

## **The Smith Point Hawk Watch**

By Susan Heath

Each fall, enormous numbers of raptors, – hawks, falcons, eagles, and vultures – travel along the Texas coast from all across the continent toward their wintering grounds in South America. This stream of raptors continues around the Gulf coast narrowing to a thin strip in Mexico as the mountains squeeze the land mass down to just a couple of miles wide. Because raptors are difficult to census on their breeding grounds, a continent-wide system of hawk watch sites has been established to monitor them where geographical natural features concentrate them during fall migration.

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is in its 26th year of raptor-counting at Smith Point on the eastern shore of Galveston Bay in southwestern Chambers County. The count begins on August 15<sup>th</sup> and runs through November 30<sup>th</sup> and is staffed every day by our volunteer counters from 8:00am until 4:00pm. Smith Point offers an exceptional viewing point as the birds contemplate crossing the bay. The hawk watch tower is located within Texas Parks & Wildlife's Candy Abshier Wildlife Management Area, the only Wildlife Management Area in Texas that does not allow hunting. If you are looking for something to do some weekend this fall, consider stopping by Smith Point and checking out the hawk tower. Our counter, Bob Baez, will be happy to visit with you.

Most small birds migrate at night to take advantage of the cooler temperatures and lack of predators. But since raptors are large, they don't worry too much about predators and instead of flying at night, they take advantage of the heat of the day by using the rising air currents caused by the sun heating the ground. These air currents, called thermals, allow the birds to ride up into the sky like an elevator to heights of several thousand feet. Once they have achieved the maximum height of the thermal, they stream out and glide as far as they can until they catch another thermal ride up. This way they can travel long distances using minimum energy.

Like all birds, raptors use stored fat as fuel during migration and this strategy allows them to move 4000 or so miles between their breeding areas and their winter quarters in Central and South America. For this reason, their southbound flights can be monitored during the day at concentration points formed by the geography of the land.

Because they use rising thermals, they prefer to migrate over land, as water absorbs the heat of the sun rather than reflecting it. For this reason, the geography on the eastern side of Galveston Bay funnels the birds to Smith Point, which sticks out into the bay making it an excellent spot to monitor the birds as they move south.

Smith Point is just one of over 200 hawk watches in the continental U.S. where raptors are monitored each fall. There is another watch at Corpus Christi and farther south in Mexico there is one in Veracruz which records millions of migrating raptors each year. The best time to go to a hawk watch is right after a cold front as the birds use the north winds to aid them in their flights south. So next time we get a cold front (yes we will get one eventually!) head to Smith Point and see what raptor counting is all about. The peak time is usually late September when you can see thousands of raptors in a single day.

Photo by Joe Kennedy

Caption: Broad-winged Hawks soaring over Smith Point Hawk Watch