

Capilla Peak

Manzano Mountains

Watchable Wildlife Site #34

Each fall, thousands of migrating raptors close by the crest of Capilla Peak in the Manzano Mountains south of Albuquerque. The rugged, west-facing canyons of the Manzanos are especially spectacular when aspens and scrub oak blaze with seasonal color.

FUNNELS FOR MIGRATION

Migrating raptors use updrafts from mountain ridges like the Manzanos to gain lift and conserve energy. Raptors in the West tend to travel in a southeasterly direction during fall migration; in New Mexico, the Jemez and Sangre de Cristo mountain ranges naturally funnel migrating raptors toward the Manzanos. Migrating raptors can best be seen at this site September 10 -- October 20 where it is not unusual to 150 raptors on a good day, weather permitting.

About 80% of the migrating hawks commonly seen at this site include the Sharp-shinned (33%), Cooper's (20%), American Kestrel (14%), and Red-tailed (13%). In a typical year here, the average number of raptors counted is about 4,000. In 1993, however, an unprecedented 7,300 Swainson's Hawks were observed. This broke the previous high of 379 Swainson's recorded the year before. Other raptors observed here include the Golden and Bald Eagle, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Northern Harrier, Broad-winged and Zone-tailed Hawk, Merlin, Peregrine and Prairie Falcon, and Northern Goshawk, as well as other species.

At dawn and dusk at this site, also keep an eye out for black bear and mule deer. During the day, visitors should also look for smaller wildlife, such as the horned toad, and birds including warblers, nutcrackers, woodpeckers, siskins, and towhees.

A 'FALL SITE'

The Manzano site is designated by the raptor research and conservation organization, HawkWatch International Inc. (HWI), as a "fall migration site." According to HWI's Phil Magasich, several factors make raptor viewing sites suitable for counts only during one season. Because raptors fly in different directions, depending on spring or fall migration, a site may or may not have a good line of site for bird observation. Another factor may be that the funneling effect of the mountain ranges do not work quite the same way in reverse, due to prevailing winds or local topography. Nearly every north-south mountain

range in the West is used by raptors during migration. However, only sites that have large concentrations are suitable for scientific study, for statistical and economic reasons.

ABOUT HAWKWATCH INTERNATIONAL

Incorporated in New Mexico in 1986 as the Western Foundation for Raptor Conservation, the name was changed in 1991 to HawkWatch International (HWI). The new shorter name reflects the group's focus on studying and protecting raptors in other countries as well as our own -- particularly in Mexico -- because raptors frequently migrate across national boundaries.

HWI's raptor count on Capilla Peak began in 1985, with banding in 1990. Why count migrating raptors? To help learn more about their nesting and wintering habits. Although recovery rates of birds banded in the Manzanos is less than 1%, returns show most of the birds to be coming from Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and the eastern Canadian Rockies.

HWI encourages persons interested in searching for new raptor migration sites to contact their Salt Lake City office. The group is always on the lookout for new sites where high concentrations of raptors migrate.

VISITORS WELCOME ON CAPILLA PEAK

Visitors are welcome anytime, but the site is less crowded on weekdays. An education intern is present most weekends in September and October to answer visitors' questions. For more information about the site or HWI, contact HawkWatch International, Inc., 21 "G" Street, P. O. Box 660, Salt Lake City, UT 84110-0660; phone (801) 524-8511, FAX (801) 524-8520.

The nine miles of dirt road, from the town of Manzano to the site, is steep and narrow -- and can be muddy, snowy, and full of potholes as well -- so prepare accordingly. Be sure to bring food, water, and sunscreen, since there are no services at the site. From Manzano, take the first right onto dirt Forest Road 245, directly across from the church. Stay to the right, following signs for New Canyon and Capilla Peak Campgrounds. The road ends in nine miles at the entrance to second campground, below the fire tower. The actual viewing site is one mile from where you park off the road, 200 yards before fire tower road. The trail is marked with a hawk silhouette. Hike west along the Gavilan Trail, across the meadow for about a half hour; the trail follows the ridge northwest to the observation site.

The Manzano site manager is the USDA Forest Service (505) 847-2990, with project direction by HawkWatch International Inc