

## **“Hawk Migration” by Sally Cureton**

One of the most predictable events of nature occurs each year during the great fall hawk migration. We are very fortunate here in Virginia to be on the route south for many, many of these birds. Over 30,000 pass our way through three major hawk watching sites, Snickers Gap - at the Loudon-Clark County line, Rockfish Gap - Afton Mountain, and Harvey's Knob - on the Blue Ridge Parkway. There are actually a total of 10 established hawk lookouts throughout the state where volunteers spend the day each fall counting the birds as they fly overhead. Through the first of November this year, there were a total of 7400 birds through Snickers Gap, 16,000 through Rockfish Gap and 7100 through Harvey's Knob. The most common one coming through all three locations was the Broad-winged Hawk, for a total of 26,500 birds. Another location on Virginia's Eastern Shore is Kiptopke. There the bird seen most frequently was the Sharp-shinned Hawk at 6,200. Next was the American Kestrel at 3,050.

The birds are using two major types of atmospheric phenomena to facilitate their journey south. First are the thermals that become huge rising columns of warm air as the sun heats areas of the ground during the day. Hawks will use these thermals to soar higher and higher until the warm air reaches its maximum altitude. Then they will break out and glide in a long descent until they can find another warm air mass to carry them back up. Someone watching these areas will see hundreds of birds spiraling upward as they travel in what are called “kettles.”

Secondly, they will glide near the crest line of a mountain. In those areas surface winds will be deflected upward as they cross the range. These currents provide a strong uplift for the birds. Red-tailed hawks, eagles and sharp-shinned hawks will glide along these mountain ridges. The most common time to see this is from about 9:00am until 4:00pm or so. Some days will find thousands of birds gliding along. Other days there will be relatively few, but the numbers mount as the season continues. Other birds commonly found in these areas heading south include kestrels, vultures, ospreys and peregrine falcons. Because of no upward air currents, they don't like to travel across large bodies of water. The birds are on the way to their wintering grounds in Mexico, Central America, and South America. With such a very long way to travel, utilizing warm updrafts and wind currents can make an enormous difference in the amount of total energy they need to expend before they complete their journey.