

2022 Raptorthon on Dinosaur Ridge Riley and the Mile High Raptors



Photo by Allison Peters

Back row left to right: husband and wife team (out of state visitors), Emma Riley,
Kate TenEyck, Joey Kellner
Front row: Carol Cwiklinski and Steve Small

Denver Field Ornithologists' (DFO) participation in Raptorthon was twofold: to raise money for our hawk counter salary and to show appreciation for the incredible support we have received from HMANA.

After some poor planning by team coordinator Janet Peters (choosing Easter weekend for the count, loss of team member Dave Hill to a family dog sitting emergency, and loss of team member Mike Fernandez due to a "falling out of a tree injury requiring surgery impeding his ability to hold binoculars for long periods of time" the team was disheartened. Down but not out, we quickly bounced back recruiting Denver Field Ornithologist President Susan Blansett, one of our biggest cheerleaders, and another strong supporter, DFO treasurer Kathy Holland to fill in. We had our A-team covering the ridge, skilled veterans Carol Cwiklinski and Steve Small along with our paid hawk counter, biologist Emma Riley.

The weather on the count day worked in our favor. The day started out a little chilly but warmed up to balmy 55 degrees by noon with calm to slight winds. Janet and Kate started the day at sunrise, hiking up the ridge and down into the eastern and western valleys.. The trail leading up to the viewing platform, along the ridge and down into the valley threads through a variety of habitats from prairie grasslands to sub-alpine juniper and ponderosa forest. Just past a grazing herd of white tail deer a complex and cheerful song was heard leading to the sighting of the first rock wren of the season.

The real action started when Janet returned to the viewing platform. Around 10 am, just as Emma arrived at the platform, the first broad winged hawk of the season passed overhead. The crowd let out a joyous whoop .Shortly after the first Swainson's Hawk of the season passed overhead. Now the joyous whoop went up a few decibels prompting one of the out of state

visitors, who appeared to have been dragged around the country to various hawk watching sites by her husband, to comment “everywhere I go you hawk watchers are all the same”. It was as if the Lions won the Super Bowl!

The day just kept getting better. We sighted fourteen species of raptors and had a kestrel count of 97, the largest American Kestrel movement in Dinosaur Ridge history. Emma stayed past her usual shift time hoping to surpass one hundred. Oh so close! We had to drag her off the ridge. We were visited and assisted by local birding celebrity, Joey Kellner, winner of the Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education in 2021, along with several other volunteers who we cannot thank enough. A special thanks goes out to team members Kate TenEyck and Mike Fernandez who played a key role in promoting our Raptorthon including setting up a radio interview with the BirdTalk guys Scott and Dave Menough (commonly known as the Menough Bros). Susan Blansett and Jeff Birek, naturalist and seasoned hawk watcher, used this opportunity to educate the listeners about raptor migration and the HMANA Raptorthon effort.

Our Raptorthon was the biggest Day ever in Dinosaur Ridge history based on HMANA data with a total of 254 migrants.

The Raptorthon count concluded at sunset, and even though we didn’t spot any owls, the herd of mule deer, the sun setting over Colorado’s beautiful Rocky Mountains, and a solitary robin serenading us with its melodic evening song concluded an excellent day. DFO hopes to make this an annual event.

Our final count totals are summarized below:

Non-raptor Species - 18 total

Double crested Cormorant (migrating flock)
Great White Pelican (migrating flock)
Northern Flicker
Black billed Magpie
American Crow
Mountain Chickadee
Bushtit
Rock Wren
Townsend's Solitaire
American Robin
House Finch
Spotted Towhee
Meadowlark
Pine siskin
Scrub Jay
Mourning Dove
White throated swift
Common raven

Raptor Species - 14 total

Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Northern Goshawk
Broad wing Hawk
Merlin
Sharp Shinned Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
Northern Harrier
Golden Eagle
Red-Tailed Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon

Total Count: 32



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Janet covered 15 miles and 1500 vertical feet during the Raptorthon effort



South View with Red Rocks Amphitheater in the distance



Raptorthon draws to a close...