

# HIGH COUNTRY HOOTS

High Country Audubon Society - Serving Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties

September/October - 2010 Volume 2, Issue 4

## HAWK IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM AT SEPTEMBER MEETING

September's monthly meeting on Tuesday, September 14 will be a member presentation by Jesse Pope, past president of High Country Audubon Society and Chief Naturalist at Grandfather Mountain. The meeting will be held at the Watauga County Agricultural Conference Center at 6:30 p.m.

Pope's presentation will be on hawk identification since September is the month that hawks begin their yearly migration journey from their breeding grounds toward their wintering grounds. Some will go all the way to northern South America.



Cooper's Hawk

Photo via <http://www.birds.cornell.edu>.

Pope will use birding software and a PowerPoint presentation to teach the group how to identify migrating hawks in flight. The different shapes, silhouettes and colors of hawks will be discussed. With hawk watches coming up at Mahogany Rock, now is the perfect time to learn how to spot and identify these birds in the sky!

Members are invited to bring and share books and field guides about hawks that they find especially helpful.

"High Country Auduboners are always interested in finding the best books and guides to make us more familiar with birds," said HCAS President Anita Clemmer.

The hawk presentation will be followed by a business meeting. Clemmer hopes the meeting will enlist more participation in the chapter committees.

The Steering Committee for the 2011 Audubon North Carolina Annual Meeting has been hard at work to book a venue and wants to update HCAS members on their progress so far. The committee, made up of Clemmer, Pope, Bettie Bond, Bob Cherry and Landis Wofford; has decided upon the Blowing Rock Conference Center (<http://www.brccenter.org>) as the location for the meetings and lodging.



The Annual Meeting will take place May 19-22, 2011 and will consist of field trips, meetings, presentations and social activities. This is our chance to show off the North Carolina High Country and the great birding in this area!

The Steering Committee has formed four sub-committees to help with the responsibilities of the event (Registration, Field Trips, Hospitality, and Information/Symposium). Members of the Steering Committee are handling the Information/Symposium responsibilities but the three other sub-committees need your help! The committees' responsibilities and tasks will be broken down at the September 14 meeting so folks will get a better understanding of what is involved. Your help is needed to make this event successful! The Audubon NC Annual Meeting will take the work and support of many!

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### September

14	Monthly Meeting at Watauga County Ag. Conference Center	6:30 p.m.
25	Mahogany Rock Field Trip	All Day

### October

19	Monthly Meeting at Watauga County Ag. Conference Center	6:30 p.m.
23	Wilson Creek IBA Field Trip	TBD

### November

10	Lenoir Greenway Field Trip	TBD
16	Monthly Meeting at Watauga County Ag. Conference Center	6:30 p.m.

### December

TBD	Christmas Bird Count	
-----	----------------------	--

A \$5 donation is requested with field trip attendance.

All events and meeting times are subject to change.

For updated information please visit

<http://highcountryaudubon.org>.

## FUN FACTS

### Golden Eagle



- The Golden Eagle is one of the largest birds of prey in North America; only the Bald Eagle and California Condor get larger.
- Although capable of killing large prey such as cranes, wild ungulates, and domestic livestock; the Golden Eagle subsists primarily on rabbits, hares, ground squirrels and prairie dogs.
- The Golden Eagle is the national emblem of Mexico.
- The bird's habitat is generally open country, in prairies, tundra, open coniferous forest and barren areas, especially in hilly or mountainous regions, nesting on cliff ledges and in trees.
- The Rough-legged Hawk, the Ferruginous Hawk, and the Golden Eagle are the only American hawks to have legs feathered all the way to the toes.
- The amount of white in the wings of a young Golden Eagle varies among individuals, and a few lack white in the wings entirely.

Info and picture found on <http://www.birds.cornell.edu>.

## MAHOGANY ROCK DATES SET

High Country Audubon Society is offering two trips to Mahogany Rock this September for hawk watching. The scheduled dates are September 16 and 25.



Photo from [www.cnyhiking.com](http://www.cnyhiking.com)

Mahogany Rock is the premier hawk watching site in North Carolina. It's located in Alleghany County, just north of Stone Mountain State Park and on the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 235.

Mahogany Rock is located on a sharp ridgeline that runs east to west, with valleys to the north that funnel the raptors over this long ridge. The birds ride the

thermal air currents along the way and southward over Stone Mountain. Some days, during mid-September when raptor migration is at its peak, thousands of Broad-winged Hawks are seen from Mahogany Rock.

Other interesting raptors are seen as well including Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks and even Northern Goshawks and Northern Rough-legged hawks.

The first planned trip to Mahogany Rock will be led by Anita Clemmer on Thursday, September 16. Those attending should meet at the Food Lion in Deep Gap off Hwy 421 at 8 a.m. to carpool or caravan.

Jesse Pope will lead the trip out to Mahogany Rock on Saturday September 25. The group will meet at New Market Center in Boone at 8:30 a.m. before making their way. Both trips will probably last all day, so bring a lunch along.

Bring your binoculars, scopes and field guides as we watch and help with the hawk count presided over by Jim Keighton and sponsored by the Hawk Migration Association of North America.

The official count will be posted online daily at [www.hawkcount.org](http://www.hawkcount.org). Click on North Carolina and scan for the Mahogany Rock section.



HCAS group at Mahogany Rock in 2007

Photo by Jesse Pope

## A HISTORY OF HAWK WATCHING AT MAHOGANY ROCK by Jim Keighton

When John Anthony Alderman, master of the autumn skies (1927-2000), started a hawk watch in 1986 at Mahogany Rock Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway Milepost 235, there was no full-season reporting of data on hawk migration to the Hawk Migration Association of North America from along the Blue Ridge as far south as North Carolina. A few birders, like Ramona Snavelly at Pilot Mountain and Leslie Hines at a few places on the Parkway, were watching for hawk migration in North Carolina but most were not

Continued on Page 3

### High Country Audubon Society Board

**Anita Clemmer** - President

**Bob Cherry** - Vice President, Conservation Chair, & Event Chair for Audubon North Carolina Annual Meeting

**Brenda Combs** - Secretary

**Doris Ratchford** - Treasurer

**Jesse Pope** - Field Trips & Social Events Chair

**Janet Palmer** - Membership Chair

**Rosalind Pevsner** - Education Chair

**Donald Mullaney**

**Mary Carol Ochipa**

**Bettie Bond**

**Martha Cutler**

High Country Hoots is published six times a year by the High Country Audubon Society, a chapter of National Audubon. Local members receive the newsletter via electronic mail. It is also archived on <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/highcountryaudubon>.

## HCAS Happenings

### Weekday Birding

- Thursday, September 16 - Mahogany Rock

It's time for raptor migration! See this spectacle from one of the best spots in the NC High Country, Mahogany Rock. Those attending should meet at the Food Lion in Deep Gap off Hwy 421 at 8 a.m. to carpool or caravan.

Any questions should be directed to Anita Clemmer at [anaclemmer@att.net](mailto:anaclemmer@att.net).

### Wednesday Morning Bird Walks

- Bird walks are led every Wednesday morning from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. by Curtis Smalling at Valle Crucis Community Park.

Information regarding the walks can be obtained by calling the Watauga Birding Hotline at 828-265-0198.



High Country  
Audubon Society

PO Box 3746  
Boone, NC 28607

<http://highcountryaudubon.org>  
E-mail: [highcountrybirder@yahoo.com](mailto:highcountrybirder@yahoo.com)

## A HISTORY OF HAWK WATCHING CONT.

reporting data to HMANA much beyond the September rush.

From 1980 to 1986 at nearby Air Bellows Fire Tower on Green Mountain at Blue Ridge Parkway Milepost 238, Jim Keighton, a Hawk-Mountain-infected transplant to North Carolina, had sporadically observed large streams of Broad-winged Hawks, among a diversity of other raptors, in September watches. He submitted the famed "green sheets" data to the HMANA and these reports



inspired John Alderman to start a formal hawk watch at the more accessible nearby Mahogany Rock Overlook on the Parkway.

At the fire tower on Green Mountain, Jim Keighton - and his middle school students - had observed as many as 1,552 a season (in 19 hours in 1985). So, it was not surprising that John Alderman with this beginning team tallied 1,244 migrant raptors in 85 hours in 1986 and 5,410 in 181 hours in 1987; and then some surprising counts for this far south of 9,429 in 1993 and 17,857 in 1994.

That 1994 nearly eighteen-thousand bird season made Mahogany Rock momentarily a premier hawk watch site in the east. While most other ridge hawk watches to the north languished throughout the Broad-wing Hawk season as the broad-wings apparently "kettled" in the piedmont and coastal plain until they reached the Carolina Blue Ridge, Mahogany Rock witnessed the return of thousands of Broad-winged Hawks within just a few days, including over 8,000 in one day leading to 15,108 broad-wings for the season. On that eight-thousand-bird day watchers were challenged to count thousand-bird tornadoes of broad-wings and many simultaneous additional kettles around the horizon, such that observers were assigned to count separate quarters of Mahogany Rock's nearly 360 degree view to avoid missing any of the wave.

John Alderman wanted every Parkway traveler to appreciate the natural assets available to them, from the dramatic migration of hawks and other birds to the seasonal change in wildflowers. He promoted hawks by sharing his enthusiasm for these amazing manipulators of the air with Parkway visitors and he began photographing and writing a guide to the *Wildflowers of the Blue Ridge Parkway*. To give himself a chance at meeting publication deadlines

he turned over the compilation of hawk-count data in 1997 to Jim Keighton, who now lived within sight of the watch post.

After John published *Wildflowers*, he turned to working on a guide of Parkway trees. A newly formed bird club, Blue Ridge Birders, representing several counties in northwestern North Carolina and southwestern Virginia took over responsibility for the Mahogany Rock Hawk Watch. John continued to support the watch with his skills and enthusiasm whenever he was near the watch in the fall, as he roamed the Parkway for wildflower and tree photos. But in the year 2000 the organizer and coordinator of the Mahogany Rock Hawk Watch, and recipient of the Golden Eagle award from the National Audubon Society, suddenly passed away, leaving a real emptiness in the autumn skies at Mahogany Rock. His raptor education legacy on the Parkway goes on, however, with the publication of the John Anthony Alderman Guide to Hawk Watching at Mahogany Rock, a brochure available to every hawk watch visitor along with postings on a portable display at Mahogany Rock during the hawk watch season. These written and visual aids help all appreciate the drama unfolding in the sky above them.

Excerpt taken from [www.hawkwatch.org](http://www.hawkwatch.org).

## OCTOBER EVENT DETAILS



### October Monthly Meeting

Tuesday, October 19 at 6:30 p.m.

Watauga County Agricultural Conference Center  
HCAS will be treated to a member presentation at the October Meeting by Carol Jennings. Carol will present on her African safari experience. She'll talk about the birds she saw on her trip, as well as other animals and the different cultures she encountered while in Africa.

### Wilson Creek IBA Field Trip

Saturday, October 23

Take this opportunity to do some birding while being surrounded by the beautiful fall color of the NC High Country! This will be a great chance to catch a glimpse of some late migrants passing through. Watch the listserv for more details on this fall field trip!



**Is there a program topic you would like to hear about?  
Let us know!**

## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

An annual membership to the High Country Audubon Society is \$10 per person and due June 1 of each year. Membership and support gives you access to the group's listserv and the HCAS e-newsletter High Country Hoots. Mail check and information (name, address, telephone number, e-mail) to:

High Country Audubon Society  
Attention: Membership Dues  
PO Box 3746  
Boone, NC 28607

## A SWIFT NIGHT OUT

High Country Audubon Society took part in A Swift Nigh Out on September 1 at Lees-McRae College. The group met at Lowe's Food in Tynecastle at 7 p.m. and was led to the chimney at the college by Betsy Murrelle and Betsy Wauters.

At least 20 people attended the outing and many photographs and video were shot of the spectacle. HCAS President Anita Clemmer reported that thousands of Chimney Swifts flew over and around the chimney at the North Carolina Building on Lees-McRae's campus before finally going down into the chimney.



"The spectacle lasted about 50 minutes right at dusk and we

were able to inform students passing by that they were not bats, but Chimney Swifts," said Clemmer. "It was a wonderful way to spend a balmy summer evening."

Chimney Swifts are aerial feeders and they spend all their daylight hours on the wing and never perch. They are among the fastest fliers of all the birds. Chimney Swifts only come to rest in the evenings and are especially adapted to cling to vertical surfaces of caves, buildings and trees. Their aerial displays before swooping down into the roost are really something spectacular to see at dusk.

A Swift Night Out was started by John Connors with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh, North Carolina. Its purpose is to raise awareness of Chimney Swifts (east coast) and Vaux's Swifts (Pacific coast).

There are two weekends to



Both photos by Monty Combs

observe and report this year. One in August and one September 10, 11 and 12. Audubon members are encouraged to participate. Just keep your eyes to the skies at dusk and watch for areas where swifts are feeding. Look for a tall shaft, chimney or similar structure to locate where Chimney Swifts go to roost in your area. Observe the site starting about 30 minutes before dusk and estimate

the number of swifts that enter.

When you have your number, send it in an e-mail to [DWA@austin.rr.com](mailto:DWA@austin.rr.com). In the e-mail include (1) the number of estimated swifts that entered the roost, (2) the time, (3) the date, (4) the location, (5) a broad description of the site, and (6) the weather conditions.

Lees-McRae is just one of the places in the High Country to observe Chimney Swifts during the September weekend, so find a roost and help gather information regarding this most interesting species.

HCAS member Janet Paulette's video from September 1 at Lees-McRae can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/JanetPaulette?feature=mhum>. Data from the 2010 Swift Night Out and past years can be found at <http://www.concentric.net/~dwa/page56.html>.

## HIGH-RESOLUTION IMAGING EXPANDS VISION RESEARCH OF LIVE BIRDS OF PREY

Bird observatories all over the world may benefit from a newly designed high-resolution imaging system used to study the retinal structure of live birds of prey. In a recently published *Investigative Ophthalmology & Visual Science* article, researchers reveal unprecedented three-dimensional information about the retina of four species of raptors — two hawks and two owls — using the non-invasive, powerful imaging tool.

Through a series of experiments conducted at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute at the University of Miami, the research team used the new spectral-domain optical coherence tomography (SD-OCT) system to test its potential for vision research in birds of prey. The resulting images show detailed retinal layers and the structure of the deep and shallow foveae, the tiny pit located in the light-sensitive retina that provides the clearest vision of all. Traumatic injury to one bird's retina was also successfully imaged.

Although OCT has been used to image retinas in animals, the authors report that this is the first time high resolution imaging has been used for living, awake birds, which provides an abundance of images with microscopic detail without harming the birds.

"Previous anatomical studies of raptor foveae required examination of the retina with a microscope, limiting the number of birds that could be studied," said author Robert W. Knighton, PhD, retired research professor at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute.

Lead researchers Marco Ruggeri and Shuliang Jiao and their colleagues suggest that the results of this research point the way for other scientists to study the eye structure and vision of large birds, including those that compare retinal anatomy differences between birds of prey that hunt during the day and those that hunt at night.



Credit: iStockphoto/Luca Manieri

"One can imagine that obtaining data with an SD-OCT scanner could become a routine procedure at the many bird observatories in the world," adds Knighton, who now lives near Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory in Duluth Minnesota.

Report taken from Science Daily July 23, 2010