – it wasn't wasted time, because "if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there." I thought about that, lying in bed that night. I thought of Vic and Brenda and Rose, how they sit out there day after day, year after year, in the heat, the cold – even when the watch is soaked in, because the clouds might lift. They endure those hard, hot, cloudless days when there isn't a breath of air and the stinkbugs descend and whatever hawks are passing Rockfish Gap are up so high that no one can pick them out of the blue. They keep the watch alive for the rest of us. At day's end, no matter how sore their eyes, they tally the numbers, write a report and post it on Hawkcount. They arrange so the watch is covered for two months. When there aren't many hawks, they count monarch butterflies and redheaded woodpeckers, note the passage of swallows and swifts. If anything comes, they are waiting to receive it. Most days there's nothing much. Then, without warning or fanfare, there is. 🦅

What's the beauty of retiring in Blacksburg?



Discovering the New River Valley's only comprehensive retirement community. The beauty of retiring in Blacksburg is that here, life is what you make it. Enjoy the breathtaking Blue Ridge Mountains. Appreciate the diversity and excitement of being in a small college town with big-city appeal. Whatever your interests are, you'll fit right in on our beautiful 220-acre woodland campus in the heart of Blacksburg.

With **Warm Hearth Village** retirement community and **WoodsEdge** active adult community, our continuum of living options include an **active adult campus, Independent Living, Assisted Living, Long-term Care, and Memory Care.** We are a **non-profit community** that offers home ownership and lifestyle choices you won't find anywhere else. Call us today to learn why your retirement will be better in Blacksburg.



2603 Warm Hearth Dr. • Blacksburg, VA
retire.org • (540) 552-9176



Blacksburg's First Active Adult Community
2014 Blue Jay Ln. • Blacksburg, VA
woodsedgeblacksburg.com • (540) 443-3416



Subject to availability. Prices and plans subject to change without notice. All images of the Village Center are artistic renderings of our vision for the future. This building is not yet constructed. Not a valid offering in any state where registration is required but not yet completed. One resident must be at least 55 years of age and no residents allowed under the age of 19. Condo association agreements apply. A leasehold condominium.



We are committed to improving the health of our environment by reducing waste and exploring energy alternatives. Ask us about our earth-conscious initiatives.

2012 TRAVEL GUIDE

A CLASSIC SPOT AND A SECRET GETAWAY IN 9 MOUNTAIN STATES

BlueRidge COUNTRY

EXPLORING THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SOUTH

Gus Welch

THE FOOTBALL STAR
WHO TRIED TO STOP
THE PARKWAY

The Snallygaster Monster

OF WESTERN MARYLAND



February 2012 \$3.95

